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From **Two-Bit**
BADDIE
to **Total**
Heart
THROB

This Villainess Will
Cross-Dress to Impress!

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Prologue

I was seven years old when I, Elizabeth Burton, was first bombarded by memories from what I can only assume was my past life.

It was a spring day, and I'd just taken a bite of my breakfast omelet. To my horror, it was tainted by the taste of minced bell pepper—my worst enemy.

Those who enjoy or tolerate bell peppers may find this hard to understand, but for those of us who hate them, surprise bell peppers may as well be classified as an act of terrorism. When that bitter taste filled my mouth, a chill ran down my spine. I fell over backwards and took the chair down with me.

This is the part when the head chef might come in and proclaim, “A bell pepper?! Goodness, what was *that* doing in there?!” If that's what you're hoping for, however, you're sorely mistaken. Let me be clear: that only happens in fiction. No matter how you try to dice it, hide it, or season it, I will always sniff out the wretched vegetable. Why? Because *that's* how much I hate it.

As I fell over backwards, an image flashed in my head. I saw an otome game featuring a girl with my name.

Of course, the world I'd spent all seven years of my life in had no such thing as “otome games”—or gas or electricity, for that matter. The only clothes I'd ever known were overly fussy dresses that were hard to move in, and the most common method of transportation was by horse carriage. Naturally, TV and video games were nonexistent too.

And yet, although things like otome games, gas, and electricity had no place in my world, I had no trouble envisioning one in which they did. Its existence—and the games that it had created—was surprisingly easy to accept.

You'd think I'd be shocked to learn that I'd been reincarnated as a character from an otome game I'd played in my past life, but strangely, I came to grips with it pretty quickly. For some reason, I found myself thinking, *Yeah, that figures.*

So, it turns out I was living in the world of an otome game called *Royal LOVERS*. If you're curious, it's one of those aristocratic dating sims that might as well come with a tagline like "You can hear the whispers of their fabulous, noble love."

At any rate—as soon as the cinematic opening started playing in my head, my chair hit the ground and sent a sharp, shooting pain through my back.

Was I a Nobody in My Past Life?

Let's put this all together, shall we?

After my fall, my father had carried me to bed and called for the doctor to examine me. With the doctor's visit behind me, I lay in bed and stared at the ceiling, my mind racing.

I'd been diagnosed with anemia and a lack of sleep. I insisted that the bell pepper was to blame for my fall, but all my father had to say in reply was that I'd better stop staying up so late and being such a picky eater.

Honestly, though—I never even stayed up late!

The *real* reason I'd fallen was because I'd gone into capsaicin shock (hey, that has a nice ring to it) and had been flooded with memories of my past life. I didn't feel like diving into that with him, though. I'd only been alive for seven years, but even I knew better than to think that concepts like "past lives" and "reincarnation" had any place in the worldview here.

And yet, here I was, with all these memories of the old me. What's more, I was able to understand the concepts of a "past life" and "reincarnation" as if they were completely self-evident. That was precisely why I knew that there must've been people out there who believed in reincarnation, and why I'd come to think that it was very plausible that I *myself* might've experienced it.

But in the world I was currently in, the dead returned to the earth, and their souls alone lived on as shining stars... At least, that was the mainstream theory. You could even call it a religious belief.

I doubted anyone would have believed me about the whole reincarnation in another world idea even in my past life, but talking about it here was even more complicated. If you wanted to talk about such abstract concepts—like reincarnated souls and past-life memories—then you'd have to start by explaining what they were and why they mattered. After all, the people here had no exposure to them. They didn't even exist in fairytales. What's more,

even if I were to do my best to explain it all, it seemed unlikely that I'd get the response I was looking for.

It didn't help that my previous memories were so fuzzy and fragmented. Even though I'd managed to recall my perspective on life and death, I didn't feel confident that I could explain it in any logical way. I could imagine explaining things like video games and electricity, and it seemed doable to describe what it was like to live in the world in which they existed. If anyone asked me how they actually *worked*, though? I was sure I'd draw a total blank.

It seemed like the world I'd lived in before this had faced turbulent times, but I couldn't remember the specifics well enough to describe them to anyone. It was the same with my past identity—I was *pretty* sure I'd been a woman, and I knew I'd grown up surrounded by electricity and video games. I'd never gone hungry, exactly, but I had a feeling that I hadn't been as well-off as I was in the present. At any rate, I couldn't tell you what kind of life I'd led or how old I'd been when I'd died, much less what my name had been. I had absolutely no recollection of those details.

I could remember the otome game that so closely resembled my current life with perfect clarity, though. If I wanted to, I could even remember *other* titles. My favorite was *Crouching Love, Hidden Blade*—an otome game about Japanese ninja. I could conjure all of the characters' names and every last detail of the story. If only I had some artistic talent, I could even perfectly reproduce the CG of Hattori Hanzo and Kirigakure Saizo's last battle. As it so happens, though, I've never been much of an artist—not in my past life, and definitely not in the present.

Other than that, I remembered getting five stitches in my head after falling from the top of a ten-person tower while doing gymnastics as a kid. I also recalled someone carrying me after I'd had too much to drink and gotten alcohol poisoning at a college farewell party. That was about it, though. Otherwise, all I had was a vague sense that I'd probably had a leisurely, uneventful life.

After I'd pieced all that together, I came to a startling realization. *Huh?* I thought. *Was I...a nobody in my past life?*

Normally (though who's to say what "normal" was in a situation like this?) you'd expect that a stream of past-life memories would make a seven-year-old's brain explode. I mean, that's a whole lifetime of memories! Surely that'd be completely overwhelming, right? What seven-year-old *wouldn't* lose their mind over that?

But no—I was ridiculously calm and levelheaded about the whole thing. Even after I'd digested all this information about my past life, I still had room to think about all kinds of other things (including tomorrow night's dinner).

While I didn't have any memories of dying young from an illness or accident, I also didn't have any memories of leading a fulfilling life and dying a peaceful death surrounded by all my descendants.

I didn't have any grudges, and I didn't possess any sense of despair towards the world. If I had to name something I'd hated, I guess it would've been income and municipal taxes. Somehow, my limited time here as a duke's daughter seemed way more eventful than my entire past life. If a normal human life were a pork cutlet rice bowl, then my past life had been nothing but rice water (not that I'd tried anything like that in this life).

Is there really anyone out there who's that much of a nobody—whose entire life is less rich than a seven-year-old's? I wondered. *If, by some one-in-a-million chance, there was someone like that out there...that'd be so depressing.*

A chill ran down my spine as I reflected on it. *Okay*, I thought. *Enough of that.*

Surely, I must've been missing some pieces that would fill in a richer, fuller picture; I'd only just remembered my past life, after all. Besides, old memories were fragmented by nature, right? It was probably a given that mine would feel vague and impossible to fully recall.

Yes, that's right. These memories are just small slivers of the full picture. That's the only reason they feel as lacking as rice water—I'm sure of it!

Having settled on that conclusion, I decided I'd done enough thinking about my past-life self for the time being. However pitiful I might've been in my past life, I was more concerned about the hardships I was likely to suffer in my *current* one. There was no time to dwell on who I was in the past and feel sorry for her—not when I needed to be looking out for myself in the present.



I'd been reincarnated into the world of *Royal LOVERS* as a villainous noblewoman, but that was overstating it a bit. Honestly, I was just an unimportant side character. Since I was engaged to one of the main love interests, I was basically there to get in the way. My role was to bully the main character, come between her and my to-be fiancé, and essentially create some exciting drama to fuel their romance.

My last hurrah was to ask my betrothed—also known as the main character's love interest—to escort me to the school dance in front of everyone. To my utter humiliation, he'd turn me down. Apparently, he didn't think my clingy and catty behavior was a good look.

I wouldn't really show up much in the game after that. Each route ends in a wedding (or hints at one), though, so I can only imagine that my engagement gets called off if the main character goes down my fiancé's route.

I didn't know how things worked in modern Japan, but in this world, daughters of noble families were expected to marry before their teenage years were over. Expectations were especially high for a duke's daughter, who sat around the top of the noble hierarchy. Failing to find a husband was one of the greatest shames a girl in such a position could endure. Naturally, people talked, and the disgraced daughter of a duke made for a hot topic. I doubted I could marry into any reputable family after that. Most likely, I'd spend the rest of my days with my maiden name, dying as a spinster in the house that my older brother had inherited.

It'd be great if the main character could just pick a different route, but unfortunately, it wasn't that simple. Everyone knew my fiancé was a lovesick buffoon. He featured prominently on the game's packaging. In fact, he was the *main* love interest. So, as you might expect, players could easily find themselves swimming in affection points for him without even realizing it.

Although his name's Robert, the fandom calls him "the Pea-Brained Prince." I think that says it all, really.

Before the common route branches, there's a stargazing event that reveals which love interest you have the most affection points with. He'll *always* show

up, even if you're not locked into his route. I remember yelling, "Ugh, not you!" and throwing my gaming console across the room several times in response to this. If the main character progresses through the story as normal, her first route will always be my fiancé's route.

At seven years old, I had no emotional attachment towards my fiancé. Even the in-game, evil-side-character Elizabeth Burton never seemed all that interested in him. Mostly, she just seemed irritated that a low-born peasant girl was trying to steal her fiancé and that he had the nerve to dump her over it. I had the impression she was only getting in their way out of spite.

These might've just been memories of my past life resurfacing, but after seven years of being raised as a duke's daughter, it hurt my pride. If the Pea-Brained Prince wanted to abandon his fiancée all because he'd fallen madly in love with some peasant from Podunk, Nowhere who'd shown him a little kindness, that was fine with me! I didn't want him anyway. Even if we did end up getting married, that lovelorn fool would just do it all again the moment he got tired of me. Mark my words—I knew I'd never be happy marrying a man like him.

I would've loved to break off the engagement right then and there. Alas, my fiancé was none other than the second prince of the kingdom. My family might have been the highest-ranking noble family, but they could hardly turn down a marriage proposal from the prince because their daughter didn't want to be with him. My family wielded a great deal of influence, and I'm sure the royal family was determined to forge a connection that could leverage that.

In any case, I'd only just been betrothed to the boy the other day, on my seventh birthday. I couldn't break the engagement off without a compelling reason. What would society think?

That being said, all I had to do was wait until I turned seventeen. He'd declare me "damaged goods" and call the engagement off himself anyway. I was hurtling headfirst towards spinsterhood no matter what I did. All I could do was bury my head in my hands.

If memory served, the game began with all of the love interests treating the low-born main character with cold indifference. As she gained affection points

and started down one of their routes, they'd show a softer, kinder side. But throughout the story's ups and downs, they'd still push her away and treat her like trash. On more than one occasion, I'd found myself mentally yelling at the main character to "Just forget about that jerk!"

Personally, I feel like they deserved *a lot* more flak than a two-bit rival like myself, but apparently being a love interest gives you a free pass to be a scumbag. No matter how much they treat the main character like trash, they all have a happy ending lined up with her. Is that insane, or what?

But the world of otome games is often harsh and unfair. A rival character like myself is destined to be at a disadvantage, while the love interests are clearly going to be depicted in a positive light no matter what. It pisses me off.

I was actually pretty easy on the eyes, and I came from a highly esteemed family. It was completely unfair that I should be subjected to such different treatment all because of my gender. I should've been able to have my own fabulous, noble love.

And that's when it hit me—all I had to do was become a love interest *myself*!

It was common knowledge that almost any love interest that the main character pursued would find happiness. This was especially true in the forgiving world of *Royal LOVERS*, where every ending was a happy one!

Fortunately, I had good looks and pedigree on my side. Even better, I had the inside scoop since I'd played the game. I figured it'd be a breeze to beat the other love interests to the punch and ruin their events. I could steal the main character from right under their noses.

Anyway, my point was that this idea had turned my world upside down.

"You can't change other people, but you can change yourself." Those were the wise words of some smart person from my past life.

I didn't have to stop my fiancé from falling in love with the main character—I just had to make the main character fall in love with *me*, and she'd never go down his route. If I managed that, Robert's lovelorn lunacy wouldn't even be an issue. As long as the main character went down my route, my happy ending would be all but guaranteed.

Here I'd been, worrying about how to break off my engagement without bringing shame to my family's name or—even worse—offending the royal family. But now that question didn't even matter. Why? Because the main character would lead me to my happy ending through...the power of love, or something.

I clenched my fist.

I'd meet the main character when we were seventeen, after her saintly powers had awoken. She'd transfer into my school that year in the spring. Until then, I'd have to do everything in my power to fashion myself into a noble, fabulous, and handsome young man (well, woman) who could hold her own against the likes of Robert and the other love interests.

There was much to do, but my mood had improved dramatically.

I got up out of bed and grabbed a pair of scissors from my writing desk. Determined, I gathered my waist-length hair up into a bundle and lopped it all off randomly. It was a short mess, but I could get the beautician to tidy it up later. Good thing I'd taken the initiative—if I'd asked them to cut it short for me, there's every chance they might have refused. But this length was just right. It called to mind the Meiji-era samurai I'd read about in my previous life, who'd chopped off their topknots in a scandalous display of modernization.

Strands of my golden hair fluttered in the air, gleaming as sunlight from the window passed through them. In the well-polished window pane, I caught a glimpse of my unusually hawkish smile that seemed completely out of place on a seven-year-old.

Reaffirming my resolve, I whispered, "Just you wait, lover boys. You have no idea what's coming."



I moved quickly to take my next steps. I tagged along uninvited to my brother's swordsmanship training so I could practice too, and I asked the head chef to put extra calcium and protein into my meals. I wouldn't get anywhere as an otome game love interest if I didn't have the muscles to show for it. It'd make swordsmanship training a whole lot easier too. If I wanted to get stronger, I'd have to do some bodybuilding. Love interests also had to be tall. I knew diet played a big part in both of these areas.

I'd need to learn about women too—especially what made them swoon and what set their hearts aflutter. I filled the library with ladies' romance novels and read them voraciously. I remembered a lot from the game, but as the player, I had no insight into the main character's tastes. What kind of men got all the ladies in this world? What did women look for in a man? If I wanted the answers to these questions, I knew romance novels would be the perfect place to look.

I even wore men's clothes that were tailored to my size. "The clothes make the man," as they say. I started my foray into men's fashion by borrowing my older brother's clothes, but the fit wasn't quite right. He was a little on the pudgy side, but in a nice way—kind of like a marshmallow.

I tried on some men's clothing and looked at myself in the mirror.

Huh. Not bad.

I had delicate facial features, and was decidedly more "homely" than "heartthrob"...but that could be fixed.

I didn't yet know much about the makeup of this world, but I could tell from looking at my mother and her friends that it was fairly advanced. I knew that learning how to harness the power of makeup would get me far. I could rely on my personality to get me the rest of the way.

Most of the love interests had long hair, so I'd cut my hair short to distinguish myself. If you're wondering just *how* short I cut it, let me give you an idea: it was an undercut that was short enough to need barber's clippers to trim up the sides. My parents cried when they saw it, by the way. They'd been laughing off my antics as childish whims, but their smiles had dropped with the undercut. I guess they'd finally realized I was serious.

The family I'd been born into, the Burtons, were regarded by the other nobles as the Honorable Duke and his family. Not only were we high-ranking aristocrats, but we had political prowess and a massive fortune. The soil of our duchy was rich and fertile, and we knew how to make the most of it. But the biggest asset that I'd inherited was reputation.

In the first days of the kingdom's founding, the threat of war for the throne had loomed large. To prevent it, the crown prince's younger brother had renounced his royal status and become a commoner. That was the start of my family tree.

Apparently, the crown prince's younger brother was a well-respected man. I suspected we likely had his bloodline to thank for our reputation. Every Burton patriarch that followed him had—more or less—been blessed with the respect of the kingdom's people. Or, to put it another way, maybe it was just that only well-respected men had been allowed to carry on the family legacy.

The Burtons were friends to the benevolent, and (oddly enough) also to the malevolent. Evil or good, anyone who dared to make an enemy of one Burton would find an enemy in all of us. That was the word around town, anyway. The Burtons' generosity might've made us seem like easy targets, but the stories of our fierce loyalty scared off any would-be, small-fry swindlers.

It was worth taking everything I just said with a grain of salt, though. Personally, I took it with a healthy heap of the stuff. But I would see for myself why the Burtons were held in such high esteem before too long.



While I was practicing my swordsmanship one day, my father showed up to dole out some brutally honest advice about my “eccentric whims” (which, to be fair, wouldn't have looked like anything else to him).

I was impressed by his method—he didn't scold me or try to force any ideas on me about how I should behave. Instead, he gently invited me to see the error of my ways. He laid out several reasons. For example, he told me that I was creating problems for my fiancé, inviting unwanted rumors, and potentially hurting myself and any future prospects...possibly even my family's. Then, he asked me why I'd chosen this course of action.

By the end of it, I had a new appreciation for why he'd been deemed "the Honorable Duke." In this world, a patriarch's will was *not* to be questioned. What's more, noble families often saw their daughters as mere political tools. You can imagine, then, that there weren't many fathers out there like him, who'd try to reason with their daughters who'd started cross-dressing out of nowhere.

If I could've given him a compelling reason for my behavior, it would've made for a fantastic story to tell once I'd made it in the world. Unfortunately, my reasons weren't so easy to explain. I could hardly tell him that I was doing all of this to pursue the main character of a dating game ten years down the road, after all. The main character hadn't even awoken to her saintly powers yet.

Instead, I said, "I just felt that this is what I should be doing. I *need* to do this."

My father frowned.

I'd tried to choose my words carefully to avoid outright lying, but it had ended up coming across as being stubborn. *Oh, well.*

"Father," my brother called out as he walked up and stood next to me.

His swordsmanship instructor hung back awkwardly, as if trying to pretend he wasn't there.

My brother's near-translucent golden hair and sky-blue eyes were the spitting image of my father's. They were the colors of honor—proof that they were the heads of the Burton household. My features bore a resemblance, but they were downright dull in comparison to my brother's luster. That being said, his pale, plump, rice-cake face looked nothing like my father's.

As he stood by my side, he lowered his head into a bow. "Allow me to add my voice to Lizzy's. Please let her do as she wishes."

My eyes shot wide open. Sure, my brother was a sweetheart. He cared deeply for me and showered me with love. All the memories that I had of Elizabeth Burton's life up until her current seven years of age were proof enough of that. Still...no matter how much he doted on me, there was no reason for him to bow his head over *my* request. Typically, he'd join my father in chastising me. That, or he'd just watch on silently. But here he was, standing at my side and bowing

his head on my behalf. I was stunned.

Why would he do that for me? I couldn't think of a single reason, but I couldn't help being touched by his gesture.

Then I realized—this was what it *really* meant to be honorable.

“Lizzie’s working really hard at her swordsmanship. She’s even more serious about it than I am! Besides, she’s not slacking off on her etiquette or dancing lessons. And she’s still reading plenty of books and devoting herself to her studies,” my brother explained.

Uh-huh, I get it now.

I was happy that he’d taken my side, and he was happy that he’d gotten to advocate for me. He was the kind of guy who said exactly what people wanted to hear at exactly the right moment, who could offer help without hesitation. It was a lifetime of just such moments that earned the Burtons such respect.

If my brother were ever in trouble, I was sure I’d come running to offer aid. Even if it asked something of me, I’d probably want to lend him a hand. Why? Because he’d done that for me, and I knew it made him happy to do so.

Once you knew the Burtons’ trick, it was actually childishly simple. But just knowing it didn’t mean you could imitate it. That’s exactly why the Burtons had come this far—because it wasn’t something you could fake, nor was it something you could resist.

“I’m sure Lizzie really believes that she needs this training. So, please, father...”

I bowed my head, just like my brother. “Please.”

Looking down at the two of us, the Honorable Duke frowned again...then finally broke into a smile.

Anyone Can Become a Heartthrob

Now that I had permission to dress as a boy and continue my swordsmanship training, I became even more obsessed with self-improvement. I begged my mother to take me to the theater so I could learn more about makeup, and—to my horror—she excitedly exclaimed, “So, you *are* interested in girly things!”

After we’d been to the theater several times together, I put my new makeup knowledge to use in my cross-dressing. That was when she realized what my interest in the theater had *really* been about. I felt a pang of guilt when I saw how disappointed she was.

I wasn’t exactly an expert from the get-go. Since I’d been learning from stage makeup, several of my attempts just ended up making me look cartoonish and absurd. I think it took me about a month before I started getting the hang of it.

With a little effort, I knew I could transform myself into a heartthrob.

My brother was absolutely no help, though. No matter what I looked like, he wouldn’t hesitate to brag that he had “the cutest little sister in the whole world.”

I don’t know if I had the calcium to thank, but I was steadily growing taller and taller. I’m pretty sure I grew twenty whole centimeters in the span of a year, and I stood a whole head above other kids my age. Aside from my everlasting hatred for bell peppers, I developed a taste for all kinds of food.

My swordsmanship gains were even more remarkable. I wasn’t exactly athletic in my past life (at least, that was the impression I had), but it seemed that I had a special talent for swordplay in my current one. Or rather...Elizabeth Burton did. Of course, if I’d lived out my whole life as a typical duke’s daughter, I probably never would’ve discovered that.

After training for about a year, I was able to beat my private swordsmanship tutor when we sparred. Naturally, I was also more skilled than my brother.

More than anything, I was obsessed with training. I still had the body of a

child, so weightlifting wasn't an option, but I could do plenty of other things: bodyweight training, swinging a sword around, sidestepping, running, defensive rolls...you get the picture. It was exciting to master skills I hadn't been able to manage the day before, and I enjoyed being surprised by how deftly I could maneuver my body.

In my previous life, I'd heard a certain saying several times—"if you find something you love, you'll never work a day in your life." That was certainly true in my case. Even outside of practice, I devoted all of my free time to my training. Not only did I have the talent, but I was also putting in the effort. I was bound to get stronger.



After immersing myself in my training day after day, I'd almost forgotten that I was a duke's daughter.

Unfortunately, even a degenerate daughter of a duke like me had to participate in high society sometimes—by making an appearance, for example, at their betrothed's eighth birthday party. Fortunately, since I hadn't made my societal debut, my actual responsibilities as a guest were few. No dancing would be expected of me. All I had to do was smile by my fiancé's side and exchange simple pleasantries.

Does it even make a difference whether I go or not?

I really wasn't up for it, but it felt like the least I could do to show my appreciation for all the freedom I was typically given. Besides, I knew there would be consequences if I didn't at least show my face from time to time.

So that was how I found myself seated in front of my dresser with several maids crowded around me applying my makeup.

"You know, I haven't dressed up like a girl in ages," I said without thinking.

"Don't say it like that, Lady Elizabeth," the head maid rebuked.

She stood in the back, watching over as the younger maids applied my makeup. I had a feeling she was probably just there to make sure I didn't try to run away.

I peered in the mirror at my dolled-up face. I was used to wearing makeup that I'd applied myself to make me appear more boyish, so the new style was actually kind of refreshing. It flattered my delicate features. Honestly, I didn't look half bad.

Still, I preferred my usual style. I spoke and behaved in a manner befitting of my typical male attire, since I was aiming to be a noble, fabulous love interest. It only made sense that I'd look better when who I was on the outside matched who I was on the inside.

"That hair simply won't do." I heard the click of her heels as my mother, who'd been watching on from a distance, approached my chair.

My mother was a dainty, pretty woman, but when she furrowed her brow and looked down at you, she was a force to be reckoned with.

"Come on, what's wrong with it?" I asked. "It'll be fine if I just wear it down."

"Absolutely not," the head maid replied.

"Okay, see, this is exactly why I feel like I'm 'dressing up' like a girl."

My suggestions were immediately shot down. *What's the deal?* I thought. *I thought I was just letting the maids do my makeup, not giving up my right to speak.*

I made eye contact with the head maid in the mirror's reflection and shrugged my shoulders dejectedly.

"Who cares what I look like? The prince is the main attraction. No one's even going to be paying attention to me."

"You're his fiancée. *Everyone's* going to be paying attention to you!" This time, it was my mother who rebuked me.

After she and the head maid hemmed and hawed over it, they decided to comb down all of my hair and pin it up in the back with a hairpiece (stabbing me in the head several times in the process). After they'd wrapped the hairpiece into a bun and pinned it, they covered it with a lace bun net and called it a day. I looked like a ballerina, but I conceded that it was probably a better look than the *au naturel* style I'd suggested.

The idea of trudging along in a heavy dress had filled me with dread, but after putting one on again for the first time in a while, I realized that it actually wasn't that bad. I figured that might've had something to do with all the stamina and muscle I'd been building. *Seems like my training's paying off.*

I hadn't really wanted to go to the party, but this unexpected opportunity to see the fruits of my labor lifted my spirits somewhat. I could protest all I wanted, but I knew it wouldn't save me. I just had to suck it up and finish the job. Then I could get back to my training.



The time of the party had finally arrived.

I transformed myself temporarily into a meet-and-greet machine, bowing at my fiancé's side and exchanging pleasantries with guests as they arrived. I'd ruin it all if I said anything of substance, so I decided to leave most of the talking to my father and just smile sweetly. Even to Robert, the most I said was "How do you do?"

The silence felt unusually stifling. I worried that I might never be able to speak again.

Left with nothing to do, I found myself staring absentmindedly at Robert's face. It felt surreal to think that we now existed in the same dimension. It was like he was a 2D character that had somehow found his way into the 3D world, which...was kind of the case, in a way.

The Robert standing next to me did resemble his in-game portrait. His bored, somewhat arrogant attitude and his swept-back, auburn hair were reminiscent of the older Robert that I was familiar with. It was no surprise that he was a love interest. Even with that vacant look in his eyes, he was too beautiful to be real.

Actually, rather than a 2D character, he looked like a child actor from some foreign movie. *He's definitely 3D, all right,* I thought. *It's weird being in the same dimension as him. It feels like I'm watching a live-action Royal LOVERS, and someone's cast this foreign child actor to play the part of little Robert.*

Yes, it was like he was...2.5D. It was a weird conclusion to come to, but I couldn't think of a better way to sum it up.

When the onslaught of arriving guests had subsided, I decided to make a break for it. I made an excuse that I was off to pick some flowers and left Robert's side to disappear into the sea of dressed up nobles. After nabbing some refreshments, I slipped through the French doors and out onto the balcony.

I looked around carefully. Seeing that the coast was clear, I climbed over the railing and leaped into the garden below. I'd worn flats that night to narrow the gap between my height and Robert's, so clearing the railing wasn't an issue.

I decided I'd hide in the garden for a while. If anyone asked what I was doing, I'd simply say, "I just had to take a look at these lovely flowers!" It seemed like a good enough excuse for an eight-year-old.

I landed on the lawn and lifted my head, immediately making eye contact with a bespectacled boy who was looking straight at me. He was sitting down, surrounded by several boys. They all looked to be around my age, or maybe a year or two older at most. The other boys seemed preoccupied with cornering Glasses Boy and didn't appear to have noticed me. My landing had been practically silent, so that was hardly a surprise.

The boys were all dressed well, so I could only assume they were the sons of noble families who'd been invited to the birthday party. Glasses Boy was the only one who didn't look as presentable; his face and clothes were slightly dirty. I felt like I recognized him.

Huh... Who is he? I wondered.

"You must think you're pretty great, huh? Always acting like a Goody Two-shoes!"

"Yeah! You think you're better than us just 'cause you're the prime minister's son?"

That's when it hit me. *Oh, the prime minister's son!* No wonder I'd recognized him.

Glasses Boy was Isaac Guildford—a love interest from *Royal LOVERS*, just like Robert. No otome game was complete without a bespectacled dreamboat, and Isaac—the son of the prime minister—was there to fill the niche. He was a

ridiculously straitlaced, stiff boy who hated women. He was the kind of character you couldn't even dream of pursuing unless you'd maxed out your Academics stat. As they say, "A leopard can't change its spots." Isaac, who was already filling the glasses niche at eight years old, seemed to be the perfect example of that.

And right now, he was slumped on the ground, surrounded by three other boys. His clothes were dirtied, his cheek was swollen, and his mouth was sporting a cut in the corner. To top it all off, his glasses had been smashed.

Oof, straight for his trademark glasses. Now that's crossing the line.

Isaac was under siege. They were hurling insults—and, apparently, a few punches—at him. There was no doubt about what was happening here: it was bullying, plain and simple.

But that wasn't any of my business. Besides, the only person who'd noticed me was Isaac.

I could just quietly slink off and pretend I never saw anything. Or I could find a responsible adult and get them to check up on him. That'd probably be the best thing to do here.

If I looked at it from a different angle, though... Maybe it was an opportunity? I'd only ever sparred with my brother and our instructor. Setting aside my brother, there was every possibility that my instructor was just flattering me and letting me win. This could be the perfect chance to test my skills against an uninvested third party. I could even get brownie points for standing up to bullies.

And if it didn't go well? I could just run away and yell for help. Either way, there was nothing to lose. I made up my mind.

The ground crunched under my feet as I stood up, alerting the boys who were surrounding Isaac. Flustered, they whipped around to find the source.

"Hey, Isaac," I said, waving.

Isaac's eyes shot wide open. His surprise was understandable—after all, we'd never met before.

The three other boys looked similarly stunned. I'd greeted them earlier, but they probably didn't recognize me either.

"Uh, are you lost? The party's over that way."

"We're just having a little chat with Four-Eyes here. Mind giving us some privacy?"

And that was all the confirmation I needed. I could tell from the way they were speaking to me that there was a zero percent chance that they recognized me. If they knew I was the duke's daughter—much less the second prince's fiancée—they never would've taken that tone with me.

Isaac, on the other hand, definitely seemed to recognize me. All of the color had drained from his face. Come to think of it, his parents had probably dragged him over to greet me... Not that I remembered any of that.

"Or," I said, "what if you included me in your little chat?"

One of the boys approached me, sneering. He was a little bit shorter than I was, and he was neither particularly sturdy nor slight. From the looks of it, he was just an exceedingly normal little boy—one who'd clearly had his guard down.

Perfect, I thought.

Just as I'd spread my legs shoulder width apart, I heard Isaac's voice.

"Don't. Just get out of here," he warned me. Then, he turned to the boys and said, "She's got nothing to do with this."

"Hear that, boys?"

"Sounds like he's got a *crush*!"

The other boys let out a loud, vulgar guffaw.

Huh, I thought. My mother was always chiding me for being unrefined, but I sure hoped I wasn't coming across like *that*.

"Stop acting all high 'n mighty!"

"Nngh?!"

One of the boys kicked Isaac right in the stomach. Isaac groaned and curled

up into a little ball.

“Pfft! Pathetic!”

“That’s what you get for trying to act cool in front of girls!”

“What a loser!”

The boys hurled insult after insult, using Isaac as their personal step stool. I knew he’d told me not to get involved, but I couldn’t just let him get treated like that.

“Hey. Lay off,” I said, pushing through them to shield Isaac with my back.

“I-I don’t need your help!” Isaac cried.

“Actually, I think you do.”

There was no way I was about to let this chance go to waste.

From the way we were all positioned, any potential passersby would likely just assume I was trying to protect Isaac. *Perfect.*

“Well, aren’t you cool?”

“Lucky you, nerd! A girl’s here to protect you!”

No sooner had the words left his mouth than one of the boys threw a punch straight at me. I caught the blow softly. Using the force of it to my advantage, I grabbed his arm and prepared for something like a shoulder throw. The difference was, I didn’t try to throw him towards the ground—instead, I readied myself to shoot him across the garden, like a catapult.

“Take that!”

The boy’s body flew up high into the air with great force before eventually coming down to land on a patch of grass between some trees.

“Huh?” Isaac and the other two boys blurted out in unison.

Without skipping a beat, I grabbed another boy’s legs as he was busy gaping at his unlucky friend.

“Okay. You’re next.”

I swung him around forcefully in a giant swing, wrestling-style, and threw him

in the direction of the first boy. I could've sworn I heard him let out a girly scream...but I might've just imagined it. I wasn't worried about him, though. I'd thrown him towards the stable, so he was bound to land on some nice, cushy grass. The world of *Royal LOVERS* was a forgiving one, after all.

The last boy grew steadily paler as he watched his friends fly, stunned. I got him before he could get away and cut off his retreat. Bending my legs, I wrapped my arms around his back.

"Last one, here we go!" I yelled, then threw him off in the same direction as the other two.

Nice, I thought to myself. *That one probably flew the furthest.*

For a few moments, I looked off into the distance where I'd thrown them. It seemed like they wouldn't be coming back. If they did, I'd just have to send them flying again. It looked like that wouldn't be necessary, though. They'd certainly been lighter to throw than my pudgy brother, but I was bound to break a few bones after throwing them around again and again. So, to be honest, I was relieved to call it a night.

By now, the three boys were probably lying on top of the soft grass, laughing heartily and belting out, "Well played!"

I was sure there were no hard feelings. After all, male friendship blossomed from trading a few blows and rolling around river beds together, right? If they could talk with their fists, then they were practically best friends already. That was just how it worked, apparently. Not that I'd know.

Anyway, I was relieved to have resolved it all peacefully. If I'd argued with them or beaten them up, frightening rumors would've spread about me. No doubt the young noblewomen would've started avoiding me, and that simply wouldn't do. My goal was to have them clamoring for me, not running away.

But now that I'd shown what I was capable of, young noblemen would know that they were no match for me, and my reputation wouldn't need to take a hit. Plus, one of the other love interests was now in my debt. The night had been a complete success.

Feeling refreshed, I turned around and faced Isaac, who was still sitting on the

ground.

“You okay?” I asked, offering my hand.

For a moment, he was silent. Then, he said, suspiciously, “Are you going to fling me across the garden too?”

The look in his eyes had changed. It was no longer the awestruck, fearful gaze of someone looking up at their superior, but the searching gaze of someone who wasn’t yet sure what they were dealing with. Honestly, it was offensive.

“Hey, give me some credit. I was only trying to help you.”

More silence. Then, he objected, “I didn’t ask for your help. I was going to get revenge in my own way.”

After dropping what had to be one of the top five grouchiest lines, Isaac refused my hand.

“Yeah?”

“It’s not like today’s the first time they’ve tried to pull something like this,” he explained before pausing. “Besides, they probably just see it as payback for when my older brothers bullied them...even if they couldn’t say that outright.”

He got up on his own and brushed off some of the dirt from the back of his pants.

I remembered from the game that Isaac was the youngest of the prime minister’s three sons. In noble families, the eldest son was the heir, while the second son was his spare, providing support and standing ready to take on the title himself if necessary. Third sons and onward were mere tools used to build connections with other families through marriage, typically joining the bride’s family. Their position was very similar to that of noble daughters, who functioned as bargaining chips in the world of diplomacy.

Noble families poured everything into raising their eldest sons. There were countless examples of them being given free rein and growing massive egos. The game made it clear that Isaac didn’t get along well with his family. I was sure he’d probably been on the receiving end of his brothers’ bullying too.

Of course, love interests almost always came from unhappy families. The only

difference was in how severe those family problems were.

“I know their names, and I’ve looked into their families. There’s no such thing as a noble family without a dark past,” Isaac said. “My plan was to bring theirs into the light and make it public.”

All I could do was laugh uncomfortably and shrug. This guy was *way* scarier than I was. “Sheesh. I wouldn’t want to be on the wrong side of a smart guy like you. Guess I didn’t need to step in after all.”

I quickly abandoned any hopes that he’d feel indebted to me. Maybe he really hadn’t needed my help. It didn’t seem like he’d been at any real risk of a serious injury, much less death. And, after all, he’d been just fine in the game when no one had been there to save him from the bullies.

Whatever happened here tonight didn’t really matter. Eight years later, he’d enroll at the most prestigious and academically rigorous school for nobles and remain at the top of his class, still obsessed with being seen as a genius. What’s more, he’d grow into his beauty as the glasses-wearing character. By then, no one would be bullying him anymore.

“You’re pretty tough, aren’t you?” I noted.

I admired his tenacity. Even if it took years, I had no doubt he’d get back at those boys. I didn’t have that kind of patience. I was in the “hit first, think later” camp.

When I considered that this boy would one day be my rival for the main character’s affections, I briefly entertained the idea of honing my patience, but then I dismissed it. When it came to romance, you had to strike while the iron was hot. You could be the most patient person in the world, but that wouldn’t get you anywhere. Nothing would ever happen unless you made a move.

Considering I’d only have one short year to make the main character fall in love with me, a “hit first, think later” approach seemed perfectly suitable. And besides, it was in my nature.

As I was staring at Isaac and pondering all of this, he peered back at me suspiciously.

“Lizzie?” I heard my father yell, from a distance. “Elizabeth?”

Crap. They're looking for me.

“Well, uh, take care. Until we meet again.” I spat out some random polite parting words and turned back towards the party.

I bent my knees slightly and hopped up to the balcony, grabbing the rail and hoisting myself over it. I made my landing and straightened myself up just as my father opened the French doors to peek over onto the balcony.

Maybe I Should Become a Knight

I was concerned.

It wasn't my height that worried me, though—on the contrary, I was growing quite nicely. Over the past two years, I'd grown more than twenty centimeters taller. Sometimes my legs would hurt so much during the nights that it'd wake me up. I'd initially chalked that up to overexertion from swordsmanship training, but apparently it was just growing pains.

By the time I was ten, I was already well past the average height for a Japanese girl. In fact, I was almost as tall as my brother, who had a whole five years on me. Girls did tend to develop faster than boys in the early years, though, so I guess that was to be expected.

What I was *really* concerned about was my direction in life.

While I was doing squats in my room, a maid brought me tea. I made eye contact and gave her a smile.

"Thanks," I said.

The young maid blushed.

My makeup skills had improved and I'd grown into a tall, slim build. Thanks to the etiquette lessons I'd been taking since I was seven, I'd had impeccable manners drilled into me too. I'd even bested my private swordsmanship tutor, so my father had recruited a knight cadets instructor to teach me instead. I hadn't beaten him yet, of course, but he'd praised my skills anyway.

Most of the maids who worked for the duke's family were from lower-ranking noble families, and they had taken the job as an opportunity to hone their skills as future brides. That meant they basically hadn't had much—if any—interaction with men throughout their lives. That, along with all of my recent growth, made them easy targets. It took no effort at all to make them fall for me.

The head maid, however, was none too pleased that I'd started using every

maid in the mansion as target practice. Not that I was doing anything that would warrant her anger—all I ever did was give a little wink here and there and carry things for them. But according to her, maid after maid had apparently been put out of commission by my charms.

Everything was going just as planned. I'd become a heartthrob for sure.

The maids were nothing in the big picture, though. At the end of the day, they were still just girls who'd barely ever spoken to a man. My real target was the main character, and she was not to be trifled with. After all, she could have all of the game's love interests head over heels in love with her. She had the transformative power that main characters tend to have; even her dull wits only served to melt the boys' cold hearts.

And here I was, readying myself to vie for her affections with the gorgeous guys that graced the game's packaging. I had no choice but to win. Regardless of the competition, I had to make sure she went down my route.

Taking both the main character's and my rivals' charisma into account, I felt wholly unsatisfied with my current charms. Sure, I was reasonably handsome, reasonably tall, and reasonably well-mannered...but all in all, I was a pretty unremarkable boy (well, girl). My noble status and swordsmanship were acceptable, but they would hardly free me from the confines of my side character status. It hurt to admit it, but I wasn't anything special.

Hence, like any talented youth, I had concerns about my direction. At the very least, I wanted something that would make me stand out. Where were the qualities I could weaponize as selling points?

Nothing was coming to me, so I continued my set of squats. Midway on my descent, I heard a very polite-sounding knock on my door.

Crap, I thought. Has word gotten out that I've been seducing the maids again?

"The duke is calling for you."

Nope. This is gonna make a scolding from the head maid seem like a slap on the wrist.



“Christopher, this is Elizabeth. She’s going to be your new big sister.”

I’d braced myself for an angry earful, but it seemed I’d been worried for nothing. The reason my father had summoned me was apparently because, in my father’s words, “Our family is growing.”

I’d just nodded along, because the first thing that I’d assumed was that we’d gotten a pet dog. So, imagine my surprise when my father introduced me, as if it were the only obvious conclusion, to a little boy.

“Wow, father. The child of an illicit love affair?” I asked, staring at him as he smiled.

“Elizabeth...” he warned, anger stirring in his voice.

Whoops. Did I say that out loud?

“I’d like you to meet Christopher. He’s a distant relative who’s come to live with us due to some family circumstances. He’s a year younger than you, so from now on, he’ll be your little brother.”

With his big hand, my father gently pushed the frightened-looking little boy towards me. He had wavy, strawberry blond hair that looked soft to the touch and big, golden eyes like honey—though they were currently downcast and brimming with tears. His eyelashes were so long, I could’ve sworn he was wearing extensions. He had skin so pale it almost looked translucent. His limbs were slender, and he was significantly shorter than I was. If you had us stand next to each other, I was pretty sure nine people out of ten would assume I was a boy and he was a girl.

The boy glanced up at me. Then, without a word, he cast his gaze back downwards.

Right. “Christopher.”

I looked him up and down, confirming my suspicions. All I could think was, *Huh. Interesting.*

As a matter of fact, I was already well acquainted with the boy...because Christopher was one of the love interests in *Royal LOVERS*. I remembered how he’d introduced himself to the protagonist as “Chris. Just Chris.”

Apparently, he'd had a rough family life, so I guess he didn't want to be called by his family name. Even his character profile only included his first name.

I had a feeling that his real full name had come up several times throughout his route, but the details were fuzzy. Even if I had managed to remember his full name, I hadn't even known Elizabeth's until I'd been reincarnated as her. I never would've realized that they shared a family name, much less that they were siblings.



I certainly hadn't expected to discover that I was the adoptive sister of one of my rival love interests.

For a while, all I'd done was obsessively rack my brain on how to handle the situation. But once I'd seen what a doting older sibling my brother had become to Christopher, I'd given up thinking about it. Christopher was adorable—there was no denying that. He looked like a scared little puppy, and it was impossible to resist the urge to protect him. I could accept that gracefully.

In the game, Christopher was the mischievous younger guy. He was always playing pranks on the main character and stirring up trouble, but he was so cute, you couldn't hold it against him. If you went down his route, you got the full story behind his antics: he'd been abandoned by his biological family and adopted by distant relatives who he'd never become close to. He'd grown up devastatingly lonely.

And, as it turned out, those distant relatives were my family.

It seemed as though my parents were deliberately keeping their distance from him, but I could understand why. He'd been abandoned at such a young age. He could hardly be expected to suddenly warm up to a new set of parents.

My older brother, on the other hand, treated him the same way he treated me—his biological younger sister. Or, if I was being a little less generous with my phrasing, I could even say he doted on Christopher even *more* than me.

Christopher liked to hole himself up in his room, so my older brother would drag him out and show him around the garden and the library. He'd even take him along to swordsmanship training. Whenever he'd buy snacks, he'd split

them with Christopher. Christopher seemed unsure how to respond, but he didn't appear to mind it. It seemed like it would only be a matter of time before Christopher would mumble something about wanting to spend more time with him.

I was baffled by how stark the contrast was between my new younger brother and the Christopher I knew from the game.

No one was quite sure how to relate to him—and vice versa—but at the rate things were going, it seemed inevitable that he'd become a real part of the family. My father was the Honorable Duke, after all, and my older brother was his heir. They'd never make Christopher feel less than for not being a biological Burton. Besides, it was unlikely that my parents had been reluctant to take Christopher in, and it wasn't like they were raising their biological children poorly.

"Strike!"

"Oh..."

The bamboo sword hit my forehead with a *thwack*!

"You're losing your focus, Lady Elizabeth," my instructor said.

I gave him a wry smile. He was right. "Sorry. I was just lost in thought."

"Letting your mind wander during a match? Unacceptable."

"You're right. I can't expect to win when my mind is somewhere else."

"That's true, but that's not the issue," he replied. "You're breaking the Code of Chivalry."

"The Code of Chivalry?" I asked. It didn't ring a bell.

There'd been no knights to speak of in my past life, and even in my present life as Elizabeth, I was only ever accustomed to being protected by the knights—not trying to become one.

"You must approach each match in earnest," my instructor elaborated. "It's a sign of respect for your opponent. One of a knight's duties is to demonstrate this courtesy as a role model for the people."

This Code of Chivalry must've been deeply important to him, because his voice was bright as he continued to tell me about it.

Another lecture on courtesy and manners, I thought. Great. My favorite.

The basics of etiquette were no problem for me whatsoever; I'd already mastered them. New principles, however, required strenuous effort to commit to memory. It was the same with my academic studies. I'd hit the limits of how far my inborn intelligence could take me, and now it felt like there was so much material that I had no choice but to learn through rote memorization.

"When you fight in earnest, you fight to win and to hone your swordsmanship skills. There's nothing unchivalrous about growing stronger or winning, but you must never misuse your power. And in order to use your power for good, you must always uphold the Code of Chivalry. 'Vanquish the strong and protect the weak. Respect your foe, no matter who they may be.' These are the Code's core tenets."

"Cool," I replied half-heartedly.

"Lizzie..." my brother warned after hearing my clearly bored reply.

Flustered, I turned to him and tried to smooth things over. "Did you know about the Code?"

"Of course. Every noble ought to know about it."

Spoken like a true duke's heir. I understood what he meant. After all, I knew my place as Elizabeth Burton.

As you'd expect of the Honorable Duke's daughter, and of my older brother's younger sister, Elizabeth Burton was apparently a very talented young lady. Growing up a golden child only to be dumped by her fiancé must've been a real slap in the face.

"Besides," my brother said. "Every boy looks up to the knights."

"They do?"

"That's right. Don't girls look up to them too? They're always showing up in those stories you read, aren't they?"

I nodded. Whether in fairy tales or romance novels, knights featured almost

as prominently as princes... Although I had a feeling they almost never got a happy ending. They were either too high-born for the peasant girls they fell in love with or too low-born for the princesses.

When I thought about professions boys admired, I imagined baseball players and police officers. I could see how knights would fit into the mix. I'd heard that the Royal Guard was an elite force on par with the high-ranking nobles. Even if you were born a commoner, you could attain knighthood through distinguished service. I figured it must've been a vaunted profession that transcended class.

Interesting. Maybe I should become a knight. Would that make me more desirable?

Fortunately, I was already good with a sword. If I had to pick, I actually preferred unarmed martial arts, but I decided I'd shift my focus to swordsmanship.

"Can we spar again, sir?" I asked.

"What? But Lady Elizabeth—" he began.

"It was fascinating to hear about the Code of Chivalry. I'd like to spar again in earnest this time, just like the Code calls for."

As I smiled at my instructor, I could've sworn I saw his face stiffen slightly.

Bad Little Boys Get Spanked

From that day on, my training was no longer limited to swordsmanship. I began to study the Code of Chivalry, which included how to conduct oneself like a gentleman as well as how to cultivate a sense of justice, virtues, and ethics. Put them all together, and apparently you had the Code of Chivalry.

As a whole package, it didn't exactly click for me, but I was able to make sense of it by dividing it into one part at a time. I already had a decent grasp on justice, virtues, and ethics, so none of those were particularly new to me, but I was able to put the lessons on how to be a gentleman to good use.

To put it simply: my posture improved. I was also paying more attention to how I conducted myself and moved through the world. I learned that there was a correct way to draw one's sword, and it also happened to be the most graceful and efficient way to do it—all valuable information. I even started getting more compliments for my perfect poise during my etiquette and dance lessons.

There was no doubt in my mind that moving with elegance would improve my chances of success with women.

Being a duke's daughter was tough work, even if I was a degenerate. After all, it wasn't as if swordsmanship training was the only thing on my plate.

Putting my new knowledge to use in all my other lessons had made me more efficient on the whole, which meant that I could expect my free time to increase. My hobbies mainly consisted of muscle building. In fact, my latest obsession was squatting with my older brother on my back.

At any rate, I couldn't have been more satisfied. Even my swordsmanship had improved. I was moving more proficiently, which meant I didn't leave myself as open when my instructor and I sparred. That probably accounted for my newfound ability to score more points on my instructor when I took things seriously.

Nice. Who knew chivalry had so many uses?

In a perfect world, though, chivalry would have just one more distinctive quality...

“Lizzie!”

Just as I was getting lost in my thoughts, the door flung open with a *wham!* Even without looking, I could tell by the voice that it was my older brother. It wasn’t like him not to knock, though.

I stopped doing push-ups and stood up. “Yes?” I asked.

“You haven’t seen Chris lately, have you?”

At those words, I unfurled my rolled-up sleeves and reached for my jacket.

All I had to go on was what I remembered from the game, but I had a feeling I knew what my brother would say next. Of course, I didn’t mention a word about that.

Instead, I pretended to look puzzled and asked my brother, “Has something happened to him?”

“I haven’t seen him anywhere, and it’s almost dinner...”

“Maybe he’s out playing somewhere?”

“Maybe, but...he’s seemed kind of down these past few days. You’ve noticed that too, right?”

I relaxed my face into a gentle expression and nodded.

Of course, I hadn’t actually noticed anything. I tended to be too busy focusing on myself to pay any attention to others.

“I hope he’s just out playing. I’m worried. When I think about something happening to him, I...” He turned his gaze to the floor, eyes brimming with tears.

Oh, don’t do this to me, I thought. I couldn’t handle seeing my brother cry. I never knew what to do.

Christopher might as well have been a real, blood-related brother to him. I could tell how much he loved him.

Christopher, you little brat, how could you say you never felt close to your adopted family when you have a brother who loves you this much?

I felt myself growing angrier by the minute. Of course, it was the in-game version of Christopher who'd said that—not the little boy who'd only just been introduced into our family.

Either way, bad little boys needed to be brought home quickly and given a spanking.

"Mother and father are away tending to the duchy, so they won't be home tonight. I-I have to make sure he's okay."

"I hear you. Why don't we get going, then?"

Slipping on my jacket, I walked through the door my brother had left open and into the hallway.

"Lizzie? Uh, where are you going?"

"To find Christopher."

I could see the worried look on my brother's face as he watched me, so I puffed out my chest and gave him a smile, hoping to put him more at ease.

"I think I know just where to look," I said.



Time for some spoilers: at this point, I already knew from the game that Christopher had gone off to pay a visit to his birth mother.

At a young age, he happens to overhear some news about his birth mother's whereabouts while wandering about his adopted family's house. The thing is, his mother's supposed to be dead, at least from what he's heard.

So he sneaks out of the estate grounds to find the house where his mother's living. That's when he sees something that changes his life—his mother, living happily with her new family. He's been abandoned. At only nine years old, his heart and soul are broken.

The CG for that scene's honestly too painful to look at.

That's the real reason that he's never able to develop a bond in the game

with the “distant relatives” who’ve adopted him. It’s not that he has any particular problem with my family, but that event totally shatters his trust, and he isn’t able to let *anyone* in afterwards.

In a way, the pranks he plays over and over again in the game are a kind of test. They’re his way of discerning whether the victim of his mischief really cares for him and whether or not that care’s conditional.

At any rate, though he’d been abandoned by his family in the game, he still had no idea in my current life.

He’d been told that his mother was dead. It was a white lie, really. Just the kind you’d expect of the Honorable Duke. I was sure my father meant to tell him the truth when the time was right. He must’ve known that hiding the truth would come with risks, but he’d weighed them against the benefits and decided that it was worth it.

I’d actually been told the same lie as Christopher, but my brother seemed to know what had really happened. That was probably why he’d tried so hard to befriend him.

Unfortunately, a stroke of bad luck had happened to tip the scales. Some random passerby had spilled the beans in our house, and Christopher had learned the truth—that his mother was, in fact, still alive.

The whole situation couldn’t have been worse, but it wasn’t exactly anyone’s fault. Things had just gone south, and that’s all there was to it.

Still, it’s hard to envision Christopher giving my older brother the cold shoulder after spending all that time with him.

I couldn’t help but suspect that greater forces were at play—*narrative* forces, that is—paving the path for the game’s main character to swoop in and be the first person to offer him unconditional love. And now, it seemed like the game’s gears were starting to turn.

“Lizzie! Over there!”

I heard my brother’s voice call out from behind me, directing my attention towards a small road, which was lined with peasant houses and far from the town center.

My brother and I had started off running side by side, but after realizing it'd be faster if he hopped on my back, I wound up giving him a piggyback ride. Even at fifteen years old, my brother was still a gloriously pudgy marshmallow. He had no objections to riding on my back, though. I'd dragged him to so many of my intense daily training sessions that he knew it wasn't a big deal for me.

I strained my eyes, and down the twilit street, I saw the small figure of a boy running. He looked to be on the verge of tears.

"Christopher!" my brother yelled.

Upon hearing his name, the boy lifted his head. Something in his expression looked...wrong. It was a face of pure terror, as if he were running for his life.

I eased my brother down from my back and squeezed through a nearby alleyway. As I disappeared into the darkness, I turned to face Christopher, ready to intercept him. Just as he was about to run past me, I covered his mouth with my hand and dragged him into the bushes with me.

My talent for stealth was a product of all the training I'd done to perfect my posture and movements. I'd learned how to muffle my footsteps and silence any other sounds. Now that I knew how to maneuver with perfect efficiency, I didn't need to exert any unnecessary force. I could blend into my environment effortlessly.

Was this an appropriate application of the Code of Chivalry? Well, I decided not to give it too much thought.

We hid in the bushes, holding our breaths. After a few seconds, we heard the clamoring of footsteps.

"Dammit! Where'd that brat run off to?!"

"He went this way, I'm sure of it! Let's find him!"

They were men's voices—mostly shouts. It sounded like there were several of them nearby. Judging from their attire, they were probably thugs.

Christopher looked up at me with tears in his eyes. I put my finger to my lips with my free hand, motioning for him to stay quiet. He was clearly terrified, but he gave me a little nod. I nodded back and removed my hand from his mouth.

We watched the men run past us, then stepped out from our hiding spot in the bushes. Christopher had quieted down, and now he seemed to be on his best behavior. I grabbed his hand. We reconvened with my older brother, who'd just come tumbling out of the alleyway.

"Lizzie! Christopher!" he gasped, his voice a raspy stage whisper. He was probably still on alert for the men from earlier. "Thank God you're okay!"

"I doubt those thugs have gone far. What in the world did Christopher do to get tangled up with them?"

"I mean... Surely he was kidnapped, right?"

"You think so?" I replied as I mulled over my brother's words. If those thugs really were kidnappers, Christopher would have been a perfect target.

Hang on, I thought. What use would kidnappers even have for a kid in this world?

I couldn't imagine that organ transplants were a thing here—medical technology likely wasn't advanced enough for that. Otherwise, why would saints be put on such a pedestal?

The only reason I could think of to kidnap a child in this world was money. Children of noble families could certainly be used as bargaining chips for ransom, and if they were easy on the eyes, they could be sold off to buyers with, ah, *certain proclivities*. Those were about the only uses I could think of for kidnapped children, though.

Attire was usually a dead giveaway of a kid's status, but it wasn't exactly a winning strategy to just wait for a nobleman's son or daughter to show up. They didn't usually wander around such places without an escort, after all. Even if they did, it wasn't easy to discern which children might sell well on the black market. Taking all that into account, I couldn't imagine that the kidnapping business was especially profitable.

"Hey! There he is!"

As I was needlessly pondering their business strategy, one of the men yelled out in a deep voice. I turned around and saw him standing roughly fifty meters behind me. He looked like trouble. No doubt he was one of the thugs from

before—or rather, one of the kidnappers.

“Let’s go!” I yelled to my brother.

“Right!” He replied and hopped on my back.

“You too!” I yelled at Christopher. “Hurry!”

I turned towards Christopher, crouching, and stretched out my arms, but he didn’t make a move.

“Sorry ’bout this,” I said. We didn’t have any time to waste waffling.

With nothing but that brief warning, I pressed my arm against the back of his knees and scooped him up, holding him like a ventriloquist’s puppet. I couldn’t believe how easy he was to lift up.

“You’re as light as a feather...” I whispered without thinking.

“Huh?!” Christopher’s eyes shot wide open in response, and he looked right at me. His fluffy, strawberry blond hair shook lightly.

“Hold on tight.”

“W-Wait...”

“Close your mouth, Chris,” my brother warned with his arms wrapped expertly around my neck, like he’d done this a million times. “You don’t want to accidentally bite your tongue.”

After checking that Christopher’s mouth was zipped up tightly, I leaped off the ground.

I would be lying if I said my older brother was just as easy to carry, but he wasn’t too bad. I could run at the speed I needed to shake off the thugs chasing us.

Since he often went into the castle town with our father, my brother knew the area well—so well, in fact, that I’d sometimes drag him into town with me to guide me around instead of relying on a map. Our parents were none the wiser, of course.

As he gave directions, perched on my back, I picked narrow alleyways to disappear into.



Just as we neared the town center, my brother tapped on my shoulder, and I came to a halt.

“We should be safe here, so you don’t have to run anymore. I’ll get off your back and walk from here.”

“You sure?” I asked. “It’s pretty late. We’d get home faster if I kept running.”

“I have a feeling my marriage prospects will go down the drain pretty quickly if someone sees me piggybacking on my younger sister.”

“Little late for that, don’t you think?” I retorted. Honestly, I’d already carried him on my back like that more times than I could count. Besides, any woman who’d turn her nose up at marrying him over a little thing like that wasn’t worth it in the first place, if you asked me.

“I, um...” Christopher mumbled. “I’ll walk too, then.”

As he started to stir, my older brother pushed down on his shoulder. “You’ve walked a lot today. Why don’t you let her carry you a little longer? She won’t mind. Right, Lizzie?”

“Nope. Doesn’t bother me.”

Christopher looked up at me, then at my brother, then back at me. He appeared to be uncertain, but he eventually resigned himself and relaxed back into my chest without protest.

“You’ve had quite the adventure today, huh, Chris?” my brother asked him, peering into his face as he walked beside us. He gave him a gentle smile. There wasn’t even a trace of blame in his voice, nor in his gaze. “I’m impressed you came all this way by yourself. That’s a big journey for someone your age.”

“I-I, um...” Christopher began, curling up. He looked like he was about to cry at any moment. “I’m sorry.”

“Hmm, well... Can you tell us what you’re sorry for?” My brother asked gently, his voice wavering slightly in response to Christopher’s tearful words. He always took a kind tone, but he’d taken extra care to soften his voice further for this question.

Tears spilled out, drop after drop, from Christopher's big, honey-colored eyes. Once the first one had been shed, it was like a dam broke, and the tears flowed out.

Don't do this to me, I thought again. I didn't know what to do.

For some reason, I suddenly remembered with vivid clarity how tiny his palm had felt when I'd led him by the hand earlier.

"I'm sorry," Christopher said. "I'm sorry! P-Please don't be angry."

"We're not angry," my brother replied, with a troubled smile on his face. He caressed Christopher's cheek gently. "We're not annoyed either. But listen, Christopher, Lizzie and I were really worried about you."

As Christopher lifted his head slightly, I saw my older brother reflected in his eyes. He looked like he was about to cry too.

"So, you don't have to apologize for troubling or upsetting us, but you can apologize for *worrying* us, if you'd like."

Christopher gulped as his body shook with sobs. He looked at my brother, who was smiling even with his eyes, and gave a slight nod. My brother gave him a gentle pat on the head in response.

"Next time, come to us first, okay? We're good at sneaking out of the house, so I'm sure we can help you."

"Hey, don't encourage him," I said.

My brother's face fell in response to my rebuke. I felt kind of bad, but it needed to be said. Kids needed to be told off when they did something dangerous—it was for their own good.

"Hmmm, what should I say, then?" he asked me. "I'm not great at scolding."

"Want me to do it instead?"

"That'd be a big help. Knowing you, though, I can't help but worry you'll overdo it."

"I—" Christopher interjected. "I, um, I heard my mother was...still alive. So, I..."

“I see,” my brother said, after a long pause. “So you wanted to see her, right?”

Christopher nodded.

I cast a sidelong glance and softly clicked my tongue. I was pretty sure that the tragic history from Christopher’s in-game flashback was based on today’s events. If memory served, he’d overheard a traveling merchant talking with one of the servants, and there were only so many gossiping merchants who might’ve fit the bill.

I’m sure I can figure out who was behind this.

Merchants hoping to trade with the Burtons came a dime a dozen. It would hardly be a loss to ban one who was dumb enough to gossip about the son of one of their most valued clients right within his earshot.

I tried to feign innocence as I secretly plotted the merchant’s demise, but my brother must’ve caught on to my ill intentions, because he shot me a brief look of disapproval.

Sheesh, I thought. I bet you’d never give Christopher a look like that!

To be fair, Christopher didn’t get up to the same shenanigans that I did. My brother was probably still stewing about how I’d made him dance with me earlier, swinging him around and around until he’d collapsed.

“But...she’s not my mother anymore,” Christopher said.

My brother’s eyes shot wide open. It seemed like this part was news to him. Only our parents likely knew the whole story. Well, and me, since I’d seen the CG.

“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.”

Christopher began to cry again. The rest of his words were too drowned out by his sobs to hear properly. He tried to wipe away the tears, but there wasn’t any sign of them stopping. Finally, we caught a little bit more as he hoarsely shrieked, “I don’t... I don’t have a family at all anymore!”

My brother cast his gaze downwards, clutching his chest as if in pain.

Okay, seriously... I looked up at the sky, imploring the heavens. *Don't do this to me.*

It hadn't even been a year since Christopher had been introduced to our family, but in my older brother's eyes, he was our irreplaceable little brother. His affection for the boy was unwavering and unquestionable. And, while I might not have loved him quite as fervently as my older brother did, I cared for our adopted brother in my own way. As long as I wasn't on the brink of death by starvation, I'd at least split a snack with him. My own survival would always come first, though.

Seeing him cry like this and feeling him shaking with sobs was too much for me. I looked up at my older brother in a silent plea for help.

I don't know how he interpreted it, but he hardened his expression and nodded. He took Christopher's hand in his gently. I stopped walking so that the two of them could talk more easily.

"Hey, Christopher?" my older brother said. His voice was so gentle, it shook me. I almost found *myself* on the verge of tears. "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... But one day, we'd really like to be your family."

Christopher was still sobbing, gaze turned towards the ground, but I felt him twitch slightly. It was the slightest gesture—so slight, I probably wouldn't have even noticed if he hadn't been in my arms—but I could tell that my brother's words had reached him.

"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," my brother said, winking at me.

Whoa, there. What's that all about?

"Lizzie's always doing things to make me worry, so she makes plenty of secrets all on her own. It'd be great to have someone on my side to help," he joked.

He made it sound like I did nothing but push him around. *That's a little uncalled for*, I thought. Sure, I did push him around sometimes...but only physically.

My big brother took Christopher's little hand in his pudgy one and squeezed it. Christopher didn't squeeze back, but he didn't brush it away either.

"So, if you're even a little bit open to that, we'll do our best to make it possible. There's no rush, so we can take it day by day. Think you can be patient?"

Christopher didn't reply, but my brother seemed to be able to tell that his words had been enough. He let go of Christopher's hand and began to walk next to me.

I'd been trekking along pretty quickly to try to distract myself from Christopher's crying, so it wasn't long before we came upon the familiar sight of the mansion. That's when Christopher's docile compliance came to a sudden end.

"Um! Uh, Lady Elizabeth? I-I'd like to be let down, please. I can walk from here," he loudly stammered.

"Oh? Were you unsatisfied with the ride?" I asked.

"N-No, that's not..."

"I'm teasing. I'm sure we'd make everyone worry if they saw you coming home in my arms, so I'll let you down." I leaned over and placed him on the ground. Honestly, he was so light that I could've easily forgotten that I was carrying him.

When I stood back up, I felt his gaze fixed steadily on my profile. I looked at him out of the corner of my eye, and—sure enough—he was looking up at me, his cheeks bright red. He looked like he either wanted to say something or was trying to restrain himself. Either way, his expression spelled trouble.

How in the world am I supposed to respond to this?

I sure wasn't about to spout off some kind reassurances like my older brother might, and I definitely didn't have any sage wisdom to impart. I hoped

Christopher knew better than to expect that of me. The only phrases that came to mind were pickup lines to use on women...which kind of made sense, actually, since I'd certainly devoted an excessive amount of time to studying them.

After a moment of hesitation, I knelt down softly, offering my adopted brother a knightly bow. Ultimately, I had to admit that I just didn't understand people. But my older brother did—or tried his best to, at least—so I figured I'd borrow an idea from him.

Just like my older brother had once said, every boy (and probably every girl) looked up to the knights.

"I'll be your knight, Christopher," I said.

Not only did I remember how to conduct myself like a knight, but I'd also practiced this part plenty. I felt pretty confident that I was pulling this off.

"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."

I took Christopher's hand and gave his fingertips a soft kiss.

I was dead set on stealing the main character, who was supposed to save him. To be honest, I didn't feel even a trace of guilt about it. Still, if I could offer him some happiness in my own way, as his older sister and a knight to look up to, then I would. He might not gain the main character's love, but at least he'd have *something*. As long as I didn't have anything to lose from it, I wanted him to be reasonably happy.

Christopher just stared at me, opening and closing his mouth repeatedly. I tried to copy my older brother and give him the gentlest smile I could muster.

"Will you let me protect you?" I asked.

"Y-Yes!" His face grew beet red, and he nodded vigorously.

Nice, I thought. *That couldn't have gone better*. No surprise, since boys his age tended to go crazy over heroes and knights.

I stood up, still holding his hand, and led him as I walked. My older brother just watched us for a while with a gentle gaze, as if amused. Finally, he took

Christopher's other hand, and the three of us leisurely walked side by side together towards the mansion.

"You know, big brother may not care, but good boys don't sneak off and run away from home," I said.

"Ack! I-I'm sorry..."

"You're one to talk, Lizzie," my brother interjected.

"Three laps around the mansion! That's your punishment!"

"Huh?!"

"Lizzie! Don't you dare bully my sweet little brother!"

Seeing my brother's flustered expression, I broke into a laugh. After looking at my face and realizing I was just messing around, he burst out laughing too, a little slow on the uptake.

Christopher looked up between the two of us—from me, to my brother, and back to me again—and finally gave our hands a little squeeze in return.

An American Touch

One day, when I was twelve years old, my instructor delayed my daily swordsmanship training to introduce me to a man he'd brought with him. The man's name was Gried, and he was a faculty member of the Knight Cadets Corps—just like my instructor. Apparently, he'd come to watch me train.

Gried looked a little...*unkempt* compared to my instructor. Or maybe "unsophisticated" was a better word?

Still, he had a fantastic physique. His chest was broad, and his arms were brawny. Both his upper and lower body were well toned, and I admired how strong his core looked. With his low center of gravity, opponents would have a hard time knocking him off his feet. What's more, he maneuvered with perfect efficiency. I'd have a long way to go before I could ever compete with him.

Before I'd even realized what I was doing, I was giving him the old once-over. I wasn't alone, though—he was returning the gesture. I could feel his penetrating gaze as he appraised me.

After warming up a bit with my brother, I sparred with my instructor. That might've sounded like a big deal, but I'd actually been sparring with him regularly. I'd started beating him at some point last year, and these days, I was able to beat him handily. This day was no different.

After our sparring ended, my instructor gave me a bow and walked towards me. "Lady Elizabeth, I have nothing more to teach you."

For a moment, I was at a complete loss for words. I turned over what he'd just said in my mind, considering the potential good and bad implications. I decided to start with the bad ones.

"Uh... So, am I expelled from my lessons?"

"No."

"Then, are you saying I've achieved full mastery?"

“No, I’m afraid I’m not skilled enough to help you reach that. But I will say this—with your level of proficiency, you should be a tutor, not a pupil. You’re more than qualified.”

“You mean I could be an assistant instructor?”

“That’s right.”

It all made sense now: today’s spar had been a test, and Gried was here to be a witness to it. No wonder he’d been giving me such probing looks.

Still, the thought of becoming an assistant instructor didn’t quite feel real yet. I mean, how could it? The only people I’d ever properly sparred with were my older brother and my instructor. I had no real way to measure my strength, but I was convinced that my martial prowess was lacking when it came to *real* combat.

I need to apply myself to my training more, I thought, reaffirming my resolve.

“That’s why I’ll be taking my leave,” my instructor said.

“Wait, what?”

I was completely taken aback. Still, I had to admit: I *was* a better duelist than him now. When I’d first started beating him, I thought he’d possibly been letting me win out of deference to my noble status. But tellingly, my brother (who underwent the same training I did) routinely lost to him.

As an aspiring love interest, I had to be strong—and not just *kind of* strong, but *really* strong. A half-assed effort wasn’t gonna cut it. From deadly assassins to toothless playboys, I’d need to be prepared to fend off any kind of ne’er-do-well if I wanted to steal the main character from the other love interests. And for that, real combat training was essential. I couldn’t afford to lose a sparring partner right now.

I just reaffirmed my resolve and everything! What’re you gonna do about this?

“If you won’t teach me anymore, then what does that mean for my brother?” I asked, trying to drag my brother into it. My instructor just shook his head.

“The earl is already seventeen now,” he replied. “Swordsmanship training is not required during the final year of the academy, so there’s no need for him to

continue.”

“The earl”—that was my brother’s title now. My father had bestowed him with the rank last year. Once my brother graduated, he was to spend several years working and building a track record as an earl before formally inheriting the title of “duke” and taking on the mantle of family patriarch.

I turned towards my brother, who just smiled awkwardly. He must’ve seen this coming.

Come to think of it, there really *wasn’t* a reason for him to continue his training. He had no desire to become a knight. As long as his swordsmanship was sufficient to get good grades at the academy, that was fine. He didn’t need to keep pouring himself into his training anymore. I knew I had no right to complain. If anything, I should’ve been thankful that I’d gotten him to undergo such rigorous training with me. It was well beyond what was required of a typical nobleman’s son.

Thanks for hanging in there all this time, I thought, genuinely grateful.

“What about Christopher?” I asked the instructor.

“Lord Christopher is still mastering the basics. Your first instructor would be much better suited to teaching him than I would be.”

Every protest I threw at him, he parlayed readily. He was right, though. Christopher apparently hadn’t undergone any training at his previous home. Even after the two years of training he’d received after moving in with us, he was still only at the level of building strength and familiarizing himself with a sword.

All right, I thought. *Enough beating around the bush. My older brother and Christopher aren’t the real concern here—it’s me I’m worried about.*

“Okay, but what about *my* training? I still have a long way to go.”

“Your skills are more than sufficient for a young lady of nobility, I assure you.”

“Well, they’re not sufficient for *me*,” I shot back.

“I’m aware.” My instructor nodded as he said this, as if only stating the obvious.

If he knew that, then why was he resigning? He had a pupil who'd just reaffirmed her dedication to training. Didn't he have some responsibility here?

Let me try this again.

But just as I was about to make another appeal, my instructor spoke again.

"I'm going to introduce you to a new training facility. That's why I've brought *him* here with me today," my instructor explained as he looked over at Gried, the man he'd introduced me to earlier.

Gried walked over to us. I'd felt his piercing gaze on me as I'd been sparring earlier, but I hadn't noticed him at all the entire time I'd been debating with my instructor. Despite his massive frame, he seemed to be skilled at disappearing into the background.

"There are two Knight Cadets Corps training grounds for young noblemen in the royal capital—one to the east of the castle and one to the west. Gried teaches at the western training grounds."

"Thank you," Gried said, raising his hand slightly and looking down at me. It looked like a careless gesture, but he was clearly on his guard.

Right. So, he's an instructor, and probably a skilled knight in his own right. Well, that certainly explained things. I knew I'd been picking up on something different about him.

Rubbing the stubble on his chin, Gried pointed back at my instructor with his thumb, looking wholly unsatisfied with the introduction he'd been given.

"Your instructor here teaches at the eastern training grounds, which tends to draw in the higher-ranking noblemen's sons. All the instructors wanna train there too, so we're always understaffed at the western one."

He paused for a moment, lifting the corner of his mouth into a smirk. There was a strange, unsettling glint in his eyes; it was the look of a bird of prey. I got the feeling he might snap if anyone so much as touched him.

"And would you look at that—you're fit to be an assistant instructor now. Why don't you come teach at the western training grounds, little lady?"



As far as I was concerned, it was a great idea. I couldn't think of anything that made more sense for me than to go work at the training grounds.

Apparently, most of the Knight Cadets Corps were young noblemen who'd yet to start their schooling at the academy, but the training academy took all sorts. Some of the cadets came from families who couldn't afford a private instructor, some were simply unsatisfied with the level of instruction a private instructor could offer, and some were there because they genuinely wanted to become knights.

This would be the perfect opportunity for me to compare my skills to those of other kids my age. Gried even agreed to let me spar with him and the other instructors after training ended. What's more, I'd get paid for my work. According to Gried, it was "only a trifling sum for a young noble lady," but I'd take every cent I could get my hands on. I was grateful for the freedom that any amount of money could afford me.

I was completely on board with the plan, but there was *one* little problem: I'd have to leave the house every day to get to the training grounds. Mentally, I might've been an adult, but physically, I was still just a twelve-year-old girl. I'd have to get permission from my father if I wanted to go out.

I considered sneaking out without telling anyone, but my father was in and out of the house all of the time on business, so he was sure to figure out what I was up to. It didn't help that the training grounds were within spitting distance of the castle. Besides, the boys at the training grounds all hailed from noble families. I couldn't just cross my fingers and hope that none of them were acquainted with my father.

With all of that taken into consideration, I knew I'd wind up busted one way or another. So, after much fretting, I decided to talk to my father about it directly.

I couldn't find it in me to tell him I'd be an assistant instructor—my mother would probably have a heart attack—so I lied and told him that I'd be training there as a cadet. I was expecting a firm refusal, but after a little hesitation, he actually gave me his blessing. I couldn't believe my luck.

Phew. Thank God I didn't have to make him see reason.

In all likelihood, he probably only said yes because he figured that I'd go anyway, without or without his permission. Still, I was glad that I'd brought my brothers along to persuade him. I suspected it had really helped my case that even Christopher had advocated for me. He rarely asked for anything, so father had been shocked.

Father had even shed a tear afterwards. I guess he must've been overjoyed that Christopher and I were that close. Heck, even I was a little touched. (Not to brag, but I've got some pretty great brothers.)

Of course, I'm sure Christopher was aware of what would happen if I hadn't gotten to pursue this opportunity at the training grounds—he'd be forced to undergo strict training at home with me. No doubt *that'd* had some part to play in his willingness to help me.



It was the first day of my new job at the training grounds. The timing was actually perfect, because a new cohort of cadets had just come in. I was to be in charge of them.

I borrowed a little room in the hut next to the training grounds (which looked like it had probably been a storage closet that they'd repurposed for me) to change into my knight's uniform. It was a different color than the ones the cadets wore, so I couldn't get dressed ahead of time at home without raising suspicion. I knew I'd want to change clothes anyway after working up a sweat during training, so this arrangement seemed like the best solution all around.

The hut looked dilapidated on the outside, but it was actually pretty nice inside—it even had a shower room. As far as I was aware, there wasn't any magic in this world besides something called a "saint's prayer." Still, it wouldn't do for the main characters of an otome game to walk around all smelly and dirty. Many of the places that were frequented by nobles had a restroom and a place to wash up, which I appreciated. That being said, the hut didn't have *hot* water...though I guess that wasn't a surprise.

I donned my navy uniform and stood in front of the mirror. Not to toot my own horn, but I looked pretty good in it. If I had to put a number on it, I'd say it gave me about a twenty percent boost in the looks department. What was

more, the dark colors and boots had a lengthening effect, making me look taller than I really was.

Never underestimate the power of a uniform. Ladies love it.

Oh, the boots weren't supplied, mind you. I'd had them specially made to go with the uniform. They were elevator shoes with padded insoles, and I was at about eye-level with the (adult male) instructors when I wore them.

If you're curious about how tall I *really* was, let me put it this way: at twelve years old, I'd finally reached the cusp of 170 centimeters. See, as a love interest, that was the golden number. I'd do whatever it took to reach it, even if it meant exaggerating my height through special boots. I *was* pleased that I was growing taller, though.

A knock sounded at the door, and I heard Gried's voice from the other side. "You ready, little lady?"

I opened the door and joined the instructors in the waiting room. They'd all added some personal touches to their uniforms; I was the only one who was wearing mine as intended.

More specifically, Gried and a few of the others were wearing tight-fitting black T-shirts, which were almost certainly supposed to be worn as undershirts. Just one look at their fashion choices, and you'd learn all you needed to know about them.

Maybe I should personalize my uniform too once I've worn it in a bit—make it a little more me, I thought. Then, a voice in the back of my mind asked, *What the hell does "more me" even mean?*

Reflecting on my choices, I realized that the whole reason I was even at the training grounds today was because I'd been trying to make being a knight my thing. But *everyone* here—whether they were cadets or instructors—had the makings of a knight. I couldn't just brand myself "the knight" when they were a dime a dozen here.

I'd always known I'd need to put some kind of spin on that trait, though. And now that I was about to teach a bunch of cadets, I really needed to start giving the whole thing some serious thought.

“Nervous?” Gried asked as I was ruminating. “Don’t worry. It’s just like training puppies.”

He gave me a good, hard slap on the back.

I shrugged in response and opened the door to the training grounds, leaving the instructors behind me. “I’ve never trained anyone before, but hey...I’ll give it a go.”

As I left, I heard a voice behind me say, “That’s the spirit.”



The new cadets sat on the field with their arms around their knees, the same way kids used to sit in PE class in my previous life.

I stood right in the center of the circle of aspiring knights, scanning their faces. *Huh. Didn’t know kids sat like that in this world too*, I thought before realizing what a strange thing it was to get hung up on.

As I stood there quietly, some boys—who had apparently been raised in a barn—looked up at me and whispered to each other. I’d expected a certain degree of maturity from the sons of nobles, but the boys around me were, well...*boyish*.

They were a lot more immature than I’d expected, both inside and out. Their arms were all stick thin, and their knees were all smooth and hairless—there wasn’t a single scab, scar, or bruise in sight.

I was struck by all their charming little faces too. So many charming little faces. Considering that this was the world of an otome game, though, that was only to be expected. The designated love interests might’ve won in the looks department, but these boys could’ve given them a run for their money.

It’s all about playing the face card.

I didn’t have the heart to compare them to my older brother at their (well, *our*) age, but they certainly seemed more childish than Christopher, who was a good year younger. Christopher might’ve had a baby face, but he was certainly a little more put-together than these boys.

I was taller than most of the cadets thanks to my calcium intake, but I wasn’t

a total tank like the other instructors. I had more of a lean, toned build. Personally, I would've preferred to bulk up a bit more, but my priority was catering to *women's* tastes, not to my own. I'd just have to grin and bear it.

Of course, there was a real possibility that I'd be underestimated for my leaner build. Some of these boys probably wouldn't take me seriously. I knew that my first impression would make all the difference here.

I looked around at all of the boys my age, slowly drew a breath, and yelled out, "Shut your mouths, maggots!"

And with that, the field was once again enveloped in dead silence. These rich little boys had probably never been called "maggots" to their faces before in their lives. No doubt they were in shock. To be fair, I'd never called anyone a "maggot" before either, but this was the solution I'd landed on to make sure I was taken seriously.

I called my strategy "Operation Demon Drill Sergeant (American-Style)."

With an unabashed air of superiority, I looked down at the noble boys seated around me and sneered. "You all *reek* of piss. One look at your skinny little arms and pretty little swords and boots tells me all I need to know: you're nothing more than a bunch of useless maggots! You call yourselves cadets? *Hah!* Give me a break. That's the worst joke I've ever heard!"

"How dare you!" a boy spat, red in the face as he stood up to confront me.

Oh? I thought. *What's this?*

He looked oddly familiar, but his long bangs obscured his face too much for me to be sure. *What's the deal with those bangs, anyway? That's no hairstyle for a serious swordsman.*

I'd expected a few cadets to take issue with my insults. Young noblemen were a proud bunch, after all. I wasn't about to back off now, though. If anything, I had to double down; this was my chance to make it unmistakably clear that I was their superior.

I mockingly beckoned him with a curled finger. "If you don't like what I have to say, then come fight me like a man! I hope you're prepared for me to add a hundred push-ups to everyone's regular training regimen when you lose!"

“Fine!” he yelled back.

He leaped up at my provocation, and in two seconds flat, I’d sent him flying.

I didn’t want him (or anyone else) underestimating me, so I’d made a point of not going easy on him...but, in hindsight, I’d probably gone a *bit* overboard. After flying up into the air, he’d smashed onto the ground. Now, he lay there and croaked out a pitiful groan.

In an instant, the other boys fell silent. They looked up at me with terror in their eyes. If anyone had been thinking of rebelling, that had probably changed their minds.

I had to make good on my word, of course, so I added a hundred push-ups to the cadets’ training regimen. As knights-in-training, every member shared responsibility for each other’s actions.

I watched out of the corner of my eye as the boys did their push-ups and gasped for air. For some reason, Gried and the other instructors had decided to join in on the training, and they seemed to be enjoying it.

Why the hell are you doing push-ups with the cadets? And why do you look so excited about it? I wondered. *Wait...what ever happened to the cadets you were supposed to be looking after?*

If I knew one thing for sure, it was this: I was the Demon Drill Sergeant, dammit, and I wasn’t about to break character. *First impressions are everything, after all.*

“Looks like you’ve still got plenty of energy! Well, I can fix that. Twenty more sprints! On the double!” I barked out.

The cadets all whined, but the instructors sounded thrilled.

Tous Pour Un, Un Pour Tous!

“Hey, you! You think you’re gonna be able to hold a real sword with that girly grip?!”

“Sir, no, sir!”

“Then keep swinging that wooden sword till you know your way around it, princess!”

“Sir, yes, sir!”

“You don’t get to decide your limits! Listen to what your muscles are telling you!”

“Sir, yes, sir!”

“Your posture looks like shit! You trying to hurt yourself or something? What are you, a masochist?!”

“Sir, no, sir!”

“You’re burning up with a fever, maggot! You won’t get a break unless you speak up and ask for it! How long are you gonna keep acting like a baby and waiting for someone to notice what you need, huh?! Hurry up and crawl back into mommy’s womb so you can shit yourself while you sleep!”

“Sir, yes, sir!”

It had been six months since I’d started working at the training grounds as an assistant instructor. Even in that short amount of time, the cadets had changed so much that they were unrecognizable from the knock-kneed brats I’d met on the first day. I wasn’t saying they were swordmasters now, mind you. It was impossible to achieve proficiency with a sword in such a short amount of time. I knew that better than anyone, given all the days I’d put into my own training.

No—it was that they’d stopped skipping the foundational training. It was the new look in their eyes when they practiced, the longer distances they could run, and the higher number of reps they could do in strength training. It was the

tougher skin on their hands and soles.

Their sword handling had improved too. They could now hold their wooden swords with all the caution of holding the real thing. You could finally see in their faces that they were knight cadets. Well, maybe that was overselling it, but they were knight cadets *in the making*, at least.

Originally, I was only supposed to be training the new recruits, but I guess the other instructors had taken a shine to my unique teaching style. They'd wanted to join in on our class too, and eventually, everyone had ended up all training together.

I now had roughly sixty cadets under my wing as pupils. I don't know who'd started it, but my training program was now known as "Lizzie's Bootcamp." And before I knew it, I'd gone from "Instructor" to "Commander."

Commander of what? I wondered.

I had to stop and ask myself what the hell I was doing. It felt like I was gradually drifting away from my goal of becoming an otome game love interest, and I wasn't even sure how that had happened.

I felt a headache coming on. As I massaged my forehead, I could sense that someone was running over to me.

"Commander!" It was one of my pupils—or rather, one of the cadets.

I turned around as I acknowledged him. "What is it, maggot?!"

Then I saw his face—it was the boy with long bangs who'd tried to come at me on my first day as an assistant instructor. But the bangs were long gone.

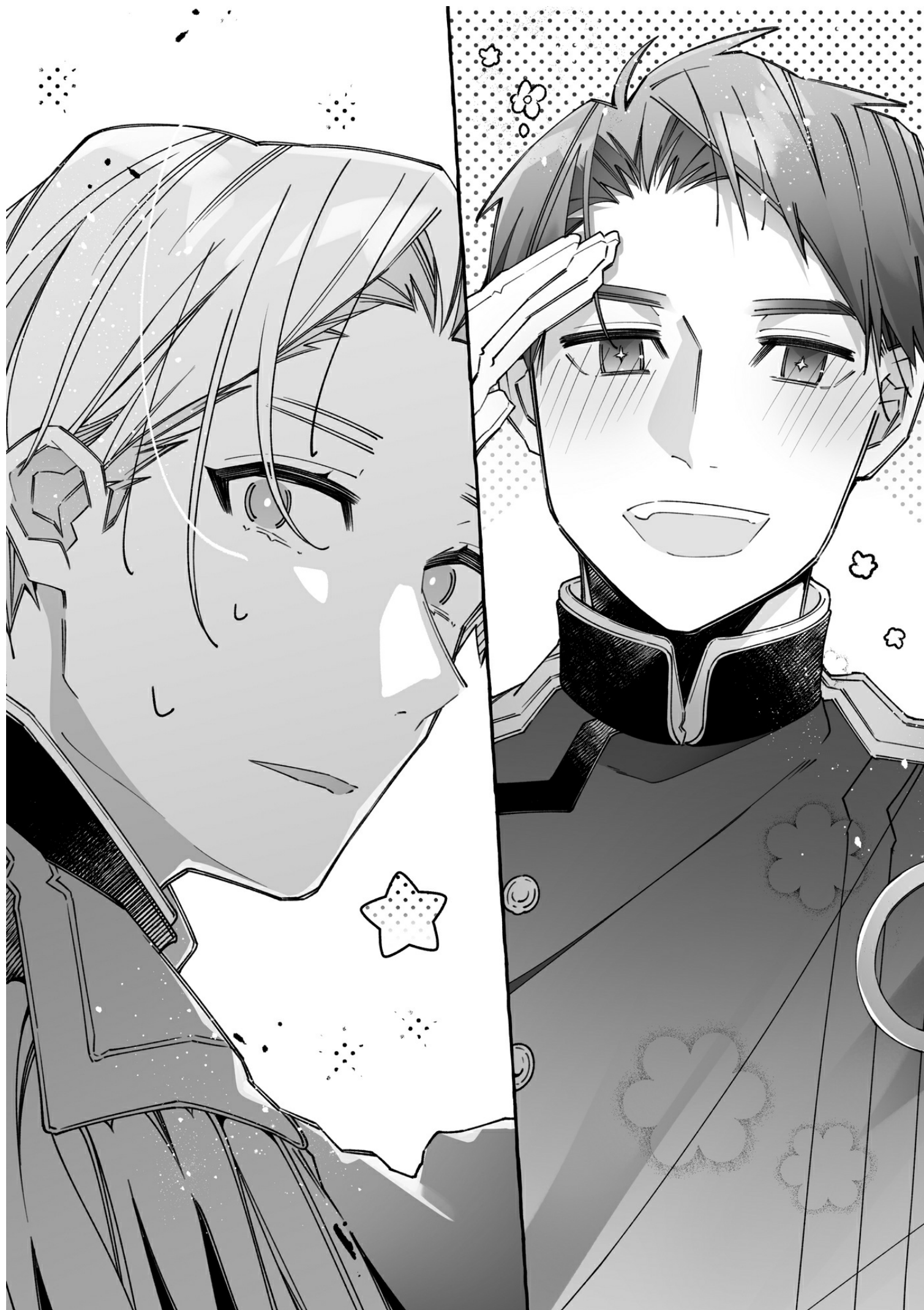
The boy standing in front of me had a neat undercut that was even shorter than mine. For a minute, I was completely taken aback. He didn't look anything like how I remembered him, but his voice was familiar.

As I stood there, suddenly at a loss for words, the boy looked back at me with a sparkle in his eyes. The sharp, bright-green color and strikingly contrasted auburn hair looked...familiar.

Without thinking, his name tumbled out of my mouth. "Robert..."

"You remembered my name! I'm honored, sir!!!" he replied, stiffening up.

Yes, the boy standing in front of me was none other than the Pea-Brained Prince, Robert, who was second in line to the throne...and also my fiancé.



My first proper meeting with him had been at his eighth birthday party. After that, I'd only really caught glimpses of him from afar at various events and ceremonies. I don't know if it was a normal amount of contact for two people who were betrothed, but I had a pretty full plate myself, so I never ended up seeing much of him.

It was expected that we would exchange some letters and gifts from time to time, but my mother and the head maid took care of that for me. They used to ask for my input, but they'd stopped after about the third time I'd flippantly said, "Just do whatever you think is best." So, I was sure they were on top of it, but I didn't really know the details.

Social engagements had begun to become a priority for me, but this had nothing to do with the engagement; I just wanted to devote as much time as possible to self-improvement so I'd make a tempting love interest for the main character.

I'd seen the prince at these social functions, but his hair had always been slicked back—just like it was in the game's CGs. He wore it that way for the ball and for official events, probably to make hearts flutter at seeing him in a new look. In his normal in-game portraits, he wore a stylish mullet with light, cropped bangs. So, could you blame me for not recognizing the kid with shaggy bangs covering his eyes as my fiancé?

Although, if I'm being honest...the resemblance probably only escaped me because I just didn't care about him.

"Did you cut your hair?"

"Yes, sir! 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!"

The sparkle in his eyes pierced me with its earnestness. His respect and admiration for me were completely unrestrained.

His current hairstyle certainly bore a striking resemblance to my own. There wasn't a trace of the long mullet or the cropped, centered bangs from the game that I associated with him. I just couldn't imagine that it was actually his style. It

made an impression, though, there was no ignoring it.

This is exactly why they call you “the Pea-Brained Prince,” I thought to myself, casting an unsettled gaze into the distance. *I worry about you, Robert. I really do.*

“You think a haircut is all it takes to get stronger, maggot?!”

“N-No, sir! Pardon me, sir!” Robert exclaimed, bending down low into a contrite bow. It was a good look for him, actually.

Is this really the Pea-Brained Prince I remember? Is the self-important asshole I know from the game even capable of such a respectful, beautiful bow?

“So?” I asked, after a pause. “What do you need, maggot?”

“Sir! Instructor Gried is calling for you, sir!”

“I’ll go see him now,” I replied, turning towards the instructors’ quarters. Even with my back turned to him, I could still feel the piercing earnestness of Robert’s sparkling eyes.

When I entered the instructors’ quarters, I found the men gathered around a desk, peering at something. I approached to take a peek for myself and saw a flyer for some event laid out on the desk. The date was three months from now, and the location was the Royal Arena. As for the title...

“The Royal Exhibition Match?” I asked.

“Yep. It’s kind of a hodgepodge of ceremonial stuff. The cadets march and show off their swordsmanship, but the main event is the match. It’s a friendly match, with the cadets from the western and eastern training grounds facing off against each other for the king to see.”

“The cadets on the east side come from higher-ranking families. A lot of ’em have had private tutors, so they’ve got a real leg up. Can’t say we win all that often.”

“But!” Gried slammed his fist on the table. *“This year’s gonna be different!”*

Gried was usually pretty laid-back, but he was clearly fired up today. After seeing him get invested in many a round of poker in the instructors’ quarters, it came as no surprise to me that he might enjoy gambling.

“Our boys have gone through a training regimen from hell. They’re the best chance we’ve had in ten years! They’ll win, I know it. This year, that victory is ours!”

“Uh-huh. Sounds like the wine talking, if you ask me.”

I pulled out a chair and sat down. I glanced casually at my uniform sleeve and noticed that one of the buttons was coming off. It seemed like I always missed these little things when I sent my clothes off for washing. And here I was again, putting on my uniform without fixing it and suddenly remembering it was an issue. I’d have to mend it before I forgot again.

“Hey, Commander,” someone said. “Listen up!”

Who’re you calling “Commander”? Before I knew it, the instructors had started copying the cadets and calling me that too. *Seriously, though. Commander of what?*

I reluctantly looked at the flyer, then at the other instructors, who were all weirdly excited.

Ah, well... Gotta humor the boss sometimes if I want things to go smoothly.

“What do you get if you win?” I asked. “Prize money or something?”

“Nope. You don’t really get anything.”

“Oh. Huh,” I said, distractedly. I’d already started thinking about that button again. *How do you fasten these things back on again?* I felt like I’d done it before in my past life, but I couldn’t remember how to do it now.

For the record, young noblewomen normally didn’t fix their own buttons. They’d learn embroidery, sure, but nothing all that practical. It didn’t help that I had absolutely no patience or artistic talent.

“C’mon, Commander. We’re counting on you here! Let’s see some enthusiasm!”

“It’s not like I’m going to be participating *myself*,” I rebutted.

No matter how enthusiastic I was, our cadets were the ones who’d be out there clashing swords with the eastern training ground kids, not me. Seemed like it’d be better to get *them* fired up.

As I stared absentmindedly at my loose button, an idea suddenly came to me. “Actually...” I said. “I know what’d motivate me. How about I get to call in a favor if we win?”

“A favor, huh?” Gried asked, frowning. Surprisingly, he looked ready to consider it (as long as it was within means, presumably).

Of course, all I’d said was that I’d be motivated—I hadn’t promised a win. No doubt this distinction hadn’t been lost on him. He seemed suspicious, and I could hardly blame him. The other instructors were giving me weird looks too, probably wondering why I was so keen all of a sudden.

“Well, go easy on us. We don’t have the coin to buy anything a little lady from the Burton household might have her eye on, y’know.”

I smirked. Coin wouldn’t be an issue. I might not have had what I wanted, but I knew they did.

“Don’t worry,” I said. “It’s nothing expensive.”



I’d promised to be motivated at the event, but in reality, there wasn’t much I could do. It wasn’t like I could participate in the match myself. I’d considered sneaking onto the field and trying to blend in with the boys, but I’d eventually dismissed the idea. It wouldn’t be just the king watching—the boys’ high-ranking families, knights, and training ground alums would all be there too. My father would likely be among them, and it didn’t seem like a winning strategy to beat up a bunch of noblemen’s sons right in front of him. Even if he didn’t come, there was a good chance that someone he knew would end up spotting me.

So, in the end, all I could do was beef up the cadets’ training regimen by ten or twenty reps.

The other instructors were working even harder than I was. Up until recently, they’d been stressing the importance of strength training and mastering the basics. Now, they were busy trying to introduce practical training for the exhibition match. I was used to seeing them practice right alongside the cadets. They seemed a lot more like real instructors now that they were demonstrating

how to actually fight. According to Gried, this had been the standard before I'd arrived.

It made sense to me. From the boys' perspective, it was probably a lot more exciting to show off their moves in practical combat training. It was also a good way for those who'd mastered the basics to improve. The instructors seemed to appreciate the opportunity to get their own blood flowing, so they probably enjoyed it too.

There was nothing *wrong* with practical combat training. In fact, there were some things you couldn't learn any other way. I knew that better than anyone, since I'd spent the last six months sparring with Gried and the other instructors. But the basics were just as important. Mastering them allowed you to make the most of practical combat training. I could see that in the cadets and the instructors as they sparred. It was nice to see them look so energetic and cheerful.

I still had a lot to learn when it came to combat. I walked around the grounds and watched the cadets as they practiced. I figured I could at least help correct their posture as they sparred with each other, so I'd started carrying a bamboo stick with me to help point out any mistakes.

Gried was so distracted watching me that he made a careless blunder, leaving himself wide open to a strike from the cadet he was sparring with. He just kept glancing over at me, though, along with the other instructors.

What's their deal? What's so interesting about what I'm doing?

It crossed my mind that they might just be straight-up masochists. I didn't want to ask, though—the last time I'd confronted them with the question, using the same aggressive tone I took with the cadets, they'd answered, “Sir, yes, sir!”

(I didn't really want a repeat of that. Some questions were best left unanswered.)

In any case, I ended up leaving most of the Exhibition Match training to the other instructors. Still, that didn't stop the cadets (and even the instructors) from throwing my name around in cheers like “Victory to the Burton Battalion!” and “Don't bring shame to the Burton Battalion's name!”

Guys, come on... You can't just declare yourself a battalion.

Maybe it was because everyone had a straightforward goal to rally around, but I'd never seen the cadets and the instructors so fired up and united. It kind of reminded me of a sports club...which made me the coach, I guess.

"Coach," huh? That doesn't sound so bad...

While I was trying to get that nickname to stick instead of "Commander," the Exhibition Match was swiftly approaching.



The day of the Exhibition Match had arrived, and "Coach" still hadn't caught on.

As I watched the cadets present themselves in their respective groups, I nodded to myself. I could see how the west side had racked up so many losses. The east-side cadets moved with unusual grace. You could tell just by looking at them that they'd been training hard. But it wasn't just the way they moved—each one of them was also *taller*.

A height difference could make or break things, especially among kids. These east-side kids had longer arms and weighed more. That might've sounded insignificant, but it was a mistake to underestimate the advantages that conferred.

Interestingly, a lot of them also seemed to be pretty good-looking. Our cadets were nothing to scoff at, of course, but theirs were something else entirely. (Jeez, how can I put it? It's like even their *hair follicles* were shiny.)

Also, I couldn't believe that their uniforms were white. I'd been wondering why our cadets wore gray when it was so easy to stain light-colored clothes, and here they were wearing *white*.

Who's gonna wash those uniforms? I wondered. *No, who am I kidding? They're from noble families, so I'm sure they have servants to take care of them.*

While I was busy spacing out, the opening act had apparently already ended. The cadets returned to where the instructors and I were waiting. The arena had wings that jutted out a bit and faced it, and this area was filled with chairs and

protected by a roof—kind of like the dugouts of a baseball field.

I looked around at the cadets' familiar faces. They were all clearly brimming with anxiety, but I could see fire burning in their eyes. Their opponents had moved with unusual grace, and their height difference put us at a disadvantage.

As I'd watched their moves, though, I'd thought to myself, *Still, this isn't an unwinnable match.*

Both the cadets and the instructors were waiting quietly for me to speak. I took in a breath, made sure to project my voice, and yelled out: "Tous pour un, un pour tous!"

"Tous pour un, un pour tous!" they yelled back.

I had a feeling no one actually knew what that meant. And, honestly? Neither did I.

"Don't you dare embarrass me out there, maggots!"

"Sir, yes, sir!"



Neither of the training camps were letting up. Stuck in a draw, the match headed into a tie breaker. Our west-side cadets had been putting up a good fight. The east-side cadets might have had better technique, but ours had stamina, so drawing out the match was a good way to gain back some ground.

Here we go...the last battle. Whether we like it or not, this is where the victor will be decided.

Our best cadet was Robert, who, almost out of nowhere, had come out on top during training. The other team's best cadet...was his older brother, Crown Prince Edward.

Robert was getting ready in the corner of the seating area. I began walking over. I was just about ready to call out to him when I noticed him staring at the ground, gripping the sheath of his sword and muttering to himself.

"If I win, I'll..."

Huh, I thought. Guess he must be nervous. I could see now why the other

cadets had been giving him so much space. It certainly didn't seem like a good time to strike up a chat.

Even in the game, Robert had often compared himself to his brother. It was no surprise that he'd be working himself up about facing his sibling now.

Still, he had no hope of winning like this. It was time for an intervention. I'd promised the other instructors I'd do what I could to help us win, after all. Plus, a victory was also in *my* best interests.

Besides...it just felt *better* to win. For me, I mean.

My boots clicked as I made my way over to Robert. I slapped him on the back, which made a satisfying *whump*. Robert looked up from the ground and straightened his back a bit.

"Go get 'em, Robert!" I encouraged him. "They're just a bunch of sheltered rich kids, so teach 'em a lesson!"

"Y-Yes, sir!"

It seemed like he'd really been brooding over something, but my pep talk had apparently breathed some life into him. I could see the vigor return to his eyes.

As far as I was concerned, Robert could've easily swept the floor with those kids under normal circumstances. I gave him an easy, carefree smile and nodded to convey my confidence in him. Seeing my face, Robert blushed deeply, and his usual bubbly enthusiasm returned.

That's it. He's back in the game now.

"I hope you'll watch me out there, Commander! I'm...gonna win!"

And with that, he took off running. I crossed my arms, watching his back grow smaller and smaller as he disappeared down the field. I was in full coach mode now.



Thanks to Robert, the match ended in what can only be described as an overwhelming victory. Our cadets had fielded several blows, but thanks to their hard-earned muscles, they emerged with barely a scratch. The crown prince had fought well too, concentrating hard on his technique, but he hadn't stood a

chance against Robert's raw power and stamina. He'd been pushed back, and finally fallen to his knees. Muscles had saved the day, claiming a victory for the west-side cadets.

I knew it pays to be jacked.

After everyone had thanked each other for the match, the west-side cadets ran back to Robert's side. They'd trained with him long enough now that he was just one of the boys—there were only a few who still treated him like a prince. They all crowded around him excitedly, without hesitation.

The Robert I knew from the game was proud and haughty—the kind of guy who'd never let anyone get close. But seeing him now, surrounded by friends and laughing with them, I couldn't see even a trace of that character.

“You did it! You finally showed your brother what you're made of!”

The boys had all gathered around Robert with such an air of excitement, it seemed like someone might've tossed him into the air in celebration. But when one of them blurted that line out, Robert's eyes went wide with surprise. Everyone looked to him, but he didn't respond. A hush fell over them all.

“Hey, what the hell're you saying?” one of the cadets demanded.

“Uh, s-sorry, Robert. I didn't mean it like that...” the guilty cadet sputtered. It seemed like even he was surprised by his comment, as if it'd just spilled out of his mouth in the heat of the moment.

That's right, I remembered. Robert hates being compared to his brother. He'd lost his shit once back when the cadets had only just begun their training and someone had brought his brother's name up.

He'd probably been compared to his golden boy sibling his whole life. Even if Robert himself couldn't see how deep the wound went, it wouldn't have been a stretch to call it trauma. Anyone else could see the damage plain as day.

He didn't lash out anymore at hearing his brother's name, but everyone was still careful to avoid the topic. The guilty cadet must've slipped up today because he was riding high on their win.

The atmosphere was tense. Robert whispered something quietly, then spoke

a little louder. “That’s right... I *did* show him, didn’t I?”

He wore a doltish expression, as if he’d genuinely only just realized this as he said it. He looked back at his companions and said, “I completely forgot my brother was on the other team.”

Now it was the cadets’ turn to be shocked. Their eyes widened in surprise—as did mine.

“I just knew that I had to win...for us. For the *battalion*. That was all I could think about,” Robert said, glancing up at me.

Huh. And here I thought you were nervous about facing off against your brother. Guess I was wrong. Apparently, all he’d been thinking about was the feeling of his comrades, the hopes of his instructors, and the burden of responsibility he might carry for a loss.

Feeling everyone’s eyes on him, Robert scratched his head and laughed sheepishly. “Ha ha... It’s funny. I thought I wanted to beat him so badly, but...right now, I’m just happy that we won this match together.”

“Robert!” the boys cried out in reply, eyes brimming with tears, as they clamored around him again.

I watched over them with my arms crossed, nodding my approval.

Ah, youth. Nothing like the power of friendship. That’s what being a team is really all about...not that I’d know.



And so, after the king had expressed his heartfelt appreciation for the match, the event came to an end. If there was one thing our king was good at, it was keeping things short and sweet. I had no idea what kind of leader he was through a political lens, but that made him a good ruler in my books.

As we continued to bathe in the glow of victory, Gried came over to tell me that he’d be taking the cadets to an after-party and invited me to join. Normally, I would’ve refused, but...

“Come on, Commander...”

I could hardly say no to all the cadets, including Robert, who were looking up

at me with those misty eyes. For some reason, even the instructors were imploring me to join. You'd think they'd have more fun without their most hard-ass assistant instructor, but I guess not.

I decided to humor them and come along, just for the day. I'd promised to be a part of this victory, after all.

They hooted and hollered. They were so fired up I thought they might've tried to lift me up above their heads as they exited the arena.

Then, suddenly, I had the strong sensation that someone was staring at me. I whipped around to see a single boy from the east-side training grounds facing me as the rest of his team had begun to leave. Our eyes met.

He had silver hair, which waved gently as a sudden breeze passed, and deep purple eyes that looked like the picture of nobility. As I peered at him, I could see that he'd been the one who was staring.

After locking eyes briefly, he suddenly averted his gaze. Then, without turning around, he left the arena.

"Something the matter, Commander?" a cadet called.

"No, uh, it's nothing. Let's go," I replied, coming back to my senses.

For a moment there, I thought I'd seen the crown prince glare at Robert with a searing hatred in his eyes...but I had nothing real to base that on. It probably wasn't worth worrying about.

And so, without giving it further thought, I turned around and joined the crew as they headed towards the after-party.



Out of nowhere, I felt an arm swing over my shoulder. Just as I was wondering what the hell was going on, I heard Robert's voice slur, "Commaaaaanderrrr!"

Now, I know anything goes at after-parties, but I could hardly believe he had the nerve to act so chummy with *me*, the Demon Drill Sergeant. I pushed his arm away and gave him a nasty glare, but he didn't seem to register it. His face was oddly red, and his eyes were clouded over.

I glanced over at the instructors and received sheepish grins in return.

“Sorry ’bout that! Said he ‘just wanted a sip.’ Wouldn’t take no for an answer!”

Just for reference, the kingdom didn’t really have any laws against underage drinking. Not sure why that was, but I guess it probably had something to do with the fact that it’s modeled off of an old European country. Still, any adult with good sense wouldn’t let a kid who was still in school touch alcohol.

Unfortunately, there were no such adults here.

Good kids need good adult role models, I thought to myself, sternly. *Underage drinking is never okay.*

“Where are his guards?” I asked.

Robert might’ve been a bit of a lout, but he was still the second prince. Even at the training grounds, he always had about three guards accompanying him. If there was ever a time he really needed them, it was now, at the local pub.

“Getting absolutely shit-faced over there.”

“Go knock some sense into them.”

Robert’s guards had apparently beaten everyone else to the sauce. Sure enough, they were wasted.

“Yer highnbess...” they groaned. “We’re sho proud o’ youuu!”

Ah, let ’em have their fun, I thought. They’d been standing guard at Robert’s side for what must’ve seemed like an eternity, so they were probably feeling the joy of the day Robert finally bested his older brother—no, that he’d finally found something *more important* than that—more keenly than any of us.

That being said, they were hardly in any state to protect him. As peaceful as the kingdom was, it was concerning to think that *these* were the men charged with protecting a member of the royal family.

No matter how many times I tried to brush Robert off, he kept coming back and clinging to me. All the while, the instructors and the other cadets just watched warmly with stupid smiles.

Some help you are.

“Commaaaanderrr! I did it! It’s all thanks to you!”

“Uh-huh. Good job, kid.” I gave him a little pat on the head. Even I couldn’t help but get into the spirit of things today. I didn’t have it in me to be mean to him. I looked him in the eyes and watched as they grew as big as saucers. “You’ve got real potential. I know you can get even stronger.”

“Commaaaanderrr!” he sobbed, eyes bursting with tears. Just as he was about to leap at me again, I clapped my hands on each side of his face to stop him.

Okay, that’s more than enough team spirit. You’re gonna bother the other patrons.

“I-I will, Commander! I’m gonna get even stronger, I swear!”

“Yeah? Glad to hear it.”

“Yeah! Like, *way* stronger! I’m gonna be as strong as *you*, Commander! No...even more!”

He peeled my hands off his face and gripped them tightly. The skin of his palms felt tough now from calluses that had broken open—like the hardened, sturdy hands of a knight. They were also surprisingly warm.

“So...so...when I’m stronger than you, Commander, will you...” he started up again. Then, suddenly, all of the strength seemed to leave his body.

He slumped down on the desk. I stared at the back of his head until, before long, I heard the soft sounds of his sleepy breaths—or, to put it less politely, of his *snores*.

Good grief. Looks like he’s completely smashed. The heat emanating from his grip was more than enough proof of that. *Wonder how he was gonna finish that sentence?*

I’d be game for a fight, if that was what he was after. But if he wanted me to join some kind of revolution? Not a chance.



Just as I was about to leave all the drunkards to deal with their own messes, Robert’s guards pleaded with me to take the prince home.

“Please...” they’d said, “I beg of you, take him home for us!”

The cadets left the pub one by one as their escorts arrived to take them home. Only ten or so boys who didn’t have anyone to help them home were left now. Gried would escort them home himself. Among all the instructors, he seemed to have the highest tolerance for alcohol. Even though Robert’s guards and the other instructors were completely plastered, he still looked fresh as a daisy.

“Why me?” I asked the guards.

“Pleashe!” they replied, not answering my question.

Oh, good God... Why do I even bother with these drunkards? “Look, I think you’ve got this backwards. Someone should be escorting *me* home. So? Anyone have the balls to do it?” I challenged them.

“We’re no match for anyone who could take you on. We’d just hold you back.”

Fair enough, I thought. They had a point.

In the end, we struck a deal when one of the guards said he’d cover everyone’s tab. Other than Gried and myself, the only people left in the pub were a bunch of drunkards and a handful of cadets, so Gried would have to take the other boys home.

I wouldn’t leave without my revenge, though. On the way out, I leaned over the bar and instructed the bartender, “Treat the rest of the patrons to your best booze. Consider it an apology for the ruckus we caused.”

That guard’s gonna get a hell of a scare once he sees the bill, I thought, smugly.

With that taken care of, I tossed Robert over my shoulder like a bag of rice and headed for the castle. As I made my way, I wondered what the hell I was going to do once we got there. *Should I speak with the castle guards and ask them to let us in? No, who am I kidding... I can’t just waltz up and chat with the castle guards when I’ve got the prince slung over my shoulder and not a single one of his personal guards in sight.* No, that would look way too suspicious. One wrong turn, and I’d probably be arrested.

There was no choice but to put Robert down. A short ways from the castle, I hoisted him off of me and propped him up so he was leaning on me instead, arm wrapped around my shoulders. I moved my ID so I'd have it close at hand, just in case I needed it.

Then, just as I was trying to figure out my plan of attack, I saw a castle guard waiting by the gate. As soon as he saw me, his face changed, and he ran over.

"Lady Elizabeth!" he called out.

Once I'd taken a good look at him, I realized that he was one of the guards that usually escorted Robert. He must've been either off duty or on castle guard duty today, because I hadn't seen him at the after-party.

"I heard you were coming from the other guards. They said you were escorting Prince Robert back to the castle, but...I didn't expect you to be *alone*!"

"Kinda messed up, huh?"

It was actually pretty unbelievable that not a single one of them had stayed by the prince's side. If my father caught wind of this, they'd be fired on the spot.

At the very least (I say, although considering none of the guards had bothered to join us, the bar was on the floor), they'd done me the courtesy of informing one of their buddies that I was coming. I did appreciate not having to worry about being arrested.

So, we made it through the castle gate without any issue. I handed Robert—who was fast asleep—over to the guard and quickly took my leave. According to the guard, the fastest way to the duke's estate was through the back door on the east side. Just as I was on my way there, something stopped me in my tracks.

"Lady Burton?" a voice I didn't recognize called out to me.

I turned around to face a man standing right behind me. I hadn't sensed his presence at all; his footsteps hadn't made a sound. Without thinking, I reached for my sword.

The man was wearing a uniform that resembled my own, but his wasn't navy

—it was deep red. That’s when his identity dawned on me. The royal family had their own knights, known as the Royal Guard. This was *their* uniform.

“Prince Edward wishes to see you.”

Prince Edward...the crown prince. Not only was he Robert’s older brother, but he was also a *Royal LOVERS* love interest. I remembered his silver hair and deep purple eyes. Edward was first in line for the throne. In a sense, that made him the most “royal” of all the *Royal LOVERS*.

“May I escort you to his office?” the guard added. His words might have sounded like a question, but I knew all too well there wasn’t room to refuse. Honestly, this was no different to being arrested at the gate like I’d feared.

I lifted my hands up in a show of acquiescence and followed him.



We made it to the office. Sure enough, it was the crown prince who greeted us. Edward was my fiancé’s older half brother (related by blood through their father, of course), and he held the first right of ascension to the throne. Edward entered the office, thanked the knight, and addressed me.

“I appreciate you coming, Lady Elizabeth Burton,” he said, calling me by my full name. But of course he would—what better way to keep me in check than to show me he knew exactly who I was?

Unfortunately for him, his threat was in vain. Despite what my appearance might’ve suggested, I wasn’t actually trying to hide my identity.

“I’m sure my sudden invitation must have come as quite a surprise,” he said with a chuckle, his tone almost apologetic.

Maybe you shouldn’t have extended it out of the blue, then.

He gave me a little wave of his head to signal that I could lift mine. I stood up, and he followed me with his gaze, looking up at me. I couldn’t help towering over him—he was sitting down, after all.

As he moved, a strand of his silver hair fell out of place. When I looked into his royal-purple eyes, flickering under his long eyelashes, my breath caught in my throat.

He was—how should I put it?—so beautiful, he could've easily been mistaken for a woman.

He was a year older than I was, but his face looked younger. In the game, his long hair was tied back loosely, but at present, it was shoulder length and free.

He was simply sitting in his chair, but he was somehow the picture of refinement. At least...that was the impression he gave me. His beauty was so otherworldly, I wasn't even qualified to describe it. I simply didn't have the flowery vocabulary to do it justice.

As angelic as he appeared, though, there was an unmistakable brashness in his eyes as he looked up at me. He was only thirteen or fourteen, but he had the penetrating gaze of an adult nobleman.

"My brother speaks quite highly of you. I must admit, you've piqued my interest."

"I'm honored to hear that," I replied, my formal words coming out stiff and affected. I gave him a smile and tried to look as respectful as possible. "If you're interested, perhaps you could come by my training grounds with your brother."

"I'm afraid I'll have to pass. I don't handle the smell of sweat very well."

"Come now, Your Highness. With your swordsmanship skills, you could easily catch up to your brother."

"No, I think I'm perfectly satisfied with my current capabilities. They're plenty sufficient for a member of the royal family. In any case, I simply don't share my brother's zeal for the sport...although *he* seems to see it as an avenue to compete with me."

He sighed for emphasis, as if to show he was above it all, and struck a pose that practically screamed, "I don't care that I lost, okay?!" It was *almost* convincing, but I could sense that the loss ate at him.

"I'm a quick learner, you see. I can easily surpass most people without even trying." He paused thoughtfully. "But that has its drawbacks. It's *boring*. I almost wish I could throw myself into something obsessively the way my brother does."

“Right...”

He looked incredibly mournful as he shared that with me, but I couldn't help hearing it as a boast. *Maybe I'm just projecting?*

At any rate, I was getting tired of this.

“So, may I ask why you called me here?” I pressed him, in hopes he'd finally get to the point. “I hurried over here thinking you wanted to hire me as your private swordsmanship tutor.”

“I just wanted a chat, that's all. You may go now,” he said flatly, as if he'd suddenly lost all interest. He gave me a polite smile and motioned towards the door.

That's it?! I yelled, in my head. You called me here just for a meaningless chat?!

If he hadn't been a prince, I would've pummeled him. But I wasn't a child, and unfortunately, he *was* a prince. I might have been screaming on the inside, but I had to be polite. So, I gave him a smile and bid him farewell.

I accidentally unlodged the doorknob on my way out, but I didn't let that stop me. What was I supposed to do about it, anyway? *Not my fault your door's so fragile*, I thought. Honestly, you'd think a prince's office door would have a little more heft to it.

I handed the doorknob to the knight standing guard outside the door. “Might wanna get that fixed.”

Turns Out, I'm a Real Catch

Pressing my heel into the stirrup, I climbed up onto the horse's back. After I gave her a light kick, the black mare set off in good spirits.

"Lady Elizabeth, next time, please at least give me a day's notice." The head maid walked next to my horse, holding my gaze as she scolded me.

All I could do was give her a wry smile in return. "Right. Sorry."

We'd won a glorious victory at the Exhibition Match the other day, and Gried had kept his promise. My request? To accompany the knights on their patrol.

I felt I'd grown stronger from my experience as an assistant instructor at the training grounds. I'd learned a lot from teaching the cadets, and sparring with the instructors had given me a wider arsenal of options for taking down an opponent. I'd also gained a lot more experience in taking on multiple foes at once.

But even with all these new learning opportunities, I made sure I didn't slack off on my usual training. I felt like I'd finally been putting on some real muscle lately. My abs were shredded, and I looked *jacked*.

There was still something crucial missing, though: I hadn't yet had the opportunity to deal with an unexpected emergency.

There would be plenty of scoundrels who'd try to lay their filthy hands on the main character—playboys, hooligans...even assassins. I couldn't exactly expect them to send letters challenging me to a duel. No, the threat would come out of nowhere. They'd probably try to pounce on her in town, at school, or anywhere else they could catch her unawares.

If I wanted to be prepared for them, then training alone wouldn't cut it. I'd need *real-life experience*. And I knew *just* how I was going to get it: on the knights' patrols through the royal capital.

The kingdom might have been unusually peaceful compared to most, but there seemed to be a reasonably high chance that I could encounter a little

dustup if I accompanied the knights on their patrol. Well, at the very least, I was more likely to encounter something unexpected on their patrols than I was just going to and from the training grounds every day.

And so, with this goal in mind, I reached out to some instructors who seemed like they could connect me with the knights. Just as I'd expected, the instructors were well acquainted with them. They managed to get me in on their patrolling, and it had been decided that my first day was today.

You needed a horse to patrol with the knights. Unfortunately, I wasn't much of a horse girl...or rather, horses weren't big fans of *me*. (Actually, that was true of every animal.) Instead of borrowing a horse from the training grounds or the knights, I figured I'd bring the only horse I could trust not to buck me off her back—my own. I called her Lady.

Gried had let me know in advance that I'd need a horse, but I'd figured I could sort that out the day of.

So this very morning, I'd approached the head maid and casually said, "Oh, by the way, I'm gonna need to borrow Lady for the day."

As soon as the words had left my mouth, she was livid. "You couldn't have mentioned this to me *yesterday?!'*" she screeched.

Apparently, you couldn't just trot out a horse on a dime—preparation was required. I guess it was like asking your mother at the breakfast table, "Hey, mom, can I have a toilet paper tube for arts and crafts class?" You were bound to get an earful about how it wasn't that easy.

My bad... I thought sheepishly. And I really *did* feel bad.

I turned my back to the head maid, as if to escape from her reproachful gaze and raised my hand to bid her farewell. "Bye. I'll see you later."

"Goodbye, Lady Elizabeth."

As we said our goodbyes, the sound of hooves grew slightly louder. Lady must've picked up on my impatience. I didn't want to be late on the first day—especially not because of some silly quibble over a horse. As I grabbed the reins, Lady and I pressed onwards towards the agreed-upon meeting spot: the training grounds.



“How was your first patrol?” Christopher asked once I’d returned.

“It was good,” I replied with a nod. “I learned a lot.”

My older brother looked on as we spoke, smiling. Since he’d graduated from the academy a month ago, he’d been constantly traveling between our estates in the duchy and the royal capital, so we hadn’t gotten to spend much time with him recently. Maybe he was just trying to make up for that lost time, but whenever he *was* home with us, he’d always make it his priority to enjoy tea with the two of us after dinner.

I took a sip of my tea, which was a beautiful amber color. Honestly, I don’t know the first thing about all the different kinds of tea leaves, but I can tell you this: it was delicious.

I’d genuinely enjoyed my first patrol. Nothing much had happened—we’d just gone into town and made the rounds—but I felt like I’d picked up plenty of useful information. Plus, I was actually kind of moved by how much the real-life town resembled the CGs from the game.

I’d passed by the café from Christopher’s route, the little accessory shop from Robert’s, the alleyway I’d hidden in with Edward, and the bookshop where I’d bumped into Isaac. It felt like a pilgrimage. If I’d had a phone with me, I would’ve been snapping a *ton* of pictures.

Then there were the townspeople’s adoring gazes. The knights were all young and handsome (oh, that probably sounds like I’m bragging about myself too, but whatever) so they had all the local ladies in a tizzy. The other knights might not have heard the masses’ adoring whispers, but my sharp ears caught their every word.

See, I’ve always had a bad case of selective hearing—the kind by which I catch every compliment directed my way and not much else.

As far as I was concerned, things had gone exceptionally well. I’d finally gotten the chance to see how I stood in the eyes of other women, and honestly, I was pretty content with the answer I’d gotten. My crowning achievement? Making a married woman swoon when I asked if there was anything out of the ordinary

around town.

Turns out, I was a catch. A *real* catch.

There hadn't been many women in my life lately, so this was kind of news to me. I'd been banned from interacting with the maids, and the training grounds were a total sausage fest—not exactly the best place to try my luck with the ladies. Sure, Christopher and my older brother were always calling me cute, but you couldn't exactly trust praise when it came from a family member's mouth.

I'd tried to forge on ahead with confidence, but I'll admit it: I was *really* craving some external validation from total strangers. Insecurity had been eating at me, but being showered with praise from the townswomen had reassured me instantly. I even felt a sense of accomplishment. It felt like confirmation that I was on the right track after all.

But, obviously, I couldn't share all of that with Christopher. Instead, I just summed it all up with, "I learned a lot."

"I wish I could've gone with you," he grumbled with a pout.

It was cute to see him act as childish as he looked. He'd grown older and taller, but I couldn't help feeling like he looked more and more like a small animal as the years passed.

My older brother frowned gently, and his warm smile grew tight. "You know you can't go with her, Chris. Patrolling is a knight's job."

As much as Christopher had changed over the years, my older brother was still a pleasantly plump, magnificent marshmallow.

"I'll become a knight cadet too!" Christopher exclaimed. "Then you can take me with you, right?"

"I'm not sure they'd take too kindly to outsiders," I replied.

He puffed out his cheeks, sulking. He was probably just getting into his rebellious years, but I knew he'd have a hard time being all *that* bad. He craved our approval too badly.

When I thought back to when he'd first joined our family, it seemed like he was almost a completely different person now. Though, honestly, that was so

long ago that I barely remembered it. At any rate, he now let us dote on him without any hesitation (at least, that's how it felt) and it seemed to me that he'd gotten a lot more comfortable around us (maybe a little *too* comfortable). The three of us felt much more like siblings than we had all those years ago.

That's kids for you, I guess. Ever adaptable.

"It's not a bad idea, though. I'm sure it'd be good for you to join the cadets. I can talk to the instructors about it."

"Thank you, Lizzie!"

Christopher broke into a wide smile. It was like watching a flower bloom. Even I couldn't help but grin.

"You'll have to talk to father about it yourself, though," I added.

"Come on now, Lizzie," My older brother intervened. "Don't tell me you've forgotten that Chris and I were there to help convince father to let *you* join the cadets?"

"Oh, I remember."



Just as expected, father was reluctant to let Christopher join the cadets. And when I say "reluctant," I mean it—it was even worse than when I'd asked him if I could join.

I guessed mother's worries might've had something to do with it. She was all in a tizzy about whether Christopher might get hurt or get caught up in some kind of trouble.

*Funny. I don't remember her worrying about any of that when I wanted to join the cadets, I thought. What's that all about? If anything, our parents had actually given in to my request a little *too* quickly. But why? Was it because my older brother and Christopher were there to vouch for me?*

That's when it hit me: father had probably only given me the green light because he knew Robert would be there. If he knew which training grounds the crown prince trained at, and he was also aware that his younger brother trained at the *other* one, then it wouldn't have been hard for him to figure out the rest

of it.

While I was sure my father's first priority had been to honor my aspirations (he *was* the Honorable Duke, after all), his acquiescence made a lot more sense in hindsight. He'd probably hoped it would be a chance for me to grow closer to my betrothed.

And in fact, Robert and I *had* grown closer. The Demon Drill Sergeant and her eager pupil might not have been the dynamic my father had been hoping to foster, but it was safe to say it was a dramatic improvement from the days when I'd completely delegated the relationship to my mother and the head maid. We saw each other and spoke every day. That had to count for *something*, right?

In the end, my family couldn't shoot Christopher's request down. He was permitted to join the Knight Cadets, and I knew I'd be doomed to hear repeated reminders from my father to make sure he didn't get into any trouble.

It was almost time for the new recruits to join the training grounds, so Christopher had perfect timing.

As for me, I'd accompanied the knights on several more patrols in the meantime. Once on the night watch, I'd broken up a drunken scuffle. After they'd seen me put the ne'er-do-wells in strangleholds and knock them out, the knights seemed convinced of my utility. They promised to call on me whenever they were short on men.

In my mind, this was proof that connections could only get you so far. If you really wanted to succeed, you needed to show that you were actually competent. That was what being a real businessman was all about...not that I'd know anything about that.

In any case, my days were fully booked now that I was training cadets during the day and patrolling at night.

It looked like everything was going just swimmingly, but I knew deep down that there was still one thing missing: memorable characterization. I needed to add a dimension to my knight archetype—a specialization, if you will—and I had yet to come up with anything. Sure, I had my "Demon Drill Sergeant" thing going on, but I knew that wasn't the direction I wanted to take in the long run.

It was too risky to put all my eggs in such a niche basket before I knew what the main character was actually into.

I figured a good place to start was to consider the character traits that women seemed to like the most. I knew I was already plenty popular with the fairer sex, but that wasn't enough. In addition to being good-looking, the other love interests had at least one or two archetypes.

Robert was arrogant and contrarian on the outside, but earnest and simpleminded on the inside. Isaac was a classic straitlaced, serious glasses-wearing character, but he also had no idea how to talk to women. Christopher was a cute little prankster—the essence of the younger boy archetype—but he also harbored a dark past. The crown prince seemed gentle and perfectly put-together at a glance, but if you looked past that, you'd find that he was a world-weary nihilist.

They all had an unexpected or hidden side, and these discrepancies were what made the love interests so popular. I wanted to find something like that for myself.

Ideas came to me more freely when I was doing some kind of repetitive or menial work. As I was mulling everything over, swinging a sword around and grunting in the corner of the training grounds, I felt a presence nearby.

I whipped around to see a man in a deep red uniform—a uniform no one had any business wearing at the training grounds. His face looked vaguely familiar. He had unremarkable features, much like my own. I might not have recognized exactly who he was, but I recognized him as a fellow side character instantly.

I wasn't exactly great at remembering faces (never have been), but there was only one man in the Royal Guard whose face I'd had any time to properly register—one of the crown prince's guards, who'd caught me by surprise that one night at the gate.

"Prince Edward wishes to see you," he said, just as he had before.

Consider It Forgotten

As I entered the crown prince's office, I found him sitting in his chair and looking a little more tired than the last time I'd seen him. It was strange—even exhaustion seemed to confer upon him a unique sort of beauty. I couldn't help feeling captivated. And as much as I admired his good looks, I envied them.

"I spoke with my brother the other day and told him about our little chat after the Exhibition Match. He's quite taken with you, you know."

"Oh?"

That was certainly one way of putting it, although I might've been more inclined to describe Robert's feelings as "idolatry." I was uncomfortably aware of the way he seemed to practically worship me.

"Yes. He was quite proud of your association," Edward said. Then, imitating his brother, he continued, "'Isn't he amazing?! We're all so proud to call him our commander!' That's how he put it. And after regaling me with tales of your heroics, he insisted that I come train with you too."

I could almost picture the whole exchange.

It was probably the first time that Robert, who harbored such a fierce inferiority complex towards his brother, had ever sought out a real conversation with him. I suspected that Edward had probably realized, just as I had, the true meaning behind his brother's capricious first attempt at connection: that Robert was brainless beyond belief.

"That's when it dawned on me that he must have absolutely no idea who you are, though I find it hard to imagine how your identity could have eluded him." As if fending off a headache, the crown prince made a show of massaging his forehead. "Tell me, does he not know that you're Elizabeth Burton?"

I hesitated. Then, after a brief pause, I replied, "No. I don't think he does."

At this, Edward leaned back into his chair, looking completely done. "Does it not bother you that *your own fiancé* has no idea who you are?"

“To be fair, I didn’t recognize him either at first. I do *now*, of course.”

Edward furrowed his brow, as if perplexed by my lack of concern. “Your own behavior doesn’t help matters, you know. If you’re not careful, you may inspire rumors of discord...”

“Rumors of discord?” I repeated, innocently. To be honest, though, I knew exactly what he was talking about. Society had fairly regimented categories for relationships, and it was hard to imagine that anyone might classify our apparent lack of communication as being on good terms.

I couldn’t exactly claim that we were close either. We’d flipped the natural pecking order of our relationship on its head. The weird, inverted dynamic we had now was, ah, hard to explain.

“After all, if you *were* on good terms, then surely you’d be devoting yourself to your training as future queen?”

For a moment, I was silent. “I’m not sure what you mean. I have no designs on becoming queen.”

“No, never mind... Forget I said anything.”

Crap, I thought, realizing the trap I’d just walked into.

He was clearly waiting for me to press him further. I could tell there was something he was desperate to tell me, if only I’d ask. When he’d said, “No, never mind,” it had totally been the, “Oh, um, it’s nothing, *really*; I’m fine,” type of never mind. You know—the kind that begs for follow-ups, like “what’s wrong,” “are you sure,” and “come on, it’s not *really* nothing, is it.”

Honestly, there was nothing in the world that irritated me more. I didn’t have time for his little game, especially not when Christopher was waiting for me back at the training grounds. I needed to get back to him as soon as possible.

“All right. If that’s what Your Highness wishes, then consider it forgotten,” I said. “I’m sure you’re very busy, so I wouldn’t dare take up any more of your time. I’ll take my leave.”

The crown prince wore a somber expression, probably still wishing I’d questioned him further. I gave him an unnecessarily wide grin, bowed politely,

then left his office.



Patience wasn't one of my virtues.

Sure, I liked to space out and entertain aimless thought exercises, but I wasn't the type for endless ruminating. I didn't have the self-control to sit with that kind of discomfort. I'd rather get my blood flowing.

I wasn't great at listening to people prattle on either. My mind would start wandering, and I'd end up just giving half-hearted replies.

So, you can imagine my chagrin when the crown prince called me up to his office again for another long-winded chat. This time, his personal guard caught me on my way home from patrolling.

I'm sure I've said this before, but I had *a lot* on my plate, and it was getting fuller and fuller by the day. I had my job at the training grounds, patrols to take care of, and—more recently—material to study for the Royal Academy's entrance exams. My schedule was chock-full from morning until evening. And, of course, my number one priority was finding a character specialization. I didn't have time to entertain the royal family.

In any case, Edward was always calling me up to see him without a second thought, but *he* was the one who wanted something. Wouldn't it stand to reason that he could occasionally grace *me* with his presence instead? If whatever he wanted wasn't worth the trip to see me, then maybe it wasn't worth summoning me for either.

This time, I tried to tell the guard I was too busy for a visit.

"Is that so? Well, perhaps you can help me with something else. I don't suppose you know anything about the doorknob that broke off of His Highness's office door the other day?" he asked, nonchalantly.

Very shrewd... With that thought, I resigned myself to accompanying him after all. I knew a threat when I heard one, and alas, it was my burden as a duke's daughter to bend to anyone of a higher status.

The crown prince was in rare form today, despondent from the get-go. I

entered his office to find him at his desk, his chin resting in his hands. As soon as I heard a sigh fall from his rosebud-red lips, I wanted to whip around and head right back out the door.

“What do you think of Robert?” he asked.

“In what sense do you mean?” I asked in return, trying to zero in on what kind of answer he was hoping for. I didn’t like where his mysterious line of questioning was going, so I wanted to put this to rest without having to draw my sword (metaphorically speaking, of course). *Please let this end swiftly and amicably*, I hoped.

The crown prince narrowed his eyes, looking at me searchingly. “Do you think he’d make a good king?”

I chose my next words carefully, after a thoughtful pause. “I don’t think it’s my place to comment on that. I wouldn’t want to be disrespectful.”

“Some might call that *deflection* disrespectful, don’t you think?”

I met his question with a pointed silence. He could take *that* for my answer.

The crown prince fell into a silence himself, as if taking in the insinuation.

I can’t let this continue, I thought to myself.

There was nothing more pointless than prolonged silence with a stranger—or near stranger, as the case might be. I’d have to try to speak up and get in his good graces. Fortunately, as a nobleman’s daughter, I knew how to butter up my superiors.

“Prince Robert is in no position to accede to the throne,” I said. “*You’re* the crown prince, Your Highness, not him.”

“No, I’ll never be king. I can’t be.”

That’s when I realized my mistake—I’d indirectly asked the question he’d been dying for me to ask. *This is what I get for stepping out of my wheelhouse. Please, just say, “Never mind” and ask me to forget about it again!*

But I could see exactly where this was going. I’d walked right into his trap again. Only this time, I wasn’t getting out of it. It was going to be a long, *rambling* road ahead.

Tch!

“I’m sick,” the crown prince elucidated, just as I’d feared. “I don’t have much longer. The doctors say I have only two or three years left.”

It was time to throw the match. Edward had won, and I was going to be stuck here for the whole tragic tale.

Blah, blah, blah, death was just a few years away. Everyone around him knew this and secretly pitied him (or worse, laughed about it behind his back). They were all probably trying to cozy up to Robert, knowing *he’d* be the one to accede to the throne. Robert probably knew his brother’s tragic secret too, and no doubt he was gathering his forces as we spoke. And even if Edward were to live longer than expected, the few things he might accomplish as king would be for nothing, since he’d die soon after. So what good did it do him to fear death anyway, if this was all life had to offer him? Yada, yada, yada...

Oh, hey... This is the uniform that’s got that screwed-up button, I thought, looking down at my sleeve. It felt like it’d been almost half a year that I’d left it like that, always forgetting to fix it. What little thread was left was quickly coming undone, and the button was hanging on for dear life.

Some of the instructors who taught at the training grounds and patrolled with the knights had offered to throw it into the knights’ laundry for me in order to keep it a secret from my family, but I kept forgetting to take them up on that offer. I always carried the cadets’ camo-patterned uniform with me to and from the training grounds—as opposed to my navy-blue instructor’s uniform—but I hadn’t gotten it dirty even once.

I couldn’t help but wonder if my parents realized there was something off about the whole thing. Had they figured out what I was really doing? If they had, they were clearly feigning ignorance; it felt only polite to keep up pretenses.

Oh, whoops... Is he still talking? Edward’s sob story had almost bored me to tears, and without even realizing, I’d let my mind wander.

I knew it wasn’t that serious. Edward was just being insecure and emotionally unstable—nothing out of the ordinary for a boy his age. Every teenager went through this phase. They’d worry that people were laughing at them when they

tripped over their feet at the train station, or that their friends were secretly bad-mouthing them behind their backs...you know, the usual. If I were being less generous, though, I might just call it a persecution complex.

The only ones who actually knew about the crown prince's impending death sentence were his parents—the king and queen—and the royal physician. And if the latter were to ever loosen his lips? Well, it would be straight to the chopping block for him.

Even if most of the nobles *were* to know his secret, his worries would still be unfounded. Sycophants were in no short supply for the crown prince, whether he was sick or not. I had a front row seat to that, seeing my own older brother's investment in Edward's success.

But it just wasn't plausible that everyone knew about his situation, much less that his pea-brained prince of a brother had any clue. There was no way that Robert could keep a secret like that—he lacked both the tact and the cunning.

In all likelihood, Edward's illness had simply worn away at his nerves and made him naive. I wished that I could just come out and tell him he wasn't actually going to die.

Yep, you heard that right: Edward doesn't die. I hope you're ready for some more spoilers.

Obviously, he shows up in his own route's "several years later..." epilogue, but he also shows up other love interests' epilogues too. In short, he always makes it, even years down the line.

In his own route, the main character awakens to her saint's powers and cures his illness with the power of love...or something. He makes a full recovery, and they live happily ever after as crown prince and princess.

In Robert's route, he relinquishes the throne to his younger brother and travels abroad to undergo a complicated surgery with a fifty percent success rate. That may sound like bad odds, but don't worry—he's a gorgeous prince and a love interest, remember? He's basically got the heaviest plot armor available. Besides, the world of *Royal LOVERS* is a forgiving one. So, you might as well read that fifty percent as a hundred percent. Anyway, after a successful surgery, he returns home for Robert's wedding, fully recovered.

Even in the epilogue of the hidden route during which you romance a prince from a neighboring country, Edward makes an appearance as a royal representative. It's actually sort of shocking how successfully he manages to evade death again and again. He doesn't even have to lift a finger. Me, on the other hand? If my betrothal breaks down—through no fault of my own, I might add—I'm left in the cold.

I was under a lot of pressure (*real* pressure) to secure a happy ending for myself, so, you can see why I wasn't in any mood to hear him whine on and on about his tragic death that wasn't actually going to happen. Sure, he was sick, but he wasn't going to *die*. He'd probably fret about it constantly until he turned eighteen, but he'd overcome all his challenges one day.

I wished he'd think about what came *after* that. He was the perfect prince, the envy of all, and sure to become a splendid king just like his father. He had a bright future ahead of him that would be practically served to him on a silver platter once he turned eighteen.

It was the same for the others. Robert's inferiority complex towards his brother, Christopher's craving for love and affection after his birth mother had abandoned him, and Isaac's pain of not being the genius his family hoped for...they were all just obstacles to be overcome on the way to their inevitable happy endings.

I felt for them, though. It must've been tough to be a love interest in an otome game for whom a dark, torturous past was basically a prerequisite. But life doesn't end at seventeen or eighteen. What happens in the game was only a sliver of the long lives they had ahead of them.

Their fates didn't revolve around the main character either. In this world, Robert had been able to overcome his inferiority complex without the main character's help. And in the game, even if the main character didn't romance Edward, he would still survive and live a healthy life.

No matter what pain the love interests went through, they were bound to be happy. That was just the way this forgiving world worked. I had no idea what the average life expectancy was in this world, but if they lived to be seventy, then their suffering would only account for roughly a quarter of their lives.

I wasn't so lucky. I might live a peaceful, happy life until beginning my studies at the academy, but it seemed like it'd be all downhill from there. There was no evidence in the game that I found happiness after my engagement was broken off against my will. I never showed up in the game after that, so I have no idea what happened to me.

In all likelihood, I was doomed for a life of despair, just as I'd feared when I'd first realized that I'd been reincarnated. If that was my fate, then my life after seventeen would be one of misery. Basically, I'd be suffering for three quarters of my life—that was *three times* as long as the love interests would.

So, hopefully you can understand why I didn't have much sympathy for the crown prince's plight, and why my loose button was a much more pressing concern to me. I just didn't have the patience to watch Edward play the tragic hero.

You're a hero, all right, but you've got the genre all wrong.

Still, he wasn't the *only* one in this romantic saga. And regardless of what he thought himself to be, he wasn't the main character. That spot was reserved for the game's *heroine*. She was the real kingmaker. No one took the game's limelight unless she deigned to choose them as her Royal LOVER.

Yet here Edward was, thinking *he* was the main character. *Way to be presumptuous.*

Or maybe he was just assuming that the main character was guaranteed to choose him, and he was already claiming his spot in the limelight? *You've got some nerve trying to steal the scene right in front of me, another love interest!* I thought irritably.

Anyway, it wasn't like everyone in the kingdom thought of the royal family twenty-four seven.

Let me illustrate my point with an example. I think pandas are really cute, right? I'd probably want to go check them out if I happened to be taking a trip to the zoo, and if I saw on the news that a baby panda had been born, I'd probably break into a smile. But if you asked me if I thought about nothing but pandas every single day, the answer would have to be no. The only people who could answer yes to that question would probably be panda fanatics and the

zookeepers who feed them.

Personally, I'm more concerned about my family's well-being, my own well-being, and my meals tomorrow. I think it's safe to say that almost *everyone* cares more about themselves and their families than they do about pandas. Most people just don't give all that much thought to pandas to begin with.

It was actually a bit concerning that someone who would one day take the throne didn't understand that. It seemed the crown prince was walking a dangerous path—one that could easily end in a vainglorious, egomaniacal dictatorship.

But, hey...that wasn't my business. Even if I left him to his own devices, I was sure that someone like my father or my brother would straighten him out eventually.

"You might have lost at the Exhibition Match, but you fought with real finesse. I certainly wouldn't have guessed that you were being ravaged by some illness," I said.

"Think what you will. I'm sick, and whether you believe me or not, it doesn't change the facts."

"Hmmm. Well, I suppose you're right."

I was losing my patience—not that I'd had much of it to begin with. I was a villain at heart, remember? Think of it this way: a good guy wouldn't plot to steal the other love interests' events from them, nor would they be perfectly okay using the game's purehearted protagonist to secure their own happy ending.

The in-game Elizabeth Burton might have amounted to nothing more than a two-bit baddie, but she was still an evil noblewoman. And what could be more appropriately evil than knocking the stuffing out of a haughty rival love interest and kicking him while he's down?

"Have you ever sneaked out into the town before, Your Highness?"

After a long pause, he reluctantly replied, "No."

To be fair, most noble children didn't sneak out into town. It was hardly

surprising that a disease-ridden crown prince wouldn't sneak out either. He couldn't exactly wander around freely.

"Why don't I take you with me, then?"

"I beg your pardon?!"

"Luckily for you, I've got an extra cadet's uniform on hand, and I'm pretty sure it'll fit you. Here, take it."

"What are you—"

"I'll come pick you up tomorrow morning. Make sure there's no one else here when I arrive, please."

I took the cadet's uniform out of my bag and thrust it into the wide-eyed prince's arms. I still couldn't believe I'd been allowed to just waltz into his office with my bag. You'd only find such lax guards in a peaceful kingdom like this.

"Well," I said, giving him a daring smile, "See you tomorrow, then."

I left his office, and the hem of my uniform fluttered as I walked by. My boots clacked with every step, reverberating throughout the castle halls.

"Wait!" he yelled out. "What are you thinking?! Do you have any idea what could happen if the guards hear about this?!"

"Oh, I would never make the mistake of getting myself arrested. I'm sure you've gleaned that from all your brother's told you about me?"

The crown prince called out to me again, but I didn't turn around. As I heard the door shut behind me, I was struck by the sense that this was the most evil I had been since my rebirth.

The original Elizabeth Burton is probably yucking it up right now in Hell, I thought, then realized how absurd that sounded.

After all, it wasn't like she was *dead*.

Any Knight Worth Her Salt Can Scale a Wall

I tapped on the crown prince's window. The curtains parted with some hesitation, and his eyes widened as I met his gaze. He gaped at me, dumbfounded, for several seconds. I tapped on the window again. Finally, he unlocked it and let me in.

"How did you get up here?" he asked. It felt like a strange question to ask when he could clearly see where I'd come from.

"Do you really have to ask? I scaled the wall, of course."

"You *what*?!"

"Come on, Your Highness. Any knight worth her salt can scale walls these days," I replied, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

"Really?" he whispered.

Well, to be honest, there were probably plenty of knights out there who *couldn't*. But I was also pretty confident that there were many who could if they simply set their minds to it, so my bold claim wasn't really a lie. The only issue was that most knights probably wouldn't actually *do* it.

"Your head would be on the chopping block in an instant if I were to call over the guard standing just outside the door, you know."

"Sure, but judging by the fact that you've put on the uniform I gave you, I'm guessing you're not going to do that."

Edward was wearing the gray cadet's uniform that I'd given him yesterday. The sleeves were a little long, but he'd rolled them up. He fell silent. *Gotcha*, I thought smugly.

"Well? Shall we go?"

"How are we going to get down, exactly? Do you plan to make a rope out of curtains and sheets for us to descend down?"

Well, well, well, I thought. *Seems like this isn't the first time His Highness has*

thought about making a break for it. He's more on board with this than I expected.

"Your Highness, *please*. We're on the third floor," I said with an exaggerated shrug. Edward looked somehow relieved, but I knew that wouldn't last. What I said next was sure to put the fear of God right back into him. "That's only three stories from the ground. We can just jump down."

"That's preposterous! We're on the *third floor*!"

I'd had just about enough of his arguing.

"Pardon me," I blurted out before scooping him up into my arms.

He was every bit as dainty as he looked; a bit heavier than Christopher, sure, but lighter than my older brother. He was probably lighter than the cadets I hurled around at the training grounds too.

"Wh-What in God's name are you doing?!"

"Careful. Don't wanna bite your tongue, do you?"

All right, I'll admit it—what I said was pretty disrespectful. Actually, I'd been showing him nothing *but* disrespect, and he was clearly pissed.

His typically porcelain cheeks burned red-hot. His indignant expression exposed his maturity for the facade it was and revealed a more age-appropriate childishness hiding underneath. And yet, the sight of his silver hair falling over his blushing face was somehow bewitching. I suddenly understood the appeal of seeing a completely different side to someone.

Yes... I thought. This is exactly the sort of personality discrepancy I need to craft for myself.

I stared down at the crown prince intently, as if trying to absorb whatever skill might be involved in fleshing out his characterization. His mouth flapped open and closed repeatedly, like he wanted to say something.

I put my foot on the window sill and jumped. For a split second, we were in the air.

After making an almost silent landing, I used the force to propel myself into a run. Not only did this give me some momentum, but it cushioned the impact of

hitting the ground. Edward probably hadn't even felt a thing upon impact.

I could sense his confusion. He blinked several times, and his eyelashes were so long that I could *feel* them fan me. I could also sense the frantic *thump thump* of his heartbeat against my arms too. He must've been pretty shocked.

I couldn't exactly blame him. We hadn't been all that high up, but there *had* been a one-in-a-million chance that we would've hit our heads and died. As small as those chances were, that was bound to make his heart race.

I looked into his astonished face and gave him a cheeky smile. "Ready to go home, Your Highness?"

"D-Don't be ridiculous!" His strained, hoarse voice only made me smile wider.



"Surely you can appreciate how...*unusual* this is?"

"How unusual *what* is?"

"*This!* You, sitting behind me!" the prince complained, turning his head around to yell at me.

We were riding on my favorite horse, Lady. I was sitting behind him, so close we were touching, with my arms wrapped around him to hold the reins. Naturally, I was the one maneuvering Lady—he was just a passenger.

It seemed like a perfectly acceptable arrangement to me, but the persnickety prince was clearly not pleased.

"I think it's only reasonable, considering I'm the better rider," I said.

"I understand you taking the reins, but I don't see why I can't sit behind you!"

"Surely you jest. What if something happened to you? They'd have my head for letting you out of my sight."

I was taller, so having him sit in front of me didn't impede my view whatsoever. In fact, the height difference seemed even more pronounced now than it did when we were standing.

Wait...does this mean my torso's longer than my legs? I began to wonder, but quickly banished the thought. It wouldn't do to start comparing myself like that

to canon love interests. I already knew they had a leg up in the looks department—their stats were rigged, after all. If I let myself get spooked over every little detail, I'd never get anywhere. So, I just shook my head and did a quick mental reset.

“Let's not get hung up on the details, all right? Just sit back and let me show you a good time,” I said with a wink.

Edward averted his eyes and scoffed. “Hmph. You seem *awfully* sure of yourself.”

I thought back to the Edward I knew from the game and broke into a wry grin. Just as you'd expect from a prince character, he loved to shower the main character in cheesy lines. It was enough to make your brain explode, and his syrupy-sweet, seductive voice just made it all the worse.

I wonder if the Edward in this world will grow up to be like that too?

When the prince finally turned around to face ahead, I gave Lady a little kick to get her moving. As Edward settled in and let his body sway gently with her movements, he looked around at his surroundings. I plopped my hat on his head to give his disguise a little extra oomph.

As we neared the town, we began to see more and more people. Occasionally, I'd see a face or two that I recognized from my regular patrols.

“Good morning, Mr. Knight! You're looking as gallant as ever!”

“And you're looking as *beautiful* as ever, my little kittens.”

The women squealed with delight. “Look at me! Look at me!”

“Thank you, thank you,” I said, chuckling. As I waved back to my roadside admirers, I felt the prince's gaze on me. He was glowering up at me with a haughty frown.

“Aren't you supposed to be a knight?” His voice came out in a strangely low register—probably because he'd been silent for some time. It was a far cry from his usual dulcet tone.

I would've been lying if I came right out and claimed to be a knight, so I kept my answer ambiguous. “Well, sort of. I'm at the bottom of the ladder among

the knight cadets' instructors."

"Hmph. I've never known knights to be such *playboys*."

Playboy... The word echoed in my mind. Suddenly, as if I'd been struck by lightning, I had a flash of brilliance. This was it—the specialization I'd been looking for! I could be the *playboy* knight: a sweet-talking, shallow, flashy ladies' man.

Raise your hands if you've ever come across a man like that, ladies. I know I have.

The playboy's a time-tested otome game and shojo manga archetype.

He's friendly and always cracking jokes, but he can get down to business when he needs to. You'd never guess how strong he is, or the sort of dark past he harbors. And for all his womanizing, he's hopeless when it comes to the woman he *really* loves. His hidden side is what *really* gets the fans going. They love to see a rare glimpse of his lonely face and his earnest desperation to save his crush from danger.

Fortunately for me, there weren't any love interests that already filled that niche. See, everyone's got different strengths. I wouldn't be able to pull off the class president thing Isaac had going on, and I wasn't cute like Christopher. I didn't have the balls to cast myself as a princely archetype when there were two *actual* princes already in the lineup either.

Besides, if I was already out here calling the local women "kittens," then I probably already had what it took to be a playboy. And I'd *just* seen firsthand how much the ladies loved it.

It's funny, though... It was only after I started using the pet name myself that I realized how little it really meant. It wasn't that I actually found these women particularly cute or catlike. Now, I know what you must be thinking: "Why do you call them that, then?" It's quite simple, really—it's a whole lot easier to call them all "kitten" than to commit every single name to memory. That's why if I ever wind up on the receiving end of that pet name, I won't blush and take it to heart. I'll know they've just forgotten my name.

Edward's put-down ended up being divine inspiration. It felt like a path was

opening up before me. *I guess this is what sets the blue-bloods apart from the rest of us*, I thought. *The kingdom's going to be in good hands with Edward at the helm.*

Thinking back on it now, there had been so much foreshadowing. I'd always winked at the maids and carried their things like it was the most natural thing in the world. And here I was, waving at townswomen and giving them cute names. I even called the older ones "princess." I must've realized, on some level, that women loved it.

Were there any men like this in my past life, though? In my real past life, I mean...not in the games I played. I racked my brain trying to recall an example, but nothing came to me. *Huh. Guess I must've picked this archetype out from the pile of 2D characters I can remember, then.*

At any rate, my answer was obvious: I could be a knight who was also a bit of a playboy, or a playboy who also happened to be a knight. The possibilities were endless.

"What're you smirking about?" the prince asked, eyeing me suspiciously as I unconsciously cupped my cheek.

Oh... Was I smirking? Well, that suits me just fine.

At thirteen years old, I, Elizabeth Burton, had settled on my characterization. This was a day to remember.



As I was strutting around the shopping streets in a fantastic mood, the wind carried a delicious scent right to my nose.

It was morning, but the morning sales rush had already ended. The bakeries and eateries were probably busy preparing food from the ingredients they'd just bought from the market. I stole a glance at the prince, who was looking around uneasily at his surroundings, and chuckled to myself.

I had two motivations for bringing the crown prince into town with me. One was to show him the local streets he'd never seen before. A leader ought to see the people he rules over, after all...or, that's the reason I'd give him, at least.

The other reason was that one of his events in the game is sneaking into town for a date. He's visited the town before, but the event is the first time he tries to blend in with the townsfolk and stop at shops and restaurants.

Edward always acts so adult and calm, but the local streets bring out a different side of him. His voice grows animated as he asks about this and that, and even the most mundane things bring a twinkle to his eye. It's all designed to make the player's heart pound, and it's very effective. But it only works because of the power of novelty. He wouldn't have a reaction like that if it weren't his *first* time exploring the town.

Fortunately, that made his event pretty easy to ruin. All I had to do was swoop in and take him on a tour before the main character could even get the chance.

The crown prince, of course, was blissfully unaware that his future event was being ruined. He just continued his horseback tour, peering at the shops around us with fervent interest. I followed his line of sight and met the gaze of a baker I often chatted with. His eyes lit up with recognition, and he waved us over.

"Who's the little lad you've got there? Don't tell me you kidnapped him!"

Without even thinking, I gave him a wry smile. He was clearly just teasing, but he wasn't actually far off the mark. Even Edward seemed surprised. I could've sworn I saw his shoulders jolt up at the joke.

"He's a knight cadet, actually. He said he wanted to see what a patrol was like, so I'm taking him along with me for the day."

"Is that right? We've got a little knight in the making on our hands, then!" the baker replied, smiling up at Edward warmly.

In return, the prince shifted his hips uncomfortably as he gave the baker a quiet, "Hello."

The baker's face softened in response, amused by Edward's awkwardness. It struck me suddenly that he must be under the impression that I was older than "the little lad" sitting in front of me.

"Here, take this," the baker said, thrusting a paper bag into Edward's hands.

“Huh? Um...”

“If you’re going to become an upstanding knight one day, you’ll need to build up your strength,” the baker explained. He grinned and flexed his arm, making a show of patting his muscles.

Those triceps are certainly worth showing off. Kneading bread every day’s gotta be a good workout!

“Here. You take one too, Mr. Knight.”

“Thanks. I appreciate it.”

I leaned over and took the paper bag from him, squishing Edward and practically flattening him over the front of the horse in the process. *Whoops. Please don’t take my head for that, Your Highness...*

I opened the bag to find a steaming-hot scone inside. The fragrant scent of butter was like a siren song for my empty stomach. *Better eat this while it’s still hot!*

As I took my first bite, jam filling revealed itself. It tasted like blueberry, and its bittersweet flavor only whetted my appetite more.

“Put some jam in them today, huh?” I said. “Such a deep, beautiful purple—just like your wife’s eyes.”

The baker laughed heartily. “I’ll tell her you said so!”

I gave him a little wave and kicked my horse’s side. As she trotted along slowly, I stuffed my cheeks with the scone. It was so flaky and delicious. The only catch was that the filling on the inside made it a bit of a risk to eat on the go.

Sensing that I was being stared at, I looked down at the crown prince. Sure enough, he was glaring up at me.

“My apologies. That was rather rude of me, wasn’t it?”

“You’re apologizing for your poor manners *now*?”

“Touché. Oh, hey... If you’re not going to eat that, I’ll take it.”

The prince paused before responding. “I never said I wasn’t going to eat it.”

He eyed the scone he'd removed from the paper bag, but he didn't make a move to take a bite of it.

That's when it hit me: the royal family never ate anything that hadn't already been tested for poison.

Robert didn't seem to care much for this custom; he'd happily chow down on any snacks or meals that were provided at the training grounds without waiting to hear that they were safe. But each time he did, his personal guards would go blue in the face. Honestly, the boy couldn't have been less cut out for the life of a royal.

Without warning, I leaned forwards and sank my teeth into the scone Edward was holding. He looked at me with pure astonishment as I licked some jam off of the corner of my lips and declared, unabashedly, "Thanks for the bite."

"H-How dare you! I just told you I was going to eat that!"

"Sorry, but some of us suffer from a fast metabolism."

"Excuse me?! I haven't even had anything to eat yet today!" the crown prince screeched, growing red in the face. For a moment, he looked just like a kid throwing a tantrum.

His usual above-it-all attitude seemed at least partly genuine, but I couldn't help but feel that—for the most part—he was just putting it on. I was guilty of a practiced ease myself, but the crown prince really came from a whole other world. I wouldn't be surprised if even he *himself* struggled to distinguish between the real him and the mask he wore.

He spent a good few moments just glaring at me, but eventually, he turned his gaze back to his scone and resolutely took a bite.

All seemed to be right with the world again. Unfortunately, that peace was short-lived.

"Mmgh?!"

The crown prince, who had only ever eaten the finest foods, seemed to have overdone it on the scone. He'd stuffed his cheeks, and now he was chewing on the pastry with unusual vigor.

“My goodness! Are you okay?!” a fruit vendor from the side of the road called out. She came running towards us at the sight of Edward going blue in the face.

“Oh, he’s fine. Just got a bit of scone in his throat.”

“Don’t be ridiculous! This poor boy needs help!” she scolded.

She went into her store and returned with a cup full of tea, which she offered up to Edward. “Here. Drink this.”

I took the cup from her instead and took a little sip. It was a black tea with sugar, and it was lovely.

“That wasn’t for you!” she yelled, scolding me yet again. I was used to the local women doting on me, so I didn’t know what to do with her.

I handed the cup to Edward, who downed the drink in a single gulp.

“Pwah!” he gasped. The vendor and I let out sighs of relief.

“That was such a lovely cup of tea, ma’am. Mind if I have one too?” I asked.

“Mr. Knight, *please*,” she replied, giving me a withering look that said more than words could.

I couldn’t blame her for being worried. She must’ve thought Edward could’ve choked to death. Of course, I knew better: a love interest wasn’t going to die over a bit of food stuck in his throat.

I gave the woman a little tilt of the head, coupled with a smile. That seemed to do the trick.

“Good grief,” she muttered, laughing, and went back into her shop to retrieve a teapot and another cup.

“Here. You have some more tea too,” she said to Edward.

“Huh?”

“You gulped that last cup down without even tasting it, didn’t you? Have a refill.”

She poured some more into his cup from the teapot. I glanced over at him, wondering if he needed me to test it for poison again. He seemed to notice my look, but he didn’t engage. Instead, he just looked down at the cup with partly

lidded eyes.

“Thank you,” he said. He smiled at the woman and brought the cup to his mouth.



At the fruit vendor’s suggestion, Edward and I had sat down for a break on a little bench outside her shop. I had tied Lady up to a nearby tree, where she waited patiently for us.

As we looked up absentmindedly at the clouds together, a passing horse carriage driver waved to us.

“Mr. Knight!” he called. “My thanks for your help before!”

“My help? What did I do, again?”

“Why, you helped me fix a wheel that came off, remember?”

“Ooh...now that you mention it, I do. I’m impressed you remember that.”

“Well, it’s not every day you come across someone who can lift up a horse carriage all by himself!”

After the driver passed us, several more familiar faces passed by. As they did, each of them called out to ask what we were doing and how we were faring. One even had the nerve to yell out, “Working hard, or hardly working?” They’d only ever seen me patrolling on horseback, so they must’ve been surprised to find me here sitting on a bench, sipping tea.

The crown prince watched my interactions with the townspeople in silence as he drank his tea slowly.

“So, *this* is what you wanted me to see,” he mumbled to himself with a nod, as if he now understood everything.

I had absolutely no idea what “this” was, but I just nodded sagely, as if to say, “You finally get it, huh?”

“I can see how much the townspeople adore you,” he said. “That’s why they’re so kind and doting.”

“That’s right.”

“And that’s why they extend the same warmth to me—because I’m with you.” He looked down at the scone and cup he held in his hands. I’d already finished mine, so I just sat there and waited for him to continue. “That’s probably true of everyone in the castle too. Their admiration for my father must be why they’re so kind to me.”

I could see why he’d say that. The king *did* have many admirers. Even my father and older brother sang his praises. According to them, we had him to thank for the peaceful state of the kingdom. I didn’t know much about politics, but I did appreciate that he always kept his speeches short and sweet. And I certainly wouldn’t complain about his peaceful style of governing.

“I’m sure their magnanimity is also partly out of self-interest,” Edward continued. “I’d be a fool to take it all at face value, but I suppose the opposite holds true too. I’d be just as much of a fool to jump at shadows and doubt *any* kindness.”

He let out a self-deprecating chuckle. There was no trace left of the attention-seeking, woe-is-me prince I’d spoken with yesterday.

“Perhaps I’ve just gotten a little overly sensitive,” he added. I gave him an exaggerated nod in agreement. He’d come to a much more positive conclusion than I’d expected, but it seemed I’d accomplished my second objective.

He’d been cooped up for an incredibly long time in the castle, surrounded only by people who were deeply invested in him. Day after day, they tried to read his mood and satisfy his every whim. It was no wonder that he’d become hyper self-conscious in an environment like that...or even develop a persecution complex.

That’s exactly why I wanted to take him out into throngs of strangers—to show him that nobody actually cared about the crown prince. Maybe everyone within the castle walls did, but in the outside world? Most people didn’t even give him a second thought.

I’d hoped that the realization would cure him of his persecution complex, and if I was lucky, that he’d even be embarrassed by how much he’d assumed other people cared about him. After all, here he was parading down the town streets, barely disguised, and not a single towns person had recognized him.

Despite that, the baker had given him a scone, and the fruit vendor had fussed over him and given him a cup of tea. No doubt these acts of kindness had left a positive impression on him.

I certainly hadn't expected his journey to take this direction, but I could hardly complain about the destination. I wouldn't have to heed any more summons from a paranoid prince, nor would I have to hear any more of his pitiful sighs.

"I'd like to put more faith in people...and develop some thicker skin," the prince said.

"Don't sell yourself short, Your Highness. You're hard as nails," I replied with a dry laugh.

The crown prince glared at me.

See? I thought. Just like I said: hard as nails.



"Mister Knight!" a toddler (well, maybe not a toddler, but a little girl) exclaimed as she ran up to hug me.

I looked up to see a woman bowing at us from a short distance away.

I recognized the girl's hair clip. *This must be the girl I looked after when she was lost*, I thought.

"Hey there, little lady. Good job not getting lost today," I said.

"My name is Ray, and I didn't get lost! *Mommy's* the one who was lost!" the girl—Ray—insisted, puffing out her cheeks in a pout.

Wow. I didn't realize kids actually used that excuse.

After having a little sulk, the girl seemed to notice Edward, who was sitting behind me. She tilted her head and looked up at me. "Who's that?"

For a moment, I drew a blank. I couldn't exactly just tell her the crown prince's name—not unless I wanted to let the cat out of the bag. I quickly searched for an innocuous answer, then leaned down to whisper in her ear, "Someone a lot higher-ranking than I am."

"Higher-ranking?" she repeated.

“That’s right. It’s a secret, though, so don’t tell anyone, okay?”

I put my finger to my lips and winked at her. I could’ve sworn I saw her mother’s heart leap out of her chest at the sight.

The little girl looked up at me with wide eyes, then looked at Edward. Finally, she looked back at me again. “Cheating is bad, Mister Knight.”

“Huh?!”

“You’re already taken! When I grow up, *I’m* gonna be your bride!”

Her precocious declaration broke my cool-as-a-cucumber posturing, and I burst out laughing.

I couldn’t believe someone had finally used that line on me. After all, it was usually only reserved for fathers or older brothers. Outsiders were only worthy of that line if they were a total catch, so it was basically a badge of honor. I *really* felt like a ladies’ man now, and let me tell you, it was great. It took everything I had to hide my delight. Try as I might, I couldn’t mask it entirely. I felt it spilling out of me, lifting the corner of my mouth as I gave the little girl a gentle pat on the head.

“Is that right? I look forward to it, then.”

“Ray, sweetheart, leave the nice knight alone,” Ray’s mother said, apparently unable to look on in silence anymore.

She grabbed the girl by the shoulder and pulled her away from me, then tried to lower her head down into a bow. I lifted my hand to stop her. Ray was just being a kid. Besides, a ladies’ man ought to be forgiving. But more than that, I was simply in a good mood.

“Hey, are you coming with us, Mister Knight?”

“Oh, are you going shopping? I’d love to.”

Ray grabbed me by the hand and began walking. I turned around to beckon Edward to join me and saw him staring at me with wide eyes.

“I-I’m so sorry,” Ray’s mother apologized.

“Please, don’t be,” I replied, smiling.

I walked hand in hand with Ray, making sure to match my pace to hers. I could feel the crown prince still watching on, dumbfounded, as we left him on the bench. But he must've been afraid I'd turn around and bid him farewell, because he got up and followed us before long.



We followed Ray and her mother all the way to a craft store. As we were walking, Ray's mother informed us that she was on the hunt for some fabric so she could make her daughter a new dress.

Jeez, I feel bad for all the mothers in this world who aren't any good at arts and crafts, I thought. Must be tough when they're expected to make everyone's clothes.

As we wandered around the store, I turned to look over my shoulder at the crown prince, who'd been following behind me. He'd paused in front of a shelf. *What's he looking at?* I wondered. I leaned in a bit to take a peak.

Sitting on the shelf next to some skeins of yarn were several decorative lace coasters. As I looked from the coasters to the crown prince's profile, I was struck by how much lace would suit him. Honestly, he was so beautiful, he really could've been a woman.

"Has that crocheted lace coaster caught your eye?" an old woman asked as she emerged from the back of the store.

"No, I just... I was just musing on how gossamer-thin and delicate it looks," Edward replied.

"Gossamer-thin'? My, my... That's quite a vocabulary you've got there, young man."

As I looked at the old woman, I realized I recognized her. I'd seen her around the neighborhood several times, basking in the sun. *She must be the shopkeeper.*

"That's a beginner's crochet pattern, you know. With just a little practice, you could make one yourself."

"Really?" The crown prince whispered, surprised, as he stared intently at the

coaster samples. He seemed absolutely transfixed by them. His eyes had lit up so much looking at them that I could've sworn they were glowing. With excitement written so visibly all over his face like this, the family resemblance to his pea-brained brother was actually uncanny.

"Excuse me, ma'am," I addressed the shopkeeper. "Would you mind picking out some materials and supplies for me? Anything required to make one of these. I'll take a whole set."

"Huh? But Mr. Knight, wouldn't you prefer one of *these*, perhaps? You just stab the needle into the wool, and—"

"Why do people always assume I'm so stab-happy?" I laughed, then clarified that I was buying the set as a gift. That was all the shopkeeper needed. She immediately switched into high gear, swinging her big hips around as she shuffled in and out of the back of the shop in search of materials.

"My friend may get bored of crocheting coasters, so throw in some other popular patterns, will you? I trust this is enough to cover the cost?" I called out to the shopkeeper, who was taking her sweet time. It didn't seem like she heard me.

In the end, I just had to wait until the shopkeeper's arms were too full to grab anything else. Finally, she returned with a massive pile of parcels.

It was time to go, but the crown prince was still too busy staring at the lace coasters to hear me call out. When he didn't respond, I went over to him and half dragged him out of the shop.

I also quietly paid for Ray's dress materials on the way out. It was my way of thanking her for the badge of honor she'd bestowed upon me with her line about marrying me when she grew up. I'd left the shopkeeper with a tidy sum, so I was sure it was enough to cover everything.

I called out a goodbye to Ray's mother, who was still looking at fabric, and dragged Edward back to the horse.



With Edward slung over my shoulder, I scaled the castle wall and entered his office through the window. I put him down and thrust the craft store parcels

into his arms.

I was glad we'd stopped by that store, but with all the stuff I'd picked up weighing me down, the journey back to the castle had taken longer than I'd expected. Honestly, it was nothing short of a miracle that we'd made it back without attracting any attention from the watch. But I couldn't guarantee that no one had noticed anything off, so I was ready to part ways and leave the scene as soon as possible.

"Well, I should head off."

"L-Lady Elizabeth, wait!" Edward called out, just as I was stepping up onto the window sill. He looked meaningfully at the piles of parcels I'd stuffed in his arms. "What in the world is all of this?"

"Uh, exactly what it looks like..." I replied, cocking my head. Did he not realize how obviously smitten he'd been with those coasters? *You can't expect me not to notice when you were glued in place in front of that shelf, practically drooling over the samples...* "I thought you may want to try your hand at it."

"M-Me? Crochet?"

"You told me before that it was boring being so good at everything, but I have a feeling you might just be bored because you haven't actually found something you enjoy yet," I added, before he could get the wrong idea. "I get it, though. Not to toot my own horn, but I master everything I try pretty effortlessly too."

I doubt you need me to clarify this, but I was *totally* bluffing. As you might recall, at only seven years old, I'd thrown myself into my ladies' etiquette lessons, my studies, and everything I could think of with extraordinary effort. And even then, all I'd really ended up doing was laying a decent foundation. Even now, I was shedding blood, sweat, and tears over exam preparation for the academy.

But playboys never let anyone see them break a sweat! I had to be able to do almost anything better than most, and I had to make it look *easy*. I couldn't tell you why, but that's just the way it was.

"Strength training is the only exception. Once I started building some muscle, I wanted to see what new records I could break and how much further I could

push myself. I grew obsessed. Before I knew it, I was good enough to be an assistant instructor. Even now, I'm still not even close to getting bored with it all. If anything, I'm even *more* into my training than I was when I started."

As I thought back to my first days of training, I could feel my gaze growing distant. I remembered the day I'd built up enough muscle to move past calisthenics. I'd never had access to a gym like I did in my previous life, but I found all kinds of heavy objects to bring back to the instructors' quarters to use as weights.

It was exciting to add different components to my training regimen, and I loved the feeling of accomplishment that came with being able to increase the number of reps I did. When I'd finally built up enough muscle to notice a difference, I was pretty impressed with what I saw. I probably never would've made it this far without my training.

"I think finding your 'thing' could change your whole outlook," I added.

"And you think my 'thing' is...*crafts*?"

"You won't know till you try it, right?"

"Well, I suppose not."

Edward removed a bundle of thin, white thread from one of the parcels and studied it intently. There was a sparkle of curiosity in his eyes.

"But unlike you, I have my hands full with official duties. I don't have time to waste on frivolous hobbies," he immediately added.

I didn't hesitate to call him out. "I think you're mistaken, Your Highness."

I knew he didn't mean it. He was just making excuses so I'd give him a good kick up the butt. And, as much as it pained me to play along, I wasn't about to just lay down and take it while he sassed me.

"If you find something you're really passionate about, you'll *make* time for it—even if that means cutting back on time you might spend eating or sleeping," I continued. "I'm always thinking of ways to get out of my ladies' etiquette lessons so I can get to my training."

"*You* take *ladies'* etiquette lessons?"

“What, are you surprised?”

He paused, averting his gaze. “No... No, of course you do.”

To be fair, I couldn’t exactly claim to be ladylike. Lately, I hadn’t even been paying any attention to my lectures.

There was an interesting saying I’d heard in my past life that still stuck with me: “What could be more manly than cross-dressing as a woman? After all, it’s something only a man can do.” If that was the case, then surely there was nothing more ladylike than cross-dressing as a man?

Nah, who am I kidding?

“You know, I’ve started developing abs lately. Would you like to see them?” I asked. “I mean, they’ve still got a long way to go, so I’d be kind of embarrassed to show them off, but...wanna see?”

“I’ll pass, thank you,” Edward said.

Bummer.

Honestly, though, my abs were hardly worth flaunting. Still...that didn’t mean I didn’t *want* to show them off. (Maybe that sounds weird, but it’s a bodybuilder thing.)

I bid the crown prince a final farewell and jumped out the window. Talking about my training had gotten my muscles itching for some movement. I hit the ground running and headed off to the training grounds.

Humans Only Have Two Hands, You Know

It was the end of autumn, and winter was approaching. My hands were freezing now whenever I went out on patrol, so I'd started wearing gloves—black ones, to be precise. They matched my knight's uniform. As soon as I put them on, I knew they'd be a total chick magnet. I could almost physically *sense* their potential.

As I returned to the training grounds to get changed after one of my patrols, I felt a presence nearby. I swiftly moved behind the presence and thrust my knife just inches away from their neck.

"Hello there," I said.

I heard a barely audible gasp.

The man in front of me was wearing a deep-red uniform. I couldn't get a good look at his face, but based on his build, it seemed safe to guess that this was the guard who always came to deliver the crown prince's summons.

I laughed. "I finally got you! Guess all the patrolling I've been doing is starting to pay off."

The guard had always had a way of sneaking up behind me. At first, I hadn't even been able to detect his presence. Even when I *had* started to pick it up faintly, he'd call out to me before I could even turn around and face him.

The implications of this were clear (and unpleasant): if I ever had to face a foe like him, I would lose. I'd resolved myself to be swift and strong enough to face even an assassin, but at this rate, the game's main character would be dead before I even had a chance to make my move. My run-ins with this guard had motivated me to pay special attention to my surroundings on patrol, sharpening my senses so I could be alert to any presence.

I realized that, whenever something seemed off, it was always the best course of action to determine why as quickly as possible. Taking the initiative conferred a heavy advantage. If you were facing an opponent of a similar skill level, you

were all but guaranteed to win as long as you struck first.

Thanks to all my practice honing my perception, I now had a much wider range in which I could pick up on anomalies. Think of it this way—you can sense when someone taps you on the shoulder, right? Well, it was a lot like that, except that my perception expanded beyond the confines of my body. It was almost like my physical form merged with the air around me.

I could sense whenever someone was staring at me, and their movements and mannerisms gave me enough information to make a reasonably good guess about whether they were friend or foe. I could also tell if something was off about them.

Anyway, that's how I was able to sense the presence of the crown prince's guard and to surprise him from behind. It felt like proof that I'd improved, and I was pleased to finally see the fruits of my labor.

Even with my knife pressed to his throat, the guard's expression didn't change. But I could feel him relax ever so slightly after hearing my voice.

He gave me the same line as always, his voice betraying not even a hint of anxiety. "Prince Edward wishes to see you."



"Good to see you, Elizabeth. Thank you for coming."

As I entered his office, the crown prince pulled out a chair for me. I didn't feel like staying for long, so I politely declined and waited for him to continue. I was still riding on the high of surprising his personal guard, so I'd almost forgotten how annoying it was to be summoned up to his office like this. Now that Edward was right in front of me, though, my irritation and apprehension were starting to win out.

What now? I wondered. *He shouldn't have any reason to summon me anymore.*

"I apologize for calling you to my office again."

"Are you actually sorry?" I tried.

"No? No, I suppose I'm not," he replied, smiling cheerfully.

Cheeky bastard. Who do you think you are? I thought, then caught myself. *Right. I'm literally talking to the crown prince right now.*

"I had something I wanted to give you," Edward said, placing something in my hands.

"What is this?"

There was a proper way to accept a gift from a member of the royal family, and this was most certainly not it...but who cared? It wasn't like this was a public ceremony. Besides, no one was here to chastise me for my poor manners.

I looked down at my hands to see a white lace coaster and a tablecloth. *This coaster looks kind of familiar*, I thought. Then I remembered the sample I'd seen on the shelf at the craft store we'd visited. They looked almost identical. To be fair, I honestly wouldn't have noticed even if they'd been completely different patterns. But since the color and size were roughly the same, they looked similar enough to me.

"I made those."

"You did?"

"Yes."

"Hey, that's awesome!"

Edward nodded proudly in agreement. He seemed a lot happier to hear this than he'd been when I told him that he had exemplary swordsmanship or that he was bound to make a good king.

"I know the coaster looks a little rough around the edges, but it's the first one I crocheted without looking down at it while I worked. The doily is a little bit bigger, but it was actually surprisingly easy to make. The only stitches you need to use are chain stitches, single crochets, and double crochets. But even if each stitch is pretty simple, they make an intricate pattern when you put them all together. You can make hundreds or thousands of different patterns just from those three different stitches."

Whoops, I thought. Apparently the tablecloth in my hands was actually a

doily. *What the hell is the difference, though?*

Edward seemed pretty passionate about his new hobby, but I had no idea what the heck he was talking about, so it all kind of went in one ear and out the other.

I couldn't even guess how much the coaster and tablecloth—uh, *doily*—that I held in my hands were worth. I could only assume that he was giving these to me as a gesture of appreciation for paying for the materials, but wow, he was really throwing pearls before swine here. It seemed like an awful waste, if you asked me.

“Please. Why don't *you* keep these, Your Highness?”

“How would I explain where they came from? I could hardly tell anyone that I made them myself.”

He had a point. Whether he said he'd procured them from somewhere or made them himself, it would be impossible to explain their existence without mentioning that he'd sneaked out of the castle with me. *I guess the only logical conclusion is to hand over the goods to his partner in crime: me.*

I had no choice but to accept them.

I put the handmade coaster and doily into my bag, taking care not to let the delicate lace catch on anything. That's when the crown prince, who'd been staring at the items in my hand with great pride, seemed to break out of his reverie.

“Elizabeth,” he said, suddenly. “Your button is coming loose.”

“Huh? Oh, right. *This.*” I'd forgotten about that pesky button.

I know it probably sounded like an excuse, but I had a few different instructor uniforms that I wore in rotation. It was easy to forget about the button when it was so long between washing the uniform and wearing it again.

“I'll fix that...eventually,” I said.

“Give it here,” the prince said after a pause.

“I beg your pardon?”

Edward turned to face me and stuck his hand out. I looked back at him, trying to figure out what he was after. He gave me his usual calm, princely smile and thrust his hand out again.

“I’m trying to tell you that I’ll fix it for you by the next time you come and pay me a visit. Give it here.”

“Come on...” I started. “I can’t ask *the crown prince* to fix my button.”

“No? Then consider it a royal order.”

Pulling the rank card, huh? I was in no position to refuse now. I handed my uniform jacket over to him reluctantly.

“I hate to ask a favor in return, but...” he said, as he thrust a slip of paper into my hand. “I’d like you to procure the items on that list for me. Bring them the next time you visit.”

Dammit, I thought. I’ve walked right into his trap again. It was too late to back out now. His concern over my loose button had just been a polite excuse for his *real* aim. How dare he hold my uniform hostage all so I’d be his errand boy.

I looked down at the note in my hand. Several kinds of thread, knitting needles, and other craft materials were listed in his meticulous handwriting.

“I’d like to try some other forms of knitting, but I can’t do them with the hook you bought me. I’ll need knitting needles—five of them. Also, the yarn you bought me before won’t be enough. I’d like to experiment with different thread thickness too, since that can make a big difference in the appearance of the final product. Besides, it’s good to try all kinds of different things,” Edward explained, revving up again. And, just like before, it went in one ear and right out the other.

You want five knitting needles?! Are you insane? I thought, incredulous. *Humans only have two hands, you know!*

“Please... I don’t have much longer. I’d like to at least try to make the most of what little time I do have.”

“All right.”

He must’ve noticed my disinterest, because his face fell in an instant.

Figures. We may have cured your persecution complex, but you'll still play the 'sickly, sheltered girl (well, boy) from a well-to-do family' card, huh?

I wished some other reincarnated person would show up and tell him he wasn't actually going to die. Couldn't be me, though.

"I can count on you, then?" he asked with a smile.

I didn't have any room to refuse. He was a crown prince, after all, and I was just a duke's daughter.

I muttered my assent as I hung my head low, dejected.

Looks like this won't be the last time I have to pay him a visit.

Royal Academy, Here I Come!

I put on my uniform and took a look in the full-length mirror.

Now, when I say “uniform,” I don’t mean my usual knight’s uniform. No, from today on, I’d be wearing the uniform of First Royal Academy.

When my uniform was still being made, my mother had stood watch as I’d spoken to the tailor. She must’ve wanted to ensure I didn’t “act out” (read: request a boy’s uniform). Unfortunately for her, she hadn’t been able to keep me from winning over the tailor and pulling a fast one.

I’ll spare you the details, though. Long story short, I *somehow* ended up with a boy’s uniform...completely and totally by accident, of course. It *definitely* wasn’t my fault.

It was hardly my mother’s fault either, and I made a point of reassuring her of this. She looked absolutely despondent, but she at least seemed to let it go after that.

I wasn’t used to my new, mostly black uniform, but I didn’t mind it. Still, I thought the knight’s uniform looked much better on me. All the popular professions had uniforms that deliberately distinguished themselves from school ones, and I appreciated that. Still, there *was* something special about a school uniform.

My ensemble’s red collar was the only big pop of color that stood out, although there were touches of gold along the hem. It was the very picture of an otome game uniform. Full points... Well, as long as you didn’t take into account the pain of laundering and ironing it.

I spent some time pondering whether it’d be better to wear my tie properly or to leave it undone like a playboy. Eventually, I settled on undoing a single button on my top and fastening my tie loosely. Girls liked to tug on ties, after all, and who was I to deprive them of that opportunity?

I tucked my shirt in to make myself look a little taller. Naturally, I was also

wearing my elevator boots. My growth spurt seemed to be leveling off around just over 170 centimeters, but with the help of my boots, I could comfortably stand taller than 180 centimeters.

Everything looked a little different when you surpassed that height. The view from up there was...how should I put it? *Elevated*. And I'll tell you what else was elevated: my spirits.

The whole getup was a little hard to move around in, though, so I decided to forgo the vest for today. I'd cross that bridge when I had to.

"Lizzie!"

Just as I was leaving my room for breakfast, my older brother called out. It looked like he'd been waiting for me.

"Congratulations on your first day," he said.

"Thanks. You didn't have to wait out here for me, you know. You could've just come in."

"That's all right," he replied, chuckling lightly. He looked a little bashful. "I just wanted to be the first to congratulate you, that's all."

His eyes looked a little misty, but that was typical for him. Whether he was sad or angry, he'd always been easily moved to tears.

"I'm glad you got accepted to the academy. Looks like all your studying paid off, huh?"

"I have you and Christopher to thank for that," I said with a wry smile.

The academy's entrance exam wasn't actually that hard. If you came from a high-ranking family, your education easily taught you everything you needed to get accepted to a respectable school. The exam didn't require any special effort to pass—it was just there to weed out the worst students. Of course, that was assuming that you applied yourself reasonably to studying with your home tutor...and that you didn't start showing off your knowledge of men's etiquette and dancing.

According to my father, in all of our family's long and illustrious history, not one Burton had failed the entrance exam to First Royal Academy.

Unfortunately, I had been at risk of being forever memorialized as the first one. After all the freedom my family had afforded me, I couldn't disappoint them like that.

My brothers had really come through for me. Both of them had kept me company throughout grueling training, and they'd even helped me study. Thanks to them, my ladies' etiquette was impeccable. Honestly, it was a debt I could probably never repay.

"That uniform looks good on you," my older brother said, his pudgy face breaking into a joyful smile.

"Thanks," I replied.

His words filled me with confidence. I straightened out my back and looked out ahead, taking a step forwards with a big stride. I fixed my mouth into an easygoing smile.

Let's do this, I thought to myself.

The curtains would soon rise on the Royal Academy—the stage upon which all the game's major drama unfolded. And here I was, an interloper ready to steal the spotlight.

I'm going to break into that lion's den of love interests and stake my claim on the main character, just you watch!



"Commander!"

"Good morning!!!"

It was my first day at the academy, and things were already going seriously downhill.

As soon as I descended from my carriage, a group of boys swarmed me, their heads bowed low in a show of respect.

"Let me carry your bag for you, sir!"

"I'll show you to your classroom!!!"

"Commanderrrr!"

“Commander!!!”

Their calls echoed throughout campus, attracting a crowd of onlookers.

Upon closer inspection—actually, scratch that. It was apparent at even a *glance* that these boys were all knight cadets. In hindsight, I suppose it was only obvious that most of the boys there would have also been students at the academy.

There were even some boys with differently colored collars, which meant they were my upperclassmen. I hadn’t paid much attention to that detail when I’d played the game, but they distinguished students by their year.

I could see this being a fun character design flourish, but wouldn’t it pose problems in real life? It probably made it hard to pass uniforms down from older to younger siblings. Although, in saying that, it was doubtful that any of the academy’s students would be wearing hand-me-downs in the first place. They all hailed from nobility, after all.

As I raised my right hand up, all of the cadets stood at attention. You could hear the *zssh* as they all whipped their hands up to salute me.

After waiting for them to fall silent, I growled, in my lowest, softest voice, “Behind the school. *Now.*”



My self-proclaimed battalion accompanied me as I made my way, as quickly as possible, behind the school. I checked that no one else was loitering nearby and gave the cadets a glare.

“Where do you think you are?” I asked them.

“The Royal Academy, sir!” they all replied. Robert’s voice rang out the loudest.

In the past few years, Robert had undergone a shocking growth spurt. He was now about the same height as I was with my boots on. If memory served, he was supposed to be taller than 180 centimeters in the game, which meant that he hadn’t even finished growing yet. I could hardly contain my jealousy.

I looked at his sharp, masculine facial features. His auburn hair was swept

gently over his bright-green eyes. He and the Pea-brained Prince from the game were, um, two peas in a pod. They were in fact one and the same, so that really shouldn't have been surprising, but the current resemblance was particularly striking. The only things missing were the stylish mullet and the bored expression.

He'd grown taller, but that seemed to be about the only way in which he'd matured. He had that same sparkle in his eyes that felt like they were shooting laser beams of adulation at me. He'd even taken my bag and was carrying it for me.

Wipe that dopey smile off your face and give that back, I thought. You're a prince, not a porter!

"Gried told us you'd be starting your first day today!"

"It's an unbelievable honor to attend the same school as you, Commander!"

I couldn't believe the utter nonsense I was hearing. I knew I should've guessed that they'd hear about the news one or another, but it was impossible to stifle my rage at Gried for letting the cat out of the bag.

I could feel wrinkles forming on my brow as I frowned. I massaged it with my fingers and let out a sigh.

"Listen up, boys. *Do not* call me 'Commander' at school. Understood?"

"Huh?!"

"But...Commander! Why?!"

"No questions! Just do as you're told!"

I couldn't have all these jacked classmates and upperclassmen from high-ranking families following me around on the first day of school. And I *certainly* couldn't have the prince carrying my bag around for me. What would the ladies think? Was *that* the kind of man they'd like to get to know? I'll tell you right now, the answer to that question is no! I mean, can you imagine anything more intimidating? I can't think of a better way to repel them than that!

I had to build a reputation for myself as a sweet playboy, beloved by all women, and I had a *strict* deadline. It needed to happen by my second year at

the academy, when the main character would join.

“For the record, I don’t recall ever giving you permission to call me ‘Commander’ in the first place!”

“B-But Commander, you’re...our commander!”

“Yeah! We’re the Burton Battalion!” the cadets cried out, flustered.

But why? I wanted to ask. Instead, I retorted, “You’re not *actually* a battalion, okay? That’s just a name you gave to yourselves!”

“Huh?”

“Wait, what?”

“We’re not?!”

“But...the other instructors said we were a battalion too...”

The self-proclaimed battalion members looked at each other in confusion, their eyes wide. When they’d first started throwing around names like “Commander” and “Battalion,” I’d told them to knock it off. It had become too much effort lately, though, so I’d just started ignoring it. Then the other instructors started using the names too, and I’d kind of resigned myself to them. What point was there in fighting it if it was clear they were going to stick no matter what I did? Unfortunately, now the cadets were apparently suffering from a collective delusion.

I suppose I was to blame a little too...actually, no, I take that back. I’ve said this before, and I’ll say it again: I *never* wanted to lead a battalion.

“If you want to be knights one day, then you need to learn that there’s a time and place for everything—and this is *not* the place to call me ‘Commander’! We’re all fellow students here at the academy, so I don’t want to hear any excessive flattery or subservience. You will treat me as your equal.”

“B-But...!”

“We can’t be expected to do thaaat!”

“I respect you too much to treat you as an equal, Commander!”

“Commander!”

“Commander!!!”

It was time to assert a little dominance. “All right, shut your pie holes, maggots! And stop following me around!” I yelled, dispelling the rest of the hangers-on. “Don’t call me ‘Commander’! Just act *normal*, for God’s sake—that’s an order! Don’t make me repeat it!”

“How *should* we address you, then?!”

“Uh, I dunno?” I grumbled irritably. “Like any other acquaintance?”

“I couldn’t possibly!”

“A-At least let us call you ‘Master Burton’!”

“What am I, your ladies’ etiquette tutor? Don’t even *think* about calling me that!”

As I listened to the cadets brainstorm a new title among themselves, I noticed that they seemed to refer to each other by just their first or last names. I was guaranteed to stand out (and probably not in a good way) if I was the only one who had a title like “Master” stuck in front of my name. Besides, it wouldn’t make any sense to have someone like Robert—who was a prince, for God’s sake—address me that way.

Anyway, I’d have to content myself with at least getting rid of the “Commander” nickname, because it quickly became apparent that I was going to be stuck with *some* kind of title. And what was the title they eventually settled on, you ask?

Lord Burton.

I’m begging you...just call me by my name like normal people.

I could tell I was going to have a long, hard road ahead of me.



Up until now, I’d had few opportunities to interact with other young noblewomen.

Ever since I’d been banned from having anything to do with the household maids, the only people besides my family I’d interacted with at home were the

head maid and the butler-in-training.

Besides, I spent most of my time at the training grounds, which might as well have been an all-boys' school. I interacted with the local women sometimes on patrol, but as much as they doted on me, they were quite firm with their boundaries. Basically, they knight-zoned me.

And yet, as soon as the entrance ceremony had ended and we'd all entered the classroom, the young ladies flocked to me. (I should mention, by the way, that the principal's speech was pretty long-winded and boring. He didn't strike me as particularly intelligent.)

I was a bit taken aback by how forceful they were, but I was careful not to show it. I had a reputation to build as a playboy knight, after all. Instead, I put on my best business smile and flashed my pearly whites.

"Nice to meet you, ladies."

The girls let out a shrill squeal. Everything was going exactly as planned.

"M-May, um...may I ask your name?"

"What are your hobbies?"

"Do you have a fiancée?"

"Do you like sweets?"

The questions came in rapid-fire, one after another, and I could feel my spirits rising with each one. *Now, that's the stuff. This is what it feels like to be popular, huh?*

I lifted a hand to calm them and opened my mouth to answer their questions in order. But, before I could begin, an irritated voice called out from behind me. "Would you be quiet?"

It sounded like it belonged to someone who wore glasses, and *boy* did it have an *edge* to it. It was also...strangely familiar.

I turned around and came face-to-face with exactly the boy I expected to see—Isaac. He looked almost unrecognizably more mature since we'd met all those years ago when we were eight. His nose was a lot longer, and his sharp eyes practically sparkled. He was a proper heartthrob now, all right.

Well, okay...if I'm being honest, I didn't actually remember what he looked like at eight years old in any real detail. I'd only met him once, after all, and there weren't any CGs of him at that age that I could mentally reference. So, I was basically just talking about his vibes.

The game was set only a year in the future, so just like Robert, he now resembled his in-game portrait pretty closely. He had burgundy eyes, framed by his trademark black-rimmed glasses. His long, black hair—so tinged with blue that it felt more accurate to call it indigo—was parted straight down the middle. He wore it in a low ponytail that dangled over his back.

Huh...

It was strange to see his hair now almost shoulder-length—in the game, it was a short mushroom haircut. I found myself baffled by this unexpected difference.

Of course, he was only human. Why *wouldn't* he grow his hair out sometimes? I figured he was probably just going to cut it later.

"We're here at the academy to *learn*. Show some respect," he continued.

"Hey, aren't you Prime Minister Guildford's son...?"

"And what if I am? Perhaps you weren't listening, but the principal *just* explained that we're all equals here at the academy," Isaac said coldly.

The girls looked uncomfortable.

You've put me in a tough spot here, Glasses Boy, I thought. I couldn't just leave these girls to stew in their discomfort. It would tarnish my reputation as a playboy.

I interjected smoothly by saying, "Let's all just take it easy, all right? Looks like the teacher's here now, so we can continue our conversation later, ladies."

I gave the girls a wink and was rewarded by more squealing. I did a little fist pump internally.



The teacher's first order of business upon entering the classroom was to get us to move seats.

Several rows of long tables were oriented horizontally throughout the classroom, designed to sit two people per desk. Both the desks and the chairs were much more extravagant than the ones I remembered from my past life, but I supposed it was exactly the level of grandeur you'd expect from the kingdom's most prestigious school.

After being given a randomly assigned seat number, I moved to find my desk. Isaac had already taken his seat next to me on my right.

"Hey," I said, but he met my greeting with pointed silence and a nasty frown.

Not that any words were needed—I could practically read his thoughts right now, and they were most certainly saying, "Make a ruckus like that again, and you're dead to me."

Frankly, being in Isaac's good graces wasn't a priority for me, so I just left it there and took my seat.

"Well then, it looks like everyone's seated," the teacher said. "Please introduce yourself in order of your seat number. You'll be studying here with each other for the next year, so it would behoove you to remember everyone's names and faces."

Beginning with the student at the back of the classroom, everyone introduced themselves one by one. I tried my best to remember at least the first three students, but after that, it was all white noise. Listening wasn't exactly my forte.

I took a quick glance around the room and recognized several of the boys as knight cadets, but Robert was noticeably not among them. *That's a relief*, I thought to myself. It'd be a lot harder for him to follow me around that way.

Alas, it seemed I was doomed to look after the cadets even at school. I'd been hoping to keep my work life completely separate from my private life—in part to avoid my reputation as Demon Drill Sergeant from tainting my playboy-knight characterization—but apparently that was just unrealistic. At this rate, I had a feeling that I wouldn't even *have* a private life.

As I was ruminating on this, I realized it was my turn to introduce myself. I stood up and felt the entire class's eyes on me. Some looked at me with interest, some with envy, and some with admiration.

I took in a breath, puffed out my chest, and began my introduction in as clear and cheerful a voice as I could muster.

“I am Elizabeth Burton, the eldest daughter of Duke Burton. Some students have apparently taken to calling me ‘Lord Burton,’ but please feel free to just address me as ‘Burton’ or ‘Elizabeth.’ I look forward to getting to know you all this year.”

I wrapped things up with a smile, and the classroom erupted in response.

“Eldest *daughter*?”

“Huh? But...she’s wearing a boy’s uniform...”

“Duke Burton? *The* Duke Burton?”

“‘Lord Burton’? What’s with that nickname?”

It felt like a hurricane was raging, and the only people standing in its eye with me were the knight cadets—who already knew who I was—and Isaac, the boy sitting next to me.

“Burton?” Isaac asked softly, looking up at me. His eyes were wide with astonishment, as if he were looking at an alien. “*You’re*...Elizabeth Burton?”

“That’s enough, everyone! Quiet!” the teacher called out with a clap, presumably tired of waiting for the storm to die down (and probably doubting that it would do so on its own). She had the class roster, so she would’ve already known who I was. Despite that, I heard a trace of bewilderment in her voice too. “I understand your curiosity, but let’s continue with the roll call, shall we?”

Yes, *let’s*, I thought. I was aware that I’d given a lot of information about myself. Combined with my surprising appearance, my introduction had admittedly been a little...*impactful*, to put it lightly. But there was no guarantee that there weren’t more colorful students further down the roster, so I was eager to get things moving.

“Please head to the headmaster’s office after we’re done, Miss Burton. The principal would like to have a word with you,” the teacher said.

Damn, seriously? I couldn’t believe I was already getting pulled aside on the

first day—and by the headmaster, no less. I didn't relish the thought of having to meet with the top dog at the academy, but hey...I'd been summoned by the crown prince before, so surely I could handle a school headmaster.

I shrugged my shoulders and gave her a mumble of assent.



The headmaster had clearly been waiting for me. As I entered his office, he pulled out a chair for me.

"Hello, Elizabeth Burton. I'm sure you understand why I've called you to my office?" he asked gravely, stroking his silver-gray beard.

I gave him a smile that was much more cheerful than necessary and shook my head. "Not a clue, I'm afraid."

The headmaster sighed. His shoulders slumped in resignation. "You're a female student, and yet here you are, wearing a male student's uniform."

"Is that a problem, sir?"

"Indeed it is. You'll need to change clothes for your self-defense class, and you're bound to cause confusion entering the ladies' dressing room like that. And I'm sure I needn't clarify this, but we can't have you using the *men's* dressing room. So you see, Miss Burton, it's difficult to imagine how your choice of uniform *wouldn't* be a problem," he said with a frown.

Aha, I thought to myself. Yes, I see what the problem is: your lack of reading comprehension skills.

"I've read the academy's rule book front to back, sir. It stipulates that 'students are required to wear the school uniform while on campus and during any outside school-related activities.' Nowhere does it specify that male students must wear the male uniform and female students must wear the female uniform," I said, reciting the answer I'd prepared for just this occasion. "The rulebook also states that its current rules are applicable from the day a student is accepted into the academy to the day they graduate—which means that, even if they were to be amended now, those amendments would only be enforceable for next year's students onward."

The headmaster's frown deepened. "This isn't about the *rules*; it's about common sense. I'm simply asking you to wear the appropriate uniform."

"If your request has no basis in the rules, then you can't enforce it. Wouldn't you agree?" *Come on, headmaster. It's common sense.*

In the nine years I'd been living in this world (if I only counted the years I'd spent with reincarnated consciousness intact, that is), I'd received very few lectures on common sense.

See, there's actually nothing "common" about it. Everyone has a different idea of what the term actually means. Besides, I couldn't let myself get hung up on notions like that, or I'd never make it as a love interest. Forget common sense—I needed to be *fabulous*. I needed to be *noble*.

The headmaster sighed, evidently aware that his rebukes were completely lost on me. "If there was no law prohibiting murder, would you argue that it's acceptable to kill people?"

"I would, yes. Do you really think that common sense alone is enough to keep people from killing each other?" I shot back without a moment's hesitation.

The headmaster looked to be roughly in his early fifties, which meant that he'd likely lived through the most recent war. Even if he hadn't, he was sure to understand that people killed each other regardless of whether or not the law prohibited it.

For a few minutes, we continued our standoff, staring each other down. It didn't seem like we were about to reach any sort of consensus, so I decided to change tactics.

I gave him my overly cheerful smile again and stood up. My heels made a satisfying *clack-clack* as I approached his desk.

"Oh, I almost forgot. I had something to give you," I said, pulling out some documents from my pocket. Fortunately, the boys' uniforms were very conveniently lined with pockets on the inside.

The headmaster picked up his reading glasses and looked over the documents I'd just handed him.

“That’s my swordsmanship certificate,” I informed him. “I’ve brought my instructor’s certification too. I assume this is ample evidence that I don’t need any self-defense classes. That makes the dressing room dilemma a moot point. Wouldn’t you agree?”

The headmaster looked up at me from the papers, as if trying to put it all together. He had an appraising look in his eyes—one that I saw often in high-ranking nobles. It seemed like he was doing the math in his head. Finally, he cast his eyes downwards and shook his head.

“The dressing room situation is only one of many problems, Miss Burton. Your manner of dress is simply—”

Bam! I slammed my fist down on his desk forcefully.

So much for that strategy. On to the next one, I guess. If only he’d seen reason. But if it was an emotional argument he wanted, then that’s what he was going to get.

Now, keep in mind, please, that I’m a villainess at heart. I didn’t know what lengths he was willing to go to, but I certainly wasn’t about to hold back. I was going to make him wish he’d given in back when I was still asking *nicely*.

The headmaster’s eyes widened in shock at the sound of my fist hitting his desk. I lifted my hand and opened it, producing another bundle of documents. I gave him a bold smirk as I presented them to him.

“I’ve also brought letters of recommendation. They’re from the instructors at the knight cadets’ training grounds and from the division commander of the knights I patrol with. And if *those* won’t convince you...”

The headmaster slowly pulled out the document at the top of the pile. I could see fear in his eyes, which quickly changed to astonishment as he perused it.

“I’ve also included letters from all thirteen division leaders, including the commander of the Royal Guard. It was hard work to get those too—they only agreed to give them to me on the condition that I bested them in combat.”

He flipped through each of the letters. One of them fell from his hands, landing gingerly at his feet and displaying the word “defeated,” along with the signature of the commander of the Royal Guard.

The letters were adorned with the knights' illustrious names, along with words of caution.

"Stay away from her. It's for your own good."

"She makes gorillas look sweet."

"I'd recommend that you separate her from the other students...for their own safety."

"If you want to put a stop to her, you'll need a bear on your side."

This was actually my first time reading the letters too, because they'd been sealed.

Is this their idea of letters of recommendation? I made a mental note to have another chat with the division leaders who'd mentioned my name in the same sentence as animals like gorillas and bears—a chat with our *fists*, that is.

I looked down at the headmaster, whose face was now drained of all color, and slammed my fist on his desk one more time. This time, I got right up in his face.

"One more thing—people are lauded for killing during times of war, wouldn't you agree? If anything, the more of the enemy they destroy, the better. Even if their own lives aren't at stake, they'll kill for ideals like 'rights' and 'freedom.' War is inevitable, and people will always find ways to justify murder." The headmaster was now shaking uncontrollably. I continued, undeterred. "People who kill in the name of justice are given the honor of being called 'revolutionaries.' As a student of the Code of Chivalry, I confess I hold a certain admiration for them."

I could hear the headmaster gulp quietly, which I took as a sign that I'd won. I broke into an even wider smile and looked him in the eyes.

"So... What were you saying about my uniform, again?"



When I returned home, Christopher was waiting to greet me in the entrance hall. "Welcome home!"

"Thanks, Christopher. I didn't expect such a hearty welcome."

“How was school?” he asked. “There weren’t any problems, were there?”

Jeez, what’s with the interrogation? I just got home! I thought. What had I done to deserve this?

“It was great. No problems at all,” I said.

“Really? You didn’t get scolded for your uniform?”

Damn, he’s sharp.

Christopher toddled behind me with a worried look on his face. I gave him a carefree smile.

“Nope!”

“Sis...”

For some reason, my family never bought my lies. My older brother and Christopher were especially good at seeing right through them.

“All right, all right. I got a few questions about it, but it’s all good. They understand now.”

“Really?” Christopher asked suspiciously.

I didn’t turn around to face him until we’d arrived at my room and I was standing in front of my closet.

I could tell from the tone of his voice that he wasn’t fully convinced. With a wry smile, I took off my jacket and put it on a hanger. Before I’d even noticed she was there, the head maid took the hanger from me and put it away. She began getting tea ready for Christopher and me.

“I wish I could’ve gone to school with you. I would feel much better about the whole thing if I were there with you.”

“You’ll be going to school with me next year,” I reminded him.

I remembered how he’d thrown a tantrum right before I’d headed off for my first day. He’d insisted on enrolling with me, and he’d absolutely refused to take no for an answer. Christopher didn’t usually fuss like that, so it had all been a bit unexpected.

In all fairness, though, it wasn’t unusual for a noble’s son to fudge his age by a

year or two. This happened often if he wanted to attend classes with a member of the royal family or another high-ranking noble, or if his age simply put him at some kind of disadvantage.

Unsurprisingly, Christopher hadn't had the courage to ask this of mother and father, but it hadn't stopped him from hounding my older brother about it. My older brother and I just fielded it all with wry smiles.

"I'm worried you'll get up to no good without me there to watch you," Christopher said. "And that you won't apply yourself to your studies."

"Well, you don't need to worry about that," I reassured him.

"Big brother was worried too."

"Urk..."

I was always at a loss when Christopher brought our older brother into the equation. I could only assume that he must've tasked Christopher with keeping an eye on me.

"You were supposed to be taking a break from working at the training grounds before your first day of school, but you kept coming home looking bruised all over. Big brother and I were really worried about you, and you never told us what was going on..."

Ah, that must've been when I was collecting letters of recommendation, I thought, remembering the trials I'd faced.

Just as you might've expected of knight commanders, they were seriously tough. I'll spare you the details, but the commander of the Royal Guard and the 13th Division commander—who was charged with leading the front line of the kingdom's defense force—were on a whole other level. Honestly, I was lucky to have beaten them.

My fights would make for great stories. If I were ever pressed for money, I knew I'd make a pretty penny off of novelizing them.

"Did you make any friends?"

I couldn't believe my little brother was asking me that. *How pitiful do you think I am?*

He wasn't wrong to worry, though. After I'd returned to class from the headmaster's office, I found the hordes of girls that had once been squealing over me were now steering clear of me. In fact, no one had even dared to speak to me. It hadn't been all bad, though—with my insanely good selective hearing, I'd managed to catch the girls whispering about how cool and amazing I was.

Now, a playboy character needs just one thing. What is it, you ask? Why, a gaggle of admiring girls, of course! It also just so happens to be what a villainess needs. And who else but the evil villainess Elizabeth Burton would be better equipped to secure such a posse?

It was all up to me to determine how my first year at the academy would go.

I looked at Christopher. I didn't want him to feel sorry for me, so I puffed out my chest and made a grand declaration. "Not yet, but I know I will."

I was optimistic. So far, I'd give my high school debut four out of five stars. That didn't seem half bad.

Win-Win? More Like, Winner Takes All

It had been a week since my new school life had begun. I'd assumed that it'd take time for everyone to warm up to the idea of a cross-dressing duke's daughter, but they'd been surprisingly receptive.

On the first day of class, people flooded into the hallway during our breaks to catch a glimpse of me. Boys, girls, upperclassmen, my classmates, teachers...they all wanted a look. I can say with one-hundred-percent confidence that I attracted even more attention than Robert, who was a literal prince.

In any media aimed at women, it's common knowledge that a heartthrob who's attractive enough to attract crowds in the hallway is the main character. It felt like I'd won. At the very least, I'd won the distinction of being the hot topic on everyone's lips—that much was clear.

"She's looking as handsome as ever today."

"I heard she's a certified swordsmanship instructor."

"She must be so strong!"

As I passed the throngs of young noblewomen, I heard every approving whisper from their lips. Their words of praise were music to my ears. *Please, keep 'em coming!*

Of course, they always fell silent whenever my deskmate, Isaac, shot a glare at them. I wasn't particularly pleased to have him sitting next to me. He might have been a brainiac, but what good did that do if he wasn't going to whisper the answers to me?

In any case, I had yet to gain any groupies, but that didn't get me down. Everything seemed to be progressing exactly as I'd hoped. I just wanted to keep up the pace and reach my goal.

I figured I might as well make the most of my current freedom—unburdened by groupies for the time being—so I spent some time touring the school

campus. I devoted lunchtime, after-school hours, and self-defense class to wandering around and visiting the scenes of the game's events, trying to line up the scenery I was seeing with the illustrated backgrounds from my memories.

Oh, yeah—speaking of self-defense class, the instructor had been quite impressed when I'd shown him my certificate. "Only a bear would be foolish enough to take you on," he'd said.

Fortunately, that had convinced him to grant me a formal exemption from the class. I wasn't allowed to go home or anything during self-defense class, though; it was more like a study hall, so I still had to stay at school.

I'd figured I might as well apply to be a self-defense tutor, since I'd be hanging around campus during class time anyway. It had seemed like it would be a great opportunity to show off my skills to the girls and get them squealing again. Alas, the instructor had turned me down. "We're training young ladies here, not gorillas," he'd told me. How rude is that?!

In any case, I'd seen plenty of familiar places after just one lap around campus: the fountain where Robert and I had gotten soaking wet, the library where I'd studied with Isaac, the student council room where I'd enjoyed tea with Edward, and the courtyard where I'd eaten lunch with Christopher...in the game, I mean.

As I took in the scenery, I conjured memories of all the corresponding game CGs. It felt like I was on a pilgrimage again, just like the first time I'd wandered around town.

Stop that, Elizabeth, I scolded myself. *You're here to figure out how to get the jump on the other love interests, not to take in the scenery.*

As I looked down from the skyway at the garden behind the school, I spotted a familiar-looking, bespectacled boy. He seemed to be dancing alone for some reason, and I didn't mean that metaphorically. He was really and truly out there practicing his dance moves.

I knew from playing the game that Isaac's reputation as a prodigy was, in fact, a lie. He was smart and talented, sure, but he worked *hard* at it. In a family of geniuses, he was simply gifted. He knew he could never surpass his father and brothers no matter how hard he worked, and this had become something of a

sore spot for him.

I recalled how, back when I'd played the game, I'd thought to myself, *Do you really need to do all this? I'm sure you were plenty smart to begin with.*

My perspective had changed after I'd met him for the first time in real life—back when we'd been eight years old at Robert's birthday party. Seeing him covered in mud like that, it had become clear to me that he'd had to work impossibly hard just to get to what I'd thought was his baseline.

Maybe that's actually part of his appeal?

I was a carefree playboy loathe to let anyone see me sweat, so Isaac was practically my polar opposite. Since we were both in the same year and would be in the same class, I found myself hoping that he'd be my main rival when it came time for me to claim my role as a love interest—kind of like how Edward was Robert's rival.

Girls love a good foil, don't they?

As I continued exploring this idea, knowing full well that I was putting the cart before the horse, I moved on to the next event venue.



"Hey! Watch where you're stepping!"

"You're the one who bumped into me."

It was time for dance lessons. We'd been split into pairs to practice dancing the waltz, and the pair next to me had just stopped dancing and broken into a heated argument.

I won't go into the details, but I'd managed to convince the dance instructor to let me dance the boy's part. I would've caused problems for the boys if I'd danced the girl's part—I was much too tall. What's more, it was a great chance to impress the ladies. Really, it was a win-win situation.

Anyway, Isaac and the young noblewoman he'd been paired with had started arguing on the dance floor.

Isaac was the third eldest son of a prime minister who had risen to power from his position as an earl. He was ridiculously strict and straitlaced, and

women were his greatest nightmare. Aside from his good looks and glasses, which gave him the attractive air of an intellectual, there was little about him that a young noblewoman might've found appealing.

Apparently, he was also a terrible dancer. And what's worse, he had no clue how to treat a lady. As a gentleman, he was an utter failure.

Some love interest you are, bud.

Dance class required everyone to dance in male-female pairs (my partner and I were an exception, of course) whether they wanted to or not, but it seemed that the girl who'd been dancing with Isaac was at the end of her rope. The other girls were keeping their distance, not wanting to get drawn in as a replacement.

Even in the game, Isaac is notoriously disagreeable. The fact that he's romanceable, though, just goes to show that there's a real demand for that from players. I guess they just can't get enough of his good looks (and glasses). Interestingly, you can't romance him without a high Academics stat.

Wonder if that's true in real life too?

I couldn't help but wonder what the hell the developers had been thinking with their arbitrary stat system. In the real world, it seemed unlikely that there were too many guys who'd wanna date someone just because they were always hitting the books. It seemed to me that Charisma would be a much more important stat to max out, especially in a school setting.

Isaac, now left without a partner, crossed his arms in a show of discontent.

Great... He's going to completely kill the vibe, I thought.

Until now, I'd just been quietly watching the whole scene unfold. But, suddenly, Isaac seemed to notice me.

Actually, I've got an idea...

If I could make this problem go away for them, then the girls in class would probably be pretty appreciative. Best case scenario, my popularity would skyrocket. I pictured them showering me with praise. In fact, I could practically *hear* their uninhibited squealing.

I only had a year before the main character enrolled at the academy and entered the story. I needed to do everything I could to lay a good foundation for myself.

“Oh, Isaac. What are we going to do with you?”

I pushed back my hair with my fingers (it was so short that there was absolutely no need to do this, but I knew it looked cool) and took a few long, gallant strides over to Isaac. With one smooth gesture, I took his hand and pulled him into a closed position. From his place under me—in the woman’s position—he looked up at me with astonishment.

I gave him a purposeful wink and said, “An essential part of dancing is to be considerate of your partner. I think you could benefit from dancing *her* part. See for yourself what it’s like for her.”

“What?”

Without answering, I simply began dancing in time to the music. I’d fully expected him to shake me off, but he was so stunned that he just followed my lead. His movements were stiff and awkward. I hated to say it, but he had two left feet. Still, those feet were moving, and that counted for something.

Thinking back on how I’d spotted him secretly practicing his moves the other day, I knew he wasn’t just slacking off. Besides, it was hard to imagine the ever-earnest Isaac not committing himself fully. He was trying his best—in his own way—to make it work. Unlike academics, though, you had to get a *feel* for dancing. It couldn’t be brute forced through sheer effort. No doubt that had only fed his inferiority complex. He’d probably filed dancing away as something he’d just never be good at.

As I looked down at his face, so close to mine, our eyes met. He looked deeply confused. He stared fixedly at me, blinking several times from behind his glasses. Without warning, I let out a bold laugh. His face went red in an instant. He opened his mouth, as if he were about to say something, and I gently pulled him in closer and moved on to the next sequence. He clamped his mouth shut in response, giving the dance steps his full attention.

Unsurprisingly, it seemed like he was more comfortable now that we were following moves straight out of the textbook. He was doing his best to smooth

his movements, match them to the tempo, and prevent himself from tripping over his own feet in the process. He was finally dancing with real grace—all he'd needed was just a little help. It was a pleasure to lead him.

Now that I was starting to get into it, I decided to spice things up a bit. After I led him through an underarm turn, though, he glared up at me in disapproval. Watching his typically calm and composed expression turn sour, I couldn't help but let out a laugh. My expression seemed to have the same effect on him; as he watched me laugh, he reluctantly broke into a smile.



“Burton...” he whispered in a voice so soft that only I could hear it.

Thinking about it now, I realized that this was the first time I’d actually had a real conversation with him.

“Would you mind helping me practice again like this?” he asked. “I hate not being able to dance.”

“Of course. I’m sure you’ll improve in no time,” I replied.

I wasn’t just flattering him either—I really meant it. He had the basics down. All he needed now was to get a *feel* for it. I figured he’d only need my help maybe two or three more times before he got the hang of it. And if that was all it took to earn the girls’ gratitude, then it was a small price to pay.

By the time the song had ended, peace had returned to the classroom. The girls were all blushing a bit as they looked at me. Actually...the boys were too, for some reason. Not that I had any complaints about that. Any guy who’s disliked by the fellas probably isn’t going to get much love from the ladies either. So, in my books, this was a good sign.

I’d actually gotten a lot out of my dance with Isaac. I could call it a win-win for both of us, but honestly, it felt like I had gained much more in the long run. We’d both won the battle, but I would win the war. *Winner takes all.*

I pushed back my hair, which had fallen over my eyes a bit during the dance, and I could swear I heard more faint squealing.



“Are you really okay with it?”

“Hmm? What do you mean?”

Isaac and I were practicing dance moves together after school when he sprang this question on me. His expression looked strangely grave.

For a moment, I assumed he was talking about my grand plan... But of course there was no way he’d know about that.

I’d changed up my routine recently, breaking up my typical after-school campus tours with dance practice with Isaac. We’d been practicing sword

fighting together too, but frankly, he was even *worse* at that than he was at dancing.

That had come as a surprise to me, actually. All of the love interests were supposed to be able to save the day and gallantly rescue the main character from danger. How could he do that without any swordsmanship skills?

I racked my brains, trying to remember how Isaac's events had played out, and recalled that he didn't need to use a sword. He solved everything with his *brains*.

He'd never struck me as someone without any martial aptitude when I'd been playing, but then again, it *was* an otome game. The genre had a habit of sweeping any inconvenient truths right under the rug. This was particularly true in the forgiving world of *Royal LOVERS*, which was no doubt built upon a foundation of white lies.

As I considered my choices, it occurred to me that it might have been a slight miscalculation to spend all this time with ill-tempered Isaac when I didn't even have any groupies yet. It was too late to back out now, though. The value of my stock was bound to plummet if I earned myself a reputation for being fickle.

Villains earn a big popularity boost when they do something uncharacteristically good, right? It's the whole jerk-with-a-heart-of-gold-rescues-a-stray-cat-in-the-rain trope. Well, on the flip side, heroes take a big hit when they do something uncharacteristically evil, no matter how trivial it may be.

And so, albeit reluctantly, I had committed myself to spending time with Isaac every week like this. It was almost like we were *friends*.

Still wearing a grave expression, Isaac asked, "I'm talking about your betrothal to Prince Robert. You don't really want to marry him, do you?"

"What?" I blurted out without thinking. He'd caught me completely off guard with that question.

He was right, though. I *didn't* want to marry Robert. In my mind, our betrothal was nothing more than an obstacle getting in the way of my pursuit to romance the main character. What could be more confusing than knowing that two of

your love interests were engaged to *each other*?

To be fair, though, I wouldn't have even needed to romance her if I could've just broken off the engagement in the first place.

Seemingly spurred on by my lack of a real response, Isaac looked me square in the eyes and said, in a resolute but delicate voice, "You're, um...you're interested in women, aren't you? I know that marriage is something of a political arrangement for noble families, but I can imagine this must be hard on you. You're my...f-friend. So, if you want to break off the engagement, then I'm here to help."

My eyes went wide with shock. "Wait, what? You think I'm gay?"

"W-Well...yes. I mean, you're always dressing and acting like a boy, so..."

I could see now why he'd had trouble getting to the point. Noble families were concerned with protecting their bloodline above all else, so same-sex relationships were completely off the table.

That being said, same-sex relationships among nobles weren't necessarily unprecedented. I'd heard of noblemen who'd gotten married just to have children—and their marriages *certainly* hadn't stopped *them* from cavorting with all sorts of boy toys.

It was one thing for me to cross-dress as a boy, but since I was trying to build a reputation for myself as a playboy knight, I was also going above and beyond to attract girls. It was understandable that Isaac might've gotten the wrong idea.

But seeing his serious expression and thinking about how much thought he must've put into this, I couldn't help but burst out laughing. "Ah ha ha! Okay, I see your point. I can hardly blame you for getting that idea."

"H-Hey! This isn't a laughing matter!"

"Ha ha! I'm sorry, I just can't help it!"

Probably sensing the teasing edge to my voice, Isaac's face grew red with indignation. As much as his awkward earnestness amused me, though, I was touched that he'd be willing to help me like that—especially considering that he

knew it would be breaking the rules of noble society. He was a lot more compassionate than I'd given him credit for.

Friends, huh? I thought to myself.

In media aimed at women, it was a given that popular male characters would have lots of friends. What's more, those friends were usually *also* heartthrobs. And since Isaac was a love interest, he was unusually handsome—so handsome that, if you caught a glimpse of his profile as he was reading, you might easily mistake him for a statue. Every angle, from his nose to his chin, was a work of art.

I needed some girl groupies, but I figured it probably wouldn't hurt to have some male friends too. At the very least, it would give me the peace of mind that I'd be able to give Christopher a satisfying answer when he asked me if I'd made any friends yet.

"I don't dress like this because I'm into girls," I clarified. "I only do it because... Well, I've got this feeling that I'm going to meet my soulmate soon. And I think I'll have a better chance with them if I cross-dress."

This time, it was Isaac's turn to tilt his head in confusion.

I figured I'd just let him ponder that insinuation and come to his own conclusions. It seemed like a better strategy than trying desperately to come up with some plausible excuse. It would've been a bad move to try to pull a fast one on him when he was clearly smarter than I was.

"Your 'soulmate'? Hmm... I didn't expect you to believe in unscientific things like fate."

"Well, what's the harm? As long as I believe in it, isn't that enough?"

"So I'm guessing your soulmate isn't *Robert*, then?"

I shrugged and gave him a cryptic smile that suggested I couldn't answer the question honestly. Instead, I said, "Look... I don't have anything against him. I mean, we go way back."

"I see..." was all he said in reply.



Isaac was absent from school—stuck at home with a cold, apparently.

I'm sure I don't need to clarify this, but even people in this world catch colds sometimes. There's even an event in the game when the main character gets a cold, and her love interest looks after her.

But for the record, I'd yet to catch a cold since my rebirth as Elizabeth Burton. I hadn't even seen a doctor since the day I'd collapsed when I'd first regained my past-life memories.

Health was a love interest's greatest asset, though. You know what they say—"Health is wealth," right?

Anyway, Isaac was missing out on handouts and homework. *Someone* had to bring those to him, and since everyone knew I was on friendly terms with him, that someone had been decided to be me. I wasn't too pleased about it, but I could hardly say no to the homeroom teacher. What kind of playboy would I be if I refused to help a lady in need?

I walked the short distance from the academy to Isaac's house and arrived at the gate. I'd considered taking a carriage, but that seemed a bit over the top.

The Guildford estate was about half the size of Burtons', but it seemed pretty respectable in its own right. That was just by my own estimation, though. I'd never really had anything resembling a friend before, so I'd never gotten a good look at any noble's lodgings but my own. It gave me a very limited frame of reference on house sizes. Given that it *was* the prime minister's home, though, surely it must've been considered on the larger side?

The exterior and landscape were somewhat spartan, lending it a sort of modern feel.

I rang the bell at the gate, and a man who looked to be in his thirties emerged to greet me. Judging by his attire, he was probably the butler.

"Hi. I'm a friend of Isaac's. Our homeroom teacher asked me to deliver some handouts to him," I said.

"Your identification papers, please?" the butler demanded after a pointed pause. He was looking at me with the most suspicious expression I had ever seen.

What's his deal? I wondered. *I'm wearing the academy's uniform and everything.*

I pulled out my identity papers from my inside pocket. (Of course, by “identity papers,” I basically just mean something like a student ID card.) It had my family crest and my father's signature, though, so it certainly wasn't something that could be forged easily.

“D-Duke Burton's daughter?!” the butler exclaimed after scrutinizing my papers.

I watched as his face rapidly shifted from its natural tones to blue, then pale white.

“That's me.”

“P-Please excuse my rudeness! Come in, come in!”

Yep, I've heard that one before. That's gotta be one of the top three lines for small-fry baddies, I thought to myself as he gave me an astonishingly deep bow and beckoned me in. Only low-ranking nobodies had such an attitude shift after learning someone's rank.

If I'd *actually* had any authority, I would've said a word or two to the Guildford house's head about his butler's disgraceful behavior. But for better or for worse, I didn't, and his efforts to ingratiate himself to me weren't going to get him anywhere. My family knew better than to give me any power, which I had to admit was for the best. They probably thought I'd abuse it—and they were absolutely right.

In any case, I made it to Isaac's bedroom without any further interrogations. *Good riddance.*

“Burton, what are you doing here?” Isaac said, sitting up in his bed and regarding me with a surly expression.

“Just saying ‘hello.’”

Sheesh... I come all the way here, and this is the thanks I get? Rude. I'd kind of been expecting at least a smile and *some* sort of gratitude.

Isaac just glared at me as I gave him a strained smile. He shook his head

slightly. “Nice try. You’re not the type to pay a ‘get well soon’ visit.”

“You know me too well, don’t you? Our homeroom teacher asked me to stop by.”

I put the handouts and homework I’d brought on his bedside table. We might have been friends, but we weren’t close enough to have any sort of animated discussions.

He seemed well enough by the looks of him, but it was hard to tell if he was contagious. Either way, I didn’t want to stick around long enough to find out. Besides, if I loitered around, the butler was bound to bring us some tea and extend my stay even longer. I needed to make an exit ASAP.

“Well, see ya,” I said.

Just as I was about to leave, Isaac interrupted me. “Burton, wait. Don’t wander around on your way out. Just go straight home.”

His expression seemed unusually serious. *What kind of advice is that?* I wondered. Actually, it sounded a lot like something Christopher might say. I just gave him another wry smile in response.

Apparently, that wasn’t enough.

“Go straight home,” he repeated with that weirdly serious expression.

“All right, all right,” I reassured him.

I made for the door again, but didn’t get very far.

“Well, well, well. Hello there.”

“Uh, *hi*...”

Isaac’s two older brothers sat in front of me.

Just as I’d been leaving, the butler had caught me. I’d found myself being escorted to the living room and offered a cup of tea.

Isaac’s brothers had already graduated from the academy, so I had a hard time imagining what they were doing loafing around at home—especially at this hour. *They must have an awful lot of time on their hands.*

They looked to be about the same age as my older brother, but they clearly

didn't follow the same schedule he did. My brother was always busy traveling back and forth between the castle and the duchy, so I almost never got to see him at home in the afternoon. Honestly, I missed him.

"I take it you're Isaac's classmate? Oh, or are you his babysitter?"

"I'm his *friend*."

"Really? You're telling me that bookworm has friends?" one of the brothers retorted.

"Please. The word 'fun' isn't even in his dictionary. Surely you don't actually *enjoy* his company?" the other added, and they both snickered.

Huh...

Their eyes were full of nothing but contempt for their younger brother, and it was making me sick. They could ridicule Isaac all they wanted, but I wasn't about to let them look down on *me* for being friends with him. Besides, it wasn't like I'd befriended him on purpose. It had just...kind of happened.

"You'd be much better off with friends like us, I can promise you that."

"Right..." I replied noncommittally.

If it hadn't been for my ladies' etiquette classes, I would've just snorted through my nose. Fortunately for all of us, though, I knew better.

I also knew better than to take anyone at their word when they said I'd have something to gain from being their friend. More often than not, those were exactly the sort of people you were better off *not* befriending. Besides, who would bad-mouth their brother in front of someone who'd made a point of identifying herself as his friend? No one with good sense, I can tell you that much.

"We got all the good genes. Poor Isaac was left scraping the bottom of the barrel."

"He spends every minute studying, and he *still* can't get the grades we did. Alas, hard work will only get you so far. You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear."

The two young men smirked as they said this, adding some affected sighs for

emphasis. They were acting awfully cocky for evil side characters, and I was getting some real secondhand embarrassment from their behavior.

Those smirks would fall right off your faces if you knew just how badly Isaac pulls the rug out from under your feet in the game, I thought to myself. Can't believe you've got the nerve to spout such shit from your generic NPC mouths. Have you even looked in the mirror lately?

I remembered the events of the game as I cringed internally.

In Isaac's route, the main character almost gets betrothed to one of his older brothers. He makes some case that he'd be a better match for a saint than his younger brother...or something.

Of course, Isaac being Isaac, he just takes this lying down. He drops some line about how his older brothers are always stealing everything that matters to him, laments about how he's not good enough for the main character anyway, and pushes her away.

Anyway, more stuff happens, and Isaac ends up winning a chess match against his older brother and reclaiming the main character. Things go downhill for the brothers pretty quickly after that. Not only are they disgraced by the little brother they've taunted all his life, but they're also finally held accountable for all the crap they've pulled. They even lose their inheritance rights.

Who knew chess could be so high stakes? I mused. *Come to think of it, the instructors at the training grounds like to play chess during breaks, don't they?*

I entertained the idea of challenging Isaac's brothers to a chess match right then and there—it would've been so satisfying to kick their butts. Unfortunately, I wasn't really cut out for brainy games like that. Now, if the winner was determined by whoever could utterly pulverize the board? *That* was a game I'd win.

I hadn't realized how pissed off I was until I'd started fantasizing about kicking their butts. *These twerps must've really gotten under my skin.*

Partly, this was because of my loyalty to Isaac. Even if I hadn't set out to make friends with him, we *were* buddies now, and I didn't appreciate hearing him

bad-mouthed. But the other part—the part that I really didn’t like to admit—might’ve been some internalized hatred of two-bit baddies like myself.

Here I was, doing everything in my power to secure a bright future for myself, and these chumps were just sitting around shit-talking their brother. I couldn’t stand it.

But I was already sixteen (even older if I counted the years I’d lived in my previous life). As much as I would’ve liked to throw hands with these guys, I was too old for that... Well, unless *they* started it, of course. Hopefully I’d grown up a bit since the day that I dislodged the crown prince’s office doorknob in a fit of frustration.

I gave Isaac’s two brothers a once-over. Their stick-thin arms looked weak and pathetic. Maybe not as weak as Isaac’s, but that wasn’t saying much. I couldn’t imagine them holding swords in their soft, uncalled hands.

Before I could even stop myself, I let out a disdainful snort.

“Something the matter?” one of the brothers asked.

“Not at all. Thank you for this *enlightening* conversation,” I replied.

I tried to smooth over my snort with a polite smile befitting of a noblewoman and stood up from my seat.



“Morning, Isaac.”

“Good morning, Burton,” Isaac said slowly.

We were back at school, and I’d caught Isaac on the way to classes. He’d apparently made a full recovery from his cold. His expression was unusually dour as he greeted me. From the way his lip curled in disgust, you would’ve thought he’d just swallowed a bug.

I couldn’t blame him, though. Despite the fact that Isaac was the closest thing I had to a friend, today I found myself in the unusual company of two young ladies.

“Oh, no, Sir Burton! Please don’t tear your gaze away from me!” one of them cried.

“Hah hah hah. You’re a handful, kitten, you know that?”

“I won’t let you steal her away, you trollop!” the other girl shrieked, then turned to me and asked in a syrupy voice, “Sir Burton, I’ve brought some sweets with me today. Would you like to share?”

“What could be sweeter than your smile, darling?”

The girl squealed. “Oh, Sir Burton! Now I wish you’d just eat *me*!”

From the way Isaac was glaring daggers at me, any onlookers would’ve been shocked to learn that we were friends. Compared to the cloying, warm gazes of the girls at my side, Isaac’s was cold as ice. The temperature difference was dramatic enough to give me a cold.

“All right, ladies. Class is about to start, so we’d better make our way back to our classrooms.”

“Awww!” the two girls cried in unison.

Incredible, I thought to myself. Their performance as side characters was absolutely impeccable. If I’d been watching from the audience, I would’ve given them a standing ovation.

“I’ll see you again at lunch, kittens,” I reassured them.

“You sure will!”

“Take care now.”

I gave them a wink, waved goodbye, and watched them leave. I could hear their melodious laughter as they walked away from the classroom, their skirts and long hair swaying gently as they walked. They really did look as sweet as candy.

“Burton.”

“Yes?”

“Those third-years you were just talking to... If I remember correctly, they’re...”

Sharp as ever, I thought. Leave it to Isaac to see right through my scheming.

“Your older brothers’ fiancées? They sure are,” I followed quickly, finishing his

sentence.

“Why are you...?” he started again, then trailed off.

“Your brothers gave me a real *warm welcome* when I visited your family’s estate the other day. I just thought I’d...show them my appreciation.”

His frown deepened. With his brains and his noble background, I had no doubt that he’d caught on to my insinuation. In fact, he was probably much better at these euphemisms than I was.

“It was so nice chatting with them. They’re great girls,” I said. “You know, I’d love to get to know them better. I was thinking we could chat about your brothers, since that’s a shared connection. Any stories you can share about them? What are they like?”

For a moment, Isaac was silent. “What kind of stories are you after?”

“Oh, you know, just goofy stories. Guys love reminiscing about heroic escapades and mischief they used to get up to, don’t they? It’s all harmless once enough time has passed. Besides, I’m sure the girls would love to hear about what your brothers were like when they were younger.”

I could see Isaac scrutinizing me over the top of his glasses. I met his gaze and made a show of stroking my chin as I looked into the distance, as if deep in thought.

“Although, ah, girls can be a little sensitive, you know? No offense, but they come from much higher-ranking families than yours. If I were to accidentally scandalize them with a story about your brothers, they might want to call off their engagements...” I said, looking Isaac straight in the eye. I gave him a knowing wink. “So, keep that in mind when you give me some stories to share. I’m trusting you to pick carefully.”

“Why would you do all of this for me?” Isaac muttered after a pause. His voice was so soft, it sounded like he was talking to himself. I took this as a sign that I’d gotten my message across.

If I pulled back the thin veneer of civility, I had essentially been trying to tell him that I was going to regale his brothers’ fiancées with tales of their misdeeds so horrible, the engagements would be nullified before I was even finished. And

wouldn't he like to see his brothers' faces as they watched their gold-digging futures swirl down the drain?

I looked at Isaac, who was still eyeing me suspiciously, and shrugged. "That's what friends are for, right?"

At this, Isaac's eyes shot wide open. It was like he'd just seen an alien. *All right, no need to be dramatic. You're the one who first called us friends, remember?*

A strange, unsettling feeling was beginning to come over me.

"Besides, I'd like to learn more about how girls think. I don't have many female friends, so it's a good opportunity for me to do some research," I added.

Isaac didn't respond. He knew I didn't have any female friends or groupies, so he probably accepted this explanation.

Honestly, it had also just felt great to be flanked by two beautiful women. I was pleased that I'd accomplished what I'd set out to, but the fact that I'd enjoyed the journey made it all the better. It put me in a good mood, and that was always a plus. After all, a good mood meant peace of mind...and peace of mind was like catnip to the ladies.

"I love talking to girls. They're sweet, and they smell good. You don't even have to respond to anything they say. All you have to do is smile and nod, and they eat it up. It's great... Well, just as long as you know how to pretend to be listening."

"They have a word for people like you, you know. 'Lady-killer.'"

"You insult me. I'm not here to menace anyone, much less the ladies."

I broke into a wry smile, surprised by my own words. It was true, though. I didn't have any enemies to menace... Well, not that I had any allies either.

"I thought you said you weren't interested in women?"

"Oh? Did I say that?"

I watched Isaac's glasses slide down his face in disbelief. *Love that*, I thought. *Classic glasses character response.*

“I’ve never fallen in love before. I dunno, maybe I *am* more interested in girls? I mean, for all I know, my soulmate might even be a girl.”

I had no idea if Isaac would remember this conversation, but I felt like I needed to keep dropping hints about “searching for my soulmate”—and to foreshadow that this “soulmate” was the main character. The more hints I dropped everywhere, the heavier the foreshadowing. I wanted to make sure that *all* these little hints I dropped made a lasting impression on as many people as possible before the main character showed up.

“Listen, Isaac. I know you’ve said women are your worst nightmare, but your feelings might change if you actually got to know one. Why don’t I introduce you to a few?” I suggested with a mischievous smile.

“No, thanks.” He immediately and irritably shut me down, clearly not giving my suggestion any consideration.

“Aw, don’t be like that.”

“I don’t need to meet any girls.”

“Why not?”

“Because, unlike you, I *know* what it’s like to fall in love.”

Whoa, whoa, whoa. Straitlaced, earnest-to-a-fault Isaac? In love?! It was unfathomable. With the way his route was written in the game, I could’ve sworn that the main character was his first love. Although, if I really thought about it...I could kind of picture him having a little crush on an older tutor.

I was eager to prove my theory now, so I pressed him for more details.

“You? In love? You’ve never mentioned *that* before.”

“I guess I haven’t.”

“What’re they like? Is it a woman? Or...is it a *man*?”

After a few moments of silence, Isaac replied, “Wouldn’t you like to know?”

“Isaac, c’mon! I thought we were buddies!”

But no matter how much I pushed him, he never gave me an answer.



If I know one thing about teenage girls, it's that they're incorrigibly fickle.

Until recently, the academy's young noblewomen seemed to have been deliberately keeping their distance, watching from afar and giving off distinct "don't come near me" energy. That had all changed when they saw me talking amicably with two other girls, though. Gradually—no, rather suddenly, actually—they became quite interested in striking up a conversation with me.

At first, I was surrounded by so many girls that even Isaac's glares couldn't keep them at bay. They'd crowd around me everywhere—in the classroom, in the hallways, at the school gate. I'd just waved at them merrily as I passed, like a politician riding around in her campaign car.

"A vote for Burton is a vote you can trust! Thank you for your support, ladies and gentlemen!"

Eventually, some of the girls began to worry that all the attention might actually be a burden, so they took the initiative to form the "Sir Burton Defense Squad." It was basically a glorified fanclub.

A fanclub, huh? I thought to myself. I like the sound of that.

In shojo manga, having a fanclub was all the proof you needed that you were a main character. In my case, it certainly *felt* like validation that I'd secured my spot as a love interest. I remembered how, back in my previous life, people would paint the left eye of a Daruma doll when they set a goal, then fill in the right eye when they achieved it. *If I had one of those bad boys now, I'd probably be ready to paint in that right eye.*

Before I'd even realized what was happening, the fanclub had suddenly gained a director who'd begun dictating rules. There were certain ways the fanclub could greet me or speak to me during lunch and after school. She'd even designed a rotating roster so that the girls would have to take turns. Thanks to her leadership, the fanclub was now causing far fewer problems for Isaac and our other classmates.

I'd managed to fulfill my goal of gathering groupies too. Granted, the fanclub was a little more formal and bureaucratic than what I'd had in mind, but I couldn't complain.

I also had Isaac's brothers' fiancées eating out of the palm of my hand. And as it turned out, I hadn't even needed to tell them any scandalous stories. They weren't too enamored with the brothers to begin with, and their dissatisfaction only grew the more time they spent with me. They made constant, unflattering comparisons. I was always hearing cries of "He never calls me 'cute' like *you* do, Sir Burton!" and "I wish *you* were my fiancée, Sir Burton!"

I felt pretty confident that the engagements would shatter to pieces with minimal intervention, but I sprinkled in a few stories I'd heard from Isaac about the brothers' misdeeds—er, *heroic escapades*—just for good measure.

I had no idea what the girls would do with the info, but I felt certain that Isaac would end up inheriting his father's title one way or another. And since his brothers were hurtling headfirst towards their downfalls, I figured I'd be doing the girls a favor by giving them the push they needed to call off their engagements. Better sooner than later, right?

When Isaac had the nerve to call me a "devious manipulator," I just shot back that I'd learned from the best of them.

He'd given me the most disgusted face I'd ever seen. His disdain felt awfully ironic, considering he'd been much craftier as an eight-year-old than I could ever dream of being. I was just copying him and getting revenge the aristocrat's way.

In any case, as you can probably guess, I'd been thoroughly enjoying my school life.

Today, I'd come to school in my horse-drawn carriage while doing finger push-ups on the way—the usual. I was in great spirits as I gently opened the door to the classroom.

"Isaac...?" I blurted out, before I could give everyone a proper hello.

Sitting in Isaac's seat was a complete stranger. Just yesterday, Isaac's long hair had been draped over his back, and his blunt bangs had been parted right in the middle and combed to death...but the boy who sat in his seat this morning had natural, flowing bangs. He was sporting a short, clean haircut that was only a little bit longer than mine. It looked nothing like the mushroom cut he'd worn in the game. If anything, it was more like the kind of haircut a white collar worker

would wear after a year on the job.

Who are you, and what have you done with Isaac? I wondered, incredulous. Only the boy's trademark glasses remained.

"What in the world happened to you? I look away for a second, and you turn into a real man!" I laughed, teasing him.

For a moment, Isaac seemed to be at a loss for words. Then he cleared his throat, and with a calm expression on his face, he said, "I guess you could say I'm...making a wish."

That doesn't sound like Isaac at all, I thought. Maybe this guy really was a completely different person? *And hang on, hasn't he got that backwards? I thought you were supposed to grow your hair until your wish comes true.*

"Making a wish? That's awfully *unscientific* of you," I teased, borrowing a phrase he'd used.

He parried with my own reply. "As long as I believe in it, isn't that enough?"

Girls Go Crazy for Boy-on-Boy Action

“Oh, that reminds me. Will you take these for me, Lizzie?”

Here I was, *again*, in the crown prince’s all-too-familiar office. I couldn’t believe that half of my day off had already been wasted accompanying Edward on an early morning shopping spree.

I desperately tried to stifle a yawn as I looked at the paper bag that Edward was presenting to me. Stuffed inside were crocheted lace coasters, capes, and all sorts of other goods that the crown prince had apparently handmade himself. I even spotted some crocheted stuffed animals.

What’s he planning to do with all of these? I wondered. I took the bag from him and was surprised by how hefty it was.

“Uh, Your Highness?” I asked, hesitantly. “What am I supposed to do with this?”

“I made far too much. There’s nowhere for me to put it all, so I’m giving it to you.”

“I see...” I said, despite not actually seeing the logic at all. What use could I possibly have for all these cute little stuffed animals and lacy capes? They’d just get stuffed away in a closet somewhere and forgotten about.

“Don’t you think this is a bit much?” I tried.

“Consider them mementos. They’ll give you something to remember me by when I’m gone.”

I could feel myself frowning. *I can’t believe he’s trying to make me feel sorry for him. I’m the one who’s actually suffering here.* I was also getting really tired of him playing the whole I’ll-be-dead-soon card. I needed to put an end to this.

“You’re free to believe whatever you want, but I’ve made up my mind. I’m not buying into all this tripe about your days being numbered,” I said.

Edwards eyes shot wide open as he stared back at me. I continued,

undeterred, as if I'd only been stating the obvious. "You trust the royal physician over me, right? Well, I don't think that's any different to me trusting my gut over you."

"You're out of line."

"If it's out of line to have faith in Your Highness's longevity, then by all means, punish me for it," I said, shrugging. Edward fell silent. "Of course, you should probably keep in mind that I was never supposed to know about your illness in the first place. I look forward to seeing how you sidestep that little problem when you mete out my punishment."

"I never realized you were so conniving."

"Well, now you know."

It seemed like I'd legitimately offended him, but it didn't take long for his huffing to subside. In mere moments, he was breaking out into a quiet, bitter laugh.

Now it was my turn to be offended. *Who looks right into someone's eyes and laughs at them?* I thought, perturbed. *If you ask me, that's out of line.*

"Forgive me. It's just...you said that so brazenly, I couldn't help but laugh," he said, then paused thoughtfully. "Maybe I was getting ahead of myself with all that puffery about mementos. But the truth is, you're the only person I can share this secret with."

Dammit. I'd dug myself into a hole again. *I don't know what I'm going to do with all this handmade crap, but I can hardly say no to him now.*

I racked my brains, searching for some way I could get out of this without taking all his handicrafts home with me.

"Hey, what if you gave them to your maids? I'm sure they'd appreciate them," I tried, desperately.

"They'd view them as gifts, and I'd rather not have to deal with any misunderstandings that might arise from that."

"Fair point."

I had to admit he was right. What's more, all of the handicrafts that were

stuffed into the bag were well-made enough to be on par with something you could buy from a store. Each item was imbued with the same beautiful, ephemeral quality that was apparent in every feature of the crown prince's face. While the maids would probably never imagine that he had made them himself, gifts from the crown prince were bound to cause scandals. His otherworldly good looks put him doubly at risk.

"You could seriously sell these, though, you know. I'm sure they'd fly off the shelves," I tried again.

"Are you suggesting I open a stall in the castle?"

"Who said anything about selling them in the castle?" I retorted.

That's when inspiration struck: if I pretended I'd bought them from somewhere, I could just give them out like candy to whoever I wanted. Scandals weren't a concern for me. People could spread whatever rumors they wanted, for all I cared. Besides, no one saw me as a young noblewoman; everyone just treated me like a womanizing knight.

"Look, I can only decorate my bedroom with so many of these. Would you mind if I found some other ways to put the rest to good use?"

The crown prince seemed to consider this for a moment. "I suppose you're right. Yes, that sounds perfectly reasonable," he replied, nodding.

We both knew how profoundly disrespectful it was to regift anything from the royal family, but surely even Edward had to acknowledge that there was a limit to how many of his girlish handmade items I could put to use.

Hmm, what did I do with the presents I got from Robert, again? I thought, trying to remember if I'd just given them to random maids. *Nope. Can't remember.*



That night, I called the head maid to my room. I thrust the bag stuffed to the brim with handmade items at her.

"Lady Elizabeth, *what is this?*" she asked.

"Oh, just some stuff I got. Would you mind passing them out to the maids for

me? I don't care who gets what."

The head maid just stared at me suspiciously. For a second, I was completely baffled as to what I'd done to deserve her mistrust, but then it hit me: she must've suspected me of trying to seduce the maids again.

Sheesh, give me a little credit here.

"Hang on, it's not what you think. I'm not trying to make a pass at anyone, okay? You don't even have to tell them it's from me."

"Well, why didn't you say so?" the head maid replied, her face noticeably relaxing.

It was one thing to be banned from interacting with the maids, but her suspicion felt a bit like overkill. Still, I had only myself to blame for earning this reputation. I couldn't protest it in good faith.

The head maid opened the paper bag and took a stuffed animal out. Judging by its color and shape, it appeared to be a bear. For a good minute, she examined the stuffed bear in silence, her expression gradually darkening.

"Lady Elizabeth..." she said, slowly.

"Yes?"

"These are handmade, aren't they?"

Urk. Busted.

I managed to keep my panic from showing on my face (at least, I think I did), but as soon as she said that, I felt myself break out into a cold sweat that dripped all the way down my back.

"What makes you think that?"

Here's a little piece of advice: anyone who evades a question (like I just did) is up to no good. A perfect example of this is the philanderer who responds to questions like "Are you cheating on me?" with another question. If he asks why, you can be sure he's hiding something.

"Because of the inefficient flourishes. If it had been mass-produced, there would be a break in the stitching. Take this part, for example—it would have

been more efficient to close off the stitching and start a new stitch. But whoever made this didn't do that, which means it's likely a handcrafted labor of love."

She'd presented hard evidence. I had no idea what she was talking about, but I could only assume she was right. It was beginning to feel like I had no choice but to concede.

"I'm impressed you could tell," I said. "It looked store-bought to me."

"Where did you get all of this?"

"I told you, it's just some stuff I got."

"Don't you dodge my question, Lady Elizabeth."

As soon as she said that, the whole mood shifted.

"*Who* did you get this from?" she pressed.

I answered her with nothing but silence.

Now, you might think I was just trying to cover my ass here, but my silence was for *her* sake. The poor woman might've had a heart attack right then and there if she found out that she was holding a stuffed bear handmade by the crown prince, of all people. She was getting on in years, after all. I didn't want to send her into shock.

Sensing that she wasn't going to get any further response from me, the head maid continued. "These are all made with the finest yarn. A commoner would never have the means to buy enough to make all of this."

Edward had picked out the yarn himself, so I'd figured it must've been nice, but I had no idea it was *that* nice. *You've been making me raid the top shelf this whole time, huh?* I thought, cursing him.

For the record, in spite of being the crown prince, Edward didn't have much pocket money. His hobby was bankrolled by yours truly. All of the thread, yarn, knitting needles, etc., had been purchased with funds from the Bank of Elizabeth. But make no mistake—I was expecting my loan to be paid back *several* times over when he rose to power.

"These are all made with such love and care too," the head maid went on,

stepping towards me and closing the distance between us. I could feel her pressing me—or, more accurately, *cornering me*—psychologically too. “Lady Elizabeth...”

Her voice rang out with unusual clarity. Maybe it was because of all the times I’d gotten into trouble as a kid, but just hearing my name like that was enough to put the fear of God in me. I felt my spine straighten up involuntarily.

“I’ve been working for your family since before you were born, and I’ve looked after you ever since you were a child.”

Of course, I already knew that. She’d been here even before my older brother was born, and she was almost like a second mother to us.

“I know I’ve been hard on you sometimes, but it’s only because I have your best interests at heart. Truth be told, it hardly matters whether you’re feminine or well-mannered.”

My eyes went wide in shock, and I couldn’t believe my ears. The head maid was practically femininity and manners incarnate (not to mention the very picture of strictness).

“All I want is for you to be happy. As long as you can greet each day with a smile, that’s enough for me.”

I found myself a bit touched by her words. I’d had no idea she felt that way about me.

“Which is why I need to warn you, Lady Elizabeth, that toying with a woman’s heart will only lead you down a path of ruin.”

Our touching moment was over as soon as it had begun.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. Hold on a minute,” I interjected.

This was clearly a huge misunderstanding. The head maid seemed to be under the impression that I was the kind of girl to regift a handmade present handmade from some poor young noblewoman. Honestly, I was offended. *Do you really think that little of me?*

If she only knew how wrong she was on both counts. The crocheted crafts were neither made with love, nor were they made by a young lady. While it

would be easy to confuse the crown prince for a beautiful girl, he was, in fact, a man through and through. He'd only given me all this crap because he'd gotten carried away with his hobby and made too many things. I was nothing but a storage closet to him.

Besides, there was no one out there who cared as much about their well-being as I did. I was well aware of any potential paths to ruin, and I strove day in and day out to avoid them. I didn't appreciate her underestimating my ability to save my own skin.

I ended up explaining the whole situation. Eventually, the head maid understood and agreed to make up an excuse to pawn them off to the other maids. She insisted that I at least keep *one* for myself, though, so I reluctantly kept the stuffed bear to display in my room.

Any decorative items with faces made me uneasy (it felt weird to make eye contact with them) but I had no choice but to resign myself to my fate. *I can display a single stuffed bear, or I can litter my room with countless paper bags full of the stuff*, I thought, trying to convince myself. *Yep...I think I've made the right call.*



"Hello, Lizzie."

"Hey, Your Highness," I said, after a moment of hesitation. "You seem to be in good spirits."

Although Edward was a member of the royal family, school policy dictated that we were all equal at the academy. There wasn't a need for formalities, so when the silver-haired heartthrob called out to me in the hallway, it took me a moment to figure out how to greet him. In the end, I settled on a casual bow.

Not only did he still summon me up to his office at every opportunity, but now I also saw him at school. Frankly, this was a rather unwelcome development, and I would've loved nothing more than to tell him to leave me alone. I didn't want to surround myself any more than I already had with unapproachable young men.

The student who was with him looked curiously back and forth between the

two of us. We were standing in the hallway right next to a classroom. Class was still in session, so everyone seemed absorbed in their studies, but I couldn't shake the feeling that they were taking every chance they could get to glance over at us.

"What are you doing out here in the hallway? Shouldn't you be in class right now?" the prince asked.

"I've been excused from my self-defense classes, so I'm just looking for a way to kill time. I was thinking of going to the library."

"What a coincidence—we've also been excused from class. Urgent student council business, you see. Well, then, enjoy the library."

Just as we started walking past each other, the crown prince suddenly began to sway.

"Whoa, there!" I exclaimed.

I quickly reached out and grabbed his arm, catching him before he could fall to the floor. The crown prince, who was shorter and far daintier than I was, fell gently into my arms.

"Oh... Forgive me. I...seem to have lost my balance for a minute," Edward murmured, pushing his fingers into his forehead. Then, he dropped his hand and opened his eyes.

I could see my reflection in his amethyst eyes. Not to toot my own horn, but I was looking pretty good. I spent a moment admiring my delightful, easygoing smile.

Edward batted his long eyelashes and straightened up, looking me in the eye as he did. It felt a bit thrilling—it was almost like holding the gaze of a formidable noblewoman who was somehow looking down on me even when she was actually looking *up* at me.

I heard murmurs and realized that a crowd of onlookers had gathered. *Crap*, I thought. *Everyone's gonna think we're friends now.* I took a peek around me and felt a strange intensity in their gazes—especially from the female students, who looked absolutely *enraptured* by the scene in front of them.

Ah, right.

That's when I remembered: girls go crazy for even a *whiff* of boy-on-boy action. I knew from my past life that just seeing two attractive men in proximity was enough to get them squealing, whether it was in kabuki, visual kei bands, or male idol groups. It also explained the intensity with which the crowd had been watching my dance with Isaac.

Guess the girls in this world aren't so different from the ones in my past life, I mused. Maybe they're like that everywhere?

And if that was the case, then I knew just what to do. I could get out of this situation ASAP while still pandering to the female gaze and eliciting some squeals from the girls.

"It may be nothing more than exhaustion, but we should take you to the nurse's office just to be safe," I said to Edward with a look of deep concern.

"N-No, that's—"

"*Please*, Your Highness. Don't strain yourself," I interrupted, ignoring his stuttering protests, and swept my arm around his slender waist. With a swift motion, I lifted him up into my arms.

"Wh-Wh-What do you think you're doing?!"

"I'm carrying you to the nurse's office."

"S-Stop this at once! Put me down!"

"Would you still visit the nurse's office if I did that?"

He fell silent. *Gotcha.*

For a guy who whined constantly about being sickly, he sure didn't seem to put any effort into taking care of himself. I had no choice but to take matters into my own hands.

If you hate being sick that much, then at least try to eat properly and get some exercise and a good night's sleep, I chided him mentally.

Now that Edward had settled down, I carried him in my arms and walked briskly through the hallway and down the stairs. The student council members

quickly moved out of our way and cleared the path. I felt like Moses parting the Red Sea.

As I walked gallantly towards the nurse's office, I heard Edward mutter quietly, "Th-This is...highly inappropriate. W-We're...much too close!"

"Little late to complain about that," I replied with a snort. "Surely you're used to this by now after all the times I've scooped you up and kidnapped you?"

I gave him a mischievous wink as I alluded to our clandestine shopping trips. He blushed a deep red. *You're the one who's always pushing for me to pick you up and take you into town, remember?*

"That's because...because you—"

"All right," I interrupted. "We're here."

I opened the door to the nurse's office with my elbow and brought him inside. The crown prince panicked and clammed up, swallowing the rest of his sentence, but no one was in the office.

"Huh. Looks like the nurse is out."

As soon as those words left my mouth, I felt Edward's shoulders jolt up. "Wait, we can't just go in when—"

"Hey, don't worry about it. It's not like we're doing anything bad."

I placed Edward down gently onto the bed and covered him with a blanket.

"Okay, then. Get some good sleep," I said.

"Wait, I can't stay here! I've got student council obligations—and class!"

"You can do anything you set your mind to without even lifting a finger, right? Then it won't make a difference if you take some time to rest and do it later."

"But..."

"You'll burn out if you push yourself too hard. Just like with strength training, moderation is key."

Edward was trying to get up out of bed, but I gently pushed his shoulders back down. With how frail he was, that was all it took to stop him.

What's all this baloney about student council obligations, anyway? I found myself wondering.

It felt like the student council was a big deal in every form of 2D media I'd consumed in my past life—not just otome games, but anime and the like too. Not only were members at the top of the totem pole among the students, but they somehow seemed to be more powerful than even teachers. It was like they had the whole school under their thumbs.

And yet, I had barely any recollection of a real student council in my past life. I *think* there was some kind of election...maybe? And I feel like I'd heard rumors that being on the student council could give you a leg up during the university admissions process...but that was about it. There certainly hadn't been any students wandering around with special armbands, nor had I ever heard cries of "OmiGod, it's the student council! They're sooo cool!"

I had a feeling that the student council I'd always heard about in stories might've just been a myth, much like fairies and the Loch Ness monster. It seemed like something that only existed in 2D media, not in real life. And if that were the case, then whatever obligations Edward had as part of the student council probably didn't have any real impact anyway.

I'll be honest: I actually had no clue what the student council even did—and frankly, I didn't care.

"Hang on..." Edward began.

I'd gotten so lost in my musings that I'd completely forgotten about him. When I turned to look at him, I realized he'd been staring at me with a suspicious expression.

"Don't tell me you were *worried* about me?" he finished.

"Of course I was. What kind of subject *wouldn't* worry when the kingdom's crown prince almost faints right in front of them?"

"But you're always blathering on about how capable I am. You don't treat me like I'm sick at all," he challenged, indignant and suspicious despite the fact that I'd just confirmed his theory.

All righty, then. Looks like you're doing juuust fine.

“What, do you *want* me to treat you like an invalid?” I snapped without thinking. I was getting fed up with this.

“No, it’s not that. I just...” he began awkwardly, before clamming up.

I made a show of shrugging my shoulders. “Because if that’s what you want, then our little trips into town are going to have to stop.”

“Urk...”

Edward hung his head in bitter resignation. Not being able to purchase supplies for his newfound passion was probably one of the worst things he could imagine. He looked so completely removed from the perfect crown prince I’d encountered in the game that I couldn’t help but let out a laugh.

“What’s so funny?” he retorted.

“Nothing, it’s just...you’re full of surprises.”

“I am?”

Edward’s eyes went wide, then quickly narrowed again as he glared at me. I cleared my throat and straightened up.

“You’re always acting so princely. I’ve never seen you make a face like that before.”

“Well... I have *you* to blame for that,” he whispered, glaring at me. A blush spread across his cheeks, and as his long hair fluttered in front of his face, I saw that the crimson had crept all the way up to the tips of his ears.

That looks like a fever. Maybe he really is feeling unwell?

If that was the case, then I deserved a reward for noticing and getting him to the nurse’s office. *I certainly wouldn’t turn down a coin purse of gratitude...*

“You know, your eccentricity has a strange way of drawing me in,” he said.

“‘Eccentricity’? You insult me.”

“Then consider us even. I found your ‘full of surprises’ comment to be rather insulting, myself.”

Fair, I thought. In all honesty, I knew it wasn’t totally unreasonable for him to call me eccentric. I was well aware that there weren’t many young noblewomen

who gallivanted about in boys' clothing, so I could see his point.

"Well, get some good rest and give yourself time to recover. You can do as much work as you want when you're back to your usual self," I said, giving the bed a pat for emphasis as I stood up.

Edward's eyes were closed as he gripped the edge of the blanket. "I guess you're right," he replied softly.

As I made my way out, I ran into the nurse and told her about Edward's fainting episode. As soon as I finished my report, she went blue in the face.

"M-Miss Burton," she said, pulling me in, "It was kind of you to bring him here, but please bear in mind that it isn't, um, *prudent* for a young lady like yourself to be alone with a boy."

"Please, give me some credit. I know the prince is a pretty boy, but I'm not about to put the moves on someone when they're *sick*."

The nurse grabbed my shoulders, hanging her head in resignation.

"No, Miss Burton, that's...not what I meant."

A Romantic at Heart

I'd been restricted to working only once a week during the school term, but summer break was a great chance for me to throw myself into patrolling again. My days were now blissfully full. It felt good to serve the local ladies, of course, but what was *really* satisfying was becoming active and getting my blood pumping again.

It was also nice to be making some more money. Every coin helped to fill the coffers for when the main character made her first appearance. I had to fashion myself into a noble, fabulous Royal LOVER after all—and there was no such thing as a Royal LOVER who was too rich. (For the record, dukes' daughters don't customarily get any allowance.)

The cadets and the instructors seemed pleased that I was around more often, as did the knights I patrolled with. Some of the cadets even cried tears of joy. Apparently, they'd had a bit of a run-in with my fanclub, but I didn't ask for the details. There was no reason to get myself involved in something that clearly spelled trouble.

There weren't really any festive summer activities going on—no, scratch that. There *was* the academy's Stargazing Party, which was a cross between a school camping trip and an Obon festival—a holiday meant for honoring dead ancestors and relatives—but I had to skip that since it overlapped with my nightly patrol. Other than a weeklong trip to the duchy and relaxing with my brothers, my summer was pretty much nothing but work.

One day, after our shift had ended and we'd changed over to the next group of knights, I spent some time wandering around the town. I bought some chestnut bread from the friendly baker and nibbled on it as I walked.

The end of summer was swiftly approaching, and the weather was gradually cooling to a pleasant autumn climate. It was the perfect season for aimless strolls. Like Japan, this world had four distinct seasons. But since it was based off of Europe, the seasonal transitions weren't as dramatic—especially when it

came to humidity.

Most Western schools tended to start the school year in autumn, but for some reason, the schools in this world started in April, just like in Japan. It made sense when I considered that the game had been *made* there, but it still felt a bit strange just how Japan-esque the world was.

Now that I'd had more opportunities to talk to girls, I needed to make sure that I actually *had* something to talk about. I tried to learn about all the hottest confectionaries, latest dress styles, and trendy accessories. The girls from noble families all listened with great interest when I talked about the goings-on about town, and the information they gave me in return was sure to prove useful on any future dates with the game's protagonist.

I figured I'd just do some window shopping today and head home, but as I made a left turn at the intersection, I noticed some kind of commotion ahead. I couldn't contain my curiosity, so I went over to take a peek. As I did, I noticed a familiar boy...who was making a beeline for me.

"Commander!" Robert called out as he ran over, his eyes piercing me with their usual earnestness.

I didn't want to let on that I'd only come over to sate my curiosity, so I fixed my face, shaping it into an expression of deep concern.

"What's going on here? I heard a commotion in the area. Tell me what's happened."

"Sir, yes, sir! I came into town with a friend and found that these thugs were working this elderly gentleman to the bone. I was just about to arrest them and bring them to the knights!"

There wasn't even the faintest trace of hesitation in his eyes. I could see that he really and truly believed, from the bottom of his heart, that he was meting out justice.

Boy, I couldn't help but feel for the members of his personal guard, considering how worried they must've been as they hung back while he played the hero. Honestly, it made my stomach hurt.

I took a look around, but I couldn't see any sign of the old man Robert was

talking about. He'd clearly hightailed it out of there.

Robert wasn't wearing the extravagant outfit I was used to seeing him wear in the game, nor was he wearing his cadet's uniform. Instead, he wore an understated outfit that seemed to announce, "I'm rich, but not *that* rich." He and his friend (who was also probably a cadet) were clearly in disguise.

If Robert was allowed to wander around the town, I figured it should've been fine for Edward to make his shopping trips alone. Then again, there were different expectations for the crown prince than for his disappointment of a brother.

In any case, it didn't really matter whether or not Robert was strolling around the town. There were bigger problems at hand.

I took a deep breath and laid into him. "Don't get cocky, cadet! This is real life, not the training grounds! Do you want to go home to your mother looking like minced meat?!"

"B-But Commander! I can't just turn a blind eye when an innocent man is—"

"If you've got a friend with you, then one of you should've stood watch while the other ran off to track down a knight on patrol! Even if you rookies can resolve things yourselves, a knight could easily do it—and they'd be much more peaceful, to boot! You maggots just got drunk on power and thought you'd try playing hero, but you need to understand that there are consequences! You've put people in danger!"

Robert suddenly fell silent. He bit his lip, looking thoroughly mortified. I'd probably gone a bit overboard there, but I knew I might not have gotten through to him if I hadn't.

A few members of Robert's personal guard turned towards me and shook their hands, which were clasped together as if they were praying, in a show of gratitude.

Fortunately, it seemed no one had been hurt. Still, Robert's showboating was sure to hurt the knights' image. And if word got out that he was one of my cadets, I might even lose my job patrolling with the knights. If he pulled this shit again, the odds of his behavior reflecting poorly on me would increase

dramatically, and I couldn't afford to lose my precious practical combat training opportunities. I needed to nip this in the bud.

Suddenly, I was struck with an overwhelming feeling that something was...*off*.

There, lurking behind Robert—and his personal guard—was a man I'd never seen before. He was dressed like a normal townsman, but the moment I locked eyes with him, I felt my skin prickle with goose bumps. I just knew he was bad news.

"Robert, get out of the way!" I yelled.

I grabbed his arm and thrust myself out in front of him. In an instant, I felt a shock jolt through my stomach.

"Ngh...!"

I looked down at the source of the piercing pain in my abdomen and saw the small knife that the man had been carrying lodged inside of me. I'd shifted slightly to protect my vital organs, but I hadn't been quick enough to avoid getting stabbed altogether. I felt the penetrating impact reverberate through my body, and I doubled over involuntarily.

The attacker must've taken advantage of an opening among the personal guard and rushed forwards, hoping to injure Robert. They probably hadn't expected to stab *me* instead.

"C-Commander!"

"Your Highness! Behind me!" a personal guard yelled out, rushing forwards to shield the prince behind his back.

"Commander! You're...you're hurt because of me..."

"Your Highness! Stand back!"

"L-Let go of me! My commander's hurt! Commander!" Robert cried out, disoriented and upset.

Half of his personal guard grabbed him and carried him away from the situation. The remaining two guards cornered the man, hoping to catch him before he made a break for it.

As it turned out, though, there wasn't a need for that. The man who'd stabbed me was standing completely still. He didn't even try to get away.

That's strange...

Under normal circumstances, I would've expected the attacker to either come at Robert again or give up and flee.

Presumably, the thugs Robert had apprehended were in cahoots with the attacker. They'd probably meant to cause a distraction so the attacker could close in on Robert while the guards' attention had been elsewhere. If the attacker had thought that much through, then there was no way he'd be drawing a blank now. So why wasn't he making any moves?

Hang on...he's basically paralyzed.

He'd tried to stab me in the stomach, but—thanks to my maneuvering and my rock-hard abs—the knife hadn't quite made it in. I'd doubled over and caught the blade sideways, right in between two of my abdominal muscles.

The attacker put all his strength into yanking it out, but the knife wouldn't budge—it was stuck. I wondered why he didn't just leave it and make a run for it, but I figured he must've just been so thrown off guard that his judgment was scrambled.

"I've got 'im!" I yelled.

The guards immediately rushed over.

The attacker's brain must've finally kicked into gear again, because he let go of the knife. Unfortunately for him, he was a moment too late. Robert's personal guard, as well as some nearby knights on patrol—who'd likely heard the commotion—descended on him and arrested him.

No doubt the attacker had been hired by one of the noble families who wanted Robert out of the picture. Why they felt his murder was important was beyond me, though. The pea-brained prince wasn't a threat to anyone.

Many members of the aristocracy were what you might politely call "pragmatists," but I didn't get the sense that any of them had any designs on seizing power through a change in succession. As far as I knew, there wasn't

really anyone waiting in the rafters to take out the crown prince and replace him with his ineffectual brother to rule as a puppet king.

Personally, I wasn't too fond of the idea of working for Robert—puppet king or not. I could only assume that the rest of the aristocracy felt the same. If we were going to serve a king, then he might as well be a sensible one.

That being said, there were some who gave a lot of weight to the fact that Robert's mother was higher-ranking than Edward's. Robert was the younger of the two brothers, but it hardly would've been surprising if there *were* more of a conflict over who had the right to rule.

Fortunately (for the kingdom, if not for Robert), it was clear which of the two brothers actually had the makings of a king, so that conflict had never actually come to fruition. Still, there were some who worried that a cadre of pea-brained nobles might want to seat the equally pea-brained prince on the throne and seize power for themselves.

Since the attacker had been aiming for Robert's stomach, it seemed unlikely that he'd been trying to *kill* him. There was, however, the possibility that his knife had been dipped in poison...there was no way of knowing for sure if it had. The attacker might end up breaking down and spilling the beans in the interrogation room, but that was entirely dependent on the skill of the interrogator.

Either way, it wasn't my problem.

I'll leave this in your capable hands, knights.

"Commander!" Robert yelled, running over to me with his personal guard. "Commander, y-you hurt yourself protecting me..."

"I'm perfectly fine. See? My rock-hard abs protected me. My uniform's a little worse for wear, though."

As I pulled back my uniform to show him my stomach, Robert quickly covered his face with both hands. The knife's edge had mostly just torn up my clothes, so I'd only suffered from a minor wound.

I figured I'd probably be dead by now if there'd been lethal poison on the knife, but I was feeling as lively and energetic as ever.

Since this world's technology was that of somewhere between medieval and modern Europe, it seemed pretty unlikely that anyone had developed a poison so lethal that coating just a small knife could do the trick. (Of course, I say that, but I actually have no idea what kind of poisons were available in medieval Europe.)

I *can* tell you one thing, though—I wasn't about to go around sacrificing myself to protect Robert. My number one priority was—and always had been—saving my *own* skin, after all. The only reason I'd jumped in front of him was because I'd deduced that it would be a good boost to my reputation (and I'd been confident I wouldn't be seriously injured doing so).

If I'd just sat around and let Robert get attacked, I would've suffered a real blow to my reputation. Some knight I'd be if I couldn't intercept a low-level thug, right? I couldn't have the townspeople thinking I had slow reflexes.

Of course, Robert didn't have a clue about all the mental calculations I'd run through. In his eyes, I'd just saved him out of the goodness of my heart...or something. He looked ready to burst into tears at any moment as he glanced between my face and my abs.

Behind him, his guards were pointing at me and whispering among themselves. I suddenly felt a bit embarrassed about exposing my abs. *Maybe I'd better put these away. They're not really shredded enough to be showing off.*

I felt conflicted, though. I knew I still had a long way to go before I was ready to put them on display, but there *was* still a part of me that craved the attention.

"If I hadn't been here, someone could've gotten hurt. Your actions put people in danger," I chided Robert, my expression stiffening.

"M-My actions...?"

"Your attacker was working with those men you apprehended. The whole scene was probably just a distraction—their real goal was assassinating you."

Robert's expression hardened.

"Did you check that the men you apprehended didn't have anyone else working with them? Did you give them a beating to make them cough up their

real goal? Did you even question the old man?" I pressed.

"I-I..."

"If you let an enemy get away, you put yourself and others in danger. Just when you think you've settled everything and start getting complacent, that's when they stab you in the back—just like what happened today."

Robert looked utterly depressed. I gave him a gentle pat on the shoulder.

"You just need to act with a bit more caution in the future. Your desire to protect the weak is admirable...just don't lose sight of what you need to do to make that happen," I said.

Something about the way Robert looked up at me with his teary, bright-green eyes reminded me of a big dog. *Oh, Robert... I thought. You're never going to cut it as a haughty prince character if you get flustered over little things like this.*

"Look, you're still just a kid. You have your instructors to lean on, and you're better off making mistakes like this when we're here to step in. It's our job to guide you, and it's your job to remember the lessons you learn. You won't forget what you learned today, will you?"

"No, sir..."

I gave the dejected prince a wry smile and left him with his thoughts.



"I hear you were quite the hero the other day," the crown prince said as he elegantly uncrossed his legs and crossed them again. He flashed me a mischievous, teasing smile.

It had only been a few days since the attack, but apparently word had already reached the crown prince—not that this was any surprise. Even though it had been unsuccessful, an attempt had been made on the second prince's life. That was kind of a big deal.

My family had grilled me about every last detail of the day's events, and boy, were they *pissed*. Christopher and my parents had already been mad enough, but it was my older brother who'd really taken the cake. He'd been so angry that he'd cried.

I would've expected to get at least a *little* pat on the back for potentially saving the prince's life, but no such luck. I was often treated by my family like some kind of demonic black sheep, but sometimes I wondered if *they* were actually the odd ones out among the nobility.

In any case, I'd been expecting my parents to be pissed, so I'd been ready for it. At least they hadn't harped on the fact that I'd been wandering around town with my knight's uniform on. So that was something.

Gotta take the wins wherever I can.

Anyway, how many times has Edward summoned me up here? I wondered. Honestly, I'd kind of gotten used to it by now. Initially, I'd been furious with him for calling me up all the time so I could entertain him, but these days, it was kind of just like, "Sheesh, *again?*"

Dealing with his personal guard had become part of my training. Every time he came to tell me that the prince wished to see me, we each tried to anticipate the other's movements. It was like a test to see who could get the jump on the other. In a way, he'd turned into a sparring partner.

"I'm just glad your brother's safe," I demurred.

"Still, I must say, I find it a little difficult to believe that you caught the knife with your *abdominal muscles*."

"Would you like to see for yourself?"

"I'd rather not, actually," he instantly shot back.

Thought so. No one with a proper upbringing would've dreamed of taking me up on that. Besides, nobles had a reputation for being modest and reserved.

"My fath—the *king* was saying he'd like to give you a reward."

"A reward, you say?"

"Yes. Saving the second prince's life *does* tend to merit a medal. Of course, I'm sure he'd rather not make it public that my brother is wandering into town in disguise..." Edward trailed off and threw a sidelong glance at me as he said this. "But he's giving a lot of thought to what he can present to you. Not that he's coming up with many ideas. You don't seem all that interested in fame or

status, after all.”

“I see...”

I certainly wouldn't say no to fame...or fortune, for that matter. It doesn't do any harm to have them.

I was mere nobility, not royalty like the prince and his family; I wasn't above lusting after material things. But I was also the Honorable Duke's daughter, which meant that I was held to higher standards. I had to tread carefully if I wanted to preserve my reputation. I couldn't just come out and say I wanted money. How crass would that be?

Again, I was running into the jerk-with-a-heart-of-gold-rescues-a-stray-cat-in-the-rain problem. A bad guy does something good, and he's a hero. A normal person doesn't commit any crime, but also doesn't explicitly do good deeds, and somehow he's the scum of the earth. *Absolutely baffling logic.*

After a moment's hesitation, an idea came to me.

“In that case, I *do* have a favor I'd like to ask,” I said.

“And what might that be?” Edward asked, his eyebrows shooting up.

Why is everyone always so suspicious when I ask for a favor?

“I'd like to call off the engagement between myself and your younger brother...as discreetly as possible.”

“Oh?”

Edward's eyes flew wide open. The placid smile that he always wore in the game had always looked a bit pasted on, as if the *real* Edward were hiding underneath, unknown. But lately, I felt like I hadn't seen hide nor hair of that expression.

“I thought you were fond of him?”

“I *am*,” I replied. “As his subject and instructor.”

My face was calm and composed as the crown prince eyed me searchingly.

“Is there...someone *else* you were hoping to marry?”

“Not really. It's just, as you can see, I'm not really cut out to be queen. I think

the kingdom would be better off if he found someone more suitable.”

“I...suppose I can’t argue with you there,” Edward replied, as if he were thinking aloud. Despite his concession, he still hadn’t let up on his scrutinizing gaze.

It seemed I had no choice but to give him a vague hint about my true motives.

“And, well, I have a feeling I might find my soulmate in the near future.”

For a moment, Edward was stunned into silence. “I never would’ve guessed you believed in *soulmates*.”

“Well, what can I say? Believe it or not, I’m a romantic at heart.”

I wore a serious expression and looked him in the eyes. For a second, I saw his breath catch in his throat, but he quickly averted his gaze. I took that as a win. Whoever looks away first is clearly the loser, after all.

“I’ll talk it over with my father,” Edward muttered, his head turned away from me. I could still catch a glimpse of his pink cheeks.

“Much obliged,” I replied, giving him a stock aristocratic reply.

The crown prince’s penchant for all things feminine was plainly evident in his talent for lacework and crafting cute stuffed animals. Surely he might enjoy a good love story too? It felt like everything was lining up just right.

Instead of interfering with my romance with the main character, maybe he could be my wingman?

Get Your Foot off the Accelerator

“Is Elizabeth Burton here?!” a voice reverberated throughout the classroom. Everyone present fell silent.

Summer break was over, and the second term had begun. Our lunch break had *also* just begun, but it was already being disrupted.

I’d just gathered my things, preparing to head over to the dining hall, when I was stopped in my tracks. I looked over towards the classroom door, where everyone else also happened to be looking.

Standing in the doorway was none other than a very huffy Prince Robert. He was always in good spirits at the training grounds, so seeing him like this felt like a rare throwback to his scowling in-game portrait.

Both Robert and I were now sixteen. In the past half year, he seemed to have gotten even taller. When he scowled like this, he was the spitting image of his in-game portrait when his affection points were low—well, aside from his hairstyle. With his towering stature, you would’ve expected the girls to flee in terror when he made that face, but no. Everyone was staring at him with fervent, naked fascination.

That’s the heartthrob love interest advantage for you, I thought bitterly. It was just the way that the world of *Royal LOVERS* worked. Exceptions could be made—and *were* always made—for attractive young noblemen.

The male students, on the other hand, had a slightly different reaction. Isaac looked particularly bewildered.

His confusion was understandable. Robert had purportedly barged in to scour the classroom for me, but my obvious presence in the front row of the middle of the room seemed to be completely eluding him. He didn’t even glance my way.

Of course, what no one realized was that he had no idea who I was.

“Hurry up and come on out already! Ugh. Why do I have to escort *you* to the

dance, anyway?” Robert grumbled as he called for me again, scanning the faces of all the young ladies in the classroom. Naturally, he didn’t find me there.

My ears pricked up at the word “dance,” and it hit me that he’d probably been instructed to escort me—his fiancée—to the autumn dance.

The academy’s autumn dance was kind of like a practice run for students’ debuts into high society, but it was also an important networking event. Students who were already engaged would escort their fiancées, and those who weren’t would invite someone who’d captured either their family’s or their own interest.

It was certainly possible to go solo, but most young noblewomen wouldn’t be caught dead without a young man to escort them. And if you had a betrothed, it was downright scandalous to attend the dance without them. That’s exactly why Robert had made a point of not inviting his villainous fiancée—well, *me*—to the dance in the game.

But the game hadn’t even begun yet, so the main character wasn’t here to steal Robert’s heart. Without anyone else in mind that he’d rather dance with, he’d probably caved to pressure from his parents and advisors to seek out and invite me.

I watched my classmates’ gazes move from Robert to me. Everyone had the same look on their face, as if they were thinking, “Huh?” and “Surely not!” or maybe even “You’re kidding me...” The cadets, however, were covering their faces and fixing their gazes on the floor.

Hey! I thought. Stop trying to pretend you’re not here and do something!

I considered feigning ignorance and making my way to the dining hall, but I couldn’t run from this forever. I’d known this day would come eventually.

I stood up, resigned and ready to face my fate. “I’m right here.”

“Commander!” Robert’s face lit up as he turned to look at me, transforming so dramatically that I half wondered if I’d imagined his earlier scowl. “I forgot *you* were in this class too!”

“Robert...” I warned, my voice low.

“Oh, right. Sorry...” he replied, looking suddenly small and dejected. He must’ve thought I was chiding him for calling me by my training grounds nickname.

The classroom had suddenly fallen quiet. Everyone was paying rapt attention to every move Robert and I made.

“Um...” he began again, his voice echoing throughout the silence. “I’m looking for my fiancée, Elizabeth Burton. Is she absent today?”

An uncomfortable tension fell over the classroom.

“That’s me,” I said, after a pause.

“Huh? What did you say?”

“That’s *me*,” I repeated.

Robert’s eyes grew wide. I let out a sigh. I was painfully aware of every pair of eyes in the classroom boring into me.

“*I’m* Elizabeth Burton. I’m your fiancée.”

“Huh?” Now Robert had tensed up too. Everyone was looking at him with incredulous stares, mouths agog. “Um, you’re joking, right?”

“Do you really think that little of my sense of humor?”

“N-No, but...”

“Remind me: what’s the name of your battalion?”

Robert was silent. Then, he slumped to the floor and croaked out, “The...Burton Battalion...”

Of course, this “battalion” didn’t actually exist, but I was willing to do whatever it took to open his eyes. *Wow, he really had no idea who I was.*

I was astounded...and deeply concerned for both his own future and the kingdom’s. *Oh, Robert...you really are a pea-brained prince.*

I sighed and extended a hand out to him. He was blocking traffic, and I needed to get him to leave.

Dazed, he took my hand without thinking. I pulled him up, then growled into

his ear (softly, so my classmates wouldn't hear), "That was *no way* to invite a lady to a dance. Have you forgotten your knight's training? *Always act like a gentleman.*"

"I..."

"Amateur. I hope you know I'm entirely out of *your* league."

Now that he was standing again, I gave him a pat on the shoulder and headed off towards the dining hall.

To my classmates, it'd probably looked like I was being nice by offering Robert a hand. They probably thought I'd whispered something forgiving in his ear like, "Don't even worry about it."

Good. Let them think that.

I heard a *thump* behind me.

Ugh, I don't want to have to go back to the classroom for afternoon classes, I thought. I ended up taking advantage of the fact that self-defense class was in the afternoon to laze around in an empty classroom until evening.

The next day, Isaac told me that Robert had fainted shortly after I'd left, and that he'd had to go home early. He had a sustained fever that wouldn't abate, so he ended up not coming to school for a while.

I chalked it up to growing pains.



The dance, huh?

There was some sort of male beauty pageant on, so I'd completely forgotten about the upcoming dance. Now that I'd remembered, it felt like it was just on the horizon.

"Wanna break out some moves with me at the dance?" I joked with Isaac.

We had a good laugh about it, but I knew it was time to start seriously thinking about who I was going to invite.

I had no interest in participating in the dance as a woman, which gave me the option of going solo. Still, if I wanted to make an impression, it was probably a

good idea to invite some random girl.

As I put my textbook away in my bag and pondered my dilemma, I noticed several girls coming in through the classroom door. They were walking over to me.

Ah, they must be the upper brass of the Sir Burton Defense Squad. The girl in the middle was the president, and the four girls at her side were giving off big Elite Four energy.

As I looked at the president, I couldn't help thinking that the title of "Commander" would've suited her much more than it did me. It seemed so appropriate, I almost *wished* everyone would call her that.

The girls came up and gave me beautiful curtsies. Then, with strangely serious expressions, they said, "Sir Burton, if we may? We're members of the Sir Burton Fan Club, and we have a humble request to ask of you."

Oh, so that's the Defense Squad's official name. It sounded like some kind of musical theater appreciation group. *Guess that's why the head honcho is the "president" and not the "commander."* What a waste.

"If you're thinking of inviting someone to the dance, we'd appreciate it if you could pick someone outside of the fan club," the president continued.

"Why's that?"

"We'd like to avoid any unnecessary in-fighting," she answered, her expression calm and composed.

If memory served, she was a marquis's daughter. She spoke in a refined manner, and carried herself with the utmost elegance. Truly, she was a thing of beauty.

"We're content to support you from the sidelines, Sir Burton. Just being able to share a few words with you and gaze upon your dashing smile on occasion is enough for us," one of the Elite Four added.

"That being said, if you were to pick one of us to invite to the dance, some of our members would no longer be satisfied with simply admiring from afar. We're concerned about the envy such an eventuality might inspire," said

another.

They seemed awfully matter-of-fact about the whole thing. They were so calm and composed that I almost wanted to ask them, “Are you *sure* you like me?” But I figured they didn’t usually speak like this.

Maybe they’ve got an on/off switch, I thought. That *would* certainly be appropriately aristocratic. Although, if that’s what it meant to be aristocratic, then my family was anything but. Take my older brother, for example—he was always wearing his heart on his sleeve.

I could understand where the girls were coming from, though. In an all-female group, precautions probably needed to be taken to prevent chaos from ensuing. And, for my part, I certainly didn’t want to be the *cause* of any such mayhem—especially not when it could negatively impact the main character.

“What if I danced with *all* of the girls in the fan club?” I asked.

“It’s a nice thought, but only one of us can join you for the *first* dance.”

I prided myself on how much time I’d devoted to studying female psychology, but I still didn’t understand what made the first dance so special. To be fair, I’d spent my whole past life in an era when dancing wasn’t really a thing. It was probably a lost cause to try to wrap my head around it at this point.

The best analogy I could come up with would be that it was like being the first one into the family bath. Nothing like getting first dibs, right? Especially when you knew everyone going after you was getting your leftovers.

“Furthermore, it’s simply not possible to make time to dance with all of us. The party would be over before you could even get through half the members.”

“Here. Take a look at our member list,” one of the Elite Four offered, handing me a bundle of papers.

The sheer volume was astounding. I flipped through the papers to see page after page filled up with names. I had to admit she was right; the only way I’d find the time to dance with every girl in the fan club was for us all to join hands and dance the Mayim Mayim—you know, that one Israeli folk dance.

“Uh, is it just me, or are some of these members guys? I recognize some of

these names.”

“The Sir Burton Fan Club doesn’t discriminate on the basis of trifling matters such as gender.”

“We’re all your fans, and that makes us equal.”

I could kind of understand the thinking behind that. Any young noblewoman who cared that much about gender probably wouldn’t have been a fan of me in the first place, after all. But the names I’d recognized on the members list were knight cadets from the training grounds. *You boys’ve got your fingers in a lot of pies here.*

“They always step up when we need a man to help out with something,” one of the girls added.

Ah, so they’re your work horses. I had to wonder what kind of fan club activities required a man’s helping hand, though.

“We realize that our selfish request may come as an imposition, but we’d be most appreciative if you could refrain from inviting any of the girls on this list.”

The five girls bowed their heads in unison. *What kind of playboy am I, making girls bow their heads to me?!*

I urged them to lift their heads and reassured them that I had no intention to invite any of the girls on the list—or any girl at all, for that matter.

“I’m a free spirit,” I told them. “I just want to have a good time with everyone.”

The girls looked relieved. It seemed I’d finally put their fears to rest.

“Thank you. We knew you were a kind soul, Sir Burton,” the president said, smiling. Unfortunately, though, she could *not* have been more wrong about me.

I was trying to establish myself as a playboy who didn’t treat any girl like she was special—and I was going to accomplish it by not inviting *anyone* to the dance. This would set the scene for when I eventually *did* invite a girl; there would be no mistake that she was special to me.

And what could be a more otome-esque development than for the main character herself to be that special girl?



“Ummm...”

As I arrived at the ballroom, I noticed a crowd had formed around the entrance. I tried to keep my distance and sneak into the ballroom, but someone from the crowd recognized me. The next moment, I saw the crowd part like the sea to reveal its epicenter: three breathtakingly beautiful young noblewomen. Or should I say, three breathtakingly *tall* young noblewomen.

Their height wasn't the only surprise—after a closer look, I realized that I recognized them.

The girl in the very middle had auburn hair and chartreuse green eyes. She was the tallest of the three, and she was wearing an absolutely stunning indigo, off-shoulder empire dress with a tightly cinched waist. On her shoulders, a black lace shawl did an admirable job of covering up her burly muscles. Her hair was held up neatly with a large, glittery hair clip. The deep V-neck of the dress revealed a glimpse of cleavage (or rather, pecs) and a large gemstone necklace that sat on top. Her makeup perfectly suited her gorgeous facial features. She was, in summary, drop-dead gorgeous.

The young lady on the left was the shortest and the daintiest of the bunch. Her silver hair was tied in a loose ponytail that rested over her right shoulder, and it was inlaid with little jewels and fresh flowers. Her already feminine facial features completed the picture, and the result was a trim, lovely woman. Her dark purple eyes were framed by long eyelashes that gave her the appearance of an ethereal, fleeting fairy whenever she batted them. She wore a classic, princess-line white dress. Touches of delicate lace gave it a distinctly old-fashioned feel. Her makeup and accessories were elegant and understated, making her look as if she were a noblewoman who kept to the secluded inner rooms of her estate, emerging only to grace the world briefly with a fleeting glimpse of her beauty.

The young lady on the right was long-limbed, with a slender physique. Behind her glasses, a pair of burgundy eyes flickered with emotion. Her glossy, indigo hair was held up in a half ponytail with an obsidian barrette. She wore a black, mermaid-style dress that was peppered with embroidery. It didn't show off

much skin, but it was so formfitting that you could see every detail of her body underneath. The shape of her back—which was so slender, it looked like it could break under the slightest pressure—was especially striking. Her long, sheer black gloves gave her the appearance of an intellectual. She wore few accessories, but the simple, monochrome look just made her model-like features stand out even more. Her sharp eyeliner was distinctly modern, and she carried herself with the air of a fashionista.

I had no idea what these three men were doing in such impeccable drag, but I could certainly see why they'd drawn a crowd. *I thought this was a ballroom dance, not a Halloween party.*

I began to legitimately wonder if it was supposed to be a costume party. If so, I was pissed that no one had told me. To be fair, I didn't interact much with Edward or Robert at school, but surely Isaac could've tipped me off, right?

As I looked around the crowd of people surrounding us, growing more and more enraged by the moment, it dawned on me that no one else was in costume. Everyone in the crowd wore normal ballroom attire.

Of course, I was wearing my knights' uniform, so I guess I couldn't exactly count myself among the people who were dressed "normally." But I couldn't stand being lumped in with these costumed show-offs.

Not making any effort to hide my annoyance, I cleared my throat and joked, "Well, what's going on here, hmm? Am I the only one who didn't get the memo about this being a costume party?"

No one laughed.

"I..." Robert began, looking flustered.

Please, I thought. I'm begging you, don't say anything weird.

"I didn't realize *you* were Elizabeth Burton, Commander. If I'd known, I would've... Well, what I mean is...it opened my eyes," he finished, averting his gaze.

Are those falsies? I wondered. His eyelashes seemed a hell of a lot longer than I remembered.

The person standing before me *looked* like a beautiful (if slightly jacked) woman, but the voice that came out of her mouth was unmistakably Robert's. It was starting to make my brain hurt. *Please, make this stop.*

"It's not gentlemanly *or* knightly to treat only some people with respect. I thought becoming a cadet had changed me, at least a little bit, but I realized that I hadn't really changed at all. I was still as arrogant as ever when I came to your classroom that day."

"Hey, don't put yourself down. You *have* changed—a lot, actually."

"You were right about me. I'm not in your league. I don't deserve to escort you to the dance," Robert continued, evidently not listening to a word I'd said. "But I couldn't let you go all alone."

Hey, I've made it all the way here by myself, haven't I? I'm more than okay on my own. If anything, being solo was an essential part of my plan to ask random women to dance with me.

"That's when it hit me: *you* could escort *me* to the dance."

Huh???

Okay, now you've really lost me. Get your foot off the accelerator, 'cause it's time to slam on the brakes.

I looked at his older brother pleadingly, but he just smiled in return. "I couldn't let my little brother have all the fun."

You didn't think to stop him?! I was incredulous. Wasn't that supposed to be an older brother's job—to stop his younger siblings from running amok and creating utter chaos?

"If the goal is simply to ensure that you're not alone, then I figured you could just as well escort *me*," Edward added.

I couldn't for the life of me figure out why they'd assumed I even *needed* a woman to escort. I'd always thought that Edward was the more sensible of the two brothers, but it seemed I'd been mistaken.

Not one, but two pea-brained princes. Is the kingdom done for?

"Isn't this dress just marvelous? If I may say so myself, I think I'm looking

rather beautiful tonight,” Edward murmured, picking up the hem of his dress and twirling it around. Ecstatic sighs could be heard from everyone in the crowd. His coquettish, blushing mannerisms were very picture of a belle. He seemed to be enjoying his new look immensely.

I get it. This was all just so he could wear a dress with lace touches he made himself.

“Opportunities like this are hard to come by, you know. Most could only ever dream of escorting me to a dance.”

He was right on one count: the idea of escorting a crown prince to a dance was downright unthinkable.

It was beginning to dawn on me now that Isaac was my last hope. He was sharp—and more than anything, he was my friend. Surely *he’d* be sympathetic to my plight? I turned to him, and he gave me a little nod.

“I haven’t mastered the men’s part in dancing yet. I’d make a fool of myself on the dance floor without you. Besides, we *did* promise we’d dance together,” he said, fixing his glasses into place as he spoke.

Edward’s ears seemed to perk up at this. Then, for some inexplicable reason, he shot me a disapproving look.

Huh? What the hell did I do to warrant that? I wondered. How am I to blame for this disaster?

“H-Hang on, Isaac. I don’t remember making a promise like that.”

“Have you forgotten our discussion? We talked about what we’d do if we didn’t have partners to accompany us and said it would be a laugh to dance together. Remember?”

“Isaac, that was a *joke!*”

Dumbfounded, I watched his shoulders drop in disappointment. Could he really have taken that seriously? Is that why he’d come here dressed in a woman’s ball gown? I knew he was earnest to a fault, but this was taking things to a whole other level.

“Oh, you poor thing. You took her joke at face value, didn’t you?” Edward said

mockingly, grinning as he took a step forwards. Even the way he moved was feminine.

“What do you mean by that, Your Highness?” Isaac shot back.

“Only that it’s a pity you made the mistaking of clinging onto such a small shred of hope.”

“Better to be invited as a joke than not invited at all, though, wouldn’t you say?”

“I’ve simply yet to be invited—a problem that will soon be remedied.”

For some reason, sparks were beginning to fly between the two of them. I had completely lost the plot by now. *If someone here has any idea what’s going on, please feel free to claim these ladies for yourself. By all means, take my place.*

“I-I’ll have you know that the commander is *my* fiancé!” Robert interjected.

“And? What of it?”

“I seem to recall that Your Highness didn’t even *want* to accompany her to the dance.”

Just as soon as Robert had entered the fray, Isaac and Edward had closed in to cut him down to size.

God, what am I supposed to do with this? I wondered. Despite being at the root of their bickering, I’d been left completely on the sidelines.



Let me briefly recap the series of events that had just unfolded, for the sake of my own sanity.

After I'd refused to accompany him to the dance, Robert's painful earnestness and inborn tendency to go completely overboard led him to come to the dance in drag, hoping he could have a second chance as *my* escort.

The crown prince caught wind of this and decided to join in on the cross-dressing. Once he gave it a try, he was surprised by how much he liked it and realized it was also a great opportunity to show off a handmade dress.

Isaac, being Isaac, took my joke seriously and thought I actually wanted *him* to be *my* escort. He decided to go all-in and cross-dress to look the part.

Well, that brings us to the current catfight.

"Commander! Please, give me a chance! I'll show you what a perfect gentleman—and perfect knight—I can be!"

Is this "perfect gentleman" in the room with us right now? How 'bout that "perfect knight"? Might wanna take a look in the mirror, pal.

"Come on, Lizzie. Won't you dance with me? Just imagine what a power couple we'd make. We'd be the envy of the ball."

A couple? Way to be presumptuous.

"Wouldn't you prefer to dance with a familiar partner? I need you, Burton. Please...choose me," Isaac pleaded.

I think you need to hurry up and master the man's part.

As their appeals grew more and more urgent, the three of them moved in closer. I didn't want any part of it. I found myself wishing I'd just picked some random girl to escort instead and saved myself the trouble.

Actually, I'm not sure that would have made a difference. Their dirty looks would've probably just sent her running.

In any case, it was typically the *men* who took the initiative to extend an invitation. It'd do these three good to cultivate some ladylike manners and learn how to wait patiently. Wait, maybe that wasn't necessary, since they were

technically men? Or...were they?

As I found myself growing increasingly confused, a boon from the heavens arrived.

“Sis!” Christopher yelled, barging in with a large bundle in his arms.

Christopher always looked as sweet as a cherub but today he looked more than just that—he looked like a *bona fide angel*.

“Christopher! What are you doing here?”

“When I saw you leave in that uniform, I couldn’t believe my eyes! I knew I had to follow you here and make you see reason. Here, I brought a dress for you. Please get changed into this quickly!”

Yes! That’s it! I snapped my fingers. “Right. Let’s go, Christopher.”

“Sis...!”

I gave him a quick squeeze on the shoulder, and we both walked over to the carriage he’d arrived in.

Christopher had been quite insistent on turning me into a proper young lady recently. Typically, this was a bit of a headache, but today, it was a godsend.

“Huh? Um, sis? Why am I—”

“Don’t worry about it. Just come in with me,” I said, and he followed me into the carriage obediently.

The three bickering beauties and the gallery of onlookers had fallen completely silent. They watched me make my retreat.

“S-Sis? No! What are— Noooo!”

I could sense the unease spreading among them as Christopher’s shrill screams echoed out from the carriage. Undeterred, I carried out my plan of attack, and the carriage shook violently.

Several minutes later, I emerged from the carriage in high spirits, squeezing Christopher’s shoulder as he sobbed into his hands. He was wearing a light-purple, flowy A-line dress. Its puffy tulle sleeves were adorable—a perfect fit for him. Which was to say, it was *way* too cutesy for *me*. *What was he thinking?*

In case you hadn't guessed by now, I'd peeled off his clothes and dressed him in the garment he'd brought for me.

It looked pretty natural on him. He had the cute, girlish face for it, and his dainty figure and fluffy, sheeplike bob really sold the whole thing. Put a dress and some ribbons on him, and anyone would be shocked to learn that he *wasn't* a young lady.

Everyone's eyes turned to us, and I smiled as I announced, "Sorry, ladies and gentlemen. I hate to disappoint, but I need to escort my younger brother tonight. So...later!"

"Ngh... *Hic!*" Christopher sobbed.

"C'mon, Christopher. Chin up. You're always talking about how you want to get a taste of the academy before you enroll next year, aren't you?"

I patted him on the shoulder, but he didn't stop crying. He just looked up at me with a tearstained, vicious glare.

I knew it'd be a bad look if people thought I'd made him cry. Honestly, I *did* feel kinda bad, but I'd been backed into a corner. All in all, it was a necessary and noble sacrifice. I made a mental note to buy him some sweets later to make up for it.

"Just so you know... I-I'll never get a wife now."

"Don't worry about that. I'm sure big brother will find you a nice girl to marry."

"He doesn't have any chance at marriage either!"

I dragged Christopher, still crying, to the dance floor and made my grand entrance.

A Boy Made for Ribbons and Dresses

“Christopher? Heeey, Christopher? C’mon, snap out of it.”

Even though the dance had come and gone, Christopher was still sulking. Every time I tried to apologize, he just turned away and let out an unhappy “hmph.”

I *did* feel bad that I’d forced him into a dress and paraded him around the ballroom, but I’d apologized more than enough. I couldn’t help but think that his bad mood, which stubbornly refused to abate, seemed a little excessive.

After I’d danced with Christopher, I’d unfortunately had to dance with the other cross-dressing men as well. It’d really cut into the time I could’ve spent with the ladies, though I’d fortunately managed to fit in a few dances with them too.

It’s not like you’re the only one who had it rough that night. Besides, sulking isn’t going to make it better.

“Come on, help me out here,” I implored my older brother.

“This one’s all on you, Lizzie,” he immediately retorted.

Strangely, hearing him say that made me feel like I really *had* done something horrible.

“I really *am* sorry,” I said to Christopher. “Please find it in your heart to forgive me?”

He continued to ignore me, so I leaned in and stole a peek at his face. I flashed him my best superficial, pleading smile. It was always a hit with the girls in my class, so I prayed that it’d get through to him too.

He looked at me out of the corner of his eye and whispered, “...ease.”

“Hmm?”

“I want you to cut my hair, please.”

“Huh?”

My smiling mask crumbled at his unexpected request.

I had a fair amount of confidence in my capabilities with a blade, but I had a feeling I’d have an easier time cutting his *head* off than his *hair*. I’d never given anyone a haircut before, and I wasn’t sure I could pull it off. I certainly didn’t have the crown prince’s dexterity.

“I’d like a haircut you consider manly!”

“H-Hold on, Christopher. You don’t need a haircut to look manly. You already look like a fine young man to me. I mean, uh...just look at you!”

“Are you sure? Even though ribbons and dresses look so natural on me?”

“Yep. You’re just a boy made for ribbons and dresses, that’s all.”

“I don’t *want* to be that kind of boy!”

I was at a complete loss. Christopher always swallowed his complaints, so it was unnerving to see him throw a fit like this.

Sure, he had a cute, fluffy—and slightly feminine—hairstyle, but I thought it really suited him. It was a lot more practical than a certain *someone’s* vision-obstructing bangs, and it wasn’t ostentatiously lustrous enough to put the young ladies to shame.

Besides, there was room in this world for all kinds of people. As a girl who was made for swords and knights’ uniforms, I could attest to that.

Unfortunately, my attempts to persuade him were unsuccessful. My older brother was afraid I’d chop Christopher’s neck off, so he arranged for a beautician to do the job. My task, in the end, was a small one: I simply had to suggest a hairstyle and give directions.

I knew Christopher would sulk until the end of time if I seemed even slightly disinterested in the process, so I made a real effort to look like I was passionate about guiding the beautician. In reality, I just ended up picking a hairstyle from a list of the beautician’s suggestions, but Christopher seemed happy enough.

Christopher’s new hairstyle was certainly much more masculine, but it still suited his cute face. The finished product was, essentially, a short bowl cut with

thick bangs. His fluffy curls gave a sort of bounce to the hairstyle. He kind of looked like a Korean idol. The beautician had done a great job—not that that was any surprise, considering my older brother had picked her.

“Wow! You look great, Christopher! Very handsome!” I exclaimed wholeheartedly.

Christopher looked bashful at the praise.

Right, I thought. Christopher’s already hit puberty, so he’s probably at the age when handsome is the goal. I’ll have to remember to keep calling him that instead of “cute.”

“Oh, hey, since I’m here, I may as well get my sides trimmed up a bit too,” I mused, preparing to ask the beautician to cut my hair next.

“Sis...” Christopher warned, the venom in his voice practically visible.

I wasn’t about to put him in a bad mood again when we’d *just* managed to cheer him up, so I shrugged my shoulders and dropped it.



Now that the dance was behind us, it was really starting to feel like winter. As I went on my daily evening run, I realized that it had started to get darker earlier.

I returned to the estate to wipe off the sweat and change clothes. Just as I finished, I heard a frantic knocking on my bedroom door.

When I opened the door, my older brother practically fell into my room. He looked extremely flustered.

“Lizzie,” he gasped, grabbing my shoulder. “I don’t know what to do... Christopher’s gone missing!”

“Missing? What do you mean?”

His face was pale, and his eyes were filled with concern. I gently sat him on the sofa to give his soft, pleasantly plump body some support.

I spotted the head maid, who seemed to have just caught up with my brother, and signaled her with my eyes. She gave me a small nod and vanished to

prepare some tea.

“We went to a meeting in the castle together. I was there representing father, and Christopher was accompanying me for support. I thought something seemed off about him after the meeting, but I had to go meet with the crown prince, so we parted ways.”

I sat down on the couch and turned to face him as I listened. The head maid set cups of fragrant black tea down in front of us.

“I asked him if he wanted to wait and go home with me, but he just told me that he could get home by himself, so...I let him go.”

He cradled his head in his hands and looked down at the floor.

I could tell from his facial expressions and his body language that he was blaming himself for Christopher’s disappearance, and my heart hurt just looking at him.

“But when I spoke to the carriage driver who’d been waiting for him, he told me that Christopher had said he’d remembered something he needed to take care of, and that he’d come home with me later. He apparently excused the driver and told him he could go back to the estate.”

What could he possibly need to take care of at the castle? I wondered, tilting my head.

Sure, my older brother was often called there—not to mention my own frequent summons—but Christopher? *He* didn’t know anyone in the castle, so he shouldn’t have had anything to take care of there. *Wish I could say the same for myself...*

“That’s strange,” I said.

My brother nodded. He looked down at his lap, where his tightly clasped, cream puff-like hands were resting. His fingernails dug deeply into the backs of his hands. Honestly, it was a pretty tragic sight.

“I thought he might’ve wanted to do some sightseeing around town before going home. I mean, one of us is always with him, so it didn’t strike me as odd that he might want the chance to look around by himself. But...” he trailed off.

His explanation had been peppered with sobs, and his voice had become so faint, it sounded like it might just disappear.

“But you came home, and he wasn’t here,” I said, sparing him the misery of finishing his sentence. He gave a limp, lifeless nod.

“I just feel so stupid. It’s not like Christopher to wander off. He’d never want to worry us like that. He’s always thinking about us, you know?”

Fat tears fell from his sapphire eyes. I thought I was pretty mature now, but seeing my brother cry was really hard to handle. I mean, it didn’t feel great to see a family member so upset—especially when I wasn’t the cause.

But as he shed tear after tear, I felt my heart quickly hardening. The more he came apart, the more composed I became. *Who’s the jerk that made my brother cry like this?*

“Any clue where he might’ve gone?” I asked.

“Well...maybe, but I don’t have any proof.”

“Doesn’t matter. Let’s hear it.”

My quick reply seemed to startle him a little. He hesitated, but then he dropped his voice and replied, “I think Chris started acting weird when he saw a member of his birth family arrive. It was Earl Wilson—a blood relative.”

The name didn’t ring a bell, but I did remember Christopher’s birth family. Not from my current life, of course, but my previous one.

I rubbed my chin as I brainstormed our next moves.

“If there’s some connection there between his birth family and his disappearance, then the earl’s family will probably know something. But...I don’t have any proof. I can’t—in good faith—suspect them,” my brother said, shaking his head slightly.

It was a classic Honorable Duke response. It was also the *appropriate* response for a member of nobility. Sowing seeds of discord with another family over unfounded suspicions was, naturally, considered very bad form.

Which meant this was the perfect job for *me*.

“Lizzie...? You’re not thinking of just marching up to the earl’s estate, are you?” my brother asked anxiously.

“Oh, now there’s a thought. I didn’t even realize that was an option!” I teased, shrugging my shoulders.

He wasn’t crying anymore. Presumably, he’d stopped the moment he’d imagined me breaking and entering. When I gave him a wry smile and reassured him that I was only joking, his expression softened slightly.

“I’ll head to the knights’ station and request the patrol keep an eye out for Christopher tonight. It’d probably be faster if I handled this, since they know me,” I said.

With that, I smiled, rose from my seat, grabbed my jacket, and headed for the door. The head maid saw me and quickly moved behind me to help me into my jacket.

“I’ll join you, then,” my brother said.

I shook my head.

“No, you stay here. There’s still a chance he’ll come home. Besides, I’m concerned about these relatives too. I’d appreciate it if you could look into them,” I replied with a mysterious expression on my face.

My brother nodded solemnly.

His composure had been broken, which is why he hadn’t noticed anything amiss. Under any other circumstances, he definitely would’ve caught my lie.



Now, if this were a video game, this is the point where you’d get a detailed explanation of Christopher’s circumstances. But it would take all day to get through that, and we don’t have that kind of time (I’ll give you the whole story if we ever do).

Besides, it’s not like hearing the past and all its details will help you change it—well, not unless time travel’s an option. The best you can do is collect flashback CGs that make you *feel* like you’ve witnessed it firsthand.

Anyway, we’re short on time, so let’s get moving.

Right now, my priority was to get Christopher back as soon as possible and put my older brother's mind at ease.

I left the estate, did some quick stretches, then broke into a casual run. It was a pitch-black night. I knew I'd have more flexibility if I ran rather than taking a horse.

Anyway, long story short, I was heading over to retrieve Christopher from his birth family's home. I remembered that there was an event like this in the game, and based on what my older brother had said, I was pretty sure it was playing out *right now*.

Christopher's family circumstances were...complicated, to say the least. His mother had abandoned him, which was why he'd come to live with us. His father had never been in the picture. He'd died in a horse-drawn carriage accident shortly after Christopher had been born, but he'd been the heir to the earldom and the title of Earl Wilson.

The Wilson family estate was located in the eastern district of town, just a short distance from the castle. It had a long and storied history. Fortunately, I knew the area like the back of my hand from the many nights I'd spent patrolling the town.

After Christopher's father had died, his younger brother had become the temporary heir. But Christopher was the *true* heir, and the brother couldn't just get rid of him. So what had he done instead? He'd married Christopher's mother.

It was, of course, a purely political marriage from the beginning. There was no love or romance between the two of them. Such marriages were unusual in times of peace—such as now, for instance—but I'd heard that they were fairly common during times of war.

I greeted a guard stationed outside the castle and entered the castle grounds. He gave me a funny look—probably wondering what I was doing out at such a late hour—but didn't stop me for questioning. He probably assumed I was working a night shift.

Anyway, back to Christopher's story...

Due to his father's premature death, Christopher became the heir to the family's title, and he was raised with great care. At least...until it became apparent that he looked nothing like his father. None of his facial features—from his eyes to his hair color—bore any resemblance to the man. What's more, he barely even bore a resemblance to his mother; the only thing he seemed to have inherited from her was his hair color.

Christopher had been born only shortly after the wedding, which had caused quite a scandal. Many suspected his mother of infidelity. I had my doubts about whether the people in this world knew anything about genetics (and how genes can skip a generation), but it certainly seemed unlikely, given its old European-esque setting.

In any case, Christopher suffered for their ignorance. He and his mother were basically locked away, forbidden from ever interacting with other noble families. They were met with contemptuous looks and even beaten.

It didn't take long for his mother's spirit to break. Her love for Christopher exhausted, she ran off with a servant she'd taken as a lover and left her child behind.

I climbed up to the castle's tallest lookout platform and looked for Earl Wilson's estate. I had to squint a bit to see in the darkness, but it didn't take long to find it. Its old age and unique roof made it stand out among all the other manors.

Hmm. That nearby church looks like a safe bet.

With a tap of my foot, I hopped off of the observation platform and onto the castle wall. From there, I could roof-hop until I reached my destination.

After his mother left, my parents took Christopher in. We'd been living as a family ever since.

This wasn't the case for Christopher in the game, though. In-game Christopher never develops bonds with the distant relatives who adopt him and never experiences love. He leads a life of anguish and loneliness.

But then a girl enters his life to give him the love he's been missing out on. That girl is, of course, the game's saint of a main character. Oh, and I mean saint

literally, by the way.

After plenty of classic otome game interactions between Christopher and the main character, he falls in love for the first time.

That's not where the story ends, though. Turns out his birth family, the Wilsons, have been keeping an eye on him. When they see how close he's grown with a saint, they reach out and entreat him to return to the family. Unsurprisingly, this is motivated by their desire to stake a claim on a saint for themselves. But the main character's too purehearted to see through their conniving, so she responds to the news with joyous enthusiasm—as if it was her own good fortune.

From Christopher's perspective, though, she's just starstruck—dazzled by his birth family's noble status. He feels that he's lost his only support and the one person he could trust.

Eventually, the main character figures out that Christopher has run off to his birth family in a fit of desperation and despair. She learns about his family circumstances and intervenes. Misunderstandings are cleared up, and when the dust settles, their bond is stronger than ever for it.

The main character might not have arrived on the scene yet in my world, but it was hardly surprising that events similar to those in the game were playing out now. What *was* weird was the difference in timing, but I figured that the timeline was probably just adjusting to match the game's. Maybe this event happening now was a necessary part of that adjustment?

It seemed highly unlikely that Christopher would lose faith in my brother and me (well, at least in my brother) so easily. If I looked at it from a villain's point of view, I could only imagine that the Wilson family had threatened our little brother.

I landed on the church roof, which stood a full story taller than the surrounding buildings. From there, it was just a short distance to the top of the Wilson family estate. If I was careful with my descent, I felt confident I'd be able to reach it easily.

I could see how Earl Wilson might be interested in bringing Christopher back into the family given how he'd bonded with my older brother. The Wilsons

probably thought it would help them build valuable political bridges.

Alternatively, his biological family might've wanted to bring him back to help preserve the family line. Sure, they'd made a fuss about him supposedly not carrying a drop of Wilson blood before, but there was no doubt they'd sing a different tune if they felt their lineage was at risk of dying out.

I could think of all kinds of different reasons why they might want him back, and all kinds of different ways they could threaten him.

They might've told him something like "We won't hurt anyone if you just come home," or "No matter how honorable the duke is, do you really think *he'll* accept *you* if he finds out you don't have a drop of the earl's blood running through your veins?"

I could see them taking things even further. Maybe they'd convinced him with a line like "Even if his family *did* accept you, what about the other noble families? They'd probably ridicule the duke for being a magnanimous fool."

Threat after threat popped into my mind unbidden. I *was* a villainess, after all.

I kicked off of the roof and landed on the Wilsons' a second later. Thanks to all the shortcuts I'd taken, I'd made it into the estate grounds pretty swiftly. I felt like I was in a racing game.

Easy, girl. You've got the wrong genre.

I took a look around me. *Now, if I wanted to lock someone away, where would I put them?* I wondered. Thanks to my villainous instincts, it didn't take long to find what I was looking for: a secluded tower that fit the bill perfectly.

Without even a light to guide me, I set my sights on the tower and leaped up again without making a sound.



With the night breeze at my back, I landed in one of the tower's dark rooms. A sliver of dim moonlight shone through the window. The window was fixed into place, so I'd had to remove the whole frame to sneak in.

"Hey there, Christopher."

Christopher opened and shut his mouth silently several times. "S...is..." he

finally croaked out.

I gently put the window frame down in the corner of the room and walked towards Christopher, who was slumped on the floor like a deer in headlights.

“Come on, let’s hurry up and go home. Big brother’s worried, you know. Do you have everything you need?”

“But, I...”

His honey-colored eyes were clouded with tears. They spilled out, clung fruitlessly to his bottom eyelashes, then finally slid down his cheeks.

“I’m...not fit to be your little brother!” he exclaimed.

It was like a dam broke. Rather than stopping to rest on his lashes now, fat tears gushed out of his eyes and poured down his cheeks.

Sheesh. Your big sister comes to rescue you, and this is how you respond? We should be past this by now, little brother.



“But you *are*,” I said as I gave him a pat on the head. No matter how much he grew, his soft, fluffy hair never changed.

He peered up at me with his big eyes. They were filled with anxiety, yet desperately searching for something.

“If I say you’re my little brother, then that’s what you are.”

I lifted him off the ground where he’d been sitting. I couldn’t help remembering when my older brother and I had gone to fetch him once when he’d gotten lost. I’d been able to hold him in my arms like a doll back then, but he’d gotten too tall for that now. I’d have to carry him princess-style, or I’d lose my balance.

“You’ve grown so much,” I mumbled out loud without thinking.

Christopher looked up at me, surprised.

“But you’re still as light as a feather,” I added.

“Sis...” he muttered weakly.

I looked down at him with a gentle smile and saw that he was grinning through his tears. His face was bright red as he peered up at me.

“Do you remember when you and big brother came to find me that one night, a long time ago?”

“Hmm, hard to say. I wouldn’t even think twice about coming to get you—I’d just do it. It’d be so natural, I wouldn’t even remember it.”

“Well, ever since then, I’ve always wanted to be just like you.”

My eyes went wide.

“Ever since then...” Christopher began, looking up at me. He narrowed his teary, doe-like eyes and gave me an earnest—if awkward—smile. “You’ve been my role model...my knight.”

I chuckled. “I can’t think of anything that would make me happier than my little brother looking up to me.”

I *did* remember the night he was talking about. It was the night I knelt in front of him and swore to protect my family as a knight. *My big brother was right*

after all, I thought. Every boy looks up to the knights.

It seemed like my promise had given him a role model and *hope*.

That being said, I couldn't help but pray that he wouldn't *actually* follow in my footsteps. Our family would be absolutely devastated. *I've already made our parents cry plenty. They don't need any more of their children giving them cause for tears.*

"Ready to go home, Christopher?" I asked.

I felt him nod in my arms. As I carried him, I gave the window a little kick and jumped out into the night sky.



We were ready to leave the Wilsons' estate and head home, but we were stopped in our tracks by a commotion unfolding at the front gate.

I put Christopher down on the ground. We hid behind a fence, peeking out in the direction that the hubbub was coming from.

"Well, I must say! I'm appalled that the future Duke Burton would dare lay suspicion on someone without a shred of evidence. 'Honorable Duke,' my foot!"

"Forgive me. I realize how rude this is, but please...do you have any idea where he may be? I'd appreciate it if you could tell me anything you know."

"I've already told you, I don't know where he is!"

At the center of the uproar, my older brother and a man with facial hair were having a heated conversation. Judging by the man's attire, I could only assume that he was the current head of the Wilson family—Earl Wilson, Christopher's uncle by blood.

Both Earl Wilson and my older brother had brought servants with them. There were also several knights from the patrol who'd probably heard the ruckus and gathered to watch the scene as well. All together, they formed quite a crowd.

My brother, who stood at the center, looked even more worn-out and disheartened than he had before. His eyes were filled with anxiety and sadness.

As he clenched his pudgy fist in front of his chest, he declared, with great

effort, “Earl Wilson, I understand you’ve had some financial difficulties as of late. I’ve spoken with members of several other noble families, who have informed me that they’ve offered you loans.”

“And what of it? Such requests have merely been made for a new venture, that’s all. I’d appreciate it if you could refrain from insinuating that I’ve been pestering other families for coin.”

“The bulk of your earldom’s production is textiles, yes? I know you’ve had a long and profitable trade relationship with the East, but I hear their demand for textiles has dwindled sharply.” Earl Wilson stood tall, but I saw his shoulders jolt ever so slightly at my brother’s words. He clamped his mouth shut, and my brother continued, as if trying to persuade him. “You’ve borrowed large sums of money from the bank as well, haven’t you? I imagine it must be difficult to even maintain your earldom with such debts.”

After a long pause, the earl replied, “Even if that were the case, what bearing could it possibly have on your ill-mannered visit? Have you any *proof* of a connection between my family’s financial circumstances and the disappearance of your adopted brother?”

“No, I’m afraid I don’t. All I have is information—information that suggests you may somehow be involved in his disappearance. But I have no hard evidence,” my brother conceded.

It was true that everything he’d laid out amounted to nothing but speculation. It didn’t prove that the earl had anything to do with Christopher’s disappearance. What’s more, it wasn’t information that my brother alone was privy to—the details he’d shared were widely known by all of the noble families; they could readily be corroborated. If anything, it was hard to *avoid* hearing about the earl’s financial circumstances. The intel was hardly worth flaunting.

And yet, it had a powerful effect on the crowd as they heard it. You could almost see their minds racing as they drew their own conclusions.

Even without his reputation as the next Honorable Duke, my brother clearly had the upper hand here. One look at the knights’ faces was all that was needed to confirm that.

I was convinced too. *Right*, I thought. *So, it was money they were after*. It was certainly the most obvious and impulsive motivation I could think of. The earl was so pathetic, he was hardly worth calling a villain. A grunt, maybe...at best.

“It would pain me to suspect you, Earl Wilson. No, it would pain me to suspect *anyone*. I’d much rather place my faith in you. So, please, while you still have my trust...I hope you’ll make the right decision,” my brother said, regarding the earl with eyes full of deep sincerity.

If anyone but my brother had said those words they’d sound laughably lenient. But coming from his mouth, they held a deeper meaning. The next Honorable Duke had given the earl an earnest warning. He was testing the man by asking if the earl would betray his trust.

My brother might have been the future Honorable Duke, but he was still a nobleman. If the chips were down, he wasn’t afraid to play his strongest cards. Even he could be a tactician when he needed to. Still, seeing how painful this was for him, it was clear that aristocratic strategizing just wasn’t in his nature.

“If anything were to happen to my precious little brother, the Burtons would be left with no choice but to consider you an enemy.”

This time, the jolt that ran through the earl was obvious. His shoulders flinched visibly.

There wasn’t a single noble family in the kingdom who didn’t know what it meant to be an enemy of the Burtons. My brother was fully aware of that, and he’d weaponized it. His threat had clearly not been missed.

“Let me ask you one last time. Do you have any idea where my little brother is?”

For a moment, silence fell.

“Big brother!” Christopher called out, breaking the silence. He bolted out from our hiding spot by the fence and towards my older brother.

“Christopher!” my older brother cried out in return and ran towards Christopher.

The two of them crashed into a desperate hug, with my older brother’s fluffy

marshmallow body enveloping Christopher.

“Oh, thank God you’re safe!”

“I’m sorry, big brother...” Christopher whispered, his voice on the brink of a sob again.

“It’s all right. I’m just glad you’re okay.”

My older brother gently patted his head, and I saw tears glisten in his eyes.

Earl Wilson, on the other hand, had gone so visibly pale that his ghostly complexion was evident even in the dark. As far as I was concerned, this was the last nail in the coffin. It was obvious now he was nothing more than a mere grunt.

(If you’re curious, the appropriate response for a full-fledged villain would be to walk over to the brothers while slowly clapping. Then, they were supposed to chuckle and comment something like, “My, what a touching reunion.” They *certainly* wouldn’t go all pale just from seeing one of their hostages had escaped.)

“Big brother, he... Earl Wilson threatened me. I didn’t ever want to come back here again, but he told me I had to,” Christopher said, biting his lip. He glared at Earl Wilson, indignant. “He said that if I didn’t, he’d tell everyone that I don’t carry the earl’s blood...and that once I’d served my purpose of getting funds from the duke’s family, I’d be treated like a real Wilson. I-I was so scared...”

“You’re not a Wilson by blood?”

I guess I called it, then. My villainous instincts had been right on point. I was afraid of my own power.

“To be honest, I-I don’t know. My mother isn’t around to tell me the truth anymore,” Christopher said, his head hung low.

“You have no reason to fear, Christopher,” my older brother assured him, shaking his head and pulling our younger brother into a tight hug. “None of us care about that. Not me, Lizzie, or our parents. You’re my little brother, Christopher Burton, and the second son of Duke Burton. Don’t ever forget that.”

“Big brother...”

“E-Earl Burton!” Earl Wilson yelled out, suddenly breaking his silence. He approached my brothers and separated them aggressively. “I’m afraid there’s been a grave mistake! I never *threatened* the boy! Why, *he* came to *me*! He couldn’t bear the thought of being the second son of the duke and never standing a chance of inheriting the family’s land and title. He *begged* me to take him back so he could be heir to the Wilson earldom!”

Even from a distance, it was clear how flustered the earl was as he clung to my brother pitifully. He’d immediately honed in on the person he needed to make his ally and done a complete one-eighty. Yep, he was a picture-perfect grunt, all right. It was actually almost refreshing to see. If we’d met under different circumstances, maybe we would’ve even been good friends. *That’s a strong “maybe,” though.*

“That’s not true! I never said that! He took me to Wilson estate against my will and locked me up in—” Christopher blurted out.

“Locked you up? I did no such thing! I sat you in the drawing room and offered you nothing but the finest hospitality!” the earl protested, rubbing his hands together.

My brother looked at him in bewilderment. First the earl half kidnapped our little brother, and now he was trying to lay the blame on him for it.

Poor Christopher. I decided it was high time I put an end to this.

“I might have some insight into where Christopher was,” I said, walking out from my hiding spot.

“Lizzie!” my brother cried when he saw me, his eyes widening.

I had a feeling I was about to out myself for trespassing, but I couldn’t stand this anymore. Besides, even if I didn’t speak up, Christopher was bound to unintentionally snitch anyway.

“It seems Christopher’s lost a cuff link. Wherever it turns up is probably where he’s been all evening, wouldn’t you agree?” I suggested, stroking my chin thoughtfully.

Christopher looked down at his sleeve and gasped. Sure enough, one of his cuff links was missing.

Why, you ask? Well, let's just say *someone* had the foresight to tear it off his sleeve and drop it on the ground when they were rescuing him.

As I looked Earl Wilson in the eyes and smiled, he began to toy with his beard anxiously.

"Oh, by the way, I was curious about that tower over there. What do you use it for? Doesn't it just seem like the *perfect* place to lock someone up and hide them?"

"I-I..."

I shook my head. "My apologies. I shouldn't have even needed to ask. It's hardly an unusual feature for a manor built before the war, after all," I added, as if to suggest that, yes, locking people up is *exactly* what it was used for.

(Of course, I had no idea what the tower was *actually* used for, but let's not sweat the details.)

"How dare you! Are you casting suspicion on me?! I simply brought Christopher back to the Wilson home, just as he requested!" the earl yelled in a voice much louder than necessary. It seemed he'd caught onto my insinuation, and now I had him cornered.

The crowd's mood was quickly souring. *This has turned into a real farce, all right.* Everyone present could see where this was going, and it was obvious how it was going to end. At this point, it was just a pointless spectacle.

"Even if that were true, it's bad form to whisk a minor away without first obtaining permission from their guardian, wouldn't you agree? Some might even call that kidnapping."

All I had to do was point out the obvious, and the earl grew increasingly flustered. His bullishness seemed to wither away just as quickly as it had emerged.

"N-No... I-I've been framed! He said he needed refuge, so I simply stationed some guards for his protection! Believe me—never would I have expected a

conspirator to break him out and try to frame me for kidnapping!”

Uh-huh...

He was shouting incoherently now and doing an expert job of digging his own grave. In fact, he was digging a grave big enough to fit *several* people.

“So what you’re saying is, someone sneaked into the estate grounds and politely walked Christopher out of a guarded tower—or wherever he was? And now they’ve brought him *here*?” I asked.

“Y-Yes, that’s it! He must have employed some sort of mercenary to do it, all so he could pin this supposed abduction on me!”

“Well, that’s a bit frightening, isn’t it? If my little brother really did all that, then he must have some *very competent people* working for him.”

The earl looked at me with a blank stare. *Are you looking at me like that because I’ve said something surprising, or because you still don’t understand what I’m getting at?* I wondered. For his sake, I was dancing around the crux of the matter.

“Financial troubles or not, your manor is certainly still befitting of an earl. It’s to be expected that you’d have adequate guards and security to protect it, right? I imagine you’d have *especially* strict security protecting any potential cash cows you might keep locked up in your tower. Wouldn’t want them to get away, right? Oh, but...of course, this is all just conjecture.”

The color was draining quickly from the earl’s face as the meaning of my words finally seemed to be dawning on him.

“But, as you can see, my little brother’s out here, not in the tower. So, if someone released him, then how were they able to sneak into your estate grounds and get him out without a single person noticing?”

The earl was sweating profusely now. I let my boots clack loudly as I approached him. I could’ve sworn stunned looks were being shot my way—both from fellow patrol knights and my older brother. Their stares were so intense I could practically feel them.

“If this infiltrator can break into the tower, then who’s to say they wouldn’t

break into the main residence?” I continued to ask innocently.

The earl could no longer look me in the eyes.

My older brother might have been kind enough to keep things political, but I wasn't. I *was* a villainess at heart, after all.

I bent over a bit, and—dropping my voice low so that only he could hear—I whispered into his ear, “I don't know about you, but I don't know anyone reckless enough to make an enemy of someone like *that*.”

He flinched.

“So I think it'd be best for all parties if we just dropped this, hmm? What do you say?” I asked (though my question was really a declaration in disguise).

Earl Wilson contorted his deathly pale face into a warped smile and nodded vigorously.



“Elizabeth...”

My older brother's voice echoed through the carriage as we made our way home, and I felt myself shrinking in my seat involuntarily. He always called me by my nickname. He only used my proper name when he was *really* mad.

“You lied to me, didn't you?”

“Well, *someone* had to roof-hop and sneak into the tower, right? And we both know that wasn't going to be you.”

“I could've, if you'd carried me on your back.”

“That would've hampered my maneuverability.”

“Oh, come on. It takes more than a piggyback passenger to slow you down. Besides, you move with extra care when I'm on your back, but you're still as nimble as ever. Actually, if anything, having me on your back *improves* your maneuvering.”

Crap. I couldn't argue with that. We had the same blood running through our veins, after all. He knew exactly what I was thinking; he could predict my every move.

“If you’d made one wrong move, we could’ve all... I could’ve *lost* you both,” he scolded.

It was obvious just how furious he was. He’d been holding it all in at the earl’s manor, trying to keep his composure in front of the crowd, but he was letting it out now. Tears streamed down his cheeks one after another.

It hit me hard when he cried, and he knew that. It felt bad enough when *someone else* made him cry, but knowing it had been *my* fault just made it all the worse. I was wracked by guilt.

Don’t do this to me. “Hey, it’s okay. You know, everyone at the academy says that the only brute who could take me on is a bear,” I exclaimed, trying to cheer him up.

“And what were you going to do if the Wilsons keep a pet bear on the premises?!”

“Fair point. Didn’t consider that possibility.”

Still, the odds of that were vanishingly slim. *Wouldn’t put it past the earl to keep a pet tiger, though.*

“Lizzie, you’re my sweet little sister. No matter how old you get or how strong you grow, you’ll always be my beloved sister.”

“And you’ll always be my beloved brother.”

“If you care about me, then you ought to care about what I care about. And I care about *you*. That’s why I need you to take care of yourself. Okay?” he said, slowly and with emphasis, as if trying to drive the point home.

I know, I know. I am taking care of myself. In fact, no one had ever looked after themselves better than I did.

I made a face that could’ve been interpreted as understanding (or not) and shrugged my shoulders.

My older brother turned to Christopher. “Same goes for you, Christopher. You’re my beloved brother. My kindhearted, sharp-as-a-tack, sweet little brother.”

Christopher’s tear-filled, honey-colored eyes became as large as saucers, and

his expression changed to some bizarre mix of crying and smiling.

“So, please...don’t ever sacrifice yourself again like that. I won’t have you taking my beloved brother for granted.”

“Y-You too,” Christopher said, his voice breaking into sobs again. It was so quiet, it seemed like it might almost disappear. “You’re my...beloved brother too. And my beloved sister.”

He met my brother’s eyes. Finally, my older brother’s face softened into a smile. It was such a joyous and infectious expression that even I couldn’t help mimicking him.

There we go. That smile suits him so much more than tears or anger.

“But...all I ever do is take. I never have anything to give. I’m not good enough to be a member of the Burton family, so—”

“Christopher,” my older brother interrupted, clasp ing his hand over the closed fist lying in Christopher’s lap. Christopher looked up at him searchingly. “Thank you. We’re really happy to hear how much you care about us. It means a lot to us. 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.”

From my older brother’s gentle expression, it was clear that he really was overflowing with joy. Christopher must’ve seen that too.

“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?” my older brother suggested with a smile.

Christopher gave a little nod and laid his other hand on top of my brother’s.

“Oh, and one more thing—I’d appreciate it if you could help me keep an eye on Lizzie too.”

“Wait...huh?” I blurted out.

I could tell from the glance he sent my way that his anger hadn’t abated. The lie I’d told tonight seemed to be a felony in his books.

Christopher looked up at me. I had a feeling he could see right through the mischievous little sister (or older sister in his case) label that my older brother had pinned on me.

“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.”

Only my older brother would gloss over my unruly behavior with a cute label like “tomboy.” In a way, I guess it was just a step removed from the Demon Drill Sergeant or the playboy knight.

And poor Christopher still cared so much about me (and my femininity) that he’d tried to bring me a dress to wear to the dance. What’s worse, he was going to be able to keep an eye on me around the clock when he enrolled at the academy next year.

It was going to get a whole lot harder for me to move around freely—and just when it really mattered too. After all, the game’s main character would *also* be enrolling next year.

But I had to tread carefully for the time being. I didn’t want to spoil my older brother’s hard-won good mood.

“Come on, don’t push your debts onto poor Christopher,” I said.

“Who would dare call my sweet little sister a debt?!” he replied, glaring at me.

Oops. Now I’ve gone and done it. He’s definitely pissed now.

“Sis! I’m gonna work hard to look after you!”

“Christopher...?”

Just as I was racking my brains for a rebuttal, Christopher jumped in to join forces. His doe-like eyes were lit up and sparkling with determination.

Um, hello? You’ve just had your pain-in-the-butt big sister foisted on you. Why’re you chomping at the bit to take that on? I think you may be taking your familial obligations a bit too seriously here.

“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!"

Hey, come on. For all intents and purposes, I'm already engaged. (Ignore the fact that I would jump at any opportunity to call the engagement off.)

"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!"

Whoa, whoa, whoa!

I was speechless. I'd had no idea he cared *that* deeply about his siblings. *He'd really commit to taking care of a spinster older sister for the rest of his life?*

I imagined Christopher looking after me, his unwed older sister, in the house our older brother would inherit. I pictured him sacrificing his own future with a family, remaining a bachelor until the day he died. *How awful...*

I knew *I* wouldn't be able to stand that. In every sense of the term, it was a heavy debt indeed. For Christopher's sake, as well as my own, I knew I had to get married.

Not sure who I'll get married to, though. "Uh, look, Christopher... I appreciate the sentiment, but..."

Christopher was usually a good kid, but sometimes he came on...a little *strong*. His convictions were sometimes a bit much.

"Hee hee hee!"

A laugh spilled out of my older brother's mouth as he watched me grow flustered. I was relieved to see that he wasn't angry anymore, but it looked like I had a new problem on my hands.

"Hey, c'mon, say something!" I pleaded. "You can't let him swear away his future like that!"

But my desperate objections seemed to fall on deaf ears. My older brother gave me a big smile and just laughed the rest of the trip away.

All of the Princes in the Land

“Lady Elizabeth!”

It was January—the start of the new year.

Just as I was in the middle of my morning squats, the head maid barged into my bedroom. Struck by how unusual this was for a woman who was typically so quiet and modest, I ran over to her. Something must’ve been up.

“H-His Highness is here to see you.”

“His Highness?”

Robert’s glistening, puppy-dog eyes flashed through my head. Since he’d fortunately(?) found out my identity not too long ago, it didn’t seem strange to me that he’d come knocking on my door. I figured he was probably here to ask me to help him train. It wasn’t really a big deal, or anything worth panicking about.

Maybe I should change into some training-appropriate attire...

He might have been royalty, but he was still my fiancé. Sure, I was itching to call off our engagement...but until that happened, it was hardly out of the question for him to pay a visit, and it was certainly nothing for the head maid to lose her mind over.

That said, he’d never visited me before and vice versa. I couldn’t deny that it was unusual.

“His Highness, the *crown prince*, is here to see you!” the head maid repeated emphatically, perhaps concerned that I wasn’t looking especially flustered by this news.

“What?” I replied in earnest, without thinking. “Wait, what’s *he* doing here?”

“I have no idea, but he says he wants to see you.”

“Without an appointment?”

“Yes, without an appointment.”

As I pestered her with my questions, my expression grew as grave as the head maid’s. I frowned deeply. To be frank, having the prince drop by unannounced was more than a minor inconvenience.

All of the princes in the land, take note—royalty shouldn’t visit without a little advance notice. If you should find yourself at some poor, unsuspecting soul’s doorstep, just turn right around and go back home.

“All right. Let’s hear him out quickly and send him home.”

“Lady Elizabeth, before you go out there...” the maid began, with an expression that signaled she thought the world was about to end. She muttered the rest of her sentence with a deep, raspy voice. “For God’s sake, put on some *clothes*.”

“I’ve already got clothes on.”

“You must be joking.”

I looked down at my clothes. I was wearing my typical at-home attire: a high-quality shirt and pair of pants that had been made to fit by a visiting tailor. A vest and a suitable jacket were all that were needed to make it a formal ensemble.

Of course, I knew what she meant; I was just being difficult. Honestly, though, it was kind of on her for only raising the issue *now*.

“You can’t seriously be thinking of greeting the crown prince in that outfit?!” she tried again.

“Why not? It’s what I always wear when I see him on my way home from the training grounds.”

“What do you mean, ‘always’?!”

Oops. Guess the cat’s out of the bag.

The head maid’s lips were trembling, and she looked like she was about to faint.

“L-Lady Elizabeth... You refuse to see Prince Robert, yet you’ve visited his

brother *multiple times?*"

"No, I see Robert plenty too."

Well, "see" might be a bit of an understatement...but she doesn't need to know that I'm bossing him around at the training grounds.

I slipped past the head maid, whose face had hardened into an expression of utter confusion and concern, and made my way to the nicest drawing room in the manor.



"Hello, Lizzie," the crown prince greeted me as he sipped on some tea. His legs were crossed elegantly.

I gave him a knight's bow in return.

"What a surprise to see you, Your Highness. If you'd let me know you wanted to see me, I could have visited *you*."

"No, there was no need for that. I wanted to come," he replied with a gentle smile.

He'd either completely missed my polite admonishment or intentionally disregarded it. Knowing how well-versed he was in aristocratic euphemisms (certainly more than I was), the latter was more likely.

"So, to what do I owe your visit? I'm sure this must be a matter of *urgency* and *great importance*."

"Tell me, where is your room?"

"Excuse me?"

"I'd like a tour."

Not only had he rebuffed my polite suggestion for him to leave quickly, but he was now spouting utter nonsense.

"Please," he entreated. Then, after a momentary pause, he said, "It may be the last chance I have to see it."

His expression was solemn.

Something seems...off.

He might've had a bad habit of indulging in pity parties in the past, but he'd been weaning off of them pretty significantly lately—probably because I was so quick to shoot him down whenever he tried it. It had been a while since I'd last seen him like this.

Ultimately, I was so psyched out by the strange tension that I ended up showing him to my room. I instructed the head maid, who I'd just left standing stunned in my room, to pour some tea for Edward. This seemed to stir her from her stupor. She gave an impressive bow and left.

I guess even when her brain shuts down completely, she can still work on autopilot. Truly, a formidable woman.

I offered Edward a seat on the sofa, which he took hesitantly as he looked around the room.

"I recognize this doily..." he said, as his eyes landed on the tablecloth that hung over the short-legged table.

Oh, right. That's what that's called.

I'm sure I don't need to clarify this, but it was the piece he'd crocheted. It seemed he had a hawk's vision for anything he'd made.

"You've put one of my stuffed animals on display too. I'm shocked. I can't believe you really put them in your room."

"Well, yeah. They were gifts, so..."

"Knowing you, I'd assumed you'd just give them all away."

I was floored that he thought so little of me. I wasn't coldhearted enough to give away all the little crafts he'd personally gifted to me. That being said, I'd admit that some of them were only here because of the head maid's insistence. *Honestly, I have nothing but respect for that woman's incredible foresight.*

"You even kept these curtains." He let out a little chuckle. "It makes me happy to see them here."

"No more hefty items, though, please. I've got enough for a lifetime."

It had been a real pain in the butt to take those curtains home with me, and it had been an *even bigger* pain in the butt to make up excuses to family members and servants about what I was doing with them.

Those lace curtains were a little nicer than anything you could find in a store. I imagined that it had taken a long time to knit them. To put it lightly...they were anything *but* light. If I hadn't known they were a product of the prince's passion, I would've just dragged them along the ground.

"A lifetime, hmm...?"

Goddammit. Here we go again...

I was getting really sick of this. It had been a while since he'd trotted out the woe-is-me-going-to-die-any-day-now routine, and it somehow felt even worse to hear it after I'd received such a long reprieve. How many times was he going to make me remind him that he wasn't going to die?

"Is something the matter, Your Highness? A stomachache, maybe?"

"Your devil-may-care attitude is on full display as usual, I see."

Now that's just rude.

I wasn't exactly sure why, but I was offended. I'd been trying to keep my worries under wraps lately so I wouldn't break the illusion of being a carefree, playboy knight, but that didn't mean I didn't *have* any—I had more than my fair share, as a matter of fact. And one worry that felt especially pressing at the moment was caused by the crown prince himself, who'd shown up at my family home uninvited and refused to leave.

"I wanted to talk to you...about my illness."

Those few words were all it took for me to completely lose interest in whatever else he had to say next.

"Uh-huh..."

Edward just gave me a sardonic smile and carried on. "I've found a healer who may be able to cure me."

"A healer?"

“Yes. They’re similar to what we call ‘saints’ in our kingdom, but in the West, they call them ‘healers.’ They use similar methods and medicines, but they also use healing arts that aren’t typical here.”

Healing arts, huh? I wondered what that entailed. *Does that include surgery?*

For some reason, the image that sprang to mind was a dubious abdominal surgery performed in East Asia to remove hair from the stomach. And immediately, I wondered why the hell I’d thought of that; I was pretty sure they hadn’t performed surgeries like that in my past life.

“That’s great. Sounds like you’ve found a cure.”

“Yes, *but...*” Edward trailed off. He was nodding, but his expression looked dark. “The treatment comes with substantial risks. I’ve been told there’s a fifty-fifty chance—either I’ll be cured, or I’ll lose my life.”

As he said that, I was reminded of a similar plot point in Robert’s route. But none of this was supposed to happen until after the main character enrolled at the academy—at least a year after her enrollment, to be precise.

I racked my brains, trying to find a reason the timing on this had been accelerated.

It was hard to imagine that this information would have suddenly sprung up out of nowhere. I could only assume that the royal physician and the king and queen must’ve been aware of the treatment for some time, but that they’d never told Edward about it.

It made sense, in theory. They say that illness is as much mental as it is physical. Anyone who knew about the treatment must’ve surmised that the crown prince, who seemed to have little will to cling to life, wouldn’t be up for battling the odds.

It all made sense when you considered that the whole reason that Edward pursued the treatment in Robert’s route was because Robert had fallen in love with the main character and made a respectable man of himself. This gave Edward the peace of mind that there would be a suitable replacement for him if worse came to worst.

Just kidding! I have no clue what the real reason was. Maybe Edward realized

how much people enjoyed seeing him full of life, and he noticed how much they were rooting for him? Maybe *that's* what spurred him on to seek out treatment sooner? Wouldn't that just be touching...and oh-so-convenient?

I know how over the top that sounds, but hey, I'm free to believe whatever I want. And I've made up my mind to believe in that touching, oh-so-convenient theory.

"Fifty-fifty is good odds. It's a far cry from *zero*."

"I had a feeling you'd say that," Edward said, looking at me with a wry smile. "That's why I wanted to visit you today, no matter what. Because you don't believe I'm going to die. Because you believe I'm going to *live*."

His amethyst eyes flickered slightly as they looked into mine. I'd heard that purple is the color of royalty, but I couldn't remember if that was a stereotype from my current life or my previous one.

"May I...have something of yours to take with me?"

"Pardon?"

"I'll have to travel all the way to the hinterlands of the West, you see. Even if my prognosis looks good, it will be at least three months before I can return home. I'd love something to remember you by and conjure your image immediately, even when we're apart. A...memento, if you will."

Oh, stop. Don't drop ominous lines like that; it's like you're foreshadowing your death.

I glared at him, sensing that he was getting drunk off of the boohoo-I'm-going-to-die-soon juice.

He threw his hands up in a show of surrender. "I've always admired your inexhaustible strength. I guess you could say I'm looking for a good luck charm. Something from which I can *draw* that strength."

"You could've just told me that from the start," I replied.

Now *that*, I understood. Honestly, I probably had more than enough strength to go around.

I searched my pockets, looking for something that could be just right, but

there was nothing in there except for coins. I silently reminded myself to take them out before the head maid scolded me again for leaving things in my pockets.

Then I reached into my inside jacket pocket and wrapped my fingers around a very familiar shape.

“Yep. This oughta do.”

I took the knife out and laid it on the table with a loud, heavy *thunk*.

It was just a simple self-defense knife that I always kept hidden in my jacket. It did the job well enough, even if it might not have been especially efficient at it.

“It’s just a self-defense knife, but it’ll lay a boar low if you need it to.”

“Were you even listening to me? I’m not venturing out into the wilderness here,” Edward said with a sigh.

As much as I hated his woe-is-me song and dance, I couldn’t stand it when he was animated like this either. It was sarcastic, mocking, and it really rubbed me the wrong way.

I glanced around the room to see if there was anything else that looked appropriate to give him, but I was surprised to realize—now that I was taking a proper look—just how sparsely decorated it was. If it wasn’t for the handmade goods that Edward had forced on me, it would’ve been completely desolate. To be fair, though, I just wasn’t much of a materialist.

The only things I might’ve put in my room were my strength training equipment, which was currently at the training grounds, and books, which I tended to just read in our library anyway. In the end, my room was basically just for sleeping and changing clothes. I had no convenient personal artifacts here to give him.

“Oh, I know... How about that stuffed bear?”

Edward was silent.

“Just a little joke, Your Highness.”

“You really can be so insensitive.”

I'd only been joking (well, *half* joking), but it had apparently been enough to sour Edward's mood. *Sheesh. Who knew the heart of a prince was even more indecipherable than the heart of a maiden?*

I had a feeling that I might at least have a pocket square stashed away in my closet, but I wouldn't be able to find it without asking a maid for assistance, and I knew that would put the prince in an even *worse* mood. I *might* have been notoriously insensitive, but even *I* knew better than to go down that road.

I figured it would probably be better to give him something I liked and used regularly—and, if possible, something that radiated a sense of good health.

"Oh!" I exclaimed, remembering just the thing.

I excused myself as I walked past Edward and retrieved it from the bedside table.

"How about this?" I asked.

"And what is this, exactly?"

"It's a nutcracker."

"A nut...cracker?"

I'd brought over a walnut in its shell to demonstrate, which I popped into the mouth of the gold contraption. It just barely fit, tightly squeezed between the mouth's teeth. I squeezed the grip, and the walnut broke open with a satisfying *crack!*

"See? That's how you use it."

"Why do you have one of these in your bedroom...?"

"I used to like cracking nuts open whenever I had a spare moment. It helped me build my grip strength. Plus, nuts are good for you."

"Are you not using it anymore?"

"Well, as fond as I am of it, I haven't had much need for it lately."

I picked up another walnut in its shell, gripping it tightly with my ring finger, my index finger, and middle finger like I was about to pitch a knuckleball. The nut broke open with another loud *crack!*

“I can just use my hands now,” I explained, stating the obvious.

Edward was speechless.

“Your muscles will probably weaken over the course of your long journey. But you can do some light grip strength training with this anywhere—even in your carriage or in bed.”

He looked at the nutcracker for a while, then looked back at me with astonishment. “You’ve never given a gift before, have you?”

“Nope,” I replied, shaking my head.

Edward let out an aggrieved sigh, but then his head shot up as he looked at me again. “Wait... You haven’t? Really?!”

“Why would I lie about this?”

“Not even birthday presents to friends?”

“To family members, sure...but unfortunately, I don’t have the kind of friends who I’d exchange birthday presents with.”

“What about my brother?”

“Oh, him? I always get my mother to pick something appropriate.” *Crap. Didn’t mean to blurt that out.* “Actually, uh, please just forget I said that.”

“Rest assured, you haven’t offended me. In fact, he does the same.”

“I thought he might.”

“You two really don’t get along, do you?”

For a moment, I was silent. “We do...as instructor and cadet.”

I wasn’t sure how things between us might change now that he knew who I was, but judging from his attitude at the dance, it seemed that at least our instructor-cadet relationship was the same as always.

It pained me to be regarded as someone with poor taste in presents, though. I started mumbling to myself, wondering if there was anything more appropriate I could give him, when I noticed Edward had broken into a wide smile.

“Actually, this will do just fine,” he said.

“It will?”

“Yes.”

I wasn't sure where his change of heart had come from, but he looked pretty satisfied. I decided to just leave it be.

Edward twirled the nutcracker around in his hand curiously, then looked up at me suddenly. “You said you don't have any friends. Does that mean I'm the first person you've shown your room to?”

Hey, I never said I don't have any friends. Just that I don't have the kind of friends I'd exchange gifts with.

“I guess you are, aside from my family,” I admitted reluctantly.

I hated the way that came out. I was making it sound like we were close friends—which we most certainly were *not*. And to suggest that the crown prince was the next closest person to me after my brothers and parents...well, that just sounded like I thought Robert and I were basically family. That couldn't be a good look, right?

Actually, maybe it could...

“Just one thing, though—that's not a gift. I'm *lending* it to you, so please return it when you finish your treatment. The head chef will put my head on a platter if he finds out it's gone.”

“Don't tell me you're lending out other people's things without asking for permission?” the crown prince asked, eyes wide in disbelief.

It sounded pretty bad when he put it that way, but I knew the head chef never actually *used* the nutcracker, so he probably wouldn't have been all that fussed. Besides, if it came down to it, I was prepared to do the job myself—with my fists.

“Well, all right. I'll make sure I bring it back home with me,” Edward conceded, nodding. “I appreciate your generosity. In return...”

My knife let out a *clang* as he lifted it off the table.

The minute I realized what was happening, it was too late—my reflexes had automatically kicked into gear upon seeing someone brandish a sharp object at

me, and I'd immediately leaped out of the way to protect myself. My self-preservation instincts were always on high alert, after all; I couldn't just turn them off.

The prince lopped off a chunk of his hair with the knife. Dazzling silver strands danced in the air.

"Wh-What are you doing?!" I cried.

I snatched the knife away from him without even thinking. Its rustic handle and blade looked completely out of place in his delicate, thin hands. He didn't put up a fight as he surrendered it to me.

"Here. Think of me when you look at it," he said, handing me the lock of silver hair he'd just cut off with a smile.

I was surprised that his hair hadn't dispersed everywhere in a glossy mess, since that knife had hardly been made for haircuts in mind. Maybe it was because he'd cut it off right at the tie that secured it, or maybe it was just because of how lustrous and neat his hair always was. Whatever the reason, he'd managed to secure it into a single, tidy bundle. If I hadn't seen firsthand where it had come from, I might've confused it for silk.

I was floored (and, honestly, kind of terrified) by the extreme gesture.

What the hell was that all about? This is so weird...and so freaking creepy. Who the hell cuts off a chunk of their hair out of nowhere and just gives it to someone? I feel like I'm about to freak out...

While I was losing my mind, I remembered something I'd heard from the other knight cadets instructors. Apparently, when knights set out for a battle they thought they wouldn't return from, they left behind something of themselves—a memento—to demonstrate their resolve. Sometimes, that memento was a lock of their hair.

Okay, so he's giving me this as a memento, I thought, trying to wrap my head around it. This is seriously extra, though.

I remembered thinking that when he'd given me curtains to take home too. That was when I realized he might have a habit of taking things too far. Plus, I didn't appreciate the literary significance of the gesture. *Can you please stop*

trying to foreshadow your death? The game's timeline hasn't even started yet.

"I was growing it out to help a wish come true, but I think this good luck charm you've given me will do the job just fine."

He looked incredibly relieved, for some reason, but I couldn't say I shared the feeling. It was my turn to be gloomy.

I stared at the hair he'd placed on my desk and wondered if I could somehow convince him to take it home with him. My head hurt as I tried to think of how I'd explain it to the head maid.

"Till next time, Lizzie. I'll have some dresses for you when I see you again."

"Please. That won't be necessary."

Edward chuckled. "No need to be shy. I'm sure I'll be bored to tears lying in bed all day for weeks on end. There will be plenty of time for me to make you a dress or two."

"Handmade dresses? Really, please...don't."

He gave me a wide grin. As he left, I could tell that he'd completely ignored my protests.

Breaking Off the Engagement

Several weeks had passed since the crown prince had left for his trip to the west. The official story was that he was studying abroad, but the strangely short time frame raised some questions. Rumors were flying among the aristocracy.

I didn't have any time for that, though. I had to make sure I was going to pass my final exams.

I knew I'd do just fine in dance class—I could dance either the men's or the women's part perfectly if I had to. And I'd been exempted from self-defense class, so that was an automatic pass. My practical skills, like manners and etiquette, wouldn't be an issue either.

All that was left were my academic classes...which were going to be *big* problems.

If I screwed around and failed those exams, I'd have to repeat the classes. That would mean that I wouldn't be in the same year as the game's main character. I couldn't let that happen. It was far too late to switch gears and mold myself into an underclassman character archetype. Besides, the thought of playing into that archetype as someone who was actually *the same age* as her was downright embarrassing. So, you can see why I had to pass these exams and progress normally at all costs.

I'd asked Isaac to help me, so we'd met several times in a study group. I'd even begged my poor, exhausted older brother to go over his old exams with me when he got home, and roped Christopher—who was studying for his entrance exams—into hitting the books with me.

Everyone has their strengths, though, and their *limits*.

My brain felt foggy from all the knowledge I'd been cramming into it. I found myself entertaining the idea that I might be better off just trying to cheat without getting caught, but I knew my older brother would be furious if he found out. More importantly, even through a purely the-ends-justify-the-means

lens, I might ruin it all on the one-in-a-million chance that I got caught. If that happened, I'd get held back anyway.

I thought and thought and thought, racking my brains for a solution, until I decided to just stop thinking altogether. Like I said, everyone has their strengths. Ruminating certainly wasn't one of mine.

Besides, I wouldn't have any clue what was on the final exams until I actually saw them. They might've been the exact same questions from last year, or they might've been pulled from the concepts Isaac had been tutoring me in. Who knows, maybe I'd get points for writing how to make curry? If I got *really* lucky, maybe just getting to the end of the exams would be enough to pass.

If I found myself in hot water, though, it was nice to know that cheating was always an option. And fortunately, I sat next to Isaac, so I wouldn't have to worry about stealing the wrong answers.

Now that I'd settled on a plan of attack, it hardly seemed sensible to burn myself out studying. I figured I'd probably only make things worse. Instead, I decided to pay a visit to the training grounds. It'd been a while since I'd last stopped by.

As I arrived, I noticed that Robert was strangely absent. Some of the cadets had stopped coming to train since they'd enrolled at the academy, but not Robert—he came to the training grounds almost every day and stayed until late. I figured he must be busy studying for exams.

I listened in on the instructors' idle gossip as I started my usual training regimen. Suddenly, I noticed them all turn to me in unison.

"Robert's been acting awfully strange lately, eh?"

"When *isn't* he acting strange?" I replied.

"Careful, Commander..." they warned, laughing, but no one denied it.

One instructor added, "He did actually stop by today, but, uh, how can I put this? His head was completely in the clouds. He was so spaced out that I had to send him home. It just wouldn't have been safe to train like that."

"Way I see it, he's probably lost his fire now that his older brother's away," I

replied.

“Oh, right... I heard the crown prince went out west lookin’ for a bride.”

It felt like everywhere I turned, people were talking about Edward. He really was the man of the hour.

I hadn’t been aware that he wasn’t yet betrothed, though. There were plenty of young noblewomen in the kingdom who would’ve been suitable, but it was probably customary for crown princes to marry princesses from abroad as a way to strengthen international relations.

“I’ve heard rumors that he might marry into foreign royalty and rule in another country, leaving Robert to accede to the throne here.”

“Yeah? Well, I guess that makes sense. Technically, Robert’s a prince too.”

“And I hear he’s engaged to a young noblewoman...*technically*.”

The instructors all turned to look at me.

That “technically” had better be modifying “engaged.” Because if it’s modifying “noblewoman,” then we’re going to have to have some words—with our fists.

Then Gried hesitantly spoke up on behalf of everyone. “Are you two really going to get married?”

“What do you think?” I shot back.

The three instructors fell silent and exchanged glances. What followed was the most bizarre attempt at being supportive I’d ever heard.

“Robert’s a good kid. He’s earnest, even if he is kind of an idiot.”

“Pretty good with a sword too. And not too bad on the eyes, right? Bit of a sucker, though.”

“I mean, I doubt he’d ever cheat on you. He *is* a moron, though.”

Silence descended.

“No comment,” I finally said.

All this talk about our engagement reminded me of the request I’d put in with

Edward to call it off. I wondered if he'd managed to get that ball rolling. Surely he'd talk to the king about it before too long, right? I made a mental note to ask him about it when he got back from his trip.

After I'd finished taking a breather at the training grounds, I headed over to my changing room with thoughts swirling in my head. I recalled all the studying I needed to get back to.

Back to the grind.



Final exam results had been posted in the hallway. Naturally, the first thing I did was check my own grades.

I felt like I'd been on a roll during exams. Question after question had been the same ones I'd reviewed in my study sessions with Isaac, so I'd breezed through them. Well, at the very least, I was pretty confident that I wasn't going to get held back.

I looked for my name. Miraculously, it was in the top half of the ranking list. I'd pretty much aced my practical classes, so I figured I'd still manage to scrape by even if I did poorly on the academic exams. I hadn't expected to do *this* well, though.

All in all, it was a very pleasant surprise. If I was hoping to guide the game's naive main character through the ins and outs of noble society, then it would certainly help my case to have some knowledge under my belt.

I certainly wasn't cut out to usurp Isaac's position as the egghead intellectual, though—that was *his* crown to wear. I just wanted to add a little flavor to my characterization. I might have crafted myself into a playboy, but I was hoping that it might surprise and delight the main character to learn that I actually had a few brain cells up there.

All in all, I'd made exactly the grades I'd hoped for. Plus, they were decent enough to save me from getting an earful from my father.

I whipped around, satisfied, and noticed that Isaac had been standing right next to me the whole time. *Isaac, buddy, come on. You're always at the top of the class. Did you really have to fight the crowd to confirm that?*

“I don’t believe it...”

Or so I thought...but the whispers in the hall and the look on Isaac’s face were all it took for me to realize how mistaken I’d been.

“Isaac?” I called out to him without thinking.

“I...lost?” he whispered.

I glanced up at the top-ranking students’ names for the first time. I hadn’t bothered to check them before, but—sure enough—Isaac’s name was in second place.

Isaac? In second place? I thought, incredulous. *Who’s first, then?*

I scanned a bit further up.

“Robert Diagrantz...?”

For a moment, I couldn’t even comprehend what I was seeing.

“Robert...” Is that a proper noun? Huh. I feel like that’s a name, but...

That’s when I started screaming internally. I was pretty pleased with myself that it managed to *stay* internal—a miracle that I attributed to my many years of ladies’ etiquette training. I silently thanked my father for forcing me to take all those lessons.

The placid, Buddha-like smile that I’d plastered on my face was twitching slightly, but I’d made it through the shock without breaking my carefree, playboy-knight facade...or so I hoped.

I studied the list five more times, but nothing changed. The student who’d wrapped up the first year at the academy with the top grades was none other than my fiancé, the Pea-Brained Prince.



After the results were posted, Isaac fell into a deep depression—the kind I would have never imagined a cool, bespectacled character to be capable of.

Just as his glasses would suggest, Isaac slotted neatly into the brainiac character archetype. He always made the best grades in the class, and he was destined to graduate as a valedictorian. After that, he’d govern the country as

prime minister.

But even in the game, you can get a catastrophic event in which Isaac *doesn't* make the best grade on an exam—that is, if the main character overtakes him.

You can't get the event unless you've basically maxed out your Academics stat, so it's pretty much impossible to see it on your first playthrough. It's one of those exciting hidden events that makes you want to replay the game to see. But even on subsequent playthroughs, it's a real chore to get it. You have to use expensive items, spend all your free time studying, and basically ignore all the love interests. And that's not all—you have to double your stat gains by getting a "critical success," which only occurs by chance.

You get the picture, right? So I'm sure you can imagine what an incredible anomaly it was for Robert to achieve a feat that only the main character should be capable of.

How in the world did he manage that? Robert typically got similar grades to mine, if not worse.

Whatever happened to leaning into the prince archetype? He'd probably given up on that. But what about leaning into his new macho meathead trope? Wasn't it a little reckless to try to reclass *again* this late in the game?

Suddenly, I remembered the instructors had mentioned the other day that he'd been acting strange and spacing out.

By the way—I have no clue if there was any truth to this, but in my past life, I had learned that there was a kung fu style that was apparently best practiced while drunk. They said it enhanced your moves...or something.

I might be onto something here. Maybe spacing out brings out his true capabilities?

The only Roberts I knew were the hopelessly energetic, meathead Robert from the training grounds and the rude, arrogant Robert from the game. It was hard to imagine a ditzy genius Robert, but that version of him was probably the best hope the kingdom had.

After all, at the end of the day, he *was* the second prince. Chances were slim that he'd go his whole life without having *some* hand in governing the kingdom.

As far as the aristocracy was concerned, it was certainly preferable to work under someone reasonably competent. Sure, he might've been spacey and glum lately (not to mention irritable), but it was better than being a complete dunce.

Wait, hang on...

Edward and Robert were only a year apart in age, and Robert's mother came from a higher social standing. That little fact had never seemed relevant before, since it was plain as day that Robert wasn't cut out to be king, but what if people decided he *was*? What if some of the nobles decided to support him and elevate him to the throne? I could already see where that would lead: another war of succession.

A shiver ran down my spine. It was not a pleasant possibility to consider.



First things first, I needed to deal with Isaac.

I found him in the classroom, his downcast face as grim as that of a man on his way to the gallows. It was kind of a good look on him, actually. That might've just been thanks to his naturally handsome features, though.

I could sympathize with his plight. I mean, it must've been mortifying to lose to the Pea-Brained Prince, of all people. If it'd been me, I probably would've lost my mind.

I couldn't let him stay in this funk, though. If I didn't want a civil war to break out over the royal succession, then I needed to make sure Robert was put back in his place as the good-for-nothing second prince. And to do that, I needed Isaac to get the top grades in the next exams.

Besides, if Isaac didn't snap out of it, then the main character might end up hitting the books a little *too* hard and swoop in on that number one position *herself*.

If that happened, it would immediately trigger one of Isaac's events. It's a pretty tough event to get, but it's a big one, and his affection points would absolutely skyrocket from it. Even if I could see the event coming a mile away, there wasn't a way I could step in and nab it for myself.

If the main character ended up going down Isaac's route, then my chances with her would be zilch. Years of careful planning would go up in smoke. So, for both the kingdom's sake and my own, I needed to restore the natural order of things and get the good old brainiac Isaac back.

I cornered Isaac on his way home after class and dragged him behind the school—the place we often practiced our dancing. We sat down next to each other on the ground, our backs against the wall.

"Isaac, buddy, come on. Turn that frown upside down already, will you?" I said, trying to act cool and casual.

His glum expression didn't change a bit. He looked down and shook his head.

"I lost...and to Prince Robert, of all people." His voice was an octave lower than usual and trembled slightly.

Ouch. "Of all people." That's rough, Robert.

I had no idea what the other students usually thought of him, but I'd seen the way everyone—including Isaac—had looked at him when I'd turned down his invitation to the dance. It wasn't hard to imagine how hopeless they thought he was.

"Hey, have you never lost before?"

For a moment, he was silent. "No..."

"You have, right? Your brothers beat you in stuff all the time—they always have. I know it sucks, but you keep at it. And thanks to your persistence, you've been valedictorian before, haven't you?"

I racked my brains, searching every corner for the right words. I was a member of the Honorable Duke's family, after all, so surely I had it in me to find them. I just didn't bother normally because it was too much of an effort. *What would my older brother say?* I wondered. When I thought about it that way, I was at least able to conjure *some* words that a friend might've appreciated hearing.

"Then why don't you stake your claim on the title again? Nothing's changed. You just have to keep at it like you always have."

“Burton...” Isaac looked up at me, and his burgundy eyes shot wide open. I could see them quivering.

“That’s the Isaac I know—he’s tough as nails. No matter how much he’s mocked, kicked, or looked down on, he always gets up again and jumps back into the fight.”

“You...” Isaac began, looking me straight in the eyes. His hoarse voice came out trembling and strained, like he had to force it out. It was so quiet that, if I hadn’t been listening for it, I might’ve missed it. “You *remember*, don’t you? The day we first met...”

I tilted my head reflexively. “Of course I do. You really think I’d forget that?” *You sure love to ask me weird questions with that surprised look on your face, huh?*

“But you’re a duke’s daughter. I wouldn’t have even been on your radar then. I don’t have any of my father’s or brothers’ talent. I’m just—”

“Doesn’t matter,” I said, ruffling his hair.

“Hmgh!”

He let out a strange, pitiful noise and brushed my hand away. He glared up at me, looking like he was ready to gripe about something.

Seeing him back to his usual self, I broke into a smile. “Thanks to that little encounter, I got to see what you’re *really* like.”

“Burton...”

“In fact, I think that’s probably why we’re friends now.”

He peered at my face, at a loss for words.

I put my finger to his nose. “I don’t want to hear any more of this ‘I don’t have any talent’ tripe. You’ve got a *lot* going for you.”

“I do? Like...what?”

“Your ability to work your butt off, for one.”

“Please. Anyone can work hard.”

“No, they can’t. If everyone could work as hard as you can, then we’d have

nothing but geniuses,” I joked with a laugh. Isaac furrowed his brow even more, but I just shrugged my shoulders and averted his gaze. “Most people just give up when they’re bad at something, you know. Once they hit a wall, they can’t bring themselves to keep pushing.”

In fact, only a small fraction of people would even consider hard work to be their primary means to an end. Most would try to find ways to achieve their goals that required minimal effort. And if there was a way to do that without expending *any* effort, then surely anyone would pick that option—especially if they didn’t have to worry about dying a disgraced old maid.

“But that’s not you, is it? You don’t give up when you run into a wall; you just keep pushing and break it down. That’s how you’ve made it this far—by working your butt off. After all the dancing and swordsmanship practice we’ve done together, I would know. You were born with a killer work ethic, and you’ve been honing that talent every day.”

Isaac looked down at his hands. A writing callus had formed on the middle finger of his dominant hand, and blisters had broken open on his rough skin—probably from swordsmanship training.

“If I know Isaac Guildford, he’s not the kind of man to back down after one or two little setbacks,” I added.

“I...”

“My friend’s made of better stuff than *that*.”

He met my gaze.

Why does this feel like we’re in some kind of coming-of-age movie about the power of friendship? I wondered, suddenly feeling a bit awkward. I looked away and let out a chuckle. “You know, I don’t think I was built for these deep discussions. I’m worn out.”

I actually was pretty tired. (Turns out, it’s tough work to cheer someone up.) *Who knew it took that much brain power?* I wondered, feeling a renewed respect for my older brother. *Probably a hell of a lot easier to just threaten someone.*

I stood up and offered Isaac my hand. “Feeling a bit better?”

He nodded and took it. “Yeah.”



I stopped by the training grounds on my way home. Just as I arrived, I spotted Robert getting kicked out.

Seeing his face, I suddenly understood exactly what the instructors had meant the other day. His chartreuse eyes were lacking their usual verve; they gazed off, unfocused, somewhere into the distance.

It wasn't so much that he looked downcast. Rather, he seemed expressionless and haggard. But the strangest thing of all was his reaction—or lack thereof—when I entered his line of sight. His eyes didn't light up with their usual reverence; in fact, he didn't even acknowledge me.

I could see why the instructors had sent him away. He was in no state to swing around a sword.

“Robert,” I called out.

He turned his gaze slightly downwards to look at me, but didn't respond.

You little brat.

Even with my ten-centimeter-tall elevator shoes, I was still shorter than he was (but only by a few centimeters).

Unlike me, he had no reason to try to preserve his toned-yet-lean frame. Instead, he'd been bulking up this past year. When I saw him standing in front of me like this, I actually felt a bit intimidated.

But despite his new muscles, he didn't look like a hardcore bodybuilder. If anything, he appeared more like a good-natured deliveryman or an athlete than the Hulk. I figured his elegant facial features must've been to thank. He was an otome game love interest, after all.

Nothing about the look on his face was “good-natured,” though.

As much as it pained me to admit it, he'd probably steal more hearts as he was than he would with his usual, cheerful expression. (No matter what world you live in, everyone *loves* a heartthrob with a dark side.)

I threw a training sword at him.

Just for reference, we taught all our cadets to handle any kind of sword, whether it was a training sword or a wooden one, with all the care of a real one. Anyone who threw a sword like I just had, even if it was still sheathed, would earn enough muscle-building reps to leave them a sobbing mess. So don't try this at home, kids.

I watched Robert catch the sword and readied my own.

"Let's duel."

For a moment, Robert was silent. "Why?"

"Do knights need a reason to clash their swords?" I replied, scoffing.

I could've sworn I saw a faint spark in his eyes. "No...they don't. You taught me that."

With the toss of a coin to signal the beginning of our duel, we turned to face off against each other.

Hmmm. Not bad, I thought, nodding to myself as I dodged several of his strikes. He was handling the sword comfortably, and his movements were cleaner than normal too. There wasn't any of the usual excess force he tended to wield; no energy went to waste. He was even reacting to my strikes in a reasonable way.

Then it all clicked in place. *This must be how he approached the final exams too.*

But something wasn't quite right. There was no *force* in his movements. Every strike was far too light.

I could honestly say that he was a lot stronger before, back when he'd been fighting recklessly and brandishing his sword with every ounce of brute force he could muster. The way he was fighting now, his blade wasn't going to cut through *anything*.



I parried his strike and immediately moved in to close the distance. With my sword held in an underhand grip, I rammed the hilt into his solar plexus.

“Hhk!”

He stopped moving. I kicked his sword out of the way and took a step back as he lost his balance, falling to his knees. Then I thrust the tip of my sword towards his throat.

After only a second, Robert stood back up. I could see a fighting spirit welling up in his eyes. “One more time...please.”

I smirked and let out a bold laugh, beckoning him with a bring-it-on gesture. “Come at me, Robert. I’ll keep fighting you until you can’t stand up again.”

“Yes, sir!”



“You’ve improved, Robert.”

I reached out my hand to help him off the ground. He gave me a pained smile and accepted, hopping to his feet with a bit of a totter.

I hadn’t expected him to take my offer seriously, but we’d actually kept going until he’d collapsed. It ended up being pretty good exercise.

With each blow we’d traded, I’d watched with fascination as he’d gradually returned to his old self. His vivid green eyes had lit up, and he’d gotten flushed in the cheeks, and he’d returned to his original fighting technique. Then, before long, we’d both broken into laughter. By the end, my arm tingled with excitement rather than fatigue as it fielded the weight of his blows.

If we were comparing our swordsmanship by raw strength alone, I knew it probably wouldn’t be long before Robert surpassed me. But that day was still a ways away from now, and I wasn’t about to let him best me—not until I’d stolen the main character’s heart, at least.

“I’m still no match for *you*, though, Commander,” Robert muttered quietly as he looked at me. He seemed to have returned to his old self.

“Yeah, probably not. You’re not the only one who’s going to keep improving.”

“Commander,” he began, in a strangely serious tone. “My brother told me about his illness. He also told me...that you already knew about it.”

Honestly, I was shocked to hear him say that. Edward was always going on about “my brother” this and “my brother” that, but Robert barely ever spoke about *him*. They didn’t really get along in the game, so I’d figured they must not talk much.

“I’ve always been right there beside him, but I never realized what he was going through. He asked me...to be ready in case anything happens.” Robert clenched his fist tight. “I was always watching him, but I never really *saw* him.”

“Robert...”

I picked up the bag I’d thrown off to the side and pulled out something Edward had left in my care.

“Here. This is for you—from your brother.”

Robert’s eyes flew wide open. He clearly knew what it was.

“I think this would be safer in your hands,” I said.

“Huh? Wait, but...”

“You said he asked you to help if anything happened, right? Then you’d better hang onto this, just in case.”

“I...guess you’re right,” Robert conceded.

He hesitantly accepted the item, and I did a little internal fist pump. That’d been a real pain to hold on to, but I’d finally gotten rid of it. *I think today might just be my lucky day.*

If anyone at home had come across it, I would’ve had a lot of explaining to do. I’d ended up wrapping it up in a handkerchief and shoving it in my bag. Passing it on to Robert felt like a real weight lifted off my shoulders.

Although, if anything, I might be about to feel an even bigger weight on my shoulders: the weight of Edward’s vengeful spirit.

“Commander,” Robert called my name again.

And to think that earlier today you were ignoring me when I called your name.

Guess that's already ancient history for you, huh?

To be fair, it was classic Robert behavior to live purely in the moment.

"What can I do? Is there anything I *can* do for him?" he asked.

"If you're asking me that, then I think you already know," I replied sagely.

Robert's eyes flickered.

Here's a quick tip: that line works really well whenever you're asked something that makes you want to snap back, "How the hell should I know?" It tricks the other party into thinking you're just withholding the answers...even if you don't actually have any. The catch is that you'll lose people's confidence if you overdo it, but there was no risk of that whatsoever with Robert.

He looked like he was still completely lost.

I took in a big breath and yelled, "How long are you just going to stand there gawking, maggot?!"

His spine straightened immediately.

"If you've got the time for that, then spend it on your *training*! Throw those useless worries away!"

"Sir, yes, sir!"

"Did your brother tell you to stand around fussing over him?!"

"Sir, no, sir!"

"Damn right he didn't! He asked for your help, didn't he, maggot?!"

Robert's eyes widened, then he grimaced. "Sir, yes, sir!"

"Are you going to make that pathetic face when you see him again?!"

"Sir, no, sir!"

"Then hurry up and get moving! If there's one thing you're good at, it's bumbling around with everything you've got!"

"Sir, yes, sir!"

The instructors and cadets had gathered around, drawn in by Robert's yelling. Gried glanced over at me, then gave a little nod.

“What the hell are you lookin’ at? Huh?!” he yelled, causing the riffraff to scatter.

I couldn’t blame them all for coming to see what the fuss was all about though. Robert had been yelling *pretty loudly*, after all.

Robert looked refreshed and reinvigorated. I felt the intensity of his sparkling gaze return. Earlier today, I’d felt like he’d been looking down at me. It didn’t feel like that now though. If anything, it actually felt like he was looking *up* at me.

“Commander, if the day ever comes when I beat you...will you hear out a request?”

Before I’d even realized it, Robert’s smiling face had turned serious. Solemnity *really* didn’t suit him.

I couldn’t stand it anymore—his serious expression was just too much. I let a little laugh slip out. “Sure, as long as you don’t ask me to participate in any coup d’états.”

“Coo de... What is *that*?!”

I laughed.

If the day he beat me ever did come, I honestly would hear him out. That being said, hearing out a request and *fulfilling* it were two very different things.

Robert followed my lead, breaking out into a laugh of his own. After we had a good chuckle together, Robert cut in again.

“Commander—no, *Elizabeth Burton*,” Robert said, calling me by my real name for the first time since the dance. He was still smiling. “I hereby formally accept your request to break off our engagement.”



What the hell is he saying? I wondered, but it was clear he was serious.

I had no idea what was going on, but I made all the appropriate responses and pretended I did. Robert had gone back to being his usual cheerful, pea-brained prince self.

When I returned home, I informed my parents that I'd broken off the engagement—or, well, that Robert had broken it off...? They both nodded wordlessly.

Honestly, the whole thing was kind of anticlimactic. I'd been fully expecting that they would burst into tears. Apparently, though, they must've already had some idea that this was going to happen.

It made sense that they would. In the end, the engagement had never really been between Robert and me *specifically*—it had been between our families. As such, the circumstances were never going to change without my parents' knowledge.

"I know this must be painful, but I believe it's for the best," my father said solemnly, placing a hand on my shoulder.

What a coincidence, I thought. I felt it was for the best too. In fact, there was nothing painful about it. I had no idea how I was supposed to receive this condolence, though.

"I've been in talks with His Majesty for a while now. I advised him that you are unsuited for the role of princess consort."

Well, that was the first I'd heard about *that*.

Apparently, both my father and I had both been individually working towards this result.

"We wanted to respect Prince Robert's wishes, so the next step was to speak to him directly about our concerns, but it looks like there's no need for that now. It's a relief to hear he's on the same page."

"Uh, may I ask *why* you were having these conversations with the king?"

"As a loyal subject of the king, it is my duty to intervene when I feel he may be making a mistake—no matter what the cost."

"Right..."

"Your marriage to Prince Robert would certainly have been a blessing for our family...but not for the future of the kingdom. If Prince Edward were to accede to the throne, Prince Robert would be next in the line of succession until Prince

Edward had children. In a worst-case scenario, you might have become the queen. I couldn't in good conscience support a union that could lead to such a future for the kingdom."

Okay, fair enough.

Everything he said made perfect sense, but having it spelled out left me feeling a little weird. I didn't appreciate being a litmus test for his loyalty to the king.

My father wore a grave expression. I could tell that this had been an enormously difficult decision for him, and I wished I could put his mind at ease. If only he knew that I was actually overjoyed by this turn of events.

"I think you'd be happier if you found someone who could accept you just as you are," he said.

I found myself tilting my head at his turn of phrase.

Everything about me was a product of my efforts to woo the game's main character. Once I'd managed that, I had no idea if I'd even be the same person anymore. That being said, I wasn't sure I'd just instantly turn into a dress-wearing noblewoman with the trademark "oho ho ho!" laugh either.

Me "just as I was" right now wasn't necessarily the same as my *authentic self*. My father's words had missed the mark, but I knew what he'd meant. I appreciated that he was thinking of me, and I *really* appreciated that he'd lovingly raised me for all these years without giving up on me. They didn't call him the Honorable Duke for nothing.

"I hope you can find someone who will rein you in one day," my mother whispered with deep concern. I pretended not to hear her.

Thus, the engagement was broken off. It had been years in the making, and now I could finally cross it off the list. The ease with which I'd managed to achieve it was, frankly, nothing less than astounding.



Okay, so what now? I wondered. I felt like I was at a complete loss.

I was glad that the engagement had been broken off. What's more, the whole

matter had been resolved as peacefully as I'd planned—no, *more* peacefully, even. Everything had gone so well that, for a moment, I wondered if I even *needed* to pursue the main character anymore.

But I knew it wasn't really that simple. I had a reputation as the prince's former fiancée now, and I knew that alone could prove to be a massive burden.

There was no guarantee that I could just pivot to being a normal noblewoman. If anything, the laws of otome games dictated that I'd probably wind up a victim to the same fate that the original Elizabeth Burton suffered. With that in mind, I had no choice but to see my plan through to the end. I still needed to secure my happy ending through the game's main character.

I'd managed to resolve that part of the equation fairly quickly, but the problem of the other love interests still weighed heavily on me.

Just as you'd expect of otome game love interests, they were all ridiculously handsome. *That* certainly hadn't changed from the game. Some of their characterizations were a little different, but for the most part, the only major difference was their hair.

Why did they all have to cut their hair?

It was like they were all trying to match or something. Honestly, it *did* look good. Their styles were all nice and clean-cut.

There was just one problem, and it was a big one: *I* was supposed to be the only short-haired character. The whole reason I'd cropped my hair so short in the first place had been to distinguish myself from the other love interests. Little had I known what a pointless endeavor that would turn out to be. They were all clamoring to copy me—especially Robert.

That's what I get for putting the cart before the horse, I guess.

The main character would be making her appearance in a mere two months. I didn't have much time, but I decided I'd grow my hair out.



Before the opening ceremony for the next school year, there was a graduation ceremony. Since the fan club president and her four close

compatriots were graduating, I figured I should attend.

The graduating girls had requested one last memory of me, so I obliged by giving out hugs and picking them up princess-style.

There. A little fanservice to remember me by.

One girl even asked for one of my uniform buttons. I didn't really think anything of it, so I ripped one off and gave it to her. It was only then that I realized that I still needed to wear the uniform next year, but it was too late. I felt a bit foolish, and I had a feeling the head maid was going to be none too pleased about it either.

The fan club (and other girls) swarmed around to give me letters. The fan club president's letter was especially bulky. Just from the heft of it alone, you'd have thought she'd given me a life's worth of memoirs.

Boy, it's hard being popular.

Oh, who was I kidding? Being this loved was hardly a burden. No sweat off my back, really. Who was the idiot that said, "Even popular people have their problems"? Being surrounded by adoring masses was a blast, pure and simple. If anything, I wanted even *more* of their attention.

I'd been so wrapped up in all the love interests' problems lately that I'd forgotten how amazing it felt to be surrounded by squealing girls. I hoped that I could go into my second year at the academy—and onto the battlefield of love—with their support and adoration.

Even the graduating cadets wanted to say goodbye to me. I humored their requests for handshakes, but some of them wanted to duel. *That* wasn't happening.

Everyone was in high spirits. Delicate spring flowers, which resembled cherry blossoms, fell gently from the trees. If I were to portray the scene as poetically as possible, it was almost as if everyone was dancing along with the petals.



It was spring, and the main character's grand entrance was swiftly approaching.

Epilogue

In the school courtyard...

I was absentmindedly staring up at the sky when a kitten padded up to me. It was a short-haired gray cat with silky smooth fur. Judging by its appearance, it must've been based off of some hoity-toity breed like a Russian Blue.

Of course, this *was* the kingdom's finest academy, fit for only the highest-ranking and most studious young nobles. It only stood to reason that even its stray cats would have a pedigree.

I scooped up the kitten, and remarkably, it didn't even try to run away. It just settled into my arms meekly.

Hold on...

Something was off. Animals hated me with such a fiery passion, you'd have thought I'd murdered their parents. And yet, this one was just letting me pick it up in my arms. It was wholly unprecedented.

That's when it hit me: this was a dream. And since I'd realized that, that made it a *lucid dream*.

Sensing something, I looked up suddenly. I made eye contact with a girl who was standing exactly where the kitten had come running up to me from. She must've followed it here.

A strangely convenient breeze blew through, gently fluttering the girl's hair and skirt.



Another realization struck me: this girl was the main character of *Royal LOVERS*. There was no other explanation for why such a conveniently timed, gentle breeze would suddenly appear.

I felt like I was in a dream, which, well...I was. I wasn't fully aware of my own feelings, but it dawned on me that I must've been growing increasingly anxious about the game's fateful, inevitable, and rapidly approaching timeline.

I turned my body to face the girl. She was about a head shorter than I was. She had a classic otome heroine figure—thin and dainty to the point that it elicited concerned questions about whether she was getting enough to eat.

This was the girl I needed to pursue. She was the one I needed to woo so that she'd fall head over heels in love with me.

The sound of a dull gong echoed through my head, and I knew the battle was about to begin.

Side Stories: Victims of the Elizabeth Burton Support Group

I Swear I'll Make You Mine —Edward—

When was it that I'd first heard word from my personal guard about my brother's strange behavior?

It was certainly clear, even from a distance, that he was undergoing a radical transformation. His hairstyle and his countenance had changed dramatically. While he'd once cast his eyes downwards, he now looked proudly up. He stood up straight and carried himself with confidence.

According to my intel, this was all thanks to an instructor he'd met at the training grounds—a person whose feet he practically worshipped.

This lined up—chronologically, at least—with my own observations. The changes seemed to have begun when he'd started training at the western training grounds. There was just one detail of this story that I found exceedingly difficult to believe: that the instructor in question was his fiancée, Elizabeth Burton. Even in isolation, it was unbelievable that the daughter of a duke would ever be a knight cadets' instructor in the first place.

And yet, I could think of no plausible reason any knight in the Royal Guard would dare give spurious intel to the crown prince.

I heard far more than I cared to from Robert's personal guard about how infatuated he was with her.

How utterly absurd.

So, his love for his fiancée had transformed him into a completely different person, had it? It was all too simple.

I'd been under the impression that he despised me. He'd spent his whole life anguishing over his obsessive need to compete with me, after all. But he must

not have been very anguished about it all, if it had been simple enough to have been fixed by a love affair.

Simpletons, all of them. Why must my life be so dull?



I invited the instructor in question up to my office to see what all the fuss was about, only to meet a disappointingly normal, wholly unremarkable man.

Well, I suppose the fact that the man was actually a *woman* made her *somewhat* remarkable, but I digress.

Certainly, her choice of attire was rather odd, but there was no shortage of eccentrics among the nobility. There were plenty of noblemen who exclusively wore high heels, and plenty of noblewomen who took countless lovers. I was hardly naive enough to be intrigued, much less scandalized, by a little quirk or two.

After giving me a stock aristocratic greeting, the girl lowered her head in a bow. Throughout the course of our meeting, she made countless attempts at flattery.

She's an utter bore, just like all the others, I thought. Unlike my brother, I wasn't enough of a simpleton to find her enthralling.

I might have been impressed if she'd rejected my invitation, but as it was, the meeting was an absolute letdown.

"I just wanted a chat, that's all. You may go now," I said, motioning towards the door.

She left with a smile. She really was no different to the other nobles. I had no desire to meet her again.

As I looked out the window, I let out a little sigh.



I'd had no intention of meeting with my brother's fiancée again, but I found myself calling her up once more for a visit.

I still had a dreadful headache owing to the chat I'd had with my brother the

other day. To my surprise, he'd shown no hesitance whatsoever in striking up a conversation with me. What's more, he'd been unusually animated.

That wasn't the issue, however.

Until just recently, my brother had barely spoken a word to me. You could hardly blame me, then, for having had the wrong idea about him. And oh, how wrong I'd been. I hadn't had a clue what a fool he *really* was.

"That's when it dawned on me that he must have absolutely no idea who you are, though I find it hard to imagine how your identity could have eluded him. Tell me, does he not know that you're Elizabeth Burton?"

"No. I don't think he does," she replied plainly.

Unbelievable. Her confirmation left me at a complete loss.

"Does it not bother you that *your own fiancé* has no idea who you are?" I asked.

"To be fair, I didn't recognize him either at first. I do *now*, of course."

I could feel my frown deepening at this strangely dispassionate reply. It certainly stood to reason that she wouldn't just openly voice her complaints about the second prince, but perhaps it was more than that—maybe they were simply cut from the same cloth.

"Your own behavior doesn't help matters, you know. If you're not careful, you might inspire rumors of discord..."

"Rumors of discord?" she repeated.

"After all, if you *were* on good terms, then surely you'd be devoting yourself to your training as future queen?"

She tilted her head and stroked her chin. After a few moments of silence, she replied, "I'm not sure what you mean. I have no designs on becoming queen."

Does she really not know what I mean, or is she just feigning ignorance? I wondered.

"No, never mind... Forget I said anything," I said.

"All right. If that's what Your Highness wishes, then consider it forgotten," she

replied with a smile. It was a typical fake, aristocratic smile. “I’m sure you’re very busy, so I wouldn’t dare take up any more of your time. I’ll take my leave.”

She then wasted no time bowing to me and leaving my office. For a moment, I was simply stunned. Then I realized what had just transpired: she was getting her revenge for the curt dismissal I’d given her when we last met.

So, she has a vengeful streak.

Or maybe she’d surmised that I was about to tell her something confidential? *No, she couldn’t have. I’m giving her far too much credit.*

I could feel an urge for mischief rear its head inside of me. Elizabeth Burton was about to find out that it didn’t pay to play games with my head.



When I called her up for another visit, she came with a smile—at least, on the *outside*. A hint of irritation seemed to be escaping its careful containment.

Serves you right, I thought.

“What do you think of Robert?” I asked her.

“In what sense do you mean?” she asked in return.

I narrowed my eyes, looking at her searchingly. “Do you think he’d make a good king?”

“I don’t think it’s my place to comment on that. I wouldn’t want to be disrespectful,” she answered. A classic noble’s response.

“Some might call that *deflection* disrespectful, don’t you think?”

She met this with silence, then broke it to offer empty flattery. “Prince Robert is in no position to accede to the throne. *You’re* the crown prince, Your Highness, not him.”

She’s just like all the rest, I thought, disgusted with her sycophancy. Her fake smile alone was enough to make me ill. *No matter what they think, everyone just hides behind flattery and smiles.*

It felt impossible to know what anyone *really* thought.

“No, I’ll never be king. I can’t be,” I said, returning her gaze. I again looked

into her eyes searchingly, as if trying to see through the facade and peer into her mind. “I’m sick. I don’t have much longer. The doctors say I have only two or three years left.”

She didn’t seem at all surprised by this.

I knew it. Of course she’d already known. Everyone must have.

She listened to my explanation with an expression that made it difficult to tell whether or not she was actually listening. The appropriate response for a noble was to at least *feign* concern, but she didn’t seem to have any desire to do so.

All she said in response was, “You might have lost at the Exhibition Match, but you fought with real finesse. I certainly wouldn’t have guessed that you were being ravaged by some illness.”

“Think what you will. I’m sick, and whether you believe me or not doesn’t change the facts.”

“Hmmm. Well, I suppose you’re right.”

She nodded, stroking her chin affectedly. Then, she blinked her eyes open wide and looked straight at me with a smile.

“Have you ever sneaked out into the town before, Your Highness?”

“No,” I replied after a long pause.

“Why don’t I take you with me, then?”

“I beg your pardon?!” I yelped. Whatever I’d been expecting her to say, it had certainly not been *that*.

It had been a long time since I’d forgotten to keep up appearances like that.

As she explained her plan in detail, she thrust a cadet’s uniform at me. Then she took off without a second’s delay.



“How did you get up here?” I asked, taking several steps back.

“Do you really have to ask?”

The next day, Elizabeth Burton climbed up the wall and through my office

window like it was nothing.

How in the world did she manage that? I wondered. This was a *castle*, for God's sake! It certainly wasn't lacking security. I couldn't even begin to imagine how an outsider like her could have slipped past them and sneaked into my office.

"I scaled the wall, of course," she said.

"You *what*?!"

"Come on, Your Highness. Any knight worth her salt can scale walls these days," she replied, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. She met my shocked face with a shrug of her shoulders.

They can? I wondered. *Am I the only one who doesn't know that? No, that can't be...*

"Your head would be on the chopping block in an instant if I were to call over the guard standing just outside the door, you know."

"Sure, but judging by the fact that you've put on the uniform I gave you, I'm guessing you're not going to do that."

She had a point. I found myself at a complete loss for words.

Just as she'd said, I'd followed her directions and put on the garments she'd given me. I couldn't deny that I was ever so slightly intrigued by the idea of sneaking out. Thanks to my illness, I seldom left the castle walls.

That being said, it concerned me to imagine what schemes she might have been hatching.

"Well? Shall we go?"

"How are we going to get down, exactly? Do you plan to make a rope out of curtains and sheets for us to descend down?" I asked, testing the waters.

"Your Highness, *please*. We're on the third floor," she said with a big shrug.

Privately, I was relieved by her response. No matter how reckless she was, surely she wasn't foolish enough to endanger a crown prince.

Then, she continued, "That's only three stories from the ground. We can just

jump down.”

I could feel my plastered-on smile suddenly stiffen.

Jump down? She must have been out of her mind.

“That’s preposterous! We’re on the *third floor!*”

“Pardon me,” was all she said in reply. Before I even knew what was happening, she had her arm under my knees and had scooped me up gently into her arms.

As you might expect, our bodies were touching. When I lifted my gaze, her face was only centimeters from mine.

“Wh-What in God’s name are you doing?!”

“Careful. Don’t wanna bite your tongue, do you?”

Her expression was completely calm and composed. After silencing my protests, she made good on her word and leaped out of the window.

Instinctively, I squeezed my eyes shut, but the impact I was dreading never came. I hesitantly opened my eyes to see that she’d made a completely silent landing with me in her arms. And only seconds after landing, she was already breaking into a run.

I could hear my heart pounding in my chest. Without thinking, I peered up at her profile. Her nose was smooth and straight, and her eyes held a calm confidence. Her thin lips were shut into a tight, long line. Looking up at her face, a strange discomfort stirred inside of me. My heart began to race, and I could feel my cheeks growing red.

No...this is just the suspension bridge effect, that’s all.

Yes, there was no doubt about it: I was simply confusing the heart-pounding terror of almost losing my life with the heart-pounding excitement of romance. That was the only reason that looking at her profile made my heart throb.

She looked down at me, and our eyes met. Suddenly, she gave me a broad, daring smile. “Ready to go home, Your Highness?”

My heart skipped a beat. “D-Don’t be ridiculous!”



After sitting me atop a black mare, Elizabeth took a seat behind me and slid her arms around my sides to grab the reins.

She was close—unusually so.

Too close.

I couldn't imagine a man whose heart *wouldn't* be pounding in a situation like this. No matter how you looked at it, she'd clearly taken up the man's position, and I the woman's.

"Let's not get hung up on the details, all right? Just sit back and let me show you a good time," she reassured me.

I protested bitterly, but she paid this no mind. All she gave me in response was a wink. It was a pompous, snide gesture...and yet, I found myself blushing.

Everywhere we went, Elizabeth was greeted by the admiring cries of the local women. She smiled amicably back at them—not a fake, aristocratic smile, but a genuinely joyful one. But there was also something...*odd* about the whole spectacle.

Is it just me, or is she being a little too friendly?

"Aren't you supposed to be a knight?" I asked, staring up at her. My voice came out lower than I'd expected. It almost sounded like I was angry.

She glanced back at me, giving me a smile as she answered mysteriously, "Well, sort of. I'm at the bottom of the ladder among the knight cadets' instructors."

"Hmph. I've never known knights to be such *playboys*."

Her eyes flew open. Seeing this new side of her made my heart pound yet again.

What in the world is my deal today? I've been acting so strangely.

I shook my head lightly and looked back up at Elizabeth. She seemed to be smiling to herself about something.

"What're you smirking about?" I asked her.

“Oh, nothing,” she said, then forced her smile back into a serious expression.



I realized, throughout the course of our outing, that Elizabeth was given a hearty greeting by all of the townsfolk, not just the women.

I looked down, eyeing the scone I’d just been given.

I’d tried to put it out of my mind, but the memory of the exchange stuck with me. Elizabeth had nearly squished me in the process of taking the scones from the baker, which meant we’d made full-on bodily contact. Even through her thick knight’s uniform, I’d been able to feel the contours of her body and the warmth that emanated from her. It had been enough to make my heart pound mightily.

Honestly, what’s with me? I eyed my scone as I ruminated.

Suddenly, she leaned over and took a bite right out of my pastry as I held it in my hand.

I looked up at her, appalled, just as she was licking a bit of jam off of the corner of her mouth. It was such a savage gesture, I found myself letting out a loud *gulp*.

Then she declared, without a care in the world for my feelings, “Thanks for the bite.”

Seeing her smile as she said that, my heart fluttered.

Wait...“fluttered”?

I shook my head vigorously, hoping to shake off the thought I’d just had in the process.

I hastily took a bite of my scone to distract myself, but in my panicked state, I ended up choking on it. Thanks to some help from the townspeople, I got something to drink and a place to rest on a nearby bench.

Everywhere we went, the townspeople called out amiably to Elizabeth as soon as they saw her. Seeing this, it dawned on me why she’d wanted to take me into town with her.

“So, *this* is what you wanted me to see,” I said.

She nodded sagely, as if to say, “You finally get it, huh?”

“I can see how much the townspeople adore you,” I said. “That’s why they’re so kind and doting.”

“That’s right.”

“And that’s why they extend the same warmth to me—because I’m with you.”

I cast my gaze downwards, looking at the scone and the cup of tea in my hands—signs of the townspeople’s goodwill towards me.

That must be true of everyone in the castle too. Their admiration for my father, the king, is probably why they treat me with kindness too.

It felt like I’d had an epiphany. Realizing this seemed to soothe the anxieties that had taken root inside of me.

“I’m sure their magnanimity is also partly out of self-interest,” I said. “I’d be a fool to take it all at face value, but I suppose the opposite holds true too. I’d be just as much of a fool to jump at shadows and doubt *any* kindness.”

It all seemed so simple now. How had I never seen this before? I wondered to myself if I might have gone my whole life in ignorance if Elizabeth hadn’t taken me into town like this.

“Perhaps I’ve just gotten a little overly sensitive,” I added.

She gave an exaggerated nod in agreement.

“Mister Knight!” a little girl yelled out as she came running up to Elizabeth.

Then she looked up at me and asked, with a tilt of her head, “Who’s that?”

Elizabeth bent over gently and whispered something into her ear.

What are you saying about me that you have to whisper? I wondered. I racked my brains as I watched their exchange.

The little girl met my gaze. Then she looked back at Elizabeth and said, “Cheating is bad, Mister Knight.”

“Huh?!”

“You’re already taken! When I grow up, *I’m* gonna be your bride!”

I was stunned into silence. *Cheating? Did Elizabeth say something to make this little girl think we were having an affair? What kind of introduction did she make to give her that impression?*

Question after question swirled in my mind.

“Yay! Let’s go!”

Then the little girl’s voice brought me colliding back into the present moment. Suddenly, I was staring at her and Elizabeth’s backs as they walked away; I realized that they’d already left me far behind.



After that, Elizabeth and I followed the young girl and her mother to a craft store.

I was strangely entranced by what I found there—in particular, by the delicate lace coasters that decorated the store shelves. When I asked about them, the shopkeeper informed me that they had been made from a beginner’s crochet pattern.

So, even I could make something like this?

I pondered this for the rest of the afternoon, and before I realized it, we were back in my office.

Elizabeth shoved a few heavy parcels into my arms, then abruptly said, “Well, I should head off.”

“L-Lady Elizabeth, wait!” I called, just as she was stepping onto the window sill.

“What in the world is all of this?” I asked, looking down at the parcels.

“Uh, exactly what it looks like...” she replied with a smile. It wasn’t her usual fake, aristocratic smile; it felt genuine and unforced, almost like it had just slipped out. “I thought you might want to try your hand at it.”

I could literally hear the sound of myself falling in love.



No, what am I doing?!

I slammed my head on the desk with a loud *thunk*.

Surely I wasn't enough of a simpleton to fall in love over a little gift...was I? And to make matters worse, I was in love with my brother's fiancée. It was hard to imagine anything more forbidden than *that*.

As I sat in my office, I picked up some lacework to try my hand at, hoping it would take my mind off everything.

The shopkeeper had assured me the pattern was suitable for beginners, and sure enough, one look at the instruction booklet was all I needed to figure out how to tackle the craft. Besides, I'd always been good with my hands. I had the utmost confidence that I could master the skill in no time.

But as soon as I began crocheting, Elizabeth's face popped up in my mind. I massaged my throbbing temples and looked up.

This can't be happening. It's not happening, I reassured myself. *That's right. I'm just confused. I'm only feeling this way because she was nice to me, that's all. It's not love.*

If I were to lose my wits like this every time a woman showed me a little kindness or warmth, I'd wind up falling for every woman in the kingdom.

"Oh..."

When I glanced down at my hands, I realized that I'd dropped a stitch. Actually, upon closer inspection, I'd dropped *several* stitches. My concentration had been completely shattered.

I undid the stitches in silence. A dainty lace had just begun to form in my hands, but it was swiftly returned to its original form of bare thread.

No. This isn't love.

I unraveled my messy feelings, just as I did the lace. I was back to my original form again: flat, apathetic, and detached.

After all, I had a feeling I knew what would happen if I admitted to myself that this was love, if I told her how I felt. Somewhere, deep down, I just knew she'd never come back again.



“Oh, that reminds me. Will you take these for me, Lizzie?”

I’d called Elizabeth to my office again that day on the pretense that I wanted to do some shopping. I’d come up with all sorts of reasons to call her up since the day she’d taken me into town: returning her jacket with a new button, shopping... We ended up meeting several times a month.

I had to be mindful of the fact that she was my brother’s fiancée, after all. I couldn’t ask her to visit without a good reason. I’d once entertained the thought that it would be a different matter altogether if *she* took the initiative to visit *me*, but I dismissed it as soon as it came. For the moment, at least, there was no sign that that would ever happen.

Today was my first time using her nickname. I’d heard her older brother—my future advisor—use it once. I’d worried that the mere act of uttering it would be enough to make my heart explode, but fortunately, it seemed to roll off the tongue fairly naturally. She didn’t seem to take issue with it, at least. She didn’t even make note of it in any way.

I felt conflicted. Part of me was relieved by this, but part of me was disappointed.

I gave her some lace I’d recently crocheted. I’d been branching out lately; I’d even begun trying my hand at stuffed animals. I’d figured I’d grow tired of this crafty hobby almost as soon as I’d begun, but I’d surprised myself with how long I’d been at it. It was exciting to see a bundle of thread take shape into a pattern in my hands, and the repetitive nature of it made it a perfect complement to my ruminating.

For the most part, my ruminations focused on the woman in front of me. But it vexed me to admit that maybe the reason I’d continued this hobby for so long was because *she* was the one who’d put me up to it.

“Don’t you think this is a bit much?” she protested, frowning suspiciously at the bundle I’d thrust into her arms.

I certainly wasn’t about to tell her the truth: that I’d gotten so lost in my thoughts about her that I hadn’t even realized how much I’d been making. So

instead, I said, “Consider them mementos. They’ll give you something to remember me by when I’m gone.”

I’d meant it in a self-deprecating way, but she didn’t seem to appreciate the remark. Her frown deepened.

“You’re free to believe whatever you want, but I’ve made up my mind. I’m not buying into all this tripe about your days being numbered.”

I was floored. I couldn’t believe she’d had the gall to outright tell me she didn’t believe me. But she ignored my shock and continued on as if she were only stating the obvious.

“You trust the royal physician over me, right? Well, I don’t think that’s any different to me trusting my gut over you.”

“You’re out of line.”

“If it’s out of line to have faith in Your Highness’s longevity, then by all means, punish me for it,” she said, sneering. Her vicious expression stirred something inside of me.

When she looked down at me with those narrowed, cold, gray-blue eyes, it felt like they were piercing right through me. Even the fact that she was looking at me without that fake, aristocratic smile I was so used to receiving was enough to put me on edge.

“Of course, you should probably keep in mind that I was never supposed to know about your illness in the first place,” she said. “I look forward to seeing how you sidestep that little problem when you mete out my punishment.”

“I never realized you were so conniving.”

“Well, now you know,” she said, completely matter-of-factly. She punctuated her statement with a smile.

All right, you win. I’ll wave my white flag for today.

“Look, I can only decorate my bedroom with so many of these. Would you mind if I found some other ways to put the rest to good use?”

An uncomfortable silence fell over us briefly, but I eventually managed to smooth over it with an appropriate response...at least, I believed I did.

“I suppose you’re right. Yes, that sounds perfectly reasonable.”

There was no other response that would have sufficed. Even if I’d wanted to, I certainly couldn’t tell her that I only wanted *her* to have them. But, of course, that concern was purely hypothetical, anyway.



Ever since Lizzie had enrolled at the academy, not a day went by without hearing about her.

The latest I’d heard was that she’d cajoled the Guildfords’ youngest son into dancing the women’s part as she led him in dance class. I also knew that she liked to smile sweetly and wave to the hordes of young ladies who admired her from afar. I only saw her behavior from a distance, but it seemed to me that she was being *awfully* flirtatious.

As for me, in addition to inviting her up to my office as usual, I now saw her regularly in the hallways. From time to time, I’d even call out to her... When it seemed appropriate, that is.

“Hello, Lizzie,” I said, making a point of using her nickname. I hoped that anyone nearby would catch this and take note that we were on friendly terms.

“Hey, Your Highness. You seem to be in good spirits.”

We’d barely exchanged a few words, but my heart was already pounding in my chest. I wanted more. Unfortunately, circumstances didn’t allow for that. I had a meeting to get to. I would just have to settle for a quick conversation today.

Just as I was resigning myself to that, a wave of dizziness assaulted me. I didn’t know where it had come from; perhaps I was simply tired. Whatever the case was, I was finding it increasingly difficult to stand. I felt my knees buckling under me.

“Whoa, there!” Lizzie exclaimed, stepping towards me and catching my arm.

“Oh... Forgive me. I...seem to have lost my balance for a minute.”

“It may be nothing more than exhaustion, but we should take you to the nurse’s office just to be safe.”

When the dizziness passed, I looked up suddenly to see her face just centimeters away from mine.

For a moment, I completely lost track of what was happening. When I came back to my senses, I noticed how closely she was holding me. My face—no, my whole body—suddenly felt like it was on fire.

“N-No, that’s—” I stuttered.

“*Please*, Your Highness. Don’t strain yourself,” she replied, sweeping her arm around my waist and picking me up.

“Wh-Wh-What do you think you’re doing?!”

“I’m carrying you to the nurse’s office.”

She ignored my panic and broke into a brisk walk.

I could feel everyone’s eyes piercing me as we passed them. Everywhere she touched me burned, and I knew I must’ve been bright red all the way up to my ears. I was so mortified, all I could do was let out weak protests.

“Th-This is...highly inappropriate. W-We’re...much too close!”

“Little late to complain about that,” she replied, looking down at me and giving me a roguish wink. The expression on her face and the tone of her voice were so sweet, I felt like they might turn my brain into mush.

“Surely you’re used to this by now, after all the times I’ve scooped you up and kidnapped you?” she added.

Just when I thought my cheeks could get any redder, I felt a deep blush spreading over my face.

What is she thinking?

I couldn’t believe she’d look at me like that in front of everyone. I’d seen her break into that bewitching smile countless times with the girls, but I’d never been on the receiving end of it, much less at such a close distance. People were bound to get the wrong idea, seeing her smile at me—and *only* me—when our faces were so close they could touch.

“That’s because...because you—”

“All right,” she interrupted. “We’re here.”

Before long, we’d arrived. It felt like our journey to the nurse’s office had ended in the blink of an eye, and yet it also felt like I’d been in her arms forever. I nervously clamped my mouth shut. When we stepped inside, there was no one there.

“Huh. Looks like the nurse is out.”

“Wait, we can’t just go in when—”

“Hey, don’t worry about it. It’s not like we’re doing anything bad,” she said with a perfectly nonchalant expression on her face. She laid me down on an empty bed and covered me with a blanket.

The sweet smile she’d been wearing disappeared in an instant. I doubted my heart could’ve taken it if she’d looked at me like that any longer.

I couldn’t allow this to stand, though. She was a young noblewoman—she shouldn’t have been alone with a member of the opposite sex anywhere that had a bed. If any strange rumors took root, *she* would be the one to suffer. Or...maybe she *wanted* people to talk?

“Hang on... Don’t tell me you were *worried* about me?”

“Of course I was.”

Her words echoed in my head. Instantly, I felt something I could only call “joy” well up from deep within me. It was a strange thing to notice in myself, considering that I’d only ever felt irritated when anyone from the castle worried about me. I hated how they treated me like I was frail, or like I had only a few fleeting years left.

But her kindness had a profound effect on me. I found myself surprised at just how happy it made me—so happy, I couldn’t hide it. Maybe she noticed, because she broke into a smile.

“What’s so funny?” I retorted.

“Nothing, it’s just...you’re full of surprises.”

Me? Full of surprises?

If anything, *I'd* been amused by how full of surprises *she* was. But please don't misunderstand me—I didn't mean that in a bad way. I saw that as a sign of interest.

I glared at her, trying to hide my bashfulness. She cleared her throat and straightened her posture.

"You're always acting so princely. I've never seen you make a face like that before."

"Well... I have *you* to blame for that," I whispered, staring straight at her. My face was burning hot, and my heart beat thunderingly loud.

That's right. This is all her fault.

I wasn't going to look away from the truth anymore. It was time to stop denying what this *really* was. It was her fault that my heart ached like this. I'd fallen in love with her, and it had left me an utter mess...but it had also given me the will to live.

I heard her talking with the nurse in the doorway as she left.

"M-Miss Burton! It was kind of you to bring him here, but please bear in mind that it isn't, um, *prudent* for a young lady like yourself to be alone with a boy."

"Please, give me some credit. I know the prince is a pretty boy, but I'm not about to put the moves on someone when they're *sick*."

Maybe I wish you would... I thought, and immediately felt disgusted with myself. *What in the world is wrong with me?*



"I hear you were quite the hero the other day."

I crossed my legs anxiously and smiled, but I had no idea if it looked convincing. I'd been on edge ever since I'd heard about Lizzie shielding my brother.

Naturally, part of my concern was for her safety. But I'd heard she hadn't been seriously injured. Besides, I couldn't even imagine her being bested by some ruffian.

What had *really* concerned me was the possibility that there was something more between her and my brother. What if, unbeknownst to me, love had been blossoming between them all this time? Was Lizzie so smitten with him that she'd lay down her life for him?

If that were the case, then I had absolutely no chance. Contemplating that had made me ill at ease. And yet, I didn't know if I had it in me to give up on her.

But then she said, plainly, "I'd like to call off the engagement between myself and your younger brother...as discreetly as possible."

Of all the favors she might have asked for, I certainly hadn't expected *that*. I uncrossed my legs and crossed them again.

She wants to break off the engagement? I pondered. *But if it isn't because she's unhappy with my brother, then I can only think of one other reason she'd ask for such a thing.*

This time, I felt nervous in an entirely different way. "Is there...someone *else* you were hoping to marry?"

"Not really. It's just, as you can see, I'm not really cut out to be queen. I think the kingdom would be better off if he found someone more suitable."

"I...suppose I can't argue with you there."

I met her gaze, looking at her searchingly.

Then she added, as if musing aloud, "And, well, I have a feeling I might find my soulmate in the near future."

She looked me straight in the eyes as she said this. Her cold, zealous gaze felt as if it were piercing right through me. Without thinking, I gulped.

Is there really such a thing as a soulmate? Could this "soulmate" she's referring to be...me? I tried to dismiss the thought. Surely I was just misreading things again. *But it would certainly explain a lot.*

I mulled over the idea extensively, but I didn't manage to come to a convincing conclusion.

I averted my eyes. I couldn't keep meeting her candid gaze. "I'll talk it over

with my father.”

“Much obliged,” she said. The words she chose were such a clichéd aristocratic “thank you” that I couldn’t help but feel it was intentional.



“Hello, Lizzie.”

“What a surprise to see you, Your Highness. If you’d let me know you wanted to see me, I could have visited *you*.”

“No, there was no need for that. I wanted to come.”

I’d come to pay Lizzie a visit at her family estate. She greeted me with a fake, aristocratic smile as she received me. I’d recently come to learn that this was a smile she wore whenever she felt irritated or inconvenienced. And now, each time I saw it, I found myself wishing that she’d look at me with a *different* expression.

“Tell me, where is your room?”

“Excuse me?”

“I’d like a tour.”

I’d heard the subtext in her words: she wanted me to leave immediately. But I paid this no mind; instead, I pressed onward.

I looked up into her eyes and continued, “Please...this may be the last chance I have to see it.”

She furrowed her brow at my remark, looking quizzical.



I looked around, taking in the sight of her oddly spartan room. It had almost no decorative touches, but I was pleased to recognize the few exceptions. I felt a gradual warmth blooming in my chest as I noticed them.

“I recognize this doily... You’ve put one of my stuffed animals on display too. I’m shocked. I can’t believe you really put them in your room.”

“Well, yeah. They were gifts, so...”

“Knowing you, I’d assumed you’d just give them all away.”

For a moment, she averted my gaze. *Aha. So you did want to give them all away*, I thought. But I didn’t feel slighted by this. After all, she’d still displayed them in her room in the end.

I was still caught off guard that she’d even put up the curtains I’d given her, but I knew I didn’t have time to dwell on my surprise. I’d come to visit her for a reason. It was time to get to the point.

“I wanted to talk to you...about my illness.”

“Uh-huh...”

She nodded along as I told her all about how I was going abroad to attempt a treatment.

“That’s great. Sounds like you’ve found a cure.”

“Yes, *but...*the treatment comes with substantial risks. I’ve been told there’s a fifty-fifty chance—either I’ll be cured, or I’ll lose my life.”

“Fifty-fifty is good odds. It’s a far cry from *zero*.”

“I had a feeling you’d say that.”

I gave her a wry smile. She’d offered reassurance so nonchalantly.

Yes, I knew you’d say that. That’s exactly why I came here to tell you about this.

“That’s why I wanted to visit you today, no matter what. Because you don’t believe I’m going to die. Because you believe I’m going to *live*.”

Seeing her today, I made a resolution to myself: I would return home, no matter what. And when I did, there would be no more holding back.

She gave me a nutcracker to take with me after I’d requested a good luck charm from her. It was certainly much more suitable than the knife she’d tried to give me initially, but I’d been expecting something more akin to...an accessory, perhaps. Given my surprise, I couldn’t help but glare at her.

“You’ve never given a gift before, have you?”

“Nope,” she replied bluntly, shaking her head.

That certainly explains it, I thought, letting out a sigh. Then, the meaning of the words suddenly dawned on me, and I snapped my head up in surprise.

“Wait... You haven’t? Really?!”

“Why would I lie about this?”

Touché. That’s a fair question.

If she’d never picked out a present for anyone before, that meant *I* was the first person to receive a gift from her. Not her friends, not my brother...*me*. The realization made my heart sing. It may have been nothing more than a plain, silver instrument, but it almost seemed to sparkle.

“You said you don’t have any friends. Does that mean I’m the first person you’ve shown your room to?”

“I guess you are, aside from my family.”

I felt my spirits soar as she confirmed my suspicions. I couldn’t even put into words the joy I felt at learning that I was the first person she’d invited to her room.

I had no idea how she felt about me, but I couldn’t help but feel that her actions betrayed some sort of affection. Maybe she just wasn’t aware of her own feelings. If she *didn’t* have any feelings for me, though, it was entirely her fault that I’d come to the wrong conclusion.

All I knew was that I craved a place in her memory as a first—whether as the first to visit her room, or something else. I wanted to take up more space in her heart and mind. I wanted her to think of nothing but me, just like I thought of nothing but her.

As I was thinking this, my body began to move on its own. Before I even realized what was happening, I had already cut my hair. Silver wisps danced in the air.

Lizzie rushed over to me, astonished, and I offered her a lock of the hair I’d just cut. As far as I could remember, this was the first time I’d seen her look so utterly bewildered. It felt like I was catching a glimpse of the teenage girl that hid behind the curtain of her grandstanding.

“Here. Think of me when you look at it,” I said.

Cutting my hair had left me feeling oddly refreshed. I had every reason to fear a fifty percent chance of death. Who wouldn’t? But I was prepared to take the chances.

I’d heard tales of knights who cut off a lock of their hair when they went to battle. I’d hoped to mimic that with my gesture, thinking Lizzie—as a knight herself—might have appreciated the symbolism. She would know, I presumed, that it functioned as a memento given to family or to loved ones. She would know that it designated the recipient as the person to whom the knight would come home to. “This is my home,” the lock of hair said.

And if I *didn’t* come home, then at least a little piece of me would forever be with her.

I left the memento on her desk and turned to her to give her a smile.

“Till next time, Lizzie. I’ll have some dresses for you when I see you again.”



When I told my father that I intended to take the trip, he approved wholeheartedly. I assumed that he must have already guessed I would make this decision, because there wasn’t a trace of surprise on his face.

“Your Majesty—if I should return, I have a favor to ask of you.”

“Name it, my son.”

“There’s a woman I wish to marry.”

My father’s eyebrows shot up. He stroked his mustache as he looked down at me. I could sense a knowing in his eyes, as if he could see right through me.

“It’s *unbecoming* to covet that which belongs to another.”

“With all due respect, Your Majesty, I wish you wouldn’t speak of her as if she were a *thing*. But if she were to belong to anyone, then I wish she would belong to me and only me.”

“Very well. If she shares your feelings, then I will allow it.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty.”

I bowed my head as he peered at me through narrowed eyes.



“Brother...” Robert said.

Before I set out for the West, I told him everything: all about my illness, the treatment I was seeking, and the kingdom. It turned into quite a long conversation.

This may be the first time I’ve ever spoken with him at length like this, I reflected.

His face had darkened upon hearing that there was a chance the treatment might fail. Upon seeing his expression, I realized how foolish I’d been to ever think he would set his sights on the throne. It was plainly evident he wasn’t shrewd enough to deceive me.

I knew that, and yet, I’d doubted it. I’d been jumping at shadows. It was only now that I realized they were nothing more than that. Without thinking, I broke into an exasperated smile.

“Robert, listen to me. If I don’t return, then I’m trusting you to look after the kingdom...and Lizzie too.”

“But—” he began. His bright green eyes were flickering with emotion.

I turned away, cutting him off.

Despite what I’d just said, I had no intention of dying. I *would* return. I’d come home to her, and then...I’d make her mine.

The Flame of That Love Still Burns within Me —Isaac—

If we considered the first time I *realized* I was in love to be my “first love,” then I was eight years old.



I’d just taken my first exam in my group tutoring lessons. When grades were handed back, my tutor said, “You scored the highest out of everyone in the class, Mr. Guildford. Of course, I’d expect nothing less from the prime minister’s

son.”

I returned home with my graded test, my chest swelling with pride, and showed my father. He took one look and said, “Your brothers only ever brought home perfect marks.”

I worked even harder—harder than ever. The more effort I put in, the better I did. But no matter how hard I worked, I never got perfect marks. I could never surpass my brothers. Anything they could achieve almost effortlessly took tremendous effort just to match.

Whenever I excelled, it was dismissed as something to be expected. “Well, he *is* the prime minister’s son,” they’d say, or “He *is* a Guildford, after all.” But whenever I did poorly, it was “Guess he missed the Guildford genius gene,” or even “What a blight on the Guildford name.”

Whichever it was, there was no room for *me*. No one cared about Isaac Guildford himself.



“Hey, Isaac,” a girl, who seemed to have suddenly appeared out of nowhere, said.

My vision was blurry (thanks to the state of my broken glasses), but I could still make out her dress and hairstyle. I recognized her as one of the party’s VIP guests: Elizabeth Burton, the eldest daughter of Duke Burton...and the second prince’s fiancée.

Why is she calling my name? I wondered. *And why is she acting like we know each other?*

I watched in astonishment as she sent the other boys flying, but that wasn’t what stuck with me. The fact that she’d called my name mattered far more.

“I didn’t ask for your help,” I said, but she didn’t seem fazed by my snippy remark.

She simply gave me a wry smile in return. “You’re pretty tough, aren’t you?”

Tough? Me?

I had no idea what she meant. All I could do was watch her, stunned, as she

hopped back up onto the balcony.

I'd never been so perplexed by someone's remark before.



Time passed.

I stopped caring about my brothers' taunts. It no longer fazed me when they ridiculed me or laughed about how pointless my efforts were. None of that mattered; not when the girl who had called my name had said I was "tough."

It had been the first time in my entire life that someone had seen me for *me* and judged me on my own merits. And since the remark had come from a girl who had been strong enough to effortlessly toss around the boys *I'd* been no match for, I felt like I could trust her.

I'm tough, I thought to myself.

It was strange how powerful those words were. Just thinking about them made me lose all interest in whatever my father and brothers might have thought of me. I replayed the scene over and over again—the sound of her calling my name, the sight of her troubled smile.

It didn't take long for me to realize that what I felt towards the girl was *love*.

I never saw Elizabeth Burton after that. It was hard to find any information about her. She apparently didn't make many social appearances, but I managed to find a tidbit or two when I dug deep enough.

According to the rumors, she liked to cross-dress. She'd also apparently just started working at the knight cadets' training grounds, but she was already a better swordsman than the full-fledged knights.

It was all pretty hard to believe. The tall tales came from people who didn't even know her, so it felt only appropriate to dismiss them all with a laugh.

That being said, I *had* seen her jump off of that balcony without making a sound. I'd seen her beat up those older boys too. I couldn't help but feel that there might have been a strange ring of truth to the rumors, as absurd as they seemed.

Ever since I'd caught wind of those rumors, I'd started growing out my hair. It

had nothing to do with “making a wish” or anything as unscientific as that. I’d made the decision on the basis of one of the rumors I’d heard about her—apparently, she “liked to seduce the ladies.”

The cross-dressing, the playing at being a knight, the recklessly valiant manner of speaking I’d heard her use when we met as children—not to mention the way she’d jumped in to save me from those boys, full of righteous indignation...it all made sense when I put it together. She wanted to be a *man*. And not just any man, but a *knight*.

Her womanizing only further cemented my theory. Everything fell into place when I considered the explanation that she was romantically interested in women.

And so, I grew out my hair. My brothers had made fun of me ever since I was a child for my “girly face,” but now it felt like an asset. Even if I only *looked* like a girl, at least I’d be a bit closer to her type.



When I enrolled at the academy, I sought her out. She was my age, and she was a duke’s daughter, so I figured it was close to certain that she’d also be enrolled at First Royal Academy.

What I didn’t know was if she’d still be cross-dressing, or if she’d arrive wearing a girls’ uniform. I scrutinized the face of every student, just in case, determined not to miss her, but nothing came of it. I didn’t see anyone who fit the profile.

As I took my seat in class, an utterly repellent boy sat down next to me. He was a frivolous playboy, working all the girls up into a frenzy as he gave them a foolish, carefree smile. There was no way I’d be able to concentrate with such a nuisance sitting next to me. I felt myself growing irritated at my bad luck.

“Hey,” he said, with a tone that was much too friendly for someone I’d only just met. I studiously ignored him.

The teacher directed us to begin our introductions. I tuned the whole thing out, uninterested in my classmates and already reasonably acquainted with most of them. Everyone took their turn. Eventually, the boy sitting next to me

stood up to go next.

It was only then that I realized I had absolutely no idea who he was. I recognized most of the students from various social engagements that my father and brothers had dragged me to, but I'd never seen *him* before.

With a clear, bright voice, he began his introduction: "I am Elizabeth Burton, the eldest daughter of Duke Burton. Some students have apparently taken to calling me 'Lord Burton,' but please feel free to just address me as 'Burton' or 'Elizabeth.' I look forward to getting to know you all this year."

Suddenly, the whole classroom fell completely silent. Then, just as abruptly, an uproar erupted, but I was too gobsmacked to pay this any mind.

I looked up at the boy standing next to me.

"Burton?" By the time I realized I'd opened my mouth, the name had already tumbled out of it.

He turned to face me, and we locked eyes.

"*You're...Elizabeth Burton?*" I asked, and he—*she*—nodded with a smile.



The shock of our meeting at the academy hit me pretty hard. The girl I'd met at eight years old felt a world apart from the woman I'd met today.

It was clear to me now that I'd been blinded by my own delusion. I'd assumed that a young noblewoman would be recognizable as such, even if she were cross-dressing. And, more generally, I'd been convinced that a woman in men's attire would look wholly unconvincing—that only one look would be required to realize she was a woman playing dress-up and nothing more.

Seeing her in the flesh, though, it was clear to me how mistaken I'd been. No matter how I looked at her, she was a man. Her feathery brows were perfectly symmetrical, and her piercing, vibrant eyes had an elegantly long and slender shape. She had thin lips, an aquiline nose, and sharp, well-defined facial features.

Her figure wasn't especially feminine either. The boy's uniform she wore looked perfectly appropriate on her. She even wore her hair much shorter than

most of the boys in our class, and she was plainly taller than I was. Then, there was her smile—the very picture of a frivolous playboy smile.

I spent several days following her introduction in a state of denial. Then, thanks to a very strange turn of events, I found myself dancing with her. And that was when I realized that no matter how I tried to suppress it, she made my heart pound in my chest. When she looked into my eyes and smiled, my face grew mortifyingly red.

At the end of the day, I didn't care what she looked like. I'd fallen in love with the woman who saw me for me, the one who called me "Isaac"—not "the prime minister's son" or "the third Guildford boy," but my *name*. Those were the only things that mattered to me.

I wonder if she even remembers our first meeting?

It might not have meant much to her, but it had come to mean *everything* to me.



In a short span of time, we became close. We'd begun meeting regularly after school under the guise of dance practice, but we'd also kill time by talking.

She'd even started helping me with my swordsmanship. We'd greet each other in class too, and if there was anything she didn't understand from the lessons, I'd tutor her.

Before I'd even realized what was happening, we were on joking terms. Which is to say, we were *friends*.

"Are you really okay with it?" I asked her one day.

"Hmm? What do you mean?"

"I'm talking about your betrothal to Prince Robert. You don't really want to marry him, do you?"

"What?"

I'd tried to pass off my question as idle small talk, but the truth is, it was something I'd always wanted to ask her about.

“You’re, um...you’re interested in women, aren’t you? I know that marriage is something of a political arrangement for noble families, but I can imagine this must be hard on you. You’re my...f-friend. So, if you want to break off the engagement, then I’m here to help.”

I glanced at her face. Her eyes had gone wide with shock as she looked at me.

She’s looking at me, I thought. Instantly, my heart began to beat faster. I couldn’t believe that was all it took.

“Wait, what? You think I’m gay?” she asked incredulously.

“W-Well...yes. I mean, you’re always dressing and acting like a boy, so...” I stammered back.

She burst out laughing. “Ah ha ha! Okay, I see your point. I can hardly blame you for getting that idea.”

The sound of her sudden outburst felt like a slap on the back. It wasn’t her usual carefree chuckle, but a real guffaw, as if she’d found my comment genuinely hilarious. I’d never seen her like this before. Then it occurred to me that I was probably seeing a side of her that no one else had seen, and my heart began to pound again.

“H-Hey! This isn’t a laughing matter!”

“Ha ha! I’m sorry, I just can’t help it!”

She kept laughing for a while. When she finally calmed down, she wiped away the mirthful tears that had welled up at the corner of her eyes.

“I don’t dress like this because I’m into girls,” she clarified. “I only do it because... Well, I’ve got this feeling that I’m going to meet my soulmate soon. And I think I’ll have a better chance with them if I cross-dress.”

“‘Your soulmate’? Hmm... I didn’t expect you to believe in unscientific things like fate,” I mused, tilting my head reflexively.

She gave me a carefree smile in return. “Well, what’s the harm? As long as I believe in it, isn’t that enough?”

Not fully satisfied with this, I pressed her, “So... I’m guessing your soulmate isn’t *Robert*, then?”

She met my question with silence, and it spoke volumes. I could think of no clearer affirmation than that.



Now that my theory about her cross-dressing because she liked girls was debunked, I saw no point in continuing to grow out my hair. Long hair was incredibly difficult to take care of, and I blamed it for many a cold. I had gotten sick on more than a few occasions after losing myself in my studies while my hair was still wet.

When Elizabeth stopped by to bring me my schoolwork when I was out sick, though, my resolve to cut my hair wavered.

Maybe getting sick isn't so bad after all...? I thought.

I spent the rest of the day feverishly contemplating this and weighing my options. Sure, there was a real risk that she'd run into my brothers, but it was almost completely overshadowed by the temptation of her visiting my room again.

But when I finally recovered from my cold and returned to school, the answer came to me almost immediately.

I found Elizabeth at her seat, flanked by two female students, laughing along with them as they chatted pleasantly. I noted from the color of their collars that they were third-years. When I saw their faces, it hit me: they were my brothers' fiancées.

"Why are you...?" I began to ask once they'd left, without even thinking, but couldn't bring myself to finish.

She gave me a little shrug.

"Your brothers gave me a real *warm welcome* when I visited your family's estate the other day. I just thought I'd...show them my appreciation."

For a moment, I was too stunned to make sense of this.

My brothers? Did they do something to her? This was exactly why I'd warned her to go straight home.

But she didn't appear to have been harmed in any way. On the contrary, she

looked as cheerful as ever. Still, I wouldn't have put it past my brothers to have given her a hard time. If they knew we were friends, there was no way they would have just left her alone. Whatever unpleasantness they'd put her through must have been the "warm welcome" she was referring to.

It wasn't clear how she'd arrived at the solution she had, but apparently she'd deemed it appropriate to retaliate by seducing their fiancées. As baffled as I was by her actions, I was also aware that I found the gesture strangely comforting somehow.

Knowing my brothers, they would have done everything in their power to befriend her as soon as they caught onto the fact that she was Duke Burton's daughter. In all likelihood, they'd tried to persuade her that they were far cleverer and much better company than the likes of me. But judging from her behavior, it was clear that she'd rebuffed them. She'd chosen *me*. I couldn't help but feel relieved at this.

"I thought you said you weren't interested in women?" I prodded, joking around as usual.

"Oh? Did I say that?" she tilted her head in a show of surprise.

Reflexively, I whipped around to face her.

"I've never fallen in love before. I dunno, maybe I *am* more interested in girls? I mean, for all I know, my soulmate might even be a girl."

There it is again, I thought. *She keeps going on about this "soulmate" thing.*

I knew she wasn't interested in her fiancé; she was still waiting for her "soulmate." And since she hadn't met them yet, that meant it wasn't *me*.

But I wasn't the kind of weak-willed man who would let that stop me.

Isaac Guildford is made of tougher stuff than that.



One day, when Elizabeth was chatting up my brothers' fiancées again as usual, I made a snide comment about her being a devious manipulator.

"What can I say? I learned from the best of 'em," she shot back.

That was the moment I realized that she *did* remember our first meeting back when we were eight years old. She remembered how I'd told her I was "going to get revenge in my own way." Now she was honoring that—playing the long game by seducing my brothers' fiancées, even if she would have preferred to settle things another way. And knowing her, I had a pretty good idea of how she would have chosen to do it: by flinging my brothers right out the window.

She respected me. She was giving me a chance at payback on my *own* terms. As always, she was thinking of me...*listening* to me. I couldn't think of anything that mattered more; it meant the world to me.

I had my answer: I would cut my hair after all.

I realized that I didn't need my long hair anymore. As things stood, there was no point in telling her how I felt about her. She was betrothed to the second prince, and besides, she was a duke's daughter. I, on the other hand, was the third son of a lowly earl. I couldn't compete with her soulmate.

My first order of business, then, was to clear these obstacles. I needed to, especially if I wanted to ensure that I held on to the advantage of being her closest friend. I had to do whatever it took. No matter who entered her life, even if it were her soulmate, I wanted to set myself up for success so that she'd still pick *me*.

I wanted to be the one she chose, and I'd do anything for the privilege. I wasn't a genius like my brothers, so I'd work myself to the bone instead. And I'd keep striving, no matter how long it took, because that was all I could do. It was all I'd *ever* been able to do.

If we considered the first time I *realized* I was in love to be my "first love," then I was eight years old.

And the flame of that love still burned within me.

Extra Story: Mister First Royal Academy

“If you participated in Mister First Royal Academy, you would *definitely* get my vote, Sir Burton!”

“Oh, absolutely! Mine too!”

As I chatted with the girls from my fanclub, my ears perked up at the unfamiliar term.

“Mister First Royal Academy? What’s that?” I asked them.

“There’s a poster for it over there. Take a look!” one of the girls replied, pointing to a sheet that had been put up on the bulletin at the back of the classroom which read “Mister First Royal Academy.”

“Everyone’s excited to see the princes compete for the title this year!”

As the girls squealed with delight, I searched my memory for anything about the event. Unfortunately, I could only vaguely recall it.

There was a reason for this, though—you only get to see the contest if you get one of the friendship endings.

Generally, in the world of otome games, these are classified as *bad* endings. The majority of players aren’t in it to make friends (they buy the games to *romance* the characters, after all), so they usually only play through the friendship endings for the sake of completion.

That had certainly been true in my case, at least. I’d only played through each love interest’s friendship ending once, and my memories of them were a bit hazy.

For reference, the Mister First Royal Academy contest is completely cut from both the good and best endings (both of which are romantic, obviously). Not to get too meta about this, but there probably just hadn’t been enough space to include it.

Anyway, the event pitted the school’s most eligible young men against each

other in a popularity contest. The contestants could either nominate themselves or be nominated by someone else. There were two rounds, each with its own voting period. After the votes for the first round had been counted, the contest progressed into a grand prix between the top-ranking contestants.

I'm sure this goes without saying, but the crown prince was the winner of last year's grand prix. Considering none of the other love interests had been at the academy at the time, his victory was only natural. I mean, there was no way that the honor of winning Mister First Royal Academy would go to a side character.

In the game, the love interest whose route you were locked into took center stage in the grand prix. No CGs or affection points accompanied the event, though. It was a wholly unmemorable segment of the game with barely any voiced lines that spanned around seven hundred and fifty words, give or take.

Hmmm...

The game's main character would be enrolling next spring. I needed to make sure that I was adequately noble and fabulous enough to earn my place in the lineup of love interests by then, and a school-wide popularity contest seemed the perfect opportunity to see how I measured up.



After Isaac and I finished some dance practice, he plopped down on the ground, completely out of breath. I squatted down and sidled up to him.

"Hey, Isaac...we're friends, right?"

"Yes..." he said, eyeing me suspiciously as I moved closer.

I took his hand in mine and clasped it tightly. His eyes went wide behind his glasses. He blinked several times as he met my earnest gaze.

"There's something I need you to do for me—something *only you* can do."



"Sir Burton! Is it true? Are you really participating in Mister First Royal Academy?!"

"It seems so, unfortunately. Honestly, I'm as surprised as you are. I guess one

of my friends must have nominated me.”

The next day, all of the girls crowded around my desk to ask about my participation. I flashed them a pained smile, as if it were the last thing I wanted to be doing.

Yep, you guessed it: I went with the looks-like-my-friend-nominated-me-so-I-guess-I’ve-got-no-choice strategy. Everyone knows heartthrobs don’t enter magazine contests or sign up for idol auditions *themselves*. It’s always a friend or family member that jump-starts their career.

I didn’t want to look *desperate*, so being nominated by a friend was the perfect excuse to give it my best. This way, I could look like I was just doing it all for them. And fortunately, Isaac had come through for me and put my name in. *Nothing beats a friend you can count on*, I thought. Isaac was nothing if not dependable.

“Oh! Yes, of course! Well, I can’t wait to support you!” one of the girls cried.

“Me too!” another chimed in.

“I suppose I’ll just have to do my best, then. I wouldn’t want to disappoint you,” I replied, smiling at my sparkly-eyed fangirls.

I could sense Isaac giving me a dour look, but I ignored him.

If I managed to make it to the grand prix stage, I could prove to myself that I had what it took to compete for the main character’s heart as a love interest. The final results would be announced in the winter, shortly before the main character would enroll in the spring. It was the perfect timing for me to see where I stood.

The stage was set, and I was ready to test my mettle against the other love interests.



“Oh, by the way, Lizzie...”

I was back in the crown prince’s office, which by now had become painfully familiar. Stopping by to drop off the haul of craft items he’d requested had turned into part of my regular routine. But just as I was about to take my leave

after dropping off the latest batch, he stopped me.

“Would you like me to throw the Mister First Royal Academy contest?” he asked me.

“What?”

“You want to win, don’t you? I’m sure my withdrawal would set you up nicely for a victory. Personally, I don’t put much stock into what the other girls think of me, so I’d have no qualms about not participating,” Edward said with a smile.

For a moment, I worried that I’d been too obviously competitive, but I quickly realized that he’d probably just misconstrued *my fan club’s* desire for me to win. That being said, he wasn’t wrong. I *did* want to win this thing.

There was no point in victory if it was handed to me on a silver platter, though. After all, my end goal was the game’s main character—and it seemed highly unlikely that he’d be willing to hand *her* to me on a silver platter.

Besides, I didn’t like his attitude. Who did he think he was, assuming he was guaranteed first place unless he forfeited?

“There’s no need for that,” I replied, forcing a smile out of sheer determination. “Of course I’d like to live up to everyone’s expectations, but there’s no point in claiming a victory unless it’s on my own merit.”

I looked down at him and gave him a meaningful smile, but he said nothing in reply. He didn’t seem at all fazed by my choice of words.



The first voting period was over, and the preliminary results were in. Flyers had been posted on every class’s bulletin board.

I peered at the one in my classroom. Edward, Robert, Isaac, and myself had apparently been nominated...along with several side characters (I say, like *I’m* not a side character, but let’s just move right along, shall we?).

So far, the results were pretty predictable. I wasn’t shocked to see Edward in first place, nor was I surprised to see that Isaac was lagging behind in votes. Isaac hadn’t done any campaigning or PR, after all, and despite his good looks, he wasn’t exactly the friendliest guy around. He probably wasn’t too pleased

that he'd been nominated in the first place. Robert and I were pretty much neck and neck, which I was satisfied with. Pea-brained or not, he *was* the second prince. That counted for *something*.

What gnawed at me, though, was Edward's enormous lead. He had way, way too many votes. It was almost the combined number of mine and Robert's—in other words, twice the votes that either of us had received.

As a love interest, Edward's good looks were naturally...well, preternatural. He had a lot going for him. Unlike Robert or Isaac, he had good people skills, a leg up from winning last year's contest, and status as crown prince that made him the most noble and fabulous of any eligible young man in the kingdom by a long shot.

Still, none of that could've explained the insane number of votes he'd received. It would've been one thing if I'd been the only one lagging behind badly because of it, but he had left all of us in the dust. I had no idea what possibly accounted for his huge lead. Was it his intelligence? His status as crown prince? Was he simply nobler and more fabulous than I could ever hope to be?

Either way, I'd have to revise my strategy. As I pondered this, a horrible thought seized me in a moment of weakness.

Wait, does this mean I'm not going to win?



I was kicking back in my room when the head maid came in looking oddly excited. "Your friend is here to see you," she announced.

I made my way to the living room to find Isaac waiting for me. He was sitting stiffly on the edge of the sofa, and the cup of tea in front of him had been left untouched.

With a soft *click*, the maid closed the door and left us alone.

"Burton," he greeted me. His brow was furrowed even deeper than usual. "Everyone in your home has been giving me the strangest looks since I arrived."

As he said this, I recalled the head maid's baffled expression. It dawned on me that she probably wasn't the only person who'd regarded him that way.

“I guess none of my family members or servants actually believed that I had any friends.”

“What? Why?”

“Don’t ask me. I’ve certainly *mentioned* friends before, so I wouldn’t have expected them to be so surprised. Sheesh, why do they have so little faith in me?”

“I think the better question is: what makes them think you’re so untrustworthy?”

“If I knew the answer to that, I wouldn’t be having this problem,” I said, flashing him a bitter smile.

To be fair, I knew I had only myself to blame. If someone pointed to my behavior as the root of the problem, I couldn’t exactly argue with them.

I glanced down at the table and noticed that we’d been served my older brother’s cherished (and very expensive) teacakes.

All right, reel it in. No need to treat your little sister’s first playdate with this much fanfare.

Putting my hand on Isaac’s shoulder, I looked him in the eyes with a grave expression on my face. He gulped.

“I’m begging you, Isaac—if Christopher or the head maid asks you what our relationship is, make it abundantly clear to them that we’re *friends*. I don’t want them pitying me any more than they do already.”

For a moment, he just stared at my face. Eventually, he let out an exasperated sigh.

I switched spots, sitting down on the couch opposite him and pouring myself some tea.

“So, what’s up? I wasn’t expecting a visit.” I paused, remembering that he’d recently loaned me his notebook. “Oh, if you’re here to get your notes back, I haven’t finished copying them yet. Can you wait till tomorrow?”

“I’m not here for my notebook,” he said. He fidgeted uncomfortably, his eyes darting around the room before finally settling on my face. “I just...thought you

may be a little down.”

I tilted my head in confusion.

“About the preliminary results, I mean,” he clarified. “You want to win this contest, don’t you?”

“Oh, that. Well, I won’t pretend I’m not disappointed,” I said with a shrug. “I’m just in the process of cooking up a strategy, actually.”

“I see.”

He looked somehow relieved to hear this.

I stared at him, doubts beginning to fill my mind. I decided to voice them. “Did you...come here to check on me? Were you worried enough to make the trip all the way to my house?”

“Is that a problem?”

“No, not at all. It’s just...”

I thought back to the expression I’d made when I saw the results. I hadn’t been torn up about them or anything. I’d been composed enough to receive support from the girls with a smile (at least, that’s what I’d hoped).

“Honestly, I’m embarrassed. Did I really look that pitiful?” I asked.

For a moment, Isaac was silent. Then, he said, “No. I just...had a feeling you might need some cheering up.”

His strange turn of phrase echoed in my head. “*Just a feeling*”? It wasn’t like him to give any weight to supposedly baseless things like intuition.

Well, one thing’s for sure: I really need to work on my poker face.

“Listen, Burton...” Isaac said, leaning forwards.

He laid his hand over mine, then clasped it. His hand was callused and rough, probably from all the writing he did.

“You have a magnetic presence. Trust me. I would know,” he said, wearing a painfully earnest expression. Behind his glasses, his burgundy eyes reflected my face. “Is there anything I can do to help? I’ll do whatever I can.”

“Pfft!”

I couldn’t help but burst into a laugh. He just looked so comically serious. If we’d been having a stare down, I definitely would’ve lost.

Oh, Isaac... Even when you’re cheering someone up, you just can’t help yourself. You really are serious to a fault.

He should’ve known better than to brandish phrases like “I’ll do whatever I can” so lightly, though—*especially* when talking to a villainess like *me*.

“Thanks, Isaac. I feel a bit better now.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” he replied, after a pause.

He let go of my hand and sat back a bit on the couch.

“But, wow. I had no idea you cared so much about your friends,” I said.

Isaac turned to look at me, his face blushing a deep crimson. “I...didn’t come here to cheer you up because we’re *friends*.”

“Hmm?” I paused thoughtfully, then nodded back at him. I prided myself on my ability to read people, so I could see where he was going with this. “Oh. I hear you. You came because we’re *best friends*. Right?”

After a moment of silence, he replied, “Sure... Let’s go with that.”

As he straightened his glasses, he let out a little sigh. I couldn’t understand why he’d deliberately blurt out a sentimental line like that if it was only going to overwhelm him with embarrassment.

Come on, buddy. If you can’t stand the heat, get out of the kitchen.



I’d expected my popularity with the girls to take a nosedive after the shenanigans I’d pulled at the dance—you know, back when I’d dressed poor Christopher up in drag and paraded him around the dance floor. On the contrary, they actually seemed to have *boosted* my popularity. Maybe they’d liked my knight’s uniform more than I’d expected?

Thank God the world of otome games places such priority on looks.

As for the other love interests, their popularity seemed to have taken a small

hit. My totally aboveboard, grassroots movement of helping them out was starting to bear fruit.

I'd made a show of gallantly carrying Edward, princess style, to the nurse's office. I took Isaac up on his offer to "do anything he could to help" and added some flourishes to our dance class routines by lifting him up into the air. I even answered questions from the girls in my fan club for their newsletter's "Thus Spoke Sir Burton" segment.

Everything was going just as I'd hoped—*better*, even. I couldn't turn a corner without hearing girls and cadets voicing their support and vowing to vote for me in the second round.

Now, you may be thinking to yourself, *But why aren't the cadets voting for Robert?*

The answer to that is pretty simple: it's because Robert had dropped out of the contest.

Apparently, he'd reasoned, "I'm not good enough to compete with Commander." Or something like that, anyway. In any case, he said he needed to dedicate himself to his training again.

Training for what? I wondered.

Apparently, the only reason the cadets had voted for him in the first place was out of pity. They'd assumed that none of the girls would vote for him, and they didn't want him to feel bad. Little did they know that he had no trouble getting votes from girls. Sure, he might've been a real piece of work, but he *was still* a love interest, after all.

Regardless, once Robert dropped out, the cadets threw their support behind me, their commander.

I don't need Robert's scraps.

Just kidding. You didn't *really* think I'd die on a lofty hill like that, did you? I didn't even inherit that many votes from him, but I'd take every one I could get!

Robert himself seemed to be chomping at the bit to back me too.

"You've got my vote, Commander!" he exclaimed, with a radiant smile.

(Though Robert might have been a prince, his vote didn't count for more than anyone else's. It was just a single vote among a sea of them.)

My campaigning was going well, and I was in top shape both physically and mentally. I had a good feeling about my prospects. Even if I didn't claim a sweeping victory, I was content with the thought that I'd at least put up a good fight.

I'd tapped into every voter I could; there was no more campaigning to be done. The final results would be announced tomorrow.



The next day, everyone—well, an audience primarily composed of girls—waited with bated breath for the Mister First Royal Academy results to be announced. We, the nominees, stood shoulder to shoulder on the stage, and there was a large banner containing the final results furled up behind us.

The banner was unraveled from the ceiling to great fanfare, and the results were displayed for all. The crown prince had won first place, with almost double the number of votes that I'd received in second place. Cries of delight and disappointment echoed throughout the auditorium.

If someone were to ask me if I was shocked by the results, my answer would've been, "No, not really."

The crown prince was admittedly blessed in the looks department—*very* blessed. If I remembered correctly, he was also the fan favorite among the *Royal LOVERS* community. Although his height was nothing to write home about, he was appealingly slender and had an ephemeral quality about him, as if he might just disappear at any moment. I couldn't replicate that if I tried.

None of that explained the ridiculous margin between our votes, though. It just didn't make any sense. I knew how many votes I'd received from my fan club and the cadets, and it was more than what the results claimed. Even just considering the number of votes I'd received in the preliminary round, the math wasn't adding up.

There was no way this could've happened...unless an *invisible hand* had intervened. If even *I'd* noticed something was off, then it was painfully obvious

that the whole thing had been rigged.

But who does this invisible hand belong to? Who'd be so determined to make sure that Edward wins the contest?

A voice called out to me as I retreated backstage with the other contestants to prepare for the award ceremony. "Lizzie."

Before I could even turn around to see who it was, they grabbed my arm.

"Your Highness? Uh..."

"Now's not the time for questions," he said. "Just come with me."

His voice was so quiet and measured, I couldn't get a feel for what he was thinking. But it was clear he wasn't going to take no for an answer, so I followed him as he tugged my arm and led me to an antechamber behind the auditorium stage. He briskly crossed the room and opened a broom closet nestled in the corner.

"Get in."

"Huh?"

He shoved me inside without waiting for any further response, then tried to cram himself into the broom closet with me.

Jeez, it's cramped in here, I thought.

It was a broom closet, so it was very clearly *not* intended for people to be crowding inside. It was a tight fit for even *one* person, let alone two. Even with his delicate build, Edward couldn't fit inside without smushing up against me.

Who is this broom closet even for? Pretty much all of the students here hail from noble families, so I can't imagine anyone would actually use it.

It was plainly evident that its function was purely decorative. It was far too small to actually be useful.

Sheesh. If you're going to go through the trouble of fitting a room with a broom closet, at least make it functional.

"Uh, Your Highness? These quarters are a bit *tight*, don't you think?"

"Only because you're not squishing in enough. Try a little harder, will you?"

“I’d really rather not...”

Ignoring my protests, Edward forced himself in with me and closed the door. We wound up practically embracing.

Ever heard of “personal space” before, Your Highness? I thought irritably.

I knew he liked to get up close and personal, but this was taking it too far. I didn’t appreciate how his silver hair tickled my cheek as it brushed against it, or how his arms were wrapped around me. Not to mention that his face was *right there*. Even at point-blank distance, his facial features were beautiful. His skin was practically translucent, and even the cuticles of his hair shimmered. There was also a faintly floral scent that clung to him.

Don’t heartthrobs have enough advantages without smelling like literal roses? This definitely counts as cheating.

“Okay, seriously. What are we doing in here?”

“Shh!” Edward chided, putting his finger to his lips.

Just as he’d shushed me, I heard the distinct sound of footsteps approaching. It seemed like someone had just entered the room. Edward and I held our breaths and perked up our ears to listen.

“Well, I’m glad that’s over with.”

“Yes. I must admit, I was worried there for a moment. I’m sure they’ll find this to be a satisfactory resolution. I appreciate your decisive action in this matter, Mr. Principal.”

We heard the voices of two men. Judging from what little we’d heard, one of them was the school principal. The other was...the vice-principal, maybe? It didn’t really matter. The content of their conversation was the point, not who was speaking.

“Personally, this seems to me to be nothing more than a silly school contest, but at least this will mollify the crown prince’s faction.”

“Well, we never know what could happen. Let’s not forget Prince Robert’s victory at the exhibition match. It’s no wonder everyone was a bit on edge.”

“Yes, that certainly did put the pressure on. Fortunately, it seems the students

on the executive committee didn't notice the 'adjustment' we made to the votes. I think it's time to draw the curtain on this, don't you? I'd just as soon forget about it."

Without thinking, I looked at Edward. His elegant smile had dropped, and his royal purple eyes were fixed on the men outside the broom closet's door.

So the "invisible hand" (or should I say, "invisible hands") belonged to the principal and vice-principal. And to complicate things further, both of them were controlled by yet *another* invisible hand—the crown prince's so-called faction. It seemed they were the ones behind the rigged Mister First Royal Academy contest. In fact, they were probably responsible for the failed attempt on Robert's life too.

The principal and vice-principal's conversation certainly seemed to back that up. If they were to be believed, then the anxiety had all begun with Robert's victory during the exhibition match. It certainly made sense.

When Robert had been nominated to participate in Mister First Royal Academy, everyone had been thrilled to see the brothers face off against each other. But no doubt there were some who worried that another victory for Robert could hurt Edward's influence. Sure, it might've been nothing more than a school-wide popularity contest, but most of the students at the academy were descendants of the highest-ranking nobility. There was no separating school politics from the kingdom's.

The assassination attempt had likely been planned in hopes of removing Robert from the contest. And although it hadn't ended up having any bearing on his participation—he'd escaped unharmed—Robert had withdrawn from the contest anyway. It would've been great if that had been enough to quell the crown prince's faction's fears, but unfortunately (for them, that is), *I* had also been nominated.

No matter how reluctant I was to marry Robert, or how desperately I was trying to call our engagement off, the fact remained that I was his fiancée. They might've viewed me as being "in his camp," so to speak. It was a misunderstanding which was probably only fueled by Robert's very open and zealous support. If that was how they saw me, then it was hardly surprising that

they'd want to eliminate *me* as a threat too.

I watched as Edward moved his head. Since we were cramped in a broom closet, this ended in disaster. His elbow slammed straight into my solar plexus. Just as I was about to complain bitterly, he flung open the closet door.

Huh? You're leaving now? I thought, incredulous.

"Mr. Principal, Mr. Vice-Principal. What is the meaning of this 'adjustment' you spoke of?"

"Y-Your Highness?!"

I heard the clacking of footsteps as the two men scurried over to Edward. From my narrow view through the crack of the half-open closet door, I could see that their eyes were wide as saucers.

Their astonishment was understandable. Who in their right mind would have expected the crown prince to be in a broom closet?

"Your Highness... Please believe me, we only have your family's and the kingdom's best interests at heart. We simply couldn't have you losing to Prince Robert. Everyone was praying for your victory, Your Highness. We did this for the both of you—for the *kingdom*," the principal muttered softly after a moment of consternation. Still, he didn't deny that they'd messed with the vote count.

"Is *that* what you believe your job to be, as shepherds of the next generation? The hallowed halls of this educational institution are meant to *foster* students' independence, not destroy it."

"But, Your Highness, our academy is—"

"No, Mr. Principal," Edward interjected. I could only see him from behind, but I had no doubt that he was wearing his typical, fake princely smile. "I think you mean *my* academy. This is the First *Royal* Academy."

I heard the clack of his shoes as he took a step towards the principal. Edward straightened his spine and assumed a confrontational stance. He looked extraordinarily beautiful.

But soft, what light through yonder window breaks! It is the east, and Edward

is the sun...or however that goes.

“I hope you’re aware that you’re besmirching the king’s name with your undignified behavior,” Edward continued. Even from this angle I could tell he was furious based on the tone of his voice. “And I hope you’re aware that you’re responsible for disgracing a female student—a *subject of this kingdom*.”

A female student? I thought, momentarily perplexed. *Wait, is he talking about me?*

I was pretty irritated, but I wouldn’t go so far as to say I felt *disgraced*. At most, I was just annoyed to have been dragged into some ridiculous royal feud. Honestly, I never had enough of a reputation to begin with for it to be ruined.

As I racked my brains, trying to think of what I should be doing next, I put my hand on the half-open closet door.

My one goal was to learn how popular I was with the girls in school. I really didn’t care about anything else. So, I decided to cut straight to the chase.

“Your Highness,” I said, stepping out of the broom closet. “If it’s all the same to you, I’d prefer not to make mountains of molehills.”

The three men all turned to look at me. The principal and vice-principal looked absolutely baffled. Their expressions practically screamed, “Just how many people are in that tiny closet?!”

They were right to be confused. That closet was *not* made for two. *Don’t try that at home, kids.*

I cracked my shoulders and continued, “We’re all only human. Even brilliant men such as yourselves make *mistakes*, right? But a good leader doesn’t attach undue significance to human error. It wouldn’t do to cause a fuss over nothing.”

Edward eyed me suspiciously, looking wholly unsatisfied with the out I was giving them.

“Wouldn’t you agree, gentlemen?” I prodded them.

The principal flinched as I smiled at him.

Hey, I don’t bite.

“I’m sure you’ve both been terribly busy preparing lessons, planning the curriculum, and liaising with parents about extracurriculars...not to mention the host of other duties you oversee as educators. It’s no wonder you’d have a little slipup here and there.”

“W-We haven’t made any ‘slipups’!” the vice-principal exclaimed.

I ignored him and stood next to Edward so I could face the principal directly.

“There’s no need to make this difficult. All you have to do is say a few words and bow your heads in front of the students.”

“If you want to kill a general, aim for his horse.” That may be true in cavalry combat, but when you’re fighting with your fists? You aim for the head.

“Just say ‘we apologize,’ and ‘we miscounted the votes.’”

“What—”

“It’s a small price to pay, wouldn’t you agree?”

I gave them an unnecessarily wide grin as I said this and watched as the color drained from the principal’s stiff face.

Oh, don’t look so afraid. You’re making me look bad, I thought in annoyance. As the victim of this crime, it was well within my rights to demand that they apologize and amend the record.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Edward go pale in the face as he watched me close in on the principal. I leaned in, whispering in his ear, “Honor, dignity...they’re a pittance compared to the price of your *life*.”



“Are you really going to be satisfied with that?” Edward asked after I’d sent the principal and vice-principal on their way to amend the situation.

“What do you mean?”

“We could’ve gone much further in exposing and censuring them. They did tarnish your reputation, after all.”

I shrugged. “I’m not that important. Taking a hit to my reputation won’t kill me.”

Edward looked unconvinced.

Honestly, I was a little surprised by his indignation. Sure, we were reasonably acquainted, but I hadn't realized he cared so much about my honor. I was impressed he'd go to all this trouble for a single subject of the kingdom.

I'm sure he'll make a great king.

As I faced him, I made a show of clapping my hands.

"Oh, but it's your right to discipline them however you wish to, Your Highness. It isn't fair for me to decide their punishment all on my own."

"My right?"

"Well, of course. Their behavior was an affront to your authority. It was flagrantly disrespectful."

Edward crossed his arms, making what seemed to be a very purposeful scowl, and shook his head. "Yes... Yes, you're right. They feared that I, the crown prince of the kingdom, couldn't possibly win unless they manipulated the votes. If that isn't disrespectful, I don't know what is."

"Exactly. So, I'll leave it to you to avenge your honor as you see fit, Your Highness. I realize the atonement I sought from them does nothing to address the harm they've done to *you*. So, by all means, take whatever measures you feel are appropriate."

"You really are..." Edward trailed off. He pushed his fingers into his forehead and shook his head lightly, letting out a sigh.

If Edward stepped in and dealt with them for me, I'd get credit for letting the principal and vice-principal off the hook. It seemed only fair, considering this royal mess wasn't even mine to begin with. I was simply an innocent bystander in the situation.

Besides, a talented young man like Edward would have no trouble exposing the people responsible and punishing them.

I puffed my chest out defiantly. "I'm...what? Devious?"

"No, I was going to say '*admirable*.'"

“What a compliment. You flatter me, Your Highness.”

“It wasn’t a compliment.”

“I know.”

Suddenly, Edward burst out laughing.

Guess that’s that, then, I thought.

Just as we were leaving the antechamber to return to the auditorium, I remembered something.

“Oh, and Your Highness?” I called out to him. He stopped and turned around. “Thank you.”

His royal purple eyes shot wide open. He blinked, and I could practically feel the breeze his eyelashes generated.

“It was sweet of you to get angry on my behalf,” I added with a wink.

He quickly averted his gaze, saying nothing in reply.



We’d gone into a sudden death round.

Facing off directly against my competitor suited me just fine, but it certainly didn’t feel like a standard turn of events for Mister First Royal Academy.

After the principal and vice-principal had offered their explanations and apologies, the auditorium had momentarily fallen silent. When the results had been announced anew, an even greater uproar had erupted.

Believe it or not, Edward and I had received the exact same number of votes.

For some reason, even Isaac had gotten more votes now that the tally had been corrected. I didn’t remember anything he’d done that would’ve increased his popularity since the first round, but maybe it was the cross-dressing?

Wow. Did people like seeing him in drag that much?

Now that Edward and I had entered into a face-off for first place, the executive committee had needed to hastily come up with a tiebreaker.

What had they landed on, you ask? The “I Love You” game.

The rules were simple: we'd each take turns saying "I love you" to the other, and whoever blushed first lost the game. It sounded a lot like a game called "Chicken" that I remembered from my last life. Since the game continued until someone lost, I figured it was an appropriate choice for a sudden-death round.

Oh, but can I just say one thing, though? Whoever decided on this game was an *idiot*.

As far as I could tell, there must've been someone with considerable authority and some very *eccentric interests* on the committee. Maybe they were even a reincarnator themselves. I'd give them credit for discerning that there's nothing the ladies love more than two handsome men acting intimate with each other, but who really stood to benefit here? Not me or Edward, that's for sure.

They were in charge, though, and as a contest participant, I couldn't just refuse to play by their rules. Maybe it was just the sunk cost fallacy at work, but I'd already come this far. I wasn't about to leave this stage before I'd claimed my victory. As ridiculous as this sudden-death round was, I'd prepared myself to see it through to the end.

The order we went in was decided by an impartial coin toss, and it was ruled that Edward would be batting first.

"Lizzie..." he said, looking me in the eyes as he faced me.

I could hear several gulps in the audience before everyone fell quiet. It was pretty remarkable how silent the auditorium got, considering it was seating hundreds of people.

As the crown prince's deep purple eyes locked onto mine, I saw my figure in their reflection—mine and mine alone. It felt like an optical illusion, as if it were only the two of us.

"I love you."

The girls in the audience shrieked with delight. I parried Edward's attack with a smile.

Hmm. So, this is what I'm in for.

I won't lie—I *did* feel a little uncomfortable. Well, maybe "awkward" was a

better word. If anything, I thought I might burst out laughing. The closest thing I could compare it to was one of those “you laugh, you lose” games you’d play as a kid. But this time, no one was making funny faces. We were looking each other in the eyes, both dead serious.

I was impressed by Edward’s performance. He’d said the line without the slightest hint of embarrassment or artifice. He’d said it so earnestly, it almost felt like he meant it. Honestly, who knew the crown prince had such a talent for acting?

Bravo, Your Highness.

He wasn’t the only one who could put on a poker face, though. Nor was he the only one with acting chops. Still, I had a feeling this might turn into a war of attrition. Steeling my resolve, I took a confrontational stance.

“Your Highness.” I took his chin in my hand, turning his head to face me. Then, with the softest, most loving smile I could manage, I cooed, “I love you.”

I watched him blush bright red as soon as the words had left my mouth.



For a moment, everything seemed to come to a standstill. Then he slapped my hand away and averted his gaze, covering his mouth with his right hand.

Huh? Wait... What just happened?

I sure hadn't expected *that* response—and neither, it seemed, had anyone in the audience. We all looked on, stunned, as Edward shrank away blushing.

Could you blame us for being surprised? Everyone was so used to the crown prince evading anything and everything with his trademark princely smile. They'd probably expected him to flash that expression of his over and over again, winning the sudden-death-round test of endurance without any trouble. No one had expected *this*.

It seemed that even the crown prince himself was surprised. He appeared so uncomfortable that he wouldn't even look at me.

"Your Highness?"

After a long silence, he snapped in a surprisingly hostile tone, "*What?!*"

Hey, come on. No need to get upset.

"I guess you and Robert really *are* related."

"Could you *please* not rub it in?" he whispered through gritted teeth.

And that's how I won Mister First Royal Academy. Alas, my victory was bittersweet. Every girl in the audience had had her eyes glued on Edward's face, following his every movement with rapt attention. One girl had even fainted.

It wasn't hard to see why—the crown prince's preternatural beauty was only enhanced by the blush that radiated across his face. Plus, I'm sure it must've felt like a real treat to see his typically indestructible, Buddha-like smile fall apart. It was probably the first time they'd ever seen him flustered.

It was a whole other side of him, and girls ate that up. It was just the laws of nature.

So, although I'd won, the only topic on everyone's lips for the next several weeks would be Edward. It was like how the second-place comedy troupe always received more attention than the first in a comedy contest. It was a

Pyrrhic victory; I'd won the battle, but I'd lost the war.

I'd never felt so let down by achieving first place.

Afterword

Masamune Okazaki here. Nice to meet you, everyone. Thanks for picking up *From Two-Bit Baddie to Total Heartthrob: This Villainess Will Cross-Dress to Impress!*

Ever since I was a kid, I've always been strangely drawn to afterwords. Now that I'm actually sitting down and writing one, though, I'm kind of at a loss. I'm realizing that I don't have much to say about myself. The only interesting topic I can think about is the tasty hot meals from the convenience store I've recently eaten.

I feel like it would be really cool if I took the stoic route and just left things at "thanks," but I've realized that I'm actually not the stoic type at all. So, I've decided to just try my hand at a normal afterword.

I like buying lottery tickets, so I usually buy about one every half year or so. My wins are pretty small, though. I've bought about five three-thousand-yen tickets that I've won a modest three thousand three hundred from.

Each time I realize that I've come out just a little bit ahead, I find myself thinking, *I guess that's my lot in life*. Sometimes I stare at my hands and it really hits me that, while I'm reasonably happy and lucky, I just wasn't built for any sort of great success. Maybe it's just the star I was born under.

For an author of middling luck like me, it's obvious that having my story published in book form isn't just dumb luck—it's like winning the jackpot. I don't know who or what I have to thank for that, but maybe it's all due to the extraordinary luck of my readers? I don't think this story could have been noticed by publishers and printed as a book, much less won an award, if it hadn't been for some truly blessed readers sharing their fortune with me.

Maybe you—the reader holding this very book, who's made it all the way to the afterword—are to thank for this. So, I appreciate you for sharing your luck with me. I'll work hard to pay you back by writing an entertaining, feel-good story, so I hope you'll keep reading and following along with Elizabeth and

company's adventures.

On a final note, I'd like to thank everyone involved in the making of this book, including the illustrator, Hayase Jyun; the manga adaptation leads, Gucche and Era Ichi; everyone in the editorial department; the printers; and the bookshop staff. In addition, I'm grateful to everyone who read this story as it was being published on the internet. From the bottom of my heart, thank you so much!

That's all for today. I'll be praying for you all to win the lottery too.

Friend Data

Character Profile

Name

Elizabeth Burton

The Basics

Birthday

April 9th

Skills

Swordsmanship and all forms of exercise

Hobby

Building muscle

Family

Father, mother, older brother,
younger brother (adopted)

Likes

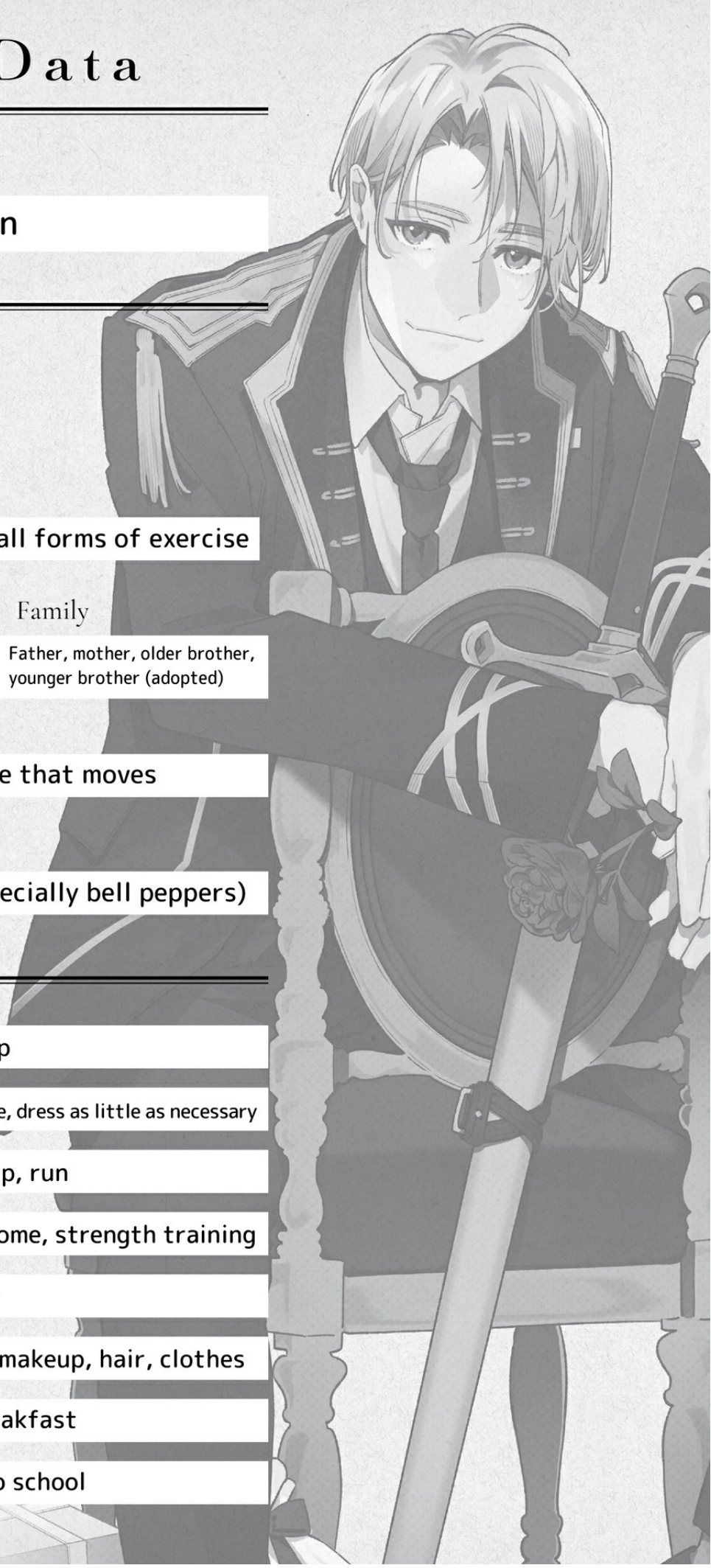
Family, anything cute that moves

Dislikes

Anything bitter (especially bell peppers)

Morning Routine

5:00 a.m.	Wake up
5:15 a.m.	Wash face, dress as little as necessary
5:30 a.m.	Warm up, run
6:00 a.m.	Come home, strength training
6:45 a.m.	Shower
7:00 a.m.	Put on makeup, hair, clothes
8:00 a.m.	Eat breakfast
8:45 a.m.	Head to school



The questions
you're dying to ask! /

Girl ♥ Talk

Q1 Let's get right to it: is there anyone you have a crush on?

Well, not at the moment...

But I'd love to meet my special someone one day.

And I'm always on the hunt for the cute kitten that might be my soulmate. ♥

Q2 What's your type?

Someone who likes me, I guess.

Q3 What's the perfect spot for a first date?

Where do I begin? I've got too many ideas!

I'd love to go somewhere that my date would enjoy. I'm happy to escort them somewhere I know or to have them show me somewhere new—that's a great way to learn about someone.

Q4 Is there something the opposite sex does that leaves you speechless?

The opposite sex...?

Well...probably seeing a different side to them.

I think that contrast really packs a punch.

Q5 What do you look for in a lover?

As long as we can be happy together, that's enough for me.

If I had to be more specific...it would be nice to have the kind of relationship where we had no trouble saying "thank you" or "I'm sorry."



Friend Data

Character Profile

Name

Edward Diagrantz

The Basics

Birthday

November 14th

Skills

Nothing in particular (since he's better than average at most things)

Hobby

Crafts

Family

Father, mother,
younger half brother

Likes

Anything beautiful

Dislikes

Anything fleeting

Q1 Let's get right to it: is there anyone you have a crush on?

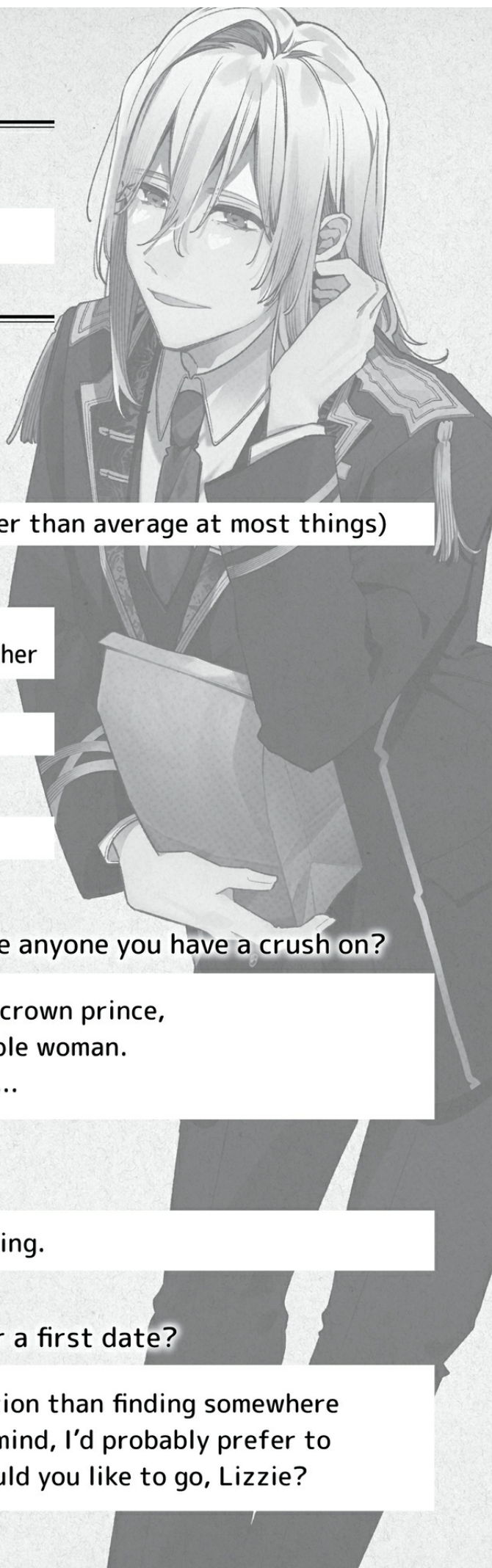
That's a secret. Even if I did, as the crown prince,
I know it's my duty to marry a suitable woman.
But maybe love could sway my heart...

Q2 What's your type?

Devious women. Hee hee... Just kidding.

Q3 What's the perfect spot for a first date?

I'm less focused on the specific location than finding somewhere
we can talk at leisure. With that in mind, I'd probably prefer to
invite them to the castle. Where would you like to go, Lizzie?



Friend Data

Character Profile

Name

Isaac Guildford

The Basics

Birthday

August 27th

Skills

Studying

Hobby

Reading, investing, chess

Family

Father, mother (deceased), two older brothers

Likes

Logic and scientific matters

Dislikes

Women, all forms of exercise

Q1 Let's get right to it: is there anyone you have a crush on?

I already told you I was in love, remember?

Q2 What's your type?

Why would you ask me that? Love is something you feel towards a specific individual, not a type of person. I don't think there's any point in trying to classify people into types, anyway.

Q3 What's the perfect spot for a first date?

I need you to be more specific. What counts as a "date"? Is it just two people spending time alone, or do they have to go out somewhere? Is this question predicated on the assumption that I'm married or engaged? Or neither? Are you asking where I'd go out with someone before we're engaged? Because that's highly inappropriate.







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From Two-Bit Baddie to Total Heartthrob: This Villainess Will Cross-Dress to Impress! Volume 1

by Masamune Okazaki

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