
Fuyu Aoki
Illust. Minori Aritani
1
Safe & Sound
in the Arms of an
ELITE KNIGHT


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Safe & Sound in the Arms of an Elite Knight: Volume 1 [Complete]

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Prologue

One evening, in the border town of Shadaf in the Kingdom of Rose...

“This is all *your* fault!”

The sharp sound of a slap followed by a dull thud rang out from within a room in the estate of the Margrave of Ardennes.

A young girl lay crumpled on the floor. The force of the strike had sent her petite frame flying. She splayed both arms out in front of her in an effort to prop herself up. Tears welled in her eyes, and she hung her head low. Her cheek, already swollen in every which place from previous blows, flushed hot with pain.

Her frizzy, shoulder length beige-blonde hair was covered in soot. Her skin was a pale, sickly white; malnourishment had left her thin and fragile. She was clothed in the simple attire of a handmaiden, ragged and dirtied all over.

“My apologies, mother. Please, forgive me.”

Her apology came right on the heels of the blow, for she knew if it didn’t, it would only be received with greater violence.

This young woman, subject to cruelty day in and day out, treated as lesser and despicable, was Chloe Ardennes.

Chloe lowered her head in deference and uttered words of apology again and again and again to the woman—her mother, Isabella—who had just struck her.

Isabella fixed a glare on Chloe usually reserved for vermin and bellowed, “You. If only you’d never been born, I’d—”

A barrage of verbal abuse followed.

You don’t deserve to live. You are useless. If only you’d never been born. The string of insults was rote to Chloe. She simply endured the abuse and continued to apologize, but that did little to abate Isabella’s anger. Finally, Isabella grabbed Chloe by the collar, lifted her face up from the floor, and struck her cheek once more with all her might.

A warm sensation gushed from Chloe's nose as splotches of dark red bloomed in her field of view.

Drip... drip...

The last blow had ruptured something in her nose.

Isabella heaved ragged, shallow breaths. There was no hint of compassion or pity in her eyes—only contempt.

A proper, decent mother would never subject her daughter to such a pitiless gaze; Chloe knew as much, and had resigned herself to her condition regardless.

"If you leave so much as a single drop of your filthy blood on my floors..." Isabella uttered one final threat before wrenching the door open and seeing herself out.

Thank goodness that was the worst of it today, Chloe thought as she pinched her nose to stop the bleeding. She finally had a moment to compose herself.

Once the bleeding stopped, she woozily picked herself up off the floor, but froze upon seeing the dark splotches of her own blood there. *I need to clean this up now before it dries.*

As she rushed to find something to wipe it up with, a voice rang out from behind her.

"Oh dear, oh my... How terrible. It happened again today, didn't it?"

Chloe turned around to see a woman with fiery red hair that gently bobbed up and down as she chuckled to herself. Unlike Chloe, her skin was as white as porcelain, and her sublime figure the subject of every man's desire. She'd slipped into an extravagant dress—the spitting image of a noblewoman's daughter.

"Lily..." Chloe addressed her sister three years her elder.

Lily's face twisted into a wicked expression as she stood next to Chloe.

Chloe felt her shoulders shudder. She was all too familiar with the violence her sister could enact.

"Say...you're free, aren't you?" said Lily. "I've a tea party at Count Morgan's

the day after tomorrow. There's this dress I've been dying to wear but I need it embroidered with something lovely."

"An embroidery...?" Chloe was quite familiar with the request—or command, rather. Having been forced to do all kinds of needlework since her childhood, her embroideries were well-received at tea parties. Though Lily, of course, never attributed a single shred of credit to Chloe.

Chloe heaved a sigh internally. "Of course. When do you need it?"

"Oh I don't know... How about...tomorrow morning?"

"To-Tomorrow morning?" Chloe exclaimed. It was already late into the night. That would be a tough deadline to meet, even for someone of her skill. "I-I still have chores to do, don't you think you're—"

Lily struck Chloe's other cheek—the one her mother had spared.

"Don't you think I'm what?" An indifferent expression on her face, Lily grabbed a handful of Chloe's hair and gave it a hard yank.

"Ow, ow! Stop, stop!" Chloe protested.

"Don't you mean, *please stop, dear sister*?" Lily taunted, throwing Chloe to the floor. Looking down at her, a sadistic smile crept onto her face. "Did that hurt? You poor thing..."

Chloe fought to hold back the tears that threatened to pour out.

"Oh but what can you do?" Contorting her lips into a sneer, Lily emphasized every last word. "You're a cursed child, after all."

Chapter One: To the Royal Capital

The circumstances that led to Chloe's current existence as a "cursed child" and the cruelty she suffered because of it can be traced back to a chain of ill-fated turns.

Sixteen years ago, in the frontier town of Shadaf in the Kingdom of Rose, Chloe was born the second daughter to Margrave Clement and Margravine Isabella. Upon her birth, Chloe presented with a prominent birthmark on her back, which led Isabella and her midwife to believe one thing.

This child must have been cursed.

Now, it wasn't exactly rare for a baby to be born with a birthmark, but Chloe's was unusually deep and dark in coloration. Shadaf was far removed from the royal capital, and its people were given to superstition. As a result, what started as a half-subjective, almost personal prejudice against Chloe ended up attributed to her as a "curse." It was only reinforced by the plague and famine that had settled over the town at the time.

"This hideous child sickens me."

So proclaimed Isabella as she washed her hands of the child, relinquishing her care to one of her handmaidens. By a stroke of luck, the handmaiden charged with raising her was a native of the royal capital. She did not indulge in the townspeople's superstitions, and paid no mind to the birthmark on her back. The good fortune, however, would not last long.

Half a year after Chloe was born, her father passed away from a bout of plague. To say it aggrieved Isabella would be an understatement. Luckily, their eldest son was already of age, so succession rights were not in dispute, but misfortune would soon come knocking once again.

The next year, and the year after that, plague continued to ravage the land, claiming the lives of many in Shadaf. The Ardennes were spared no grief; Isabella lost her younger sister and her second son to the disease. Isabella herself also fell ill and found herself on death's door, but somehow managed to

cling to her life.

Isabella's mind began to drift.

This misfortune—all of it. It all must be because of Chloe's curse.

Faced with overwhelming adversity, the human mind tends to deflect blame and rationalize it in terms it can understand. While logically, the origin of the plague could be traced back to rats from the royal capital, and the deaths in the family could be explained away as nothing more than a series of cruel coincidences, Isabella would not see it that way. It *must've* been Chloe's fault. No doubt about it, the repulsive child.

Temperamental, dogmatic, and mentally fragile, Isabella could not recover from the loss of her husband and son, and instead chose to use Chloe as an outlet for her anger. The "cursed child" rhetoric gradually spread from Isabella to the townspeople, and eventually they too came to believe in it. Shortly after, Chloe would be confined to the estate and forbidden from leaving, on account of it being unbecoming for someone of a cursed nature to wander around freely outside.

Thus began the abuse.

"If it weren't for *you,* my husband would still be alive!" Isabella would rage. Following her example, Chloe's sister Lily and the household servants would join in on her unholy crusade.

To those of us blessed with perspective, this might seem like yet another tragic case of the residents of an isolated backwater succumbing to mass hysteria, but try explaining that to the young Chloe, who had to live through it all. Called a cursed child by her mother, her sister, and her servants, Chloe, too, began to believe she was cursed.

If there were any silver linings to be found in this whole situation, it might be the fact that Chloe was a naturally resilient and optimistic child, along with the fact that she had an unwavering ally in the handmaiden that had raised her.

"Don't listen to them," she would say to Chloe. She would prove to be an unconditional source of encouragement and comfort for the young girl.

In fact, if it weren't for her, Chloe might not have survived.

Once, Isabella contemplated disposing of Chloe. After all, why let a cursed child continue to live? It would've been more than trivial to dispose of a babbling infant and pass it off as the plague's doing, but thanks to the handmaiden's intervention, Chloe was spared.

If you kill a child that is cursed, it will only bring forth further disaster...

She has potential, it would be worth your while to keep her alive...

Unfazed by talk of curses and superstitions, the handmaiden brought forth argument after argument against Isabella's plans of infanticide. In the end, her efforts proved fruitful, and Chloe was spared. In exchange, Chloe would be worked to the bone and subjected to conditions even their servants would find unconscionable, but at least she would live.

Alas, when Chloe reached the age of ten, a death in the family forced her guardian angel to return home, and Chloe lost her sole pillar of support.

And now we arrive at the last misfortune. Normally, birthmarks disappear between the ages of five to six. Chloe's, however, still remained at age ten, though it had grown slightly lighter. That was the final straw that led to Chloe's current fate. Abused by her family, worked like a dog all around the estate, Chloe Ardennes was now sixteen years old.

And she was still treated worse than the dirty, worn-out rags she used to clean with.

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"There. Only half to go."

In a detached building on the estate grounds, Chloe dutifully stitched away at Lily's requested embroidery. The time was three hours past midnight. After doing laundry for the entire household and preparing for the next day's chores, it had gotten quite late. As it was almost her time to begin preparing breakfast for the next morning—well, this morning—she was hoping to finish up soon.

Though usually unthinkable for the daughter of a margrave, Chloe performed almost all the Ardennes household's chores at Isabella's behest. Everything

from simple tasks like cleaning and laundry, to cooking and gardening—even administrative affairs like the estate's financial matters—were her obligation.

"I let you have your life, so you'll work until you drop dead!" Isabella had proclaimed from the very start of Chloe's career.

For better or worse, Chloe was born with fast hands, a sharp mind, and the stamina to match. Coupled with her nigh-compulsive, guilt-driven cursed child complex, she alone could manage the work of five servants. This of course meant that, unbeknownst to their master Isabella, the other servants saw fit to neglect their duties and live the good life. All the while, Chloe devoted herself to chores, bowed her head in greeting to her own family, and worked tirelessly through her nights on administration.

As a result, the current estate was so precariously reliant on Chloe for the running of its daily affairs that even Isabella, previously so disgusted by her that she wouldn't even lay eyes on her, would admit that she was indeed capable, though not enough to warrant praise.

Well, that's simply expected of her, she would think.

But, everyone has their limit, even for someone of Chloe's stamina. Worked without rest, abused by her mother, harassed by her sister—Chloe was worn out. Assaulted by exhaustion, sleepiness, her aching body, and above all else—

"It's so cold."

—the freezing cold that numbed her hands and fingers, she was progressing at a snail's pace.

Chloe had called this storage-room-*cum*-living quarters home for as long as she could remember. Equipped with nothing more than a crude bed, a table and chair with broken legs, and walls and windows so drafty they couldn't keep an elephant out, it wouldn't be amiss to say she was living in a shack. Needless to say, no efforts were made to insulate the building after Chloe moved in, so every winter, she would suffer through the brunt of the bone-chilling cold. And while she did eventually get a furnace, she used it only sparingly, as she was provided with such a bare minimum amount of firewood, you'd think they only cared about her not freezing to death.

She only bothered to break it out when conditions grew so dire that she'd begin to dip in and out of consciousness.

Draped in a thin blanket that was only slightly better than nothing, Chloe let out a big yawn. Was she tired, or about to pass out? She couldn't tell. If it were the latter, she could finally start up the fireplace, but then again, that meant things were *bad.*

She pricked herself on the thumb with the sewing needle.

She needed to focus. If she couldn't finish Lily's floral embroidery exactly as requested, she would have to face her wrath again. She mustered what little remained of her willpower and continued to stitch away.

"Done..." Finally, she finished—just as the sun was about to crest the horizon.

She looked over her handiwork a few times. *A pretty good job, if I do say so myself*.

Chloe finally had a moment to breathe. Her hands were pricked all over from the needle she'd used to keep herself awake, but if it spared her from her sister, it'd be but a small price to pay.

"How much longer do I have to keep this up...?" she muttered.

Thoughts like these would intrude on her mind every now and then.

Is this really all there is? she thought. In her heart of hearts, Chloe yearned for something more. If her mundane days were at least peaceful and tranquil, then that would be something, but the cruelty she suffered at the hands of her family and servants was anything but.

If Chloe hadn't known of anything else, then perhaps she wouldn't have these thoughts, but alas, she knew. Chloe's guardian, Shirley, had taught her much.

Now listen, young lady. The world is much, much larger than you think. In the royal capital, there are so many buildings, they cover up all the mountains and rivers, and compared to this town, there are so many people you couldn't even imagine! Best of all, it's filled with all the most delicious and beautiful things you can think of. For example...

It didn't take long for Chloe, who grew up knowing nothing more than the

town she was raised in, to be captivated by Shirley's tales about the royal capital.

"I'd love to...go there one day..."

Even though it was something that might never happen, she couldn't help but wish.

In truth, if Chloe had so desired, escaping was well within her means. While she was prohibited from leaving the estate, it had no guards to keep her there. In fact, she even knew the general route to the royal capital thanks to Shirley.

The only thing that stopped her was the *distance*. Even someone like Chloe—who had developed immense stamina from trekking around her vast estate since childhood—would find it unreachable on foot.

As such, Chloe had long believed in the fatalistic notion that she'd never be able to reach the capital by herself. On top of that, the sense of guilt she grew up conditioned to feel chained her down like a shackle.

A brand new world...the big city...

Her aspirations for the royal capital would fade away as just that.

Lost in her thoughts, Chloe drifted off to sleep.

"Oh, no!" Chloe shot up. "What time is it?!"

From the position of the sun, it was all too likely she'd overslept. *If breakfast is late I'm going to get scolded again!*

Cutting her own morning routine short, Chloe rushed towards the main estate. A few minutes later, she arrived and began to head towards the kitchen, only to find Isabella standing before her.

"M-Mother?!" The sight alone made Chloe tremble with fear. "W-What is it?"

"I said to not leave a single drop of your filthy blood on my floors, did I not?" Isabella's tone was calm and clear as ice. Something was clearly wrong.

Chloe understood the meaning behind Isabella's words immediately and dropped to the floor on her hands and knees. "I-I'm so terribly sorry, mother. I

thought I'd wiped everything spotless. I checked over and over and over again, but I—"

Thwack.

Isabella struck Chloe on the side of her head with full force. Knocked down to the floor, Chloe wrestled her upper body up and stared fearfully at her.

"Why? Why are you like this?" Isabella looked down at Chloe, murderous intent in her eyes.

It was then that she noticed the knife in Isabella's right hand. Its silver blade glinted menacingly.

Chloe's reaction was delayed. She could not process what was happening. Her own mother brandishing a blade at her? *This must be a dream*, she thought. But the pain ringing in her head reminded her that it was all too real. Her mind went blank from shock. "M-Mother, wh-what are you—"

"Why, why, why, WHY?! Why did *you* have to live? Why not my husband? Or my son?! Why did they have to die?!" Isabella drowned out Chloe's feeble squeaks.

Chloe was at a loss for words, paralyzed in front of her screaming hysterical mother—she had never seen her like this before.

Isabella's violent outbursts toward Chloe could be distilled down to one simple impetus: since losing her husband and her son, her anxieties and mental distresses built up over the course of days, weeks, and years. As much as Isabella would take it out on Chloe, she was little more than a punching bag—capable of absorbing the abuse but able to do nothing more than apologize. Isabella's acts towards Chloe had gradually escalated to their logical conclusion.

While in her own mind Isabella may not have fully meant to take her daughter's life, to Chloe, cornered and at her wits end, there was no other interpretation.

Isabella stared down at Chloe with crazed, bloodshot eyes. "You are a cursed child! You bring nothing but disaster and misfortune! You can't be allowed to live!"

Isabella raised the knife.

I-I don't want to die! A single thought ran through Chloe's mind. Her survival instincts took over. Her body reacted and threw itself to the side.

Thunk.

The knife made a wholly unimpressive sound as it struck the floor, but to Chloe, it might as well have been the sound of the reaper's scythe coming for her soul.

Having thrown herself to the floor, Chloe looked up to see Isabella on all fours, her knife thrust into the floor where Chloe was just a moment ago.

Isabella panted raggedly, like a rabid animal.

A brief moment of silence fell before Isabella slowly craned her neck around to look at Chloe. Her eyes brimmed with rage, fixed on her target.

Run... RUN!

Her inner voice screaming, her heart pounding in her chest, the sweat breaking out across every inch of her body—every fiber of her being was telling her to flee. Tripping over herself, Chloe scrambled to her feet and broke off into a run, leaving her mother behind.

"Come back here right this instant!"

Chloe ignored her mother's bellows behind her.

"This...stupid..."

While Isabella attempted to free the knife that she had planted unexpectedly deep into the floor, Chloe made her escape.

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Chloe panted heavily. She'd made it back to her room. As early in the morning as it was, she managed not to run into anyone else.

Chloe swiftly barricaded the door, planting her desk and chair in front of it. Despite only sprinting a distance that normally wouldn't even wind her, Chloe's

entire body was covered in sweat.

“I’m... I’m alive, right?” Chloe looked down at her own hands uneasily. Pale, sickly, and quivering ever so slightly, those were indeed her hands, and they were indeed still moving.

Chloe breathed a sigh of relief in her mind.

But if I were just a second too late...that knife...that knife would’ve...

“I can’t,” Chloe uttered with quiet conviction. She felt everything she’d kept repressed inside of her well up in an instant. Her memories assaulted every corner of her mind—all the pain she went through, the suffering, the anguish, the despair...

The despair the despair the despair the despair the despair.

She’d endured so much.

She’d endured too much.

“I... I can’t be here anymore!!!”

Chloe made up her mind. She was going to run away from this place.

She bolted into action. Change of clothes, water, non-perishables, warm furs, flints, a bare minimum of personal effects: she jammed everything she needed and everything she could need—along with a memento from Shirley—into a large, shoulder-slung sack.

Her hands moved quickly. She was afraid that Isabella would free the knife and come after her again. If there was ever even the slightest possibility that Isabella could still reach her, she would not feel safe.

She found herself wishing for someone in the house to come to her rescue and stop the enraged woman with a knife in her hand, but to no avail.

BAM!

A dull sound emanated from the door. Chloe’s heart jumped out of her chest.

BAM BAM BAM BAM BAM BAM BAM!

Chloe shrieked in fear.

“OPEN THE DOOR. OPEN THE DOOR RIGHT THIS INSTANT OPEN THE DOOOOR!” Isabelle roared, loud enough to rupture eardrums.

The pounding at the door went on, Chloe’s makeshift barricade sliding and shifting with every hit. Her composure on a razor’s edge, she continued to pack away with single-minded focus. As one final step, Chloe took the embroidered dress off the chair back and crammed it into her pack—a small act of defiance against the sister she suffered at the hands of for so long.

Chloe stood up. At that moment, the pounding on the door stopped.

A terrifying silence descended upon her.

Did...did she give up? Just as a small glimmer of hope crossed Chloe’s mind, a different noise shook the room.

Chloe turned her head towards the source of the commotion—to see Isabella glaring at her through the door-side window, a fist-sized rock in her grip.

The instant Chloe met Isabella’s eyes, she broke off into a run. She dashed to the back of the room, towards the window on the opposite side. She opened it and threw herself through, just as the sound of a shattering window reverberated behind her.

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Chloe ran as fast as her legs would carry her.

Flying out the window of the detached room she had called home for sixteen years, she tumbled a few steps before picking herself up and accelerating, leaving Isabella’s piercing screams far behind her.

She ran on, not offering a single look behind her.

Despite barely sleeping the night before, the exhausted and sleep-deprived Chloe found herself overflowing with energy. Crossing the wide-open plains that made up the Ardennes’ estate, she reached the walls that had separated her from the outside world for sixteen years. She scrambled over them, emerging on the other side—and kept running.

Basking in the morning sun's gentle glow, Chloe continued down the path that led away from the estate, not a stray thought in her mind. The fog of fear that had clouded over her had dispersed and given way to a feeling of uncontested liberation.

"I... I did it... I... I did it!" Chloe gasped in between ragged breaths.

She had fled that home of hers of her own volition. She had finally shaken off the chains that had bound her for so long. As the reality of the situation set in, Chloe felt unparalleled joy.

Every bit of scenery that flew past her was new and refreshing. The outside world that she had been hesitant about for so long was now exciting and positively sparkling with possibility. At that moment, she even found peace with the sweat lingering on her skin.

She hadn't a single obligation, and every single opportunity was laid out before her. This was a first for Chloe.

As for what she wanted to do first... Well, it's safe to say she had an idea or two.

After running for a while and checking that no one was coming after her, Chloe stopped and opened up her pack. She rummaged around until she found it: a hand-drawn map—the memento Shirley had left her. After getting her bearings and figuring out the path forward, she set off once again.

Her destination could be but one place.

The capital city of the Kingdom of Rose: Liberta.

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How much time had passed since that fateful day?

It must have been ten days...no, a fortnight since Chloe made her departure from the Ardennes' domain. A lot had happened to her since then, but those stories can wait for another time.

"I-I can't...any further..." Pelted by droplets of freezing rain, Chloe slumped

against the side of a building.

An alien scene unfolded before her: rows of brick-and-mortar construction flanked both sides of a wide, bustling street, as throngs of people and horse-drawn carriages flew by. One thing was for sure: she was definitely no longer in the verdant realm of the Ardennes.

Chloe had finally made it to Liberta. Even with the rain, the moment she laid eyes on the royal capital, she was elated beyond words. With her last bit of energy, she'd willed herself into the city limits—but after traversing mountains and wilderness for days and days with limited food and warm clothing, her emaciated and exhausted legs would carry her no further.

After having briefly wandered the city streets, Chloe calmed down, and a single thought floated through her head. *I...huh? What...what do I do now?*

Having finally reached the promised land that she had dreamed about for so long, the one thread of resolve that had been holding her together had suddenly snapped. Her consciousness wavering, Chloe plopped herself down on a street corner.

The rain was the killer. Despite moving quite a ways south to reach Liberta, the rain was still rain—its merciless, frigid drops sapped her of her body heat.

Her body was hot to the touch, but she felt chills. Her heart had begun to palpitate. The unrelenting stress had taken a toll on her body.

I might...be in real trouble...

The last time she felt such an overwhelming sense of crisis was when her sister abandoned her on a mountain within the Ardennes' domain back when they were children. On that occasion she managed to follow the animal trails back to safe harbor, but this time...this time was different.

She was alone in the big city, with no money and no one to call on. Shirley *was* here, supposedly, somewhere—but Chloe had no way of finding out where. After making it all the way here without so much as a plan to speak of, she realized she was in a dire situation.

A steady flow of pedestrians made their way past her, but no one offered more than a curious glance in her direction. Was it that empathy and common

decency were concepts lost to the urban-dwelling folk of the capital? Or was it perhaps that most were simply prudent enough to avoid getting involved with the odd-looking, ragged girl squatting on a street corner?

Just as she started to think that perhaps this was the end, three shadowy figures crept up next to her.

“You lost, missy?” A phlegmy voice called out to her.

Chloe raised her head to see three shady men standing over her with broad, off-putting grins on their faces. The man in front had a clean-shaven head and was quite large in stature. Behind him stood a skeevy-looking man with long blonde hair and another stout man with a bowl-shaped haircut.

A certain conversation from her childhood began replaying in her mind:

“Now listen, young lady. The capital might sound like a fun place, but you must also be aware of the dangers.”

“Dan...gers?”

“Depraved individuals who would want to take advantage of an adorable little girl like you, for example.”

“De...praved?”

“Well, I suppose it *might* be a little early for us to be having this conversation.”

It seemed that Chloe would come to understand the meaning of Shirley’s words—though she’d have preferred not to find out this way.

“You a runaway? Lucky us, eh boys?”

“Oh, we’re gonna have some *fun* tonight.”

Clad in tattered clothes and blown-out boots, the three men eyed Chloe up and down. Judging by their previous remarks, these men must’ve approached her for what Shirley had called “depraved” purposes.

“Alright. Get up.” The bald man, presumably the leader of the group, grabbed

Chloe's arm and yanked.

She whimpered. The frail and lightweight Chloe was brought up to her feet almost instantly.

"Well look at that. She got a pretty face on her, don't she fellas?" he said, to the jeers of the other two.

The three leaned in to get a closer look at Chloe—their yellowed teeth, putrid breath, and bug eyes drew close to her face. As repulsed as she was, Chloe was unable to put up a fight—the exhaustion was simply too great. Yelling and drawing attention to herself was surely an option, but, as someone who had lived a life of subservience, she would not.

She could not.

Running away from home was an extraordinary case, as she'd been faced with mortal harm, but ordinarily an action like that would've been out of the question. Her obedient upbringing meant she had developed almost no sense of autonomy or self-determination.

"Come on, let's go." The bald man urged Chloe to move. "I said, let's move." Utterly exhausted, Chloe remained motionless—which he took as an act of defiance.

He clicked his tongue in annoyance. "Alright boys, gimme a hand. Doesn't look like this one wants to come quietly."

"Gotcha, boss."

"Shame."

The three of them began dragging the exhausted Chloe along.

Do I even fight it anymore...? The thought crossed Chloe's mind. She knew that bad things were in store for her, surely, but if she simply put up with it, just as she always had, it would go away eventually, right?

They would force her into all sorts of unpleasant things, but at least they wouldn't kill her, right?

Looks like the reaper has finally caught up to me.

She had won her freedom, even if just for a moment. To her, that was enough.

I'm so tired...

Chloe closed her eyes, resigning herself to her fate—and yet...

No.

A voice cried out from the deepest, most intimate corner of her heart.

No, no, no, no, NO! Is this really how it's going to end? After all I've been through? I'm going to get taken away by these strange men and let them do as they please? No, no, no, no! I'll die before I let that happen!

With her last ounce of remaining strength, she cried out in a raspy whisper, "Somebody..."

The men stopped. "What's that? You finally say something missy?" One taunted. He mimed like he was hard of hearing and brought his ear next to Chloe's face.

"That's enough." An unfamiliar voice joined the fray.

"Huh? Who're you?"

Unlike the other three men, the newcomer's voice was deep and resolute. Finding comfort in its gentle, firm caress, Chloe slowly lifted her head to spy the source of the commotion.



Facing off against the three men stood the most handsome man she had ever seen. His disheveled black hair was darker than night and loosely combed back. Behind a simple shirt hid a lean and athletic, yet not overly muscular, physique. A dark and brooding expression was etched on his face, and a strong, chiseled nose loomed over tightly bound lips. A hint of youthful innocence remained on his otherwise sharp features, suggesting that he was not that much older than Chloe herself. Standing about two heads taller than her perfectly average height, he cradled a large bag in one arm, possibly filled with groceries from a recent shopping trip.

How...handsome... Thoughts of delirium floated through Chloe's head.

The young man's gaze slowly passed over the three men before coming to a stop on Chloe. His emerald eyes were as sharp as a knife and shone with an unshakeable resolve, giving off the impression that he was not someone to be messed with.

"You got a problem, kid?" Without hesitation, the leader attempted to intimidate the mysterious young man.

"I see three men trying to take a woman somewhere against her will. If that is the case, I hope you know that I cannot allow that to happen."

Hearing the young man's bold proclamation, all three men burst out into raucous laughter, shaking and bobbing so violently Chloe felt nauseous by association.

"Looks like we got a hero on our hands, boys," the bald man said. "Tell you what, I ain't gon' judge, you can play pretend all you like, but this ain't your business, so move along."

"Not a very convincing statement coming from a lowlife who's trying to take advantage of a vulnerable lady," the young man shot back.

A pale blue vein in the bald man's head bulged. "Well, sounds like this one's got a death wish, don't he?"

The two goons behind him shrugged. "Guess we gotta teach him a lesson."

"Threatening violence on top of assaulting a woman? How foolish."

The three goons were taken aback. “Who do you think you are getting off on false accusations like that?! Look at her, she ain’t resisting. You call this assault?”

Ignoring the drivel spewing out of the bald man’s mouth, the young man met Chloe’s eyes with an earnest gaze. “Then let me ask the lady.”

Chloe looked up, stunned.

“Did you agree to go with these men?”

In response, she dropped her head low, and uttered with trembling lips, “...Me.”

“Louder.”

“Please...help me.”

“Understood.”

With a nod, the young man slowly approached the group of three.

“You’re starting to piss me off, asshole,” the leader said. “It’s three against one. Get ’im, boys!”

The two thugs gave their leader affirmative grunts, then rushed the young man. Chloe was released from their grip and fell to her knees. She could only watch helplessly as the scene unfolded.

It was over in an instant.

Baldie threw the first punch—which the young man was quick to avoid by swiftly jerking his head to the side. Hitting air, Baldie stumbled forward. Seeing an opening, the young man used his free hand to deliver a chop to the back of Baldie’s neck. He let out a pained cry as he fell to the ground.

Next came Blondie. The young man dodged his attack with a clean, effortless motion before wrapping around him and countering with a swift kick to the back. Croaking like a dying frog, Blondie collapsed, incapacitated.

“Y-You bastard!” Having just seen his two buddies eat dirt in the blink of an eye, fear flickered in Bowl Cut’s eyes. He reached for a weapon in his breast pocket, when suddenly an onion whizzed by at incredible speed and smacked

him square between the eyes. He pitched over and fell on his back.

The young man nimbly caught the projectile before it hit the ground—which he then nonchalantly stuffed back in his grocery bag.

Chloe could hardly believe her own eyes.

Whimpering and groaning, Baldie and Blondie pulled themselves off the ground, only to find the young man standing before them. “Haven’t had enough?”

Humiliated and demoralized, the two men cowered. “This...this guy’s crazy, boss!”

“Yeah, let’s get outta here!”

Dragging Bowl Cut behind them, Baldie and Blondie ran with their tails tucked between their legs.

“I suppose catching them is out of the question...” the young man murmured to himself.

To her savior, Chloe uttered two words. “You’re...amazing...”

She couldn’t help but marvel at his strength. Every aspect of his demeanor, from his posture, to his technique, to the way he improvised a weapon out of nothing, revealed the unmistakable signs of a seasoned fighter.

She gulped. *Who...who have I just run into?*

At that moment, the rain subsided, and Chloe was left in awe.

A beam of sunlight pierced through the thick cloud cover, illuminating the young man’s silhouette. She found herself enchanted by his imposing yet chivalrous beauty.

“Are you okay?” The young man moved next to her and dropped to his knees.

Their eyes met.

“Y-Yes, I, uhm...” *Thank you for saving me*—is what Chloe wanted to say, but the words caught in her throat. Her lips floundered like a fish out of water.

“Your face is red. What’s wrong? Do you have a fever?” He put his hand up to her forehead, causing her to let out an odd whimper.

“Hm. Yes, you do.” The young man’s face turned pensive. “And you’re getting warmer. Are you okay?”

Chloe struggled with her words. Eye contact was its own separate ordeal. Her heart was beating out of her chest. *Wh-Why is this happening?* she thought, her face feeling hotter by the second.

I—Oh, no.

“Hey, hey!”

A hint of alarm tinged his voice as she drifted out of consciousness. Like a puppet with its strings cut, she went limp. Her eyelids draped over her vision like curtains over a stage, and everything went black.

The last thing she remembered was the sensation of being caught in someone’s arms.

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Chloe awoke.

An unfamiliar ceiling. An unfamiliar scent. Where was she? What was this place? Dazed and confused, she slowly sat up; her body felt like lead.

“You’re awake.”

She gasped in shock. Sitting by the bed was the young man that had saved her earlier. “Oh! Um, um... Um.”

“Relax.”

“...Okay.” Chloe took a deep breath in, then out. Her mind finally began to connect the dots.

“Thank you so much for saving me,” said Chloe with a timid bow.

“Of course,” the young man replied.

As she recalled the course of events that had just taken place, Chloe’s pulse quickened. The more she stared at his face, the more her composure faltered. She averted her gaze in embarrassment.

Get it together, Chloe! She scolded herself in her mind. First, she needed to understand her current situation. “Could I ask y—”

“Lloyd Stewart. You can call me Lloyd.”

“Oh! Yes. I’m Chloe, Chloe Ar—” She hesitated. On a whim, Chloe made the split second decision to keep her last name secret—for whatever good that would do after revealing her real first name.

“Chloe? Understood.” Lloyd accepted her introduction without a second thought, much to her relief.

“Um, so where...?”

“This is my home. Under proper procedure, I would have us wait and let the guards take custody of you, but since you fainted, and considering the circumstances, I took special action.”

Chloe squirmed. “I... Thank you for everything.” She bowed her head deeply once more.

“It was nothing. You woke earlier than I expected, which saved me some trouble. I was thinking about what I’d do if you didn’t wake for two or three days.”

“How long was I out?”

“Five hours. About as long as it takes for me to finish a book, plus a little extra.”

Chloe looked down and noticed the book resting by his feet. “Um...”

Lloyd grunted inquisitively.

“Have you been here the whole time?”

“Yes?” Lloyd replied. “I didn’t know if your condition would worsen, so I stayed just in case. Of course, I’ve been to the bathroom, and I made dinner as well, so no, technically I haven’t been in this chair the whole time.”

“I...I see.” Chloe responded, a little befuddled. Though grateful that he had stayed by her side the entire time, she couldn’t help but sense some oddness from the way he gave his reply so matter-of-factly.

“So are you feeling better?”

“Yes I feel much better thanks to you. My fever has gone down too.”

Though Chloe felt that a restful nap in a warm bed was enough for her to recover from the exhaustion and the rain, Lloyd seemed surprised. His eyes widened. “You recuperate quickly. You were running quite the temperature.”

Chloe giggled uncomfortably. “I...I guess.”

She knew that while she did have a mild fever, there was a separate and very different reason for her sudden increase in body temperature. Not that she had any intention of divulging this information to Lloyd voluntarily, of course.

Lloyd’s demeanor turned professional all at once. “Now that you’re feeling better, I need to ask you a few questions about your—”

Gurgle.

Chloe’s stomach cried out in hunger.



“Your face is reddening again, are you sure you’re okay?”

“I’m fine! Yes! I’m fine!”

No matter how natural a bodily response it may be for someone who ran out of sustenance three days and three nights ago (for water she made do with what came from the river), Chloe couldn’t help but feel agonizing embarrassment at her uncooperative stomach. She pulled the covers over her head in shame.

Lloyd simply observed her with abject curiosity. After a brief pause, he spoke, “I made some pot-au-feu, would you like some?”

Chloe popped her head out of the covers and tilted her head in confusion. “Pot-au-feu?”

“Pot-au-feu? It’s a stew made with meat, vegetables, consommé, and salt. It’s perfect for cold days like these. You’ve never heard of it?”

Gurgle.

“...”

“I’ll warm it up for you.”

“Th-Thank you...”

And once more, Chloe’s head dived beneath the covers.

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At a dining table set in the middle of an open living space, a wide-eyed Chloe was gulping down the aforementioned “pot-au-feu” at a lightning pace.

“I assume you like it?” Across the table from her was Lloyd, keenly observing her as she devoured the stew like a famished animal.

Chloe gulped down the contents in her mouth before bowing her head in shame. “I’m so sorry! Please excuse my manners, it’s just that I...haven’t had a proper meal in two weeks.”

If she were to be truthful, she’d tell him the soup was a little too salty, the bacon a little too bland, and the vegetables a little too undercooked. It was leaps and bounds better than the half-eaten leftovers she helped herself to at

the Ardennes', but it was still by no objective measure "good."

But to Chloe, who'd endured these past two weeks on rock-hard preserved foods, river fish, berries, leaves, and roots, there was nothing better. And, having cooked exclusively for others her entire life, a meal made with her in mind felt as if it came from a better, brighter, but altogether alien reality.

"I honestly can't begin to thank you enough," she said.

Lloyd scratched his head uncomfortably in response to Chloe's heartfelt expression of gratitude. "All I did was throw cut ingredients into a pot." He paused. "I...didn't think it'd be that impressive..."

After a brief moment of silence, Lloyd spoke again, "Here." He slid his bowl of pot-au-feu over to Chloe.

"But this is yours..."

"Don't worry, I haven't touched it."

"That's not it. I just thought I'd be eating your dinner!"

"I don't mind. In my line of work, I know what it's like to survive three days and three nights on nothing but water. Not quite two weeks, but still. Besides, I can always make more," Lloyd replied, again missing the point.

Though hesitant, Chloe got the sense that even if she were to reject his kind gesture, he wouldn't back down. Besides, in her current state, she'd be hard-pressed to turn down an extra serving.

Gurgle.

Quiet down, you! Chloe reprimanded her own stomach.

"At least your body's honest," Lloyd said with a slight smile.

Chloe was looking for the nearest hole to crawl into. "Thank you," she said, hesitantly accepting Lloyd's offer.

Chloe felt a gentle, otherworldly warmth radiating from the otherwise lukewarm bowl. After finishing her own, she went in for seconds.

"It's so good." This second bowl of stew, still overly salty and its ingredients so undercooked it would earn her more than a stern talking-to if she served it at

home, was better than the last. “It’s just delicious.”

This time she ate slowly, savoring the flavors.

As she did, she felt a heat welling up from within, as if a dam had just burst somewhere deep inside. Memories of her past life, of the past two weeks, of her struggle to survive flooded her mind.

Her vision blurred over.

“I—hey! What’s wrong? Was it something in the stew? ...No, if that’s the case you would’ve noticed the first time around...”

“No, no, it’s not that. It’s just that... It’s just that it’s so delicious. It honestly, really is,” Chloe said, tears streaming down her face.

She could taste it all. The bacon, the carrots, the sausage, the onions, the soup—all of it.

I’m...I’m alive. Chloe felt as if a giant boulder had been lifted off her chest. A sense of relief and joy washed over her.

Lloyd could do nothing but stare awkwardly as a whirlwind of emotions swept over her—this was definitely not something he was accustomed to. And, though he would never admit it, he was at a loss for what to say in this situation.

“Well...enjoy,” he said simply.

Chloe gave a quiet nod. She had forgotten what it felt like to be on the receiving end of so much care. That too helped spur the waterworks.

It seemed that the pot-au-feu would be extra salty tonight.

Chloe continued to sob and eat, while Lloyd looked on in silence.

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After finishing her meal for two, Chloe found herself comfortably seated with Lloyd on a sofa, surrounding a low table.

“I’m sorry you had to see that,” Chloe said, bowing her head deeply.

“Not to worry. Judging by the way you spoke and your physical condition, I’m sure you have your reasons.” Lloyd said, eyeing her tattered clothes and

scraped skin.

“I’m...yes. It was very hard... I think.” She stared off into the distance, her tone full of confusion. The upheaval in her life the past two weeks was so great, she felt like she had just awoken from a terrible nightmare.

“Oh! My bag...” She suddenly remembered her belongings, the only physical reminder she had to prove everything was in fact real.

“It’s in the room you were just in. I haven’t looked through it, I assure you.”

“Thank you again, for everything,” replied Chloe.

“So,” Lloyd said, cutting to the chase. “Who are you? Where did you come from?”

Chloe’s breath caught in her chest. She knew this was coming. She knew that he would ask. In fact, it was a miracle he hadn’t already. Any reasonable person would have treated her with a healthy dose of distrust. He must’ve believed he would be able to handle her if she tried anything, she thought.

“I, um...” she said. “I had a fight with my parents, and I ran away from home...”

Though that was technically the truth, she refrained from telling the whole story. She was afraid that if she did, the authorities would get involved and they would contact her family. If worse came to worst, they might even take her back.

Please, please, anything but that. Recalling her hellish days, Chloe involuntarily hugged herself.

“I see. So you’re a runaway...” Lloyd’s voice trailed off, deep in thought. “You must’ve come a long way.”

“Huh?” Chloe looked on in surprise.

“Your pack is caked with mud and dirt and bits of leaves, your shoes are in tatters, and your skin is pockmarked all over—thorns, I suspect? You also said you hadn’t eaten a proper meal in two weeks, which means...” he paused. “You must’ve come here from several mountains over.”

Chloe was astonished by Lloyd’s insight.

“Am I right?”

She spoke after a brief pause, “Yes, that’s—that’s right. I did come from just a little bit aways.”

“Just a little bit, eh?”

The interrogation was calm and civilized, but Chloe couldn’t shake the feeling that he saw through everything. She sat, nervous and agitated, anticipating further questions that would pick apart her alibi—but none came.

What sort of argument did you have with your parents?

Which far away region did you come from specifically?

Nothing. Lloyd didn’t pry for specifics. Chloe couldn’t help but wonder about his motives.

“Why come to the capital?” Lloyd restarted his questioning.

“Because I wanted to.”

“And why is that?”

Chloe paused to organize her thoughts. “I used to know somebody—a long time ago—who told me all about how wonderful the capital is, so I wanted to come visit at least once before I died.”

A subtle, wry smile crept onto Lloyd’s face. “The capital’s not that great of a place. It’s chaotic, the air is stale, and there’s no shortage of hoodlums like the ones that attacked you.”

“Even so.” Chloe smiled gently, looking Lloyd in the eyes. “Even if that is the case, I know now that there are also kind and wonderful people like you, and that alone has already made my trip worthwhile.”

At Chloe’s impassioned response, a look of discomfort flitted onto Lloyd’s face. “I see,” he said, scratching his head.

Did I say something to upset him? wondered Chloe, tilting her head in confusion.

Lloyd’s next question followed quickly. “Now, what are you planning on doing next?”

Chloe was unable to offer an immediate response to this question. “I don’t really have anything in mind.”

“Any money?”

“...No.”

Silence descended upon the pair.

Uncomfortable with the heavy air in the room, Chloe sought to lighten the mood. “W-Well! I’m sure I’ll figure something out! There are a lot of people here, after all. And if worse comes to worst I’ll just return to the mountains and go forage, or...”

“Your situation is worse than I had thought.” Lloyd crossed his arms and paused in contemplation. “In any case, you’ll be staying here for the night.”

“Huh?! I couldn’t possibly...”

“Don’t worry, this house is inexcusably large as is, and there’s a free room available. Of course, you have it on my word as a knight that no harm will come to you here.”

Of course, that was not the part that Chloe had objected to, but instead of dwelling on that, she was distracted by a new piece of information that tickled her curiosity. “I just had one question, if you don’t mind...”

“Yes?”

“What is it that you do, exactly?”

“Of course,” Lloyd replied. “I’m a knight with the First Order of the Knights Rose. Besides that, I have no special peerage—I don’t come from noble heritage.”

Chloe had difficulty figuring out whether she should be taken aback or not. If Lloyd *were* a knight, it would explain how he could so easily defeat three random street thugs. Knights, according to Lloyd, were primarily tasked with defense of their kingdom, and were more heavily armed than their city guard counterparts, who typically handled only lesser and petty crimes.

But Lloyd was still far more impressive than she could’ve imagined. Of those in the knightly orders, the First Order was a handpicked group of one hundred

elite warriors. First Order knights were typically found either stationed in the royal castle, occupied with daily training, patrolling the streets of the capital, or occasionally dispatched to the countryside, tasked with quelling local troubles.

Lloyd must've been off duty today, thought Chloe.

Moreover, the two were currently in the North District. Owing to its proximity to the royal castle, the North District was known for its safety and was home to fellow knights and members of nobility. Lloyd's home was a two-story detached house with a yard, furnished to members of the Order. Its spacious and luxurious interiors left Chloe with little doubt that the elegance of his home reflected his importance in society.

After briefly explaining things to Chloe, Lloyd fielded a suggestion. "How about taking a bath? You should clean yourself up."

"A...bath?" Chloe echoed, as if it was a completely foreign notion.

"A bath? It's when you soak yourself in a basin filled with warm water. You've never heard of it? It's a great way to relax when you're tired," explained Lloyd.

"You're telling me such a marvel exists?!"

Witnessing Chloe's reaction full of wonderment and surprise, Lloyd stifled a small chuckle.

"D-Did I say something strange?"

"No, no. My apologies. That was an interesting reaction, is all."

"I-I'm so sorry! I overreacted..."

"No worries. It was refreshing, if anything."

Not picking up on Lloyd's enjoyment of the situation, Chloe hung her head low.

"Back to the matter at hand. A bath is no marvel—it's an amenity, if anything. Not every house will have one, but as it happens, mine does. The capital has direct access to the ocean and rivers, and we have plentiful water, so it's a bit of a custom here."

"Wow... The capital is amazing..."

Though it may come as a surprise to hear that a noble raised in the household of a margrave had never seen a bath in her life, the truth was that in Chloe's mountainous hometown, hygiene habits consisted mainly of wiping oneself down, or taking quick dips into cold water. Chloe herself, as she was restricted from using towels to cleanse herself, washed in secret by taking dips into the river that ran through their estate. While refreshing in summertime, it was pure hell in winter.

Lloyd hummed in thought. "Those open wounds of yours might sting, so a quick wipe might be better after all."

"No, no! That's okay, I'll manage!"

Though Chloe had wiped herself off in a river before entering the capital and had been drenched by the rain, she hadn't had a proper wash in over two weeks. She was desperate for the opportunity.

But before that, and above all else...

"I'm very interested in this...this *bath*, was it? If it'd be no trouble to you, of course. I wouldn't not be inclined to try it out for myself."

"Okay, understood. Just...settle down, I'm losing track of your words."

"Oh—sorry..." Chloe realized that she had inadvertently jutted herself forward. She meekly sat herself back down.

Watching Chloe ride the highest of highs before dropping to the lowest of lows, Lloyd chuckled to himself.

"Was there something funny?" Chloe inquired after a short pause.

"No, no. I was just thinking about how interesting each and every one of your reactions are."

Chloe felt her cheeks burn up.

"I'll go fill up the bath. You can relax for a bit."

"Y-Yes, thank you very much."

Chloe watched as Lloyd made his exit from the living room. A sharp pang of guilt stabbed at her chest. *Is it really okay for him to keep doing all this for me?*

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After following Lloyd to the changing room, Chloe began to undress when she suddenly stopped. She remembered the birthmark on her back and the various scars on her body inflicted by her family and hesitated.

Well, it's not like it matters now.

In the end, the temptation of the bath was too great. Chloe shed herself of her ragged clothes and made her way into the bathing room.

She was immediately hit with a pleasant, woody fragrance, and she unwittingly closed her eyes.

"Wow..." When she opened her eyes, the sight before her took her breath away. She had never seen a room like this before. Next to the entrance was a space that looked like it was for washing. A wooden pail was lined up next to several small bottles filled with unknown liquids. Behind that was a long rectangular basin full of hot water, its curling tails of steam beckoning her. The whole scene was gently lit by candlelight.

Chloe's excitement began to bubble over. Following Lloyd's instructions on bath etiquette, she first made her way over to the washing station, and used the pail to scoop hot water over herself.

"Ow." The hot water washed over her and ran along unhealed wounds, making Chloe grimace. But immediately after, she was enveloped by the feeling of warmth and comfort.

Lloyd had also instructed her on the use of soaps, so Chloe went ahead and tried some, lathering up her hair and body. "Ow!" Her wounds stung again. "But it smells so good!" Floral and fruity aromas wafted through the air, and Chloe's face slackened. *I could smell this forever!* The sensation of the lather on her body, too, Chloe found new and interesting. She couldn't quite put it into words, but she felt that perhaps this is what being *clean* truly meant.

After thoroughly washing herself, she made her way over to the bathtub. She went in slowly, feet first, and carefully lowered herself in.

As she sank into the bathwater, a sigh of relaxation escaped her lips—a first for Chloe. *I can't believe such a marvel exists!* she thought as her body and mind

melted into the warm water.

She gazed up towards the ceiling. An installed skylight offered an uninterrupted view of the night sky. As she gazed languidly into the starry depths, a feeling of quietude enveloped her.

She felt that if she closed her eyes, the sweet embrace of slumber would take her then and there, but recalling Lloyd's warning—*you'll catch a cold if you fall asleep in the bath, so try your best to remain conscious*—Chloe pinched her cheek. "It hurts... I'm not dreaming..." she muttered to herself.

Two weeks ago, her own mother tried to kill her, and she fled her home. She crossed mountains and rivers upon mountains and rivers before making it to the royal capital with no one to call on and no money to her name. Now, she was drowning in the lap of luxury. Chloe doubted whether this was the real thing or some fever dream cooked up by her mind on the brink of death.

If that's the case... A feeling of abject terror flooded Chloe's mind.

She chased those thoughts away.

The comfort that she currently felt—that was real. If she pinched her cheek, it hurt. This wasn't a dream. She was alive.

She had to be.

At any rate, she couldn't believe that such a luxurious custom existed. In her neck of the woods, where the rivers ran drier and fewer, using such large quantities of hot water to bathe was unthinkable.

"The capital really is amazing..." Chloe muttered to herself, when suddenly—

"How's the water?"—Lloyd's voice rang out from behind the changing room door.

SPLASH.

Surprised, Chloe created a large splash in the tub.

"Sorry, did I surprise you?" Lloyd said.

"N-No, no! I'm perfect! The water's perfect! H-How are you?"

"I'm...fine?"

Realizing that a single partition was all that separated her stark-naked self from Lloyd, her cheeks flushed red hot.

“I’m leaving a towel for you here.”

“Okay! Thank you!”

Hearing Lloyd’s departing footsteps, Chloe dipped her head down below the waterline and blew bubbles into the water. *That was so embarrassing...*

Alas, what convinced Chloe that this was reality more than anything else was the way her heart fluttered in her chest and her body ran hotter whenever Lloyd came around.

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Finished with her bath, Chloe passed her arms through the sleeves of a shirt many times her size—Lloyd had left it with the towel that he had brought her.

Touched by his quiet gesture of consideration, Chloe felt a gentle smile break out on her face. The large size and faint odor of someone else made her heart skip a beat.

Making her way back to the living room, she found Lloyd on the sofa, reading a book.

Looking up, Lloyd blinked his eyes in surprise. “You look...different.”

Oblivious to the fluster on Lloyd’s face, Chloe responded, “Yes, I feel much cleaner now, thanks to you.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

Confused, Chloe cocked her head to the side, still oblivious to the way Lloyd was sheepishly scratching at his own cheek.

“Never mind that. Did you like your first bath?” Lloyd said.

“Yes! It was heaven.”

“Meaning it felt so good you thought you had gone there?”

“Exactly.” Chloe paused awkwardly before continuing. “Thank you—for the shirt, that is.”

“Unsurprisingly, I couldn’t find anything in your size. It must be too large, but you’ll have to make do; forgive me.”

“No, no, please. I’m already grateful that you would lend me anything at all!” Chloe said, a large yawn punctuating the end of her sentence.

“You must be tired.”

“Oh no, I-I’m fine—” Another yawn. It seemed that the warm bath had imparted upon Chloe a serious case of drowsiness.

“Don’t force yourself. You probably haven’t had a good night’s sleep in two weeks. I doubt you’ve fully recovered just from that short nap alone.”

Chloe gave a dry chuckle. “Is it that obvious?”

“The bags under your eyes don’t lie. You should sleep.”

“Yes, then I suppose I shall.”

Lloyd, now standing, stretched a hand out towards Chloe.

“I—uhm? Yes?” Chloe’s heavy eyelids shot wide open at the sudden development.

“It’d be dangerous if you tripped and fell in your current drowsy state. I can escort you.”

“Y-Yes, of course. Please, and thank you.”

“Think nothing of it.”

Speechless at Lloyd’s heedlessly candid offer, Chloe took his hand. Feeling a hand that was much broader, firmer, and rougher than her own, she was suddenly overcome with a sense of security.

Led by the hand, Chloe walked behind Lloyd like a baby bird.

They made their way down to the room where Chloe had first awakened, and Lloyd stopped. “Unfortunately, I hadn’t foreseen that I’d be having guests, so while I have an extra room, I don’t have an extra bed. I’ll sleep on the sofa, so this room is yours.”

Chloe gasped in surprise. “I couldn’t possibly!”

“Not to worry. A knight is trained to sleep anywhere. If anything, the sofa is preferable compared to the sleepless nights I spent in the depths of the jungle.” Lloyd rattled off an impressive feat as if it were nothing.

Inferring that perhaps this was his attempt at alleviating her guilt, Chloe decided to take him up on his kind-hearted offer. Besides, the fluffy white bedspread in front of her looked *far* too inviting. “I’ll take you up on that then. Thank you.”

“No problem.” Lloyd paused, as if remembering something. “Right, I forgot to ask earlier, but how old are you?”

“I’ll be...sixteen this year.”

“Sixteen? Then there’s no issue, I suppose.”

“Issue? What issue?”

“Here in the capital, the age of adulthood is fifteen. As you can imagine, it’d be ill-fitting for a man of my station to let someone not of age stay the night.”

“I see.” Chloe paused. “Would it not have been prudent to have asked this question first, then?”

Lloyd scratched at his head sheepishly. “It simply slipped my mind. In any case, there’s no problem here.”

Having intuited Lloyd as austere and somewhat callous, Chloe was a little relieved seeing him slip up like that.

“What about you, by the way?” she asked.

“I’m nineteen.”

At least that part of Chloe’s intuition proved correct. Nineteen made him the same age as her sister. But—unlike her sister—Lloyd was calm, collected, and mature.

Nineteen years old and a First Order knight? Isn’t that extraordinary?

Though ignorant to the ways of the capital, if Chloe were to hazard a guess, she would’ve assumed that nineteen would’ve been an age of apprenticeship for any profession. For someone at that age to be part of a handpicked group of

one hundred people out of the entire kingdom—he must have been exceptional.

Unaware of Chloe's internal dialogue, Lloyd continued. "Snuff out the candle whenever you wish. One more thing, I'll be attending to my duties tomorrow, so I'll come wake you before I leave."

"Okay! Thank you very much."

"Right."

Lloyd made his leave, and all turned silent. A final wave of lethargy crashed over Chloe, and she sunk into the bedspread. "So warm... So soft..."

A relaxing scent tickled the tip of her nose.

Perhaps she *was* in heaven, she thought. Maybe this was a fever dream after all. But this time, she didn't even have the energy to pinch herself. She surrendered herself to the bed's warm embrace and drifted off into a deep slumber.

Chapter Two: To the Knight that Saved Me

“Wake up, it’s morning.”

The next morning, Chloe was roused by a most simple string of words. As she blinked her eyes open, Lloyd’s image swam into view. “Good...morning... Lloyd...”

“Hey, don’t go back to sleep.”

“Gah!”

A finger jabbed at Chloe’s forehead, shocking her awake.

“Your reactions are truly fascinating.”

“...Sorry. I must be so obnoxious.” Rubbing her forehead, she looked up to see Lloyd with an engrossed look on his face. “Good morning to you!”

“You wake up fast.”

“Too many dangers lurk in the countryside for me not to.”

Once, she had been fast asleep on a mountainside when suddenly, sensing an ominous presence, she awoke to see a vicious beast stalking her. Ever since, she never let herself sleep too deeply, lest she be turned into an unwitting breakfast.

“I was just about to leave,” said Lloyd.

“Oh, of course! Have a good day!”

A sharp departure from his informal look the day before, Lloyd was dressed in knightly attire. Little white adornments and decorations dotted his uniform’s jet-black exterior.

“I suppose I’ll be coming with you,” said Chloe.

Lloyd shot a puzzled look her way. “Why is that?”

“Well I... I shouldn’t intrude any longer...”

Lloyd assumed a solemn air and spoke, “If I had planned on you leaving with

me I would've come to wake you earlier. I heard that ladies take longer to get ready."

"That...that *is* true..." Chloe said, seemingly still a little groggy.

"In any case, you can spend the day here. I'll be back by evening. We'll talk about what's next then," Lloyd said, turning to leave.

"Ex-Excuse me!" Chloe suddenly called out. "Why are you so kind to me? You don't know me or what kind of person I am—I could be a bad person and steal all your belongings for all you know!"

Chloe was well aware that what she just did amounted to no less than self-sabotage, but alas, her conscience couldn't leave well enough alone.

Not to mention, in the back of her mind lurked the possibility that Lloyd's attitude would turn, and he would later come to demand unthinkable things from her. Perhaps a truly unjust suspicion toward her savior, but the possibility gnawed at her mind nonetheless.

Lloyd pondered for a moment, as if searching for the right words to address Chloe's question. "It's because you had the eyes of a dead man."

"The eyes of a dead man?" Chloe repeated.

"A long time ago, I was in a place where I was made to train without relent, day in and day out. There, I was surrounded by men who had forsaken their dreams and all hope; their eyes were like those of corpses."

"I...I see."

Chloe combed through her thoughts for a moment. It made sense that knights underwent rigorous training. On top of that, Lloyd was part of the First Order, a handpicked group of one hundred elite knights. Perhaps their training was so indescribably rigorous it could only be likened to cruelty?

Satisfied with her conclusion, she probed no further.

Wait. My eyes looked like that? Chloe dabbed at her eyes with her fingertips.

Ignoring her, Lloyd continued, "Many couldn't withstand the rigor of the training and dropped out, one after the other. Fortunately, I was able to remain."

Behind his stoic words, a tinge of emotion haunted his eyes, which Chloe was quick to notice.

“Afterwards, I began to have regrets. I wondered if I could have done something to help them,” he paused. “But now, at least, I can help you.”

I knew it; there’s a kind and gentle soul behind that face of stone, thought Chloe as she listened along.

“What I mean to say is that I’m doing this for my own sake. The right thing to do was to force you to tell me where you came from and send you right back. But, after listening to what you had to say last night, I gathered that you didn’t want that.”

“That’s...that’s correct.” Chloe was again taken aback by his insight.

“And as for you stealing... Well, there’s no problem there. There’s nothing of worth in this house anyway.” A small, self-deprecating smile flitted across Lloyd’s face—was he suppressing a laugh?

After giving Chloe a chance to speak, Lloyd nodded. “If you have no further questions, I’ll be on my way.”

“Oh sorry, wait! One more thing.”

“What is it?”

“What is it that I should be doing while you’re gone?”

After making it to the capital, Chloe had no idea what to do next.

Lloyd shot her a quizzical glance. “You can do as you like?”

“As I like...?”

“Just like everybody else.”

Those words struck a strange chord in Chloe’s heart.

Lloyd continued, “Feel free to use anything in my home. For lunch, you can make do with what’s on the dining table.” He turned to leave. “All right then.”

“Yes! Thank you again, for everything.”

With that, Lloyd made his leave.

“Do as I like...” Chloe muttered. Now alone, she began to think about what she could do next. “For now I suppose...I’ll go wash my face...and change.”

Whilst rattling off the steps of her morning routine, Chloe set to work. Using the water pail next to the wash basin, she washed her face. Next, she took out a change of clothes from her pack. Her belongings were untouched by the rain thanks to a waterproof cloth she had draped over it—a good habit that rural living had imposed upon her.

“Now then.” That was it for her morning routine. Next—

Gurgle.

—it was time to appease her unruly stomach. Chloe was honestly a little relieved her next task was decided for her.

She made her way over to the living room. On the table were yesterday’s leftovers, some bread, and some fried up bacon and sausages, among others.

Among the uncategorizable sundries was a curious block-shaped mass resting on a plate. Next to it sat a box with the words “meal bar” written on it. She slid the lid off the box, and took a peek. Inside were more of the same. *So this is what a meal bar is*, she thought.

Her stomach gurgled again in anticipation of the brave new smorgasbord before her.

“Let’s eat!” She clapped both hands together, and began to work her way through the smorgasbord that Lloyd had left her.

With a focus on function more than flavor, Lloyd’s food was hardly haute cuisine, but it was still more than enough to satiate Chloe. She took a bite of the meal bar. *Tastes a bit like a mildly sweet cookie,* she thought. It was a little too one-note and a little too dry, but she savored the experience regardless.

“What a feast!” Chloe ate and ate and ate, and stopped just shy of a full stomach—she didn’t want to overeat and risk immobilizing herself.

“Now then.” There went the only task on her to-do list.

She plopped down on the living room sofa and began to think. “What is it that I want to do?” she said aloud. Perhaps she hoped she could conjure up an idea

by vocalizing her intent, but nothing came. Back home, after finishing up her chores and paperwork, Chloe was usually too tired to do anything but sleep. Having spent no time cultivating a hobby of any kind, she had no idea what she enjoyed or what made her happy.

But that's not to say that nothing had changed at all. In fact, there was quite a big change—she now had the time to *think* about what she wanted to do.

She gazed up towards the living room ceiling, and turned her ears inwards. At first, she heard nothing, but slowly, the gentle whisper of her innermost desires began to stir from within.

I want to be helpful to Lloyd.

She decided that instead of indulging herself, she wanted to do something for the man who had saved her.

I want Lloyd to praise me.

Putting her desire into words, a peculiar sensation twinged in her chest. She didn't want to be praised by just anyone. She wanted to be praised by Lloyd.

Embarrassed at her revelation, Chloe buried her face in the sofa and flailed about.

After allowing sufficient time for her face to cool off, Chloe got up. "Okay!" she said, pumping her fist in front of her.

First up, she...

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Within the Kingdom of Rose, in its capital of Liberta, on the First Order's training grounds in the royal castle, Lloyd was tending to his sword in an antechamber, clad in armor.

On the outside, he looked as serious as he always did. But on the inside, turmoil clawed at his mind.

What should I do next? The source of his troubles was none other than the young woman he had saved just yesterday.

Frankly, he'd done it all on impulse.

As a royal knight, Lloyd had been instilled with a strong sense of justice and selflessness. Unable to turn a blind eye to three lowly men preying on a young girl, he saved her despite being off-duty.

That was all well and good. The problem was what came next.

Unable to abandon the unconscious and sickly Chloe, he brought her to his own home, which was close by. The plan had been to wait until she recovered enough to hand her off to the guards, but after listening to her story and reading a little between the lines, he had deemed the best course of action was to keep her under his protection for a little while longer.

As an agent of the kingdom, he was gravely aware that his actions were not praiseworthy by any means. He was a good soldier, fiercely loyal to his country and disciplined to a fault. But the haunting memories of losing lives for the sake of the mission compelled him to act.

And, there was more to it: *I just couldn't...leave her.*

From the way she so tearfully and gratefully enjoyed the pot-au-feu that he had choked down perfunctorily for so long, to the way her eyes lit up at the thought of her first bath, to the way she rubbed her eyes sleepily like a child, Lloyd thought Chloe to be pure, open-hearted, and so *honest*, a true exception to the cynical, jaded culture of the capital. Of course, it all made sense when she mentioned where she was from.

Her animated and lively demeanor stirred a warmth in his stoic and impassive heart—he couldn't help but be drawn to her.

At the very least, Lloyd decided he wanted to keep an eye on her for just a little bit longer, no matter how illogical that desire might have been. For a man who had lived his entire life by the sword, this was a first.

At that moment, he felt fortunate to be so passionless, realizing that had he been any less wooden, his block-headed self would have been exposed repeatedly in the past day.

But in any case, Lloyd knew that this couldn't last. He racked his brain, trying to come up with a more permanent solution.

"I think you've polished that one particular spot quite enough, don't you

think?” A voice rang out beside him.

Lloyd sighed and turned his head to see a man with long, golden-blonde hair and piercing blue eyes. The kind of man you’d imagine to have never once had girl troubles their entire life.

“Something on your mind? You can always talk to your trusty and rich-in-life-experience deputy commander, you know?” The First Order deputy commander, Freddy, said with a glib-looking smile.

Lloyd sighed again.

“Hey. I heard that. No sighing when you’re talking to me.”

“That was not a sigh. I was simply regaining my composure in preparation to talk to you.”

“Are conversations with me *that* tiring?!” The thirty-year-old Freddy shot back in mock indignation—their unreserved back-and-forth would incline an outside observer to assume they had a long history together. Showing concern for his subordinate more than a decade his junior, a wry smile crept onto his face. “So? What’s up?”

Having no intention of sharing last night’s events with his superior, Lloyd replied with a stony affect, “Nothing in particular.”

“You’re a bad liar, you know. Nothing less than the sky falling could leave our own *Ebon Reaper* spacing out like this.”

“The nickname’s a bit much.”

“I mean, think about it! When you’re as ruthless and skilled in combat as you are, people talk! You know, whether it’s a term of endearment or...not.”

“My combat skills are far from perfect. As for being ‘ruthless,’ well... I simply have faith in my orders. Is that wrong of me?”

“Faith in your orders, eh?” Freddy shrugged. “Well, if you say it’s nothing, I’ll leave it at that. Just make sure it doesn’t affect your work.”

“Thank you.”

“That’s a weird thing to get thanked for, but all right.” Freddy paused, then

spoke again, as if remembering something. “Are you eating well, by the way? You don’t look so good.”

“I made pot-au-feu yesterday, but a lot happened and I missed the chance to eat.”

“Pot-au-feu? You mean that muscle pot-au-feu or whatever you were talking about? With all the sausages and bacon and whatnot?”

“Have I mentioned it before?”

“*It’s simple to make and packed full of muscle-building nutrients, so I eat it almost every day*—that was you, wasn’t it?”

“You have a good memory, Deputy Commander.”

“It doesn’t take a savant to burn a string of words as powerful as *muscle pot-au-feu* into one’s own brain. Anyway, why don’t you treat yourself to something better? I imagine you must be sick of stews by this point. You live alone; you have the money.”

“It tastes like getting stronger, and I can assure you getting stronger tastes very good.”

“And what does getting stronger taste like, exactly?” A quizzical expression on his face, Freddy continued, “Eat something that’s more, you know...*human*.”

“I have meal bars as well, just in case. In fact I’d say they’re more efficient to eat.”

“No that’s not what I... You know what? Forget it.” This time it was Freddy that let out an exasperated sigh. “You know what you need? A woman.”

“What’s this all of a sudden?”

“Imagine having a precious wife at home who can cook for you and help you unwind. There’s nothing better!”

“I see.”

“You’re so candid about your disinterest I can’t even fault you for it.” Freddy paused before snapping back with an idea. “I know, how about coming over for dinner at my place? My wife cooks a mean meal!”

“I’ll check my schedule.”

“You’ve been checking your schedule the past ten times I’ve asked. Anyway, come whenever you feel up to it, you’re always welcome.”

“Thank you.”

With a polite dip of his head, a wave of his hand, and a “Later,” Freddy took his leave. Lloyd never did fully understand why a man very much his senior both in age and rank made an effort to care about a workplace recluse like him.

Heaving one last sigh, Lloyd picked up his sword and resumed his work.

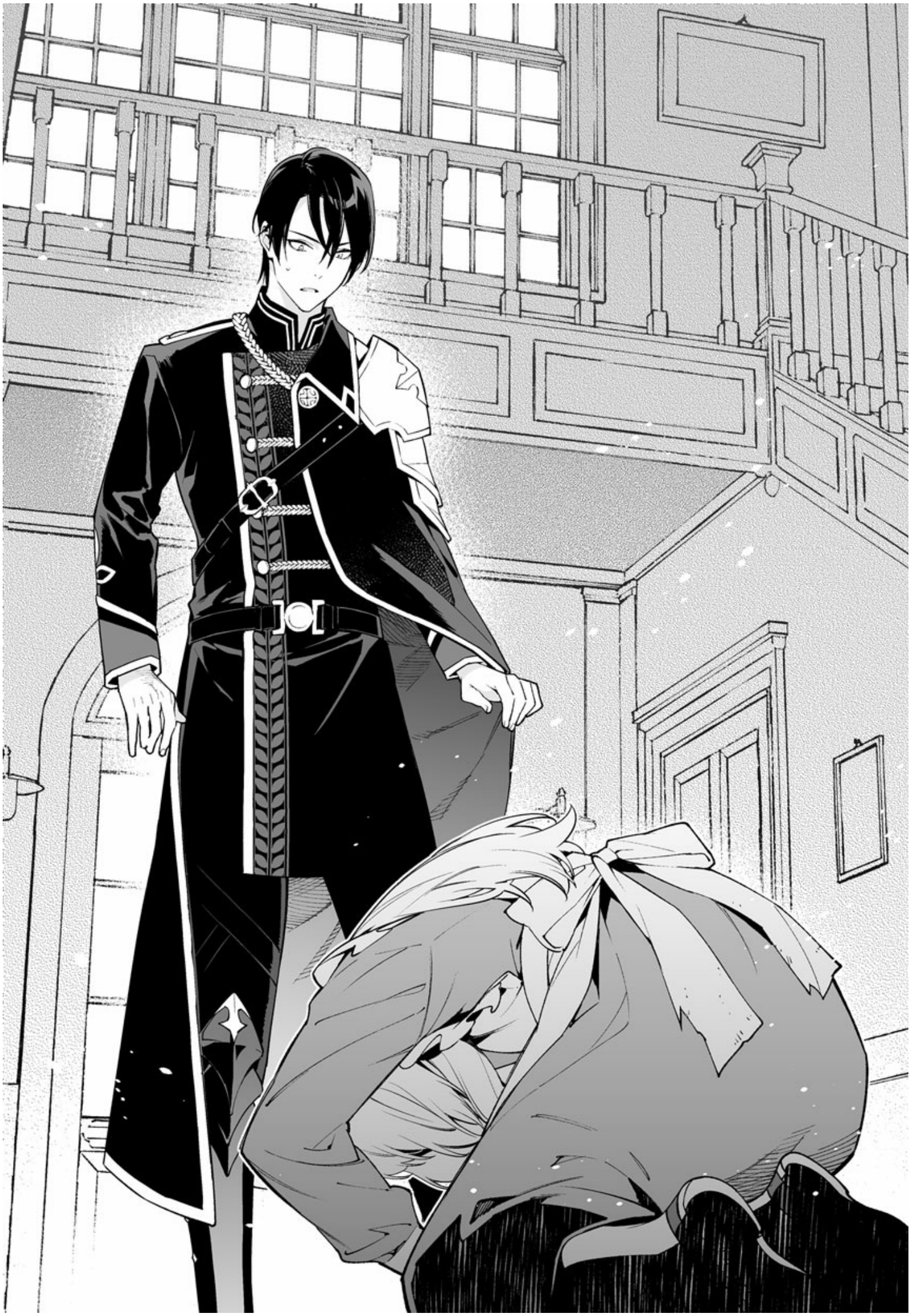
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“Welcome home.”

Lloyd returned home by evening, exactly as promised.

Greeting him as he walked through the door was Chloe—on her hands and knees, bowing so deeply her head kissed the floor.

Faced with such an unusual sight, Lloyd looked on in puzzlement.



After waiting for a reaction that never came, Chloe tilted her head, befuddled. “Is something the matter?”

“Just... What are you doing?” said Lloyd.

“What am I doing? Well...this is a greeting, is it not?” Chloe said, to Lloyd’s bewilderment.

“Is a greeting really that bombastic of an affair?”

“This is what was normal in my house...”

“Really...” said Lloyd, putting a hand on his chin. “I don’t see a need for you to greet me at all. If you must, remain standing. You’re not a nobleman’s servant.”

“Is that really okay?” said Chloe, after a slight pause.

“Truth be told, I don’t understand why you feel the need to.”

“Really?” Chloe said, troubled. “Very well then.” She slowly rose to her feet.

A great sense of relief washed over her. Frankly, Chloe did not like that greeting very much. If her family happened to be in a foul mood that day, she would be stomped on, sometimes multiple times from above.

“But if I may, I’d still like to greet you with a ‘welcome back,’” said Chloe.

“Why?”

“Well, coming home after a long day to silence and an empty house just feels so lonely, doesn’t it?”

“I see, is that how it is?”

“That is indeed how it is.”

Lloyd, seemingly convinced, gave a small nod of approval. Seeing that, Chloe again thought that he was just a bit of an odd duck.

“Still, that was a first for me,” Lloyd said.

“What was?” asked Chloe.

“Having someone welcome me at the door when I arrive home. That was...quite novel.”

This time, Chloe was the one with a puzzled look on her face. After taking a moment to digest the meaning behind Lloyd's words, she broke out into a broad smile. "And what do we say when someone says to us, 'welcome back'?"

"...I'm home."

"That's correct!"

Seeing Chloe beam so brightly and innocently, Lloyd's breath caught in his throat. "You're having fun," he added.

"To tell you the truth, it's been a long while since I've had an exchange like that."

Chloe's family, of course, never bothered to greet her with words. They preferred kicks, stomps, or the occasional cold shoulder. The only person who did bother was Shirley, and that was a long bygone memory by now.

In fact, it was Shirley who had taught Chloe the importance of a proper greeting.

Now listen, young lady. Welcome back, I'm home, and good morning—these are called greetings. These are magic words that can create conversation out of nothing and effortlessly deepen your bonds with others.

The young Chloe took her words to heart, and practiced greetings with Shirley day and night. To Chloe, it was a little bit of fun that she had always looked forward to.

After Shirley left, Chloe took it upon herself to always greet her family with a "welcome home." It wasn't until today that she finally received an "I'm home" back.

"Would you like to take your bath?" Chloe said to Lloyd as they made their way into the living room.

"Yes, I think I would. I'll go draw the water."

"Oh no, I already have. I put the cover on as well, so it should still be nice and warm."

Lloyd blinked in surprise.

“Um, is there something wrong?” Chloe asked.

“You’re very thoughtful,” Lloyd said after a pause.

“No, no. It’s not nearly enough to repay you for the meal and the night’s stay.”

Following behind Chloe as they walked, Lloyd couldn’t help but notice the walls, the floor, even the clutter on the table looked cleaner than before.

“Did you say you had any dislikes, by the way?” asked Chloe.

“I dislike injustice, untruths, and the irrational.”

“Sorry, I meant in terms of food.”

“...I suppose I don’t enjoy bell peppers very much.”

Chloe suppressed a small giggle.

“Did I say something funny?”

“Oh I’m sorry! No, I just thought...that was a bit adorable, is all.”

A handsome and dependable knight, disliking peppers—the gap in expectation warmed the cockles of her heart.

“That was the first time someone’s called me adorable,” Lloyd muttered, scratching at his head.

“Okay! Then I’ll make something without peppers... Well, I suppose you wouldn’t have them around anyway.”

“Do you plan on cooking a meal?” Lloyd asked.

“Indeed I do! That’s not a bother, is it?”

“No, no bother. In fact I’m grateful, but...that’s not too much to ask, is it?”

Lloyd conceived of eating as a means to an end. He was so detached from the art of cooking, he even found his muscle pot-au-feu to be burdensome to make. He only made some yesterday because he had doubled up on sword and strength training and was feeling mighty sore.

“Back home, I handled several people’s worth of food every day. This will be a piece of cake!” Chloe said, rolling up her sleeves.

The kitchen-phobic Lloyd took that as the impressive proclamation of a master chef. He stood still, dumbstruck.

“Lloyd...?” Chloe called out.

“I haven’t been this impressed since fighting Sword Saint Laius.”

“Sword Saint...Laius?”

“The commander of the king’s personal guard. In other words, the strongest man in the kingdom.”

“I’m not sure how I feel about being likened to someone like that...”

“You’re amazing, no doubt,” Lloyd blurted out.

Met with silence, Lloyd looked up to see Chloe standing still, frozen in time. “What’s wrong? Why are you just standing there?”

Chloe had both hands pressed against her cheeks, as if trying to hold back a big, dumb grin. “Um, it’s just... That was the first time anyone’s called me “amazing”, and I’m just really happy? About it? You could say...” she said, pitch higher than usual, her face turning a bright, beet red.

“O-Okay, I’ll go ahead and whip something up while you take your time in the bath. Enjoy!” Chloe added, making her escape to the living room, leaving Lloyd behind in a daze.

It felt like butterflies were flapping about in his chest. *This feeling...* Assaulted by the unfamiliar sensation, he grimaced and put his hand to his chest.

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After his bath, Lloyd was presented with Chloe’s homemade cooking: a tuna & bacon tomato pasta. He brought a forkful to his mouth and took a bite. His eyes widened in surprise. “This is delicious.”

“Really?!”

“Really. This is amazing. I’ve never tasted anything like it,” Lloyd said, conveying his fork between the plate and his mouth

The flaky tuna meat, tart tomato sauce, and thick-cut bacon bits beautifully browned to a crisp combined into a wonderful symphony of savory flavors. *And*

was that...olive oil? Though Lloyd usually used olive oil simply as a means to prevent meats and vegetables from burning during cooking, Chloe had used it as a garnish; its delicate aroma wafted up from the dish.

The pasta, too, was radically different. No longer a bumpy gradient between hard and soft, the noodle texture was cooked through with just the right amount of give. It was miles above and beyond what Lloyd's own haphazard boiling skills could accomplish.

The portion was large and perfect for a working man of Lloyd's size; he definitely would not go hungry tonight.

Chloe watched happily as Lloyd chowed down on her cooking. "I couldn't find the kitchen knife, so I had to tear the bacon by hand. Hopefully the little bits and pieces aren't too irregular for you."

"Ah, sorry about that. I usually use a field knife to do all my cooking with, and I brought it with me today."

"A field knife?" Chloe echoed as Lloyd slurped down the noodles like a growing boy.

It had been so long since he had tasted food cooked for him by someone else, he had almost forgotten what it was like. He couldn't believe that the usual pasta he seasoned with only saltwater and black pepper could be transformed into such a complex dish. Truthfully, he was impressed beyond words.

After making it halfway through his dinner, Lloyd suddenly noticed that something was off. "Have you eaten?"

"Not really, no."

"You aren't going to have some pasta?"

"No, that's for you. There's some leftover—what were they called? Meal bars? I'll have those later."

The main reason Chloe had decided to cook for Lloyd today was because she had inferred—from yesterday's salt bomb stew and this morning's breakfast—that he was just a little cooking-impaired. As she was also all too familiar with the health consequences of a bad diet, she wanted Lloyd to come home to a

good meal after a long day of demanding physical labor. The pasta was all for Lloyd. She spared no thought for her own dinner.

Lloyd hummed in thought. Then, he stood up and fetched a second fork. Swapping his fork out with the new one, he pushed the dish towards Chloe. “You can have the rest. Apologies that it’s half-eaten.”

“Huh? But this is yours...”

“It doesn’t sit right with me that you have to settle for a meal bar while I have this feast to myself.”

“But you can’t possibly be full from just a half portion!”

“Not to worry; a knight is trained to operate on an empty stomach. This is nothing compared to the time in the jungle when I ran out of provisions and subsided solely on mud water.” Again, Lloyd rattled off an impressive feat as if it were nothing. “Besides, you must be hungry.”

“No, no, I’m fine—”

Gurgle.

“...”

“...”

“I’ll have you know I won’t be eating the rest no matter what you say.”

“I’m so sorry...”

Cheeks red hot, Chloe resigned herself and took up the new fork. “Thank you for your kindness.” Timidly, she took a bite. “It’s delicious...” she muttered.

To Chloe, who was used to eating stale leftovers, the heavenly flavors and textures of the fresh pasta were an indulgence.

Watching Chloe wolf down her own scrumptious cooking, Lloyd brought up a suggestion. “Be sure to make enough for two from now on.”

Chloe nodded her head in response. Feeling the warmth from two hot meals two days in a row, and distracted further by the pasta at hand, she didn’t give Lloyd’s most peculiar inclusion of the words “from now on” a second thought.

Half the extra-large serving of pasta was just the right amount for Chloe. She

finished it in an instant. “Thank you for the food.”

“Thank you for cooking, it was delicious. You can just leave the dirty dishes,” said Lloyd.

“No, no. I’ll do the washing up!”

“Please, allow me.”

“But the meal and the night’s stay!”

Relenting to Chloe’s insistence, Lloyd sat back as she did the washing up. Later, the two found themselves relaxing on the sofa, with Chloe humming a cheering tune.

“You seem quite happy,” remarked Lloyd.

“Of course I am, you complimented my cooking!”

“Hasn’t anyone ever told you that before?”

“I-I suppose not...” Chloe said hesitantly. Her family, of course, never hesitated to tell her how disgusting her cooking was, or throw it directly to the floor.

Get this slop out of my sight!

Make it again!

Their scathing words echoed in her mind. Her gaze lost focus, as if she was lost in the distant past, and her pupils clouded over. “So, yes. I am very glad you said you liked it. Thank you.”

Noticing her somber expression, Lloyd said, “I should be the one thanking you. It’s been ages since I’ve had such a delicious meal. Thank you.”

Chloe blushed at his sincere expression of gratitude, nervously twirling her hair between her fingers.

Sensing the shift in mood, Lloyd decided to switch topics. “By this way, this might just be my imagination, but...”

“Yes?” broached Chloe.

Lloyd’s gaze wandered around the room before returning to Chloe. “My

house looks a lot more tidy. You didn't clean it for me, did you?"

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After Lloyd had left for the day, and Chloe finished lunch, the first thing she decided to do was to clean the house.

It was perhaps a trait common to all single working bachelors, but tidiness was evidently not a virtue in Lloyd's household. With the floors covered in a layer of dust so thick it stood out to the naked eye, the kitchen water-stained to hell and back, and the tabletops cluttered with detritus, Chloe simply couldn't let it slide.

Having been made to maintain the cleanliness of a mansion several times the size of this house since she was a child, Chloe's cleaning skills were many times above and beyond that of your average person (hence her regard of her failure to clean up her own blood stains the day she left home as a most disgraceful blunder—threat of mortal harm notwithstanding).

Putting that all aside, all Chloe wanted now was to be of use to Lloyd. With that one mantra in mind, she set out to clean. Despite it being much smaller than her family estate, half a day was still not enough time to fully deep clean a two-story house.

She started out focusing her efforts on the entrance, the corridors, and the living area. Despite being limited by the cleaning tools she could find, she managed to tidy up all the clutter and polish everything up to a tentative shine. By the time she finished, the sun had dipped under the horizon.

Filled with a sense of accomplishment, she wiped the sweat off her brow. *I'm sure Lloyd will be tired coming home, so I should put the bath on for him. And...right! I can make dinner too. Let's see...I'm sure being a knight gets plenty physical, so I should make something filling...*

Thinking of all the things she wanted to do for Lloyd, Chloe slowly but surely fell back into her role as a servant. Outwardly, perhaps it appeared as if nothing had changed—she was cleaning and cooking as she always did. Inwardly, however, there was a sure and mighty difference: her motivation. She was used to being ordered around and did as she was told, but now—for the very first time—she wanted to do something for someone out of her own volition.

Which brings us back to the present.

“My house looks a lot more tidy. You didn’t clean it for me, did you?”

Chloe was elated that he had noticed. “You can tell? Yes I cleaned the entrance, the corridors, and the living area.”

Lloyd responded with a quizzical look on his face, “I thought I told you to do as you liked?”

“Well, this is what I liked,” Chloe said, beaming brilliantly.

Lloyd thought for a moment. “In that case, I’ll have to compensate you.”

“No, no, pay it no mind. I still can’t begin to repay you for—”

“A bath, a meal, and a cleaning is already more than enough.”

“That’s not even remotely...”

To Lloyd, clinically bad at housekeeping as he was, Chloe’s actions amounted to no less than an immense service. “A knight shall repay a favor in kind. If there’s anything I can do for you, please, speak your mind.”

“Anything you can do for me...?” Chloe’s mind blanked at the sudden request. Although she hadn’t done this for a reward’s sake...

I want Lloyd to praise me.

Recalling her innermost desires, Chloe spoke, “Then, um... if you consider what I did to be a favor to you, could you...” Half hemming, half hawing, she relinquished control to her most primal self. “Could you...tell me I did a good job?”

Even she couldn’t believe what just came out of her own mouth. She said it against her own better judgment—she simply couldn’t hold it back any longer.

A short pause passed before Lloyd responded, “Are you sure that’s all you want?”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

A little confused, but willing to oblige nevertheless, Lloyd opened his mouth:

“You did great.”

A small giggle bubbled forth from Chloe’s lips. Though the words came out stilted, they touched her heart all the same. Having carried out her duties whilst being beaten and broken, without receiving so much as a single word of praise for so long, Chloe felt the utmost joy at being recognized for her contribution.

Upon seeing a few simple words send Chloe over the moon, Lloyd felt butterflies again. *That feeling again.* He put his hand to his chest.

Suddenly, Lloyd came up with an idea. “I have a suggestion, if I may.”

“Yes?” said Chloe, apprehensively.

Looking her in the eyes, Lloyd continued. “How would you feel about becoming my housekeeper?”

Chloe blinked her eyes in surprise. “Your housekeeper?”

“Yes.” Lloyd nodded with a straight face. “As you clearly saw, my place is a bit of a mess. Between my duties and my ineptness at household chores, I was actually just considering hiring one.”

A purely practical and logical arrangement, Lloyd would tell you. A win-win situation for both of them, he would say.

What he wouldn’t admit was that—hidden behind all that pretext and justification, somewhere deep underneath—there dwelled a desire to continue seeing Chloe, to be together with her a little longer. Whether or not he was actually even aware enough of that feeling to admit it in the first place, well...that remained to be seen.

“I see. Well that’s convenient timing, isn’t it?” said Chloe.

“Indeed. Dust is bad for your health, don’t you know.”

“What does that have to do with anything!” Chloe said, suppressing a chuckle at Lloyd’s somewhat superfluous comment. But from her experience today, she did see his point.

“Of course, the choice is entirely yours to make, but if you have nowhere else to turn, you could stay here for a while,” said Lloyd.

“Nowhere...?” *He’s right,* Chloe thought. She never asked for Shirley’s whereabouts in the capital. She couldn’t find her if she tried. Even if she could, Shirley no longer worked for the Ardennes. Chloe’s presence and status as a runaway could even spell trouble for her.

“If you’d be willing, I’d get help around the house, and you’d get a place to rest your head. It would be a beneficial arrangement for both of us, I think.”

After coming to the capital with no money and no contacts to her name, the only option for Chloe was to drift around doing odd jobs until she saved up enough to find a place to stay. Perhaps she could find a live-in job if she looked hard enough, but that was far from a guarantee.

Lloyd’s proposition seemed a little too perfect.

“Are you sure you want someone like *me*?” Chloe asked, her insecurity nipping at her heels. Despite being more than qualified to head up housekeeping at even the royal castle at this point, her lack of self-esteem proved fatal here.

What if I can’t be of use to him? What if he sees me for the worthless person I am and kicks me out? Negative thoughts spiraled in Chloe’s head. She was used to being told she was beyond help, or to do it again but better, being called worthless, but for some reason, she didn’t want Lloyd to see her that way.

Fortunately, he saw her for what she truly was. “I think you’re fit for the job. Drawing a bath in anticipation for my arrival, the high quality cooking, the attentive and thorough cleaning... If I’m being honest, I could think of no one better.”

“Y-You’re far too kind...” Even if it *was* flattery, Chloe could barely contain her smile. *Keep it together, Chloe! This is a serious conversation about your future!*

Chloe put both hands on her cheeks and yanked the upturning corners of her mouth down.

“What kind of face is that?” Lloyd asked.

“My serious face!” Chloe replied.

“I see. Glad to see you’re taking this to heart. Back to the subject at hand,

your one mandatory duty will be to clean. Everything else—cooking, laundry, bathing, you can do at your discretion. As for your wages, I'll have to research the nominal wage for a live-in housekeeper and get back to you. You can stay in my spare room and arrange your own meals. I'll provide you a stipend tomorrow so you can go out and buy whatever necessities you need."

"Th-That's extraordinarily generous!" Chloe said, unable to contain her surprise.

"Is it? I thought this was standard..." Lloyd said, a puzzled look on his face.

Objectively, these were average, if not slightly better than average stipulations for a live-in housekeeper. Chloe, of course, had no way of knowing that. To her, this was like stumbling her way into a luxurious hotel after weeks of wandering the desert.

"So? What do you think?" Lloyd asked.

"Um..."

On paper, this was an incredible opportunity, but Chloe couldn't shake the one fear in the back of her mind: *This all sounds too good to be true...* What if he had ulterior motives? What if she was about to fall for some grand, wicked plot? Chloe's previous life experience colored her perception.

Then, she remembered...

Did you say you had any dislikes, by the way?

I dislike injustice, untruths, and the irrational.

Chloe consolidated his thoughts on Lloyd from their past two days together. *He's got his peculiarities and odd ends here and there, but under that he's earnest, sincere, and kind. He's not the type to trick others.*

In which case, her answer was already laid out for her.

"Yes, I accept, thank you. I'll be in your care."

"Very well. And...it's a little late for formalities, don't you think?"

"Oh! Yes. I apologize!"

And just like that, Chloe became Lloyd's housekeeper. Though surely a bevy of

unknowns awaited her, she couldn’t help but feel giddy excitement that they were to be together for at least a little while longer.

Chapter Three: Chloe Ardennes, Housekeeper!

Later that night, Lloyd stepped outside to practice his swordwork, his forceful grunts echoing through the darkness. Swordwork and strength training had been staples of his regimen for years. *A knight should train far above and beyond the call of duty!* he would often say.

The night was overcast, but that did little to hinder his keenly honed vision. His yard was spacious—likely designed to accommodate a knight's daily training—and completely overgrown. Long blades of grass and weeds swayed in every direction across its unkempt surface—except where he stood. There, where he carried out his training regimen, nothing grew at all. It was a most curious sight to behold.

Completing his one-thousandth practice swing with a grunt, a peculiar thought crossed his mind: starting today, he would be sharing his home with someone else. *What a strange feeling,* he thought. He had lived alone for as long as he could remember, and the feeling hadn't quite sunk in.

He had been contemplating hiring Chloe as his housekeeper since before he came home that day, but after witnessing her exceptional housekeeping skills and attention to detail, he was certain she was the right choice for the job.

The agreement was swift and mutually beneficial, yet Lloyd couldn't shake his concerns. *Will I be able to live up to my duty as her employer?* he wondered. Having dedicated his life to the sword, he lacked experience connecting with his fellow human beings in general, much less a young woman of similar age. He was worried that he would do something unbefitting as her employer, that he was going to do something to make her dislike him—just imagining the possibility of the latter made his chest feel strangely heavy.

He recalled something Freddy had said to him in the past, *I think you should involve yourself more with people—it'll help you come out of your shell.* Though he couldn't say for certain, he felt that perhaps this was what Freddy had

meant. With that thought, he began to feel a little more optimistic.

And...I just need to know, Lloyd thought. Behind Chloe's sunny disposition and innocent nature, there lurked a past filled with bitterness and pain. Lloyd caught glimpses through her actions and words. A normal sixteen-year old girl wouldn't prostrate herself on the floor in greeting, nor succumb to such total insecurity. What kind of upbringing could have brought about such submissive behavior?

As he thought about who or what would hurt such a gentle soul, a white-hot rage ignited within him, fueled by his unwavering sense of justice.

Whatever the case might've been, Lloyd found himself deeply invested in her story. *Where did you live? What kind of life did you lead? What made you come to the capital?* He would ask when the time was right.

As he waded through his thoughts, he heard Chloe call out to him. "Lloyd! Thank you for the bath!" she said, coming out of the house and trotting over to Lloyd.

"All done?" Lloyd asked.

"Yes, it felt great!" replied Chloe. "Oh my! I didn't notice because it was so dark, but were you practicing with your sword?"

"I'm just training, yes."

"You must've worked up a sweat! I'll draw you a bath."

"No need. This isn't enough to make me sweat."

"I-I see... That's a knight for you, I suppose!"

It was then that it happened.

The clouds parted, and a beam of moonlight shone down from the heavens, illuminating the scene.

It all happened so fast.

Chloe gulped. She froze.

Noticing something was amiss, Lloyd asked, "What's wrong?"

Her gaze was transfixed on one particular object—the longsword Lloyd had

been using for practice. Its silver blade took on a menacing gleam in the moonlight.

She let out a shriek and collapsed onto her knees.

“Hey, hey!” Lloyd sheathed his sword and rushed to Chloe’s side.

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It all happened so fast.

After finishing her bath, Chloe had walked outside and over to where Lloyd was practicing. The moonlight peeked out from behind the clouds, casting light on Lloyd’s longsword.

Its silver blade shone in the dark—just like the knife her mother had used to try and kill her.

Chloe’s pulse surged. A cold, clammy sweat broke out across her body, and her blood froze. It felt like there was a lump of coal in her throat. She couldn’t breathe.

“What’s wrong?”

She couldn’t offer a response to Lloyd’s question.

Images of that day flashed through her mind: Isabella’s crazed figure, her ear-piercing screams of anger, and the deadly knife hungry for her blood.

Chloe screamed.

“Hey, hey!”

The moment she collapsed, Lloyd was already by her side.

She clutched at her chest. Her breathing was ragged.

“What happened? Are you okay?”

She couldn’t respond. She continued to gasp and heave.

Lloyd recognized that she was going into a panic attack. He dropped down to his knees and put his hands on her shoulders. “Hey! Stay with me! Can you look at me?”

Chloe did not see Lloyd. Her gaze was vacant and unfocused. “No, no! Please!

Forgive me! I-I'm sorry!" Tone dripping with fear, she apologized to someone who wasn't there.

Lloyd's instincts told him this was serious. Chloe was in distress. At this rate even her breathing would be at risk.

Lloyd, however, remained calm—he had been through much worse than this. He sifted through his memories looking for a way to...

Then, he remembered. He'd endured a panic attack once. He remembered calming down after being embraced tightly and patted on the back. He swiftly wrapped both arms around Chloe and squeezed, replicating what was done to him back then.

Chloe let out a small whimper, but he did not let go. He continued to hold her tight.

"You're safe now. Everything's okay," he uttered in the most gentle voice he could manage. He patted and stroked her back with utmost care, as if handling the world's most delicate treasure. Her body was even smaller than he expected. He was overwhelmed by an urge to protect. "There's no danger here. You can rest easy."

After the initial shock of contact wore off, Chloe began to calm down. The soothing warmth of Lloyd's body heat and the reassuring sensation of his hand on her back slowly brought her back to reality. With every gentle stroke, with every quiet whisper, Chloe felt her palpitating heart quiet down. Lloyd's warmth, scent, touch, and most of all his presence returned calmness to her being.

"Better?" Lloyd asked.

Chloe gave a small nod of her head. "I'm... I'm sorry." The first thing that occurred to her after regaining her composure was to apologize.

"What are you apologizing for?" said Lloyd, patting her twice on the back. "For now just focus on your breathing. Deep breaths. In and out..."
Following his instruction, Chloe slowly breathed in, then out—in, then out.

After giving her some time, Lloyd spoke again, "Did my sword scare you?"

Chloe's body twitched at the word. Then, she gave a small nod. "Just a while ago, I...I had a knife pointed at me—I was being chased. I thought I was going to die—I-I..."

She felt his embrace tighten. Lloyd's comforting scent wafted into her nose and she went limp.

"You don't have to explain," he said with another pat on the back. "We can talk things over when you're able." He tried his best to bend his stilted delivery into something reassuring.

Something warm stirred within Chloe's chest. Not the anxiety-induced palpitations from earlier, but a steady, reassuring pulse. "Yes," Chloe said with a slight nod. As a warm blush spread across her cheeks, she gripped Lloyd's clothing and held on tight. "Thank you."

"Think nothing of it."

For a little while, Chloe remained in Lloyd's embrace.

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"Can this damn thing heal already?!"

In a bar within the unruly South District of the capital, a certain bald man—real name Alan—and his two lackeys sat around a low table.

"Me too, boss... My back is killing me—feels like I got whipped." Alan's blonde-haired right hand man, Giusto, whimpered as he nursed his back.

"Me too! I've been traumatized..."Alan's left hand man with the bowl cut, Mush, picked up the thread. "I haven't been able to eat anything with onions since..."

"Nobody asked you."

Giusto's verbal jab was interrupted by Alan slamming his glass on the table. "Who gives a shit? All I know is that I'm pissed off!"

"Same goes for me."

"Aye, aye!"

The two goons nodded in affirmation. The fracas two days prior still stoked

their ire.

Out in the middle of the pouring rain in the Middle District, the gang had attempted to forcefully pick up a lone runaway girl—"attempted" being the operative word. A lone young man passing by had thwarted their efforts. Annoyed, they wanted to hurt him a little, just to teach him a lesson, but were instead thrown out on their backs. Alan escaped the encounter with an injured neck; Giusto was nursing a bad back.

Mush came out with a phobia of onions.

They got what they deserve! one might say. *Serves them right!* one could argue, and of course, they'd be right. But these were three men who saw nothing wrong with abducting a young girl; their loathing of the young man who had humiliated them would not be so easily dismissed.

"Ahh, damn it! Just thinking about it is pissin' me off even more. That punk!"

"Yeah. Next time I see him I'll give him a piece of my mind... Maybe even two—no, three pieces."

"I'll grind minced onions in his eyes and make him cry!"

Conventional wisdom would tell you not to mess with someone who'd just easily beat you one-on-three, but there was nothing conventional nor wise about this bunch.

Bearing witness to this conversation was a rotund, middle-aged fellow. A greasy, mirthful laugh escaped his lips as he observed them with great delight.

"Whaddya laughin' at, Morgan!" roared Alan.

"Oh nothing, I was just thinking about how our very own braggadocious brawler over here so easily had his ass handed to him! The irony is delicious indeed," Morgan, a local celebrity of the South District, said with a self-satisfied smirk.

"Shut yer trap! If it weren't for my neck that kid would be face down in the dirt!"

"Oh, but I thought *he* was the one that injured your neck in the first place?"

"Quit nitpickin'! Anyways, the point is as soon as my neck gets better, I'm gon'

grind my boot in his face!”

“If you’ll see a doctor, it’ll heal up right away, you know?”

“Whaddya think I’m made of, money?!”

Morgan shrugged his shoulders. “Alright, alright, settle down now. If you’ll just listen, I have some information that might be of interest to you.”

“What information?”

A crooked smile flitted onto Morgan’s face. “That kid you were talking about, I happen to know of someone who fits the description.”

To the sound of his clattering chair, Alan abruptly jutted his body forward. Giusto and Mush, too, opened their eyes wide and pricked up their ears.

“Tell me right now, you bastard!”

“Easy now. You know I don’t work for free. Information...comes at a price.” Morgan opened up his hand to reveal five outstretched fingers.

“Five hundred Crowns? Say less. Wait right there.”

“That’s fifty thousand, you oaf!”

“Fifty thousand?! Yer the one that’s outta your mind chargin’ fifty thousand!”

“Fine, suit yourself. You’re free to keep drowning your troubles in this dingy ol’ bar if that’s what you want,” said Morgan, reclining back in his seat. “Now tell me, what’s it gonna be?”

Alan clenched his fist with murderous rage. “Give me a week. I’ll getcha the money.”

Morgan’s mouth twisted into a wicked smile. “Appreciate the business.”

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“You’ve really done it now, Chloe...”

The next morning, Chloe lay on the living room sofa as memories of none other than last night flashed through her mind—how she had frozen at the sight of the sword, how her heart had begun to beat out of her chest, *how Lloyd had embraced and held her so tight.*

Chloe let out an anguished warble. She covered her face with her hands and flailed about on the sofa. Her body felt hot—and oddly sweaty.

Thank goodness I'm on the first floor. If she were on the second floor, the whole house would've shook with how much she was flailing about. The previous night, Lloyd had offered her the bedroom again, but she had insisted on sleeping on the couch. A second night on the bed would've been too much, she argued.

What have I done what have I done what have I done what have I done.

She still couldn't believe what had happened. Her regret was almost tangible.

To be fair, what had happened last night was beyond what anyone could predict. At the sight of Lloyd's sword, her whole body had gone into panic mode, stricken by an irrational fear that the weapon would be used to hurt her once more.

"And here I thought I was all better now..."

It seemed that the trauma ran deeper than she thought. But then again, what sixteen-year-old girl *wouldn't* be severely traumatized by her own mother trying to kill her?

Chloe had learned to repress her negative emotions—showing weakness in that household was a surefire way to invite abuse. Memories, however, were not so easily repressed. The bad ones stay with you, no matter how hard you try to convince yourself otherwise. They lurk, somewhere deep inside, waiting for anything at all to trigger them to resurface, just as they had yesterday.

But, triggers and trauma aside, there was another, equally pertinent reason for Chloe's current state of agitation: Lloyd had held her in his arms *impossibly* close for an *impossibly* long time.

Oh, the shame that she felt.

Of course she knew that Lloyd had only done what needed to be done—Chloe was in crisis, and he had pulled her out of it. There was nothing more to it. In fact, she was beyond grateful that Lloyd had the presence of mind to take action.

Still.

Chloe emitted another quavering cry.

The embarrassment hit all the same.

Afterwards, Lloyd had pulled away from her as if nothing had happened and said, *You must be tired. You should sleep for the night*, then led her back to the bedroom. On top of that, he even offered her a cup of warm water and told her, *Drink this, it'll help you relax.* His flawless gentlemanly behavior tugged at her heartstrings.

But, Chloe knew she couldn't afford to lose her cool here. If she let her emotions affect her work, that would defeat the entire purpose of her being here. She wasn't going to let this opportunity slip away. She was going to be a good housekeeper.

She exercised her strong mental control in an effort to purge the shame from her head. Perhaps she was not not quite successful, as the shame still lingered, but at least she was able to regain her composure. Next, she focused her mind on what was truly important now.

"Alright. Time to make breakfast."

Mentally reset, Chloe hopped off the sofa.

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"Morning."

"Good morning!"

Lloyd shuffled down to the living room just as Chloe finished preparing breakfast. Perhaps still hungover from a poor night's sleep, he looked visibly frazzled.

"Ah!" Noticing something, Chloe trotted over to him. "Your bedhead is awful!" she said, reaching up to pat down a particularly stubborn lock of springy black hair. "There, all better."



“Unnoticed cowlicks are a swordsman’s shame.”

Chloe stifled a laugh with one hand. “Where did that come from?!”

Lloyd was—for some reason—now wide awake.

“What do you usually do for breakfast?” asked Chloe.

“I either go without it or have a meal bar, whole.”

“And that’s enough to keep you going?”

“Of course. Back in the jungle I often went without food or water for three days and three nights.”

“This jungle does sound like quite an awful place... Well, in any case, breakfast is ready! It’s a fairly simple affair but if you would like some, please help yourself!”

Lloyd’s eyes widened in surprise. “You made some?”

“Yes! I thought it would be a nice change of pace.”

“In that case, I guess I’ll partake.”

Lloyd took his seat at the table and Chloe brought over a deep dinner plate. On it was a steaming hot dish of a rather coarse, crumbly matter topped with a very generous drizzle of a thick, gooey honey-like substance. A faintly sweet aroma wafted from the dish, stimulating Lloyd’s appetite.

“Here,” said Chloe, handing him a spoon.

Lloyd scooped up a heaping spoonful and shoved it in his mouth.

He stopped mid-bite.

“H-How is it?” inquired Chloe.

After savoring the first bite, Lloyd removed the spoon from his mouth. “This is good,” he uttered simply. Its crunchy, crumbly texture gave way to the decadent flavor of honey and butter, all garnished with just the faintest hint of chocolate taste. All in all, a most satisfying combination of flavors engineered to jumpstart his groggy morning brain and start the day right.

“Yay! So happy to hear that!” Relieved, a look of happiness bloomed across

Chloe's face. "Here, try it with some coffee; I think you'll like it." She gestured at the already poured cup next to him.

"I see." He took a sip. "Yes, I do." The bitter coffee cut right through the sweetness of the dish and refreshed his dry palate—a perfect marriage, a match made in heaven.

Lloyd continued to munch and sip away, when a certain thought crossed his mind. "I don't recall having anything like this in the house."

"Oh, I used your meal bars," replied Chloe.

Lloyd blinked his eyes in surprise, speechless.

"I didn't know when you would leave for work, so I wanted to make something simple and easy to eat. The meal bars already taste mildly like a chocolate cookie, so all I did was crush them, warm them up, then drizzle butter and honey over top."

"You really know how to work your magic," Lloyd said, praising her ingenuity.

Back home, Chloe was used to improvising dishes out of whatever she had on hand, as the neglectful kitchen staff had often failed to replenish their provisions on time. Because of this, she had developed a good understanding of the mechanics behind flavor and texture combinations—this morning's concoction was but a simple application of theory.

"M-Magic? I'm flattered..." Chloe said, scratching at her cheek.

"Have you eaten?" asked Lloyd.

"Yes, of course."

"Good." He paused. "Did you sleep well last night?"

"Yes! Yes, I did. Thanks to you." Being reminded of last night's events, she fidgeted uncomfortably. But, knowing full well that Lloyd's question had come from a genuine place of concern, she tried her best to counter in good faith. "I must've caused you a lot of trouble..."

"You've done nothing that warrants an apology, so please, don't." Lloyd cut her apology short.

Chloe spoke after a brief pause, “Y-Yes, of course. Thank you.”

“Good.” Lloyd flashed a rare smile, then returned his attention to his breakfast, which he cleaned up in no time. “That was a welcome delight first thing in the morning; thank you.”

“You’re very welcome!” Chloe replied with a smile, basking in Lloyd’s approval. Being appreciated for her efforts truly was a joy in and of itself.

Her gaze then dropped, fixing on Lloyd’s sword hung at his hip. She reacted audibly.

“Sorry, I should have known better.” He hurriedly attempted to hide it behind his back.

“No, no! I’m fine, I’m fine!” Chloe interjected. “It seems that I’m okay when it’s still in its scabbard. It must be something about the blade itself that’s the problem—the light, the edge...”

“I see.” He let his sword fall back into place.

“Sorry for the false alarm.”

“Not to worry. We’ll revisit this later.”

The root cause of her newly discovered trauma was yet unknown. Perhaps it was the sight of any blade, or perhaps it was simply because she hadn’t been mentally prepared last night. At any rate, the limits of her condition would need to be explored.

As Lloyd got up to leave, Chloe accompanied him to the entrance.

“I’ll be back by evening. What about you?” Lloyd said.

“I was thinking I’d take you up on your offer from yesterday and go out to buy some necessities.”

“Right, I did say something like that, didn’t I...” he thought for a moment before continuing, “Will you be all right going by yourself?”

“I’ll have you know that I’m a proper adult! I can handle a daytime errand or two.”

“Is that so? In that case, when you leave the house, take the street on the left

and follow it all the way down. You'll reach a merchant district. It's fairly safe there. The shops there cater to nobles, and there are plenty of guards on patrol."

"Okay! Then I will do all my shopping there. Thank you for that."

"No problem. Oh, and money...right." Lloyd took out a few silver and gold coins and handed them to Chloe.

"Th-This is too much!"

"Think of it as an advance on your wage. Feel free to spend whatever's left over on anything you like."

"Oh, okay! Thank you again, for everything."

"Pay it no mind. Very well, I'm off then."

"Have a good day!" With a small wave of her hand, she saw Lloyd off.

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"Wow..."

The royal capital, North District, Merchant Quarter, Main Street—as she strolled down the avenue, Chloe marveled at the sights before her.

"So this is the capital... Amazing..."

As she had first set foot in the capital under the rain and totally exhausted, and then spent the next few days holed up in Lloyd's home, this was her first real look at the city.

Colorful white-, brown-, and red-brick masonry abounded.

An endless throng of people and carriages came to-and-fro.

It was truly a sight she would never see back home.

The quarter bustled with activity. Fancy boutique storefronts were interspersed with buzzing street stalls, creating a lively, bazaar-style atmosphere. Pedestrians—perhaps nobles, if Lloyd was to be believed—strolled by in fancy, put-together outfits. Here, Chloe felt safe. She didn't even feel the need to buy anything—she was having fun just being there.

Chloe herself, in fact, happened to be wearing a certain embroidered dress, making her no less presentable than the ladies around her.

“Thank you, Lily,” she muttered.

Indeed, it was the same dress that she had snatched off that chair back on that fateful day. The same dress that she had worked so hard to embroider the night before. Surely no one would blame her for taking it as recompense for the many, many embroideries she’d been made to stitch, right? Lily definitely wouldn’t miss it—this was but one dress out of hundreds she had lying around.

The dress had kept her alive in the freezing cold mountain passes, and it was keeping her nice and warm now, on this cold, wintry day. Though she had never thanked her sister for anything up until this point, she felt that this was a good place to start.

“Right! I’m supposed to be shopping!” Chloe snapped back to reality. She almost forgot she was here to buy necessities for her new life at chez Lloyd.

“Okay. First up is...” Not stopping to take in any more sights, Chloe navigated her way over to a reasonable-looking general store selling daily necessities and sundries.

There, she helped herself to a variety of personal effects: towels, tableware, clothing and the like—anything and everything she could think of.

Walking past a display of various cosmetics and small cute accessories, she stopped. “Oooh...”

Well, who could blame her. She was a sixteen-year-old girl, after all.

Her eyes were particularly drawn to a small accessory in the shape of a flower. After asking the clerk, she learned that it was called an “earring”. Chloe’s sister had often adorned herself with necklaces and rings, but this was a vogue that hadn’t yet reached the interiors of the Ardennes’ domain. *An accessory you wear on your ear? How exciting.*

Feel free to spend whatever’s left over on anything you like. That was indeed what Lloyd had told her. She stretched a hand out towards the pair of earrings but stopped herself. *No, I shouldn’t... Something like that wouldn’t suit me anyway*. She shook her head to try and rid herself of the temptation.

Her low sense of self-worth rearing its ugly head again, Chloe compromised and instead picked up a pink hair clip with a ribbon design. *It wouldn't be responsible of me to spend my first payout on something frivolous like that anyway.*

This hair clip, though—completely different. It was cute, necessary, *and* utilitarian. She needed something to hold her hair out of the way when she was doing chores, and it just so happened that she had lost hers somewhere over the mountains.

After fully rationalizing the purchase in her head, she headed towards the till.

"Appreciate your patronage!" the clerk said. "That's quite the haul you got there, miss. Are you gonna be okay by yourself?"

"Oh yes, of course! I made my way over the mountains with much more than this," Chloe replied.

"The mountains? I'm not sure about all that, but take care getting home!"

"Yes, thank you!"

She stuffed her purchases in a newly purchased shoulder-slung sack—or *rucksack,* as it was known in the capital—and headed out.

"Let's see... Next up is..."

Chloe decided to buy some more clothes next. Heaving the bulging rucksack onto her back, she set off towards the next store.

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"Okay! Now all that's left is to sort out what's for dinner."

By the time Chloe finished procuring everything for herself, the sun was hanging low in the sky. Her rucksack was bursting at the seams and paper bags hung from her right hand. Provisions for the night's dinner she would have to entrust to her left hand. She wasn't worried—she still had tons of that country strength left in her.

At first, she considered patronizing a purveyor of fine foods catered towards nobles, but after careful consideration of Lloyd's diet and lifestyle, she figured that he wasn't terribly picky.

With that in mind, she decided instead to buy from one of the many value-oriented streetside stalls that dotted the main street.

Provide good cooking without breaking the bank! That's my job!

Of course, the only job she had actually been charged with, as per Lloyd, was to keep the house clean. But it seemed that all of that had gone out with the wind.

For thirty minutes, Chloe performed some market reconnaissance, scouting out each and every stall. Eventually, she found herself in front of a stall run by a stout, spry-looking older woman. "Come one, come all! We got onions on sale!" the proprietress barked at passersby. Her stall was well-stocked with everything you could possibly need to cook a decent meal—vegetables, fruit, meat, and fish, all at reasonable prices. On top of that, her stall seemed like quite the people's choice; a steady stream of passersby flowed in and out, each leaving with a purchase. A man who looked like a stall attendant hung around the register area.

"First time here, sweetie?" The stall proprietress called out to Chloe.
"Oh! Um, sorry are you talking to me?" A bewildered Chloe stammered back.

"No I'm talking to the ghost behind you—yes I'm talking to you! You're new around here, aintcha?"

"Why, yes, but how did you...?"

"Sweetie, I've been running this stall for twenty years without a single day off. You come around with all that luggage of yours, I know you're not here to visit."

"Wow, how very perceptive of you!"

"What kind of merchant would I be if I wasn't! Anyway, take your time sweetie, enjoy your shopping."
Chloe took a look around. All the produce looked fresh and appetizing, a sign of a very perceptive merchant indeed.

Still, what should I make tonight...? Stricken by indecision, her eyes began to wander.

Back home, all ingredients and groceries were procured for her, and the

meals from the past few days she whipped up from leftovers and on-hand ingredients. When it came to making a meal from scratch, this was all uncharted territory for her.

"Thinkin' about what's for dinner?"

"Yes, I'm not quite sure what to make..."

"I getcha, I getcha. It's hard to keep things fresh when you're in the kitchen every single day."

Chloe laughed uncomfortably. Better not let her know it was actually her very first day.

"What does your lover like?"

"L-L-L-Lover?! No, no! It's nothing like that!"

"Husband, then?"

"H-H-H-H-Husband?!!! It's even more nothing like that! Wh-What makes you say that?!"

"I see it in your eyes, sweetie. You've got the eyes of someone who's fixin' to make a meal for a certain special someone."

"I-I do?!" She stuck her hand to her face. A soft warmth shot down her fingertips. *I—huh?! Why is my face so warm?*

The woman laughed and continued her line of questioning. "Well? Who is he?"

Chloe hesitated for a moment. "Well, he's not my lover or my husband, but yes, it's for me and him..."

"Oooh." A hint of glee flickered in the merchant's eyes. "So? What does he like?"

"I'm not quite sure what he likes yet, but he did mention he doesn't like bell peppers."

The woman let out an inquisitive, drawn-out three syllable laugh. "Newly acquainted and still feeling each other out, eh?" she said, to no one in particular. Then, turning to Chloe, "In that case, what do you *think* he would

like?”

Though she was worried that she was standing precariously close to the wrong end of a grand misunderstanding, Chloe decided to tap into the woman’s expertise. “Well, his job involves physical labor, so I think he’d appreciate something hearty and filling.”

“Ah! Now *that* we can work with. How about something with chicken?”

“Chicken! That’s a good idea! That does sound very filling indeed!” She remembered the first night’s pot-au-feu, with its generous chunks of bacon and sausage. There was a high chance Lloyd was a meat lover at heart.

“We just got some fresh birds in this morning; I’ll give ya a little discount.”

“Wow, thank you so much!”

“And chicken this time of year should go in a stew, whaddya think?”

“A stew! Yes, that does sound amazing! I’m getting hungry just thinking about it.”

“Oooh we’re cookin’ now! Let’s see...for a stew you’ll need...”

She led Chloe around, suggesting and picking out ingredients for her. She gave out well-reasoned, thoughtful explanations for her choices, much to Chloe’s delight. As they shopped, the woman merrily greeted other customers and engaged in small talk, ensuring that everyone who walked away from her stall also walked away with a great big smile on their face. Seeing that, Chloe recognized that some customers came by just to talk to her.

“Thank you sweetie! Make sure you come back now.” With a warm smile on her face, the woman waved her hand at Chloe as she was about to leave.

“Thank you for everything! Especially the stuff you threw in for free, I really appreciate it!” Chloe said. At the register, the woman really had given her a lot for free. So much so that she felt just a little guilty about it.

“Don’t sweat it. Consider it a lil’ housewarming gift. Good luck to ya!”

“Y-Yes, thank you!”

Chloe couldn’t help but feel they were on two different pages here, but

brushed the thought aside. She'd managed to get dinner sorted, and that was all that mattered.

With her left hand now full as well, Chloe set out for home. *Well that's why her stall is so popular*, she thought. *Now I need to hurry home and get dinner started!*

Chloe's mind conjured up images of the night's dinner in anticipation. She just couldn't wait to see Lloyd's reaction to the very first bite. She began to pick up the pace when she suddenly stopped and planted her feet in front of a city park. "Oh my..."

Right next to the park entrance was a tree. Next to the tree stood a girl, maybe around five or six years old. She had a worried expression on her face, and gazed upwards at the tree. She had fluffy, soft-looking golden blonde hair that ran down the length of her back, and a pair of big blue eyes. She wore a frilly dress, fitting for the young daughter of a well-to-do family.

Chloe looked around. The young girl was alone; there were no adults to be seen.

I wonder what's wrong... she thought.

Curious as to the girl's plight, Chloe approached her. "Excuse me..."

The little girl turned to look at Chloe and tilted her head in confusion. "...A moving lady?" It appeared that she thought Chloe to be in the middle of moving house. A reasonable misunderstanding to make considering how much luggage she was hauling.

"Just a shopping lady, actually. Is everything okay?" Chloe replied.

The girl pointed upwards to the crown of the tree. Following her direction, Chloe looked up to see a kitten crouched on a branch, quaking in fear. Perking up her ears, she could hear it meowing faintly.

"I think that poor kitty's stuck. I felt bad, so I couldn't just leave it."

"I see..." replied Chloe. *What a kind-hearted young girl!*

"Can't we do something, Miss Shopping Lady?" She looked up pleadingly at Chloe, a sense of unease emanating from her eyes.

Chloe, of course, was not about to turn down this precious girl's request. *Maybe I could bait it down with some food? Or maybe grab its attention with a branch? No, wait. If it's scared, it won't be able to come down by itself in the first place...*

Chloe looked up again at the tree. She gauged it to be about three stories high. Slowly sweeping her gaze downwards, she observed thick, sturdy-looking branches sprouting out from a well-gnarled trunk.

In that case... she thought. The corner of her lips upturned into a small cheeky smile. "Wait right here."

"Huh?" The young girl watched on, wide-eyed, as Chloe dropped her bags on the ground and removed her rucksack. By the time she caught on to what was happening, Chloe already had all four limbs off the ground. "M-Miss Shopping Lady! Be careful!"

"Don't worry about me! I can handle this much!" With a confident declaration, Chloe scampered up the side of the tree and reached the kitten in no time.

"Here, kitty, kitty! Don't be scared!" She beckoned the frightened kitten over with an index finger. Despite being at quite the perilous height, Chloe showed no signs of fear—in fact, she almost looked as comfortable up there as she did standing on solid ground.

With an air of practiced ease, Chloe slowly coaxed the kitten over to her. "Good kitty!" She grabbed the kitten and stuffed it down her dress collar, before dexterously descending back down to the ground.

"You're amazing, Miss Monkey Lady!" The young girl had watched the entire sequence of events unfold with an expression of pure astonishment.

"Is this your kitten?" Chloe asked, gesturing at the kitten. Its big head popped out of her collar; it was grooming itself, seemingly feeling very safe.

The young girl shook her head.

"Oh I see." Chloe said, freeing the kitten from her dress. The kitten trotted a few steps away, turned around to give Chloe one final meow, then darted off.

“It thanked you, Miss Monkey Lady!”

“Miss Monkey Lady...?”

“How did you climb the tree like that?! Teach me, teach me!” The girl asked, eyes glittering with excitement.

Chloe, as a born-and-bred country girl who grew up next to a forest on her estate, could offer no more than a, “Just, y’know...?” in response. Since she had often played in the treetops with Shirley, it was a skill that she and her kinfolk had taken for granted.

“Thanks, Monkey Lady!” With an aggressive bow of her head, the young girl thanked Chloe for her little act of heroism.

“Y-You’re welcome...”

“Millia!” At that moment, a beautiful young woman with glossy, light pink hair approached the two at a swift pace.

“Ah! Mother!”

“What have I told you about running off on your own?”

“But staying at home is so boring!”

The heartwarming exchange brought a smile to Chloe’s face.

“And who is this, Millia?” the mother asked.

“This is Miss Monkey Lady!”

“Miss Monkey...?”

“Oh no, I’m sorry! You see...” Before the mother could jump to any conclusions, Chloe hurriedly gave a brief explanation of what had just transpired.

“Is that what happened...? I apologize on behalf of my daughter. She really can be quite the handful sometimes. Go on Millia, you apologize too now.”

“I’m sorry...”

“No, no, it’s fine! Please, raise your head!” Having never had anyone bow to her before, Chloe was flustered at the sight.

“I must thank you for playing along with her whims. Look what happened to your lovely dress! Please, I must make it up to you somehow.”

“No, no, no, that’s absolutely fine! It was really nothing at all!” Having already broken it in on the mountainous trek over, Chloe didn’t mind her dirtied dress in the slightest.

“May I ask your name, at least?” the woman said.

“I’m—my name is Chloe.”

“Chloe, what a lovely name. I’m Sara, pleased to make your acquaintance,” she said with a slight bow of introduction.

Rattled, Chloe responded with a hasty bow of her own.

Sara let out a brief giggle of amusement. “Please, no need to be so formal. Make yourself at ease.”

“Y-Yes, thank you.”

A gentle smile broke out on Sara’s face.

Chloe’s first impression of Sara was of a kind woman who would never threaten her daughter with physical harm. Their conversation continued for a short while longer, broaching topics like Chloe’s day out shopping and her dinner plans for the night, and by the end of it all, Chloe’s fondness for Sara had only grown.

“Well, it’s been a pleasure, but I must get going. My husband will be back soon,” said Sara.

“Oh, yes of course! I’m sorry for keeping you!”

“Not at all; I thoroughly enjoyed our conversation. I hope we meet again someday.”

“Of course! Until next time!”

“Bye-bye, Miss Monkey Lady!” With an exaggerated wave bidding her farewell, the young Millia trotted up next to her mother, taking her hand.

“How wonderful.” Chloe watched as the two made their leave. *So that’s what a normal mother-daughter relationship is like,* she thought.

When Chloe was growing up, Isabella had never shown her so much as a hint of motherly affection. Not in the business of missing something she never had, Chloe never felt particularly strongly about its absence—in fact, she even found it to be a bit liberating. But then again, she'd be lying if she said she didn't romanticize it just a bit.

And having just witnessed it firsthand, that yearning got a teensy bit stronger. Before her thoughts could spiral too far, she shook her head and chased them from her mind.

It was time to hurry back and get dinner started. Chloe set out on her way home once more.

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Lloyd returned by evening, same as the previous night. Greeting him again at the door was Chloe.

“...Welcome back.”

“I’m home—” Lloyd froze in his tracks. Chloe wasn’t prostrated on the floor like the night before, but something was clearly amiss. Her voice lacked energy, her gaze aimlessly drifted to the floor, and her shoulders drooped. “What’s wrong? Did something happen?”

Chloe let out a strained laugh. “And here I thought I was doing a good job of hiding it... What was I thinking, trying to deceive a knight...”

“No, it was quite obvious,” Lloyd shot back. “So? What happened?”

“It seems that I’ve discovered a critical weakness in my housekeeping skills.”

“A critical weakness?” Intrigued by Chloe’s unusually solemn expression, Lloyd unintentionally furrowed his brow as well. Chloe’s gaze wandered around the room as if she were struggling to bring up a particularly difficult subject. Finally gathering the courage to speak, she locked eyes with Lloyd and confessed, “It seems that...I’m unable to use a knife!”

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That afternoon, Chloe had successfully purchased a kitchen knife—or perhaps *managed* to would be a better way of putting it.

Okay Chloe, you can do this. You’re just buying this knife. No one’s holding it. All you’re doing is buying it. As Chloe approached the knife display, her whole body began to tremble. Fragmented memories from that fateful day flickered through her mind. Pushing through them, she managed to complete her purchase. Although it was a far cry from the panic attack she experienced the other day, the ordeal was still distressing nonetheless.

Will I be able to use a knife like this...? she’d thought at the time.

Her gut instinct would later prove to be true.

Before preparing dinner, she first made her rounds cleaning the house. Then, when the time came, she gripped the knife and— “My hand was...shaking so much. I couldn’t hold it properly—let alone cut with it.”

Chloe sat on the living room sofa, one hand gripping the other, as she explained the situation to Lloyd, who was sitting across from her. “A housekeeper who can’t even hold a knife? That’s unheard of. I-I’m so sorry, this must come as such a disappointment to you.” Chloe bowed her head deeply. *How can you be a competent housekeeper without being able to use a knife? He’d be justified in firing me on the spot.*

Oblivious to the thoughts running through Chloe’s head, Lloyd’s gaze remained fixed on her. He rose from his seat, moved closer, and knelt in front of her. “You know, I’m terrible at sewing.”

“...I’m sorry?” Bewildered by the abrupt change of topic, Chloe cocked her head to one side.

“Terrible doesn’t even begin to describe it. I tried it once and couldn’t handle it. The small needle going in and out and in and out and in and out... I thought I’d be driven mad.” Lloyd grimaced as if recalling an unpleasant memory. “I’m terrible at all tasks that require any sort of finesse, frankly. The same goes for cooking, cleaning in tight spaces... They’re all just things I’m not suited for.”

Slowly but surely, Chloe began to see what Lloyd was getting at.

“What I’m trying to say is, we all have things we can and can’t do. That much is obvious. No one is perfect, so I’m not expecting you to be.” He looked at her with his usual serious, deadpan expression. “There’s no need to berate yourself over a knife.”

With a single sentence, Lloyd cut through all of Chloe’s past struggles and left her vindicated. For far too long, her world had expected perfection from her. The vitriol she faced if she fell short—sometimes even if she didn’t...

Lloyd continued, “Besides, you have many exceptional skills apart from cooking. Cleaning, for one. And—for what it’s worth—I thoroughly enjoyed all the meals you managed to make without a knife these past few days.”

“Y-You’re far too kind...”

Having thought she’d get scolded or fired, Chloe was instead showered with praise. Her expectations were so far off the mark she was more confused than happy.

“Not to mention our original agreement was for you to keep the house clean, first and foremost. Cooking was never a part of that. What would I be if I got angry at you for that?”

“Th-That’s right... But still!”

“You’re diligent, so you try to take everything on by yourself. I’m appreciative, but it is by no means necessary. As I said, we all have our strengths and weaknesses, and when it comes to the latter, we should reach out for help.” Lloyd locked eyes with Chloe. “Rely on me. Don’t struggle alone.”

“Lloyd...” His name escaped her mouth as she choked back emotion. He was so kind, so considerate. She couldn’t have asked to run into a better person to be her employer.

“So? What do you need me to do?” Lloyd stood up and asked.

Chloe’s gloomy composure cleared up into a sunny smile. “I still hate to trouble you, but in that case, could you cut chicken into bite-size pieces for me?”

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Later that evening, Chloe and Lloyd sat around the living room table, piping hot dishes of her cooking set out between them. After giving thanks, the pair took up their spoons and dug in.

“This is good.” One bite into the evening’s main dish—a chicken and tomato stew—and Lloyd’s tongue was greeted with the rich, unctuous flavor of slow cooked chicken. The beautifully prepped chunks of chicken meat—so tender they could be flaked apart with a spoon—intertwined with the tangy tomato, the sweet onion, and the aromatic garlic to form a wonderfully complex yet harmonious dish.

“It goes great with bread too!” Chloe playfully jested.

“Very well.”

Lloyd heaped up a hot and fluffy piece of baguette with some chicken and mushroom. Then, after giving it a generous topping of tomato sauce, he brought it to his mouth and took a bite. “This is the devil’s bread, no doubt,” he

muttered in reaction.

After the second bite, third bite, fourth... Lloyd showed no signs of slowing down.

“I’m glad you like it!” said Chloe.

“I do, very much. Today’s training was extra rigorous, so something filling was exactly what I needed. What a great, muscly dish.”

Chloe burst out into laughter. “Muscly! That’s a new one.”

A nourishing dish worthy of a working man had been her main goal for the night’s meal, so it seemed that she had at least hit the mark on that one. Chloe proudly pumped an imaginary fist.

“Um, thank you again for helping out, by the way.” Halfway through dinner, Chloe addressed Lloyd again.

During dinner prep, Lloyd had stood in for Chloe and cut the chicken—and the onions, the garlic, and the bread. As it turns out, his knife skills were not too shabby.

“Of course. You could say cutting is my area of professional expertise. As someone who cuts through enormous straw dummies regularly on the job, cutting through chicken is child’s play.”

“R-Right, that *is* true...” Chloe couldn’t help but feel some of the nuance behind the word “cut” had been lost in translation.

“Judging by your culinary prowess, you must’ve been able to use a knife before,” said Lloyd.

“Yes. You could say that back home I did wield dual roles in both kitchen and home.”

“Dual wielding, eh? Incredible. Even among the Order, few knights can boast of that.” Lloyd nodded deeply in agreement.

“You’re being silly!” Lloyd’s misguided reply tickled Chloe’s funny bone.

“The point is, if you could use it before, you’ll be able to use it again, so there’s no point losing sleep over it. If you ever need something cleaved in the

meantime, don't hesitate to ask."

"Yes, thank you. I'll definitely call on you if I need anything...cleaved." Chloe let out another small giggle.

"Did I say something funny?"

"I'm sorry, I suppose I just find your choice of words oddly amusing," she said, stifling another giggle with her hand.

Not at all dissatisfied with her playful retort, Lloyd's lips rounded into a subtle smile.

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"How was the town?"

After dinner, the two found themselves in the living room, relaxing on the sofa.

"It was so much fun!" Chloe said, face lighting up. "The buildings were all so big, there were so many people, and the shops—my goodness, the shops! It was never-ending! First, I went to this general store on Main Street, and they had so many goods that I—Oh! They had this one thing..."

Starting with her purchase of a complete set of personal effects, Chloe gave an animated account of the day's events, from her memorable encounter with the lovely grocery stall lady, to her unexpected run-in with the young girl and the cat on the tree. She talked and talked and talked, walking through her entire day in chronological order when suddenly she stopped in her tracks. "I-I'm so sorry! How long have I been talking for?"

"It's fine. It sounds like you enjoyed yourself," Lloyd said with a warm smile on his face. The way she managed to portray something as simple as a day out as a grand and amusing adventure warmed his heart.

"Do you not go into town that often?" asked Chloe.

"I keep it to a minimum. I don't like to drink, so I suppose the only time I go is to buy food."

"Really? That's a shame! You should explore the town! I'm sure you'll find something you like!"

“I think I’d rather watch you explore instead.”

“And what’s that supposed to mean?!”

“It means exactly what it means,” Lloyd replied, a hint of a teasing smile on his face.

Chloe puffed her cheeks in protest. Then, an idea floated into her mind. “Then...would you like to join me the next time I go?”

“Into town?” Lloyd’s eyes widened.

“Yes...if you don’t mind, that is.”

“Someone as dull as I am? I’ll only put a damper on things, you know.”

“That’s...that’s not true... It’ll be fun—I promise.”

Lloyd carefully considered Chloe’s words for a brief moment before answering. “I’ll try and make time.”

A brilliant, frame-worthy smile broke out on Chloe’s face. “Yes! I’ll be looking forward to it!”

A tinge of discomfort tickled his chest, and Lloyd turned his head away from the little bundle of joy that was currently Chloe Ardennes—it was almost as if there was something he didn’t want her to see.

“Lloyd? Is something the matter?”

“...That hair clip. Is that new?”

Taken aback by Lloyd’s brazen attempt at changing the topic, Chloe was left momentarily perplexed. Yet her confusion quickly dissolved, giving way to an even greater surge of joy. “Y-You noticed...”

It was the very same pink hair clip with a ribbon design that she had picked up at the general store. The one that was cute, necessary *and* utilitarian.

“A knight must be able to pick up on even minute changes in their surroundings. I had already noticed when I got home, I just didn’t feel the need to bring it up until—what’s wrong?”

Lloyd noticed Chloe was unusually fidgety—squirming, even, and a faint rosy blush adorned both her cheeks. Never having dealt with a similar reaction from

a member of the opposite sex, he was at a bit of a loss.

“Nothing, I’m just happy.”

“I don’t recall saying anything that would make you happy?”

“Well, you see...it makes a girl very happy when you notice something small like that.”

“Is that how it is?”

“That is indeed how it is.”

They both fell silent for a moment.

“So...what do you think?” Chloe spoke up first.

“Think about what?”

“It’s not...weird, is it?” An embarrassed Chloe put her hands on her lap and cast her gaze to the floor.

Lloyd attempted to give his honest opinion, but the words hitched just shy of his throat. *That was...strange?* Perplexed by his own response, he paused, composed himself, then tried to string together a response once more. “It’s not weird. It looks great on you.”

Upon hearing that, Chloe’s face lit up like a lantern. “Thank you...for that.”

The smile on her face was bubbly like that of a child who had just received a present from her parents for the first time.

Lloyd attempted to turn his head away once more, but this time, he was too late.

She saw it—his cheeks, tinged with just the slightest hint of blush.

Though he hadn’t realized it yet, something had shifted with him. The warm glow in his chest and his oddly quickening pulse were surefire signs of change that stirred within Lloyd’s heart.

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“What do you mean you *still* haven’t found her?!”

The Kingdom of Rose, Margraviate of Ardennes, Shadaf—Isabella’s rage

echoed throughout the estate.

"A-Apologies, milady. We've dispatched all servants to assist in the search, but we've been unable to locate her," the head maid meekly reported.

Isabella sat on a sofa and hurled her drink at the head maid's feet, shattering the glass vessel. Its contents seeped out, forming a puddle around her.

Suppressing a shriek, lest she be reprimanded, the head maid trembled silently in fear. An entourage of maids-in-waiting hurriedly swooped in and swept away the remains of the glass—their haste in no small part motivated by fear also, no doubt.

"*We've dispatched all servants, we're still unable to locate her*—I'm *tired* of hearing it!" Isabella's rage knew no bounds.

It had been two weeks since her daughter Chloe had disappeared.

Upon her disappearance, Isabella had contacted Harry, her eldest son and the current head of the Ardennes household, who in turn oversaw the search order.

Manpower for the search had been limited to servants of the Ardennes household. Many townsfolk still held a grudge against Chloe for her perceived role in the recent plague and famine, and it would've chipped at the house's reputation if news spread that their daughter was missing. Resolving the issue internally was crucial.

"Milady, we've searched nearly everywhere of note! It may be worthwhile to consider the possibility that she is no longer within our domain!"

"Enough of your nonsense!"

The Ardennes' domain was a valley basin flanked on all sides by mountain ranges. On top of that, it was winter. By carriage, it was a three-day journey through treacherous snow-capped mountain terrain to reach the plains beyond. Leaving on foot in this season amounted to no less than suicide.

Although items and supplies had gone missing from Chloe's room, Isabella would not even humor the possibility that she had left their domain. In her mind, Chloe was hiding somewhere, biding her time.

Isabella was furious. She couldn't believe that ungrateful little brat would do

such a thing to her. Sure, she had gotten a *little* emotional that day, but running away from home? Preposterous.

The faster they found her, the better. She'd teach her to never leave home again.

Of course, in the back of her mind lurked the possibility that Chloe had indeed attempted the crossing but perished somewhere over the mountains, but that would be inconvenient. She brushed the thought from her mind.

"Keep searching. Pick over every nook and cranny if you have to. She's still here, I know it!"

"Y-Yes, milady!"

With that, the head maid took her leave. Isabella slumped back in her seat and emitted a guttural snort. "How irritating."

Chloe's disappearance had caused Isabella considerable stress. Not just because she was gone, no, but because since her disappearance, the quality of cooking at the estate had declined considerably.

Unbeknownst to Isabella, Chloe's culinary prowess, honed through Shirley's tutelage, rivaled that of chefs who ran restaurants in the capital. Finding someone to replace her was not so simple a task.

It wasn't just cooking either. All kinds of housekeeping-related matters around the estate had fallen into decline since her disappearance. The true extent of the household servants' reliance on Chloe's competence was quickly becoming apparent.

Isabella, as prideful as she was, would never admit it.

The only emotion she *would* admit was the white-hot rage she felt towards Chloe for running away.

"Hmph. No matter. That brat. She'll see her folly and come crawling back soon enough."

She turned a blind eye to all of it—the skills Chloe had forged through years of hellish existence, the cracks that had begun forming in the estate in her absence...

Rejecting the truth, she poured herself another glass.

Chapter Four: Days In the Capital

When Chloe came to, she was somewhere unfamiliar.

Everything was dark. The air was light, yet heavy—pleasant, yet off-putting.

The hazy darkness shrouded everything.

What a confusing, incoherent place.

Wait—she saw something.

Candlelight threw a dim human silhouette into relief before her.

As she strained to make out who it was, her field of view suddenly expanded tenfold.

Everything was now vivid and clear.

A familiar room. A familiar table. A familiar sofa. A familiar painting on the wall. A familiar chandelier hanging from the ceiling.

This was her old family estate—the one she swore she would never return to.

Drip.

She looked down at her feet.

A single drop of crimson spread across the floor.

As she realized what it was, a bone-chilling voice rang out in front of her. *I said to not leave a single drop of your filthy blood on my floors, did I not?*

Her gaze flicked upwards.

The silhouette from earlier. It now looked...familiar.

The wrinkles etched on her face from age.

The thick layer of makeup she caked on to hide her weariness.

The decadent, self-indulgent dress shrouding her body.

Her mother held a knife in her right hand.

Why? Why are you like this?

Isabella took one step toward her.

Why, why, why, WHY?! Why did you have to live? Why not my husband? Or my son?! Why did they have to die?!

Another step.

The silver blade glinted, full of menace.

Chloe tried to speak. The words wouldn't come out.

Chloe tried to run. Her legs wouldn't move.

Drip. Drip.

She looked down. Blood was everywhere.

You are a cursed child! You bring nothing but disaster and misfortune! You can't be allowed to live!

The knife swung down at her chest.

She couldn't move, she couldn't close her eyes, she couldn't scream.

She could only watch as the overwhelming sense of fear took hold of her and —

Chloe jolted upright, gasping.

An unpleasantness coated her back, her neck, all over her body.

She panted, lungs starved for air.

Calm down, calm down... You're okay...

She concentrated and took control of her breathing—in, then out—in, then out. She fought to coax her pounding heart to slow.

After a few moments of controlled breathing, Chloe regained her composure.

She took a look around.

She was in a simple bedroom, not a grand and lavish estate.

An early morning glow seeped in through the windowsill. The sound of chirping birds graced her ears.

Recognizing that this was in fact the spare bedroom on the first floor of Lloyd's home, Chloe breathed one final sigh of relief.

"That dream again..." she mumbled.

It was the same awful, recurring dream—the one that showed her images from that nightmarish day against her will. It seemed that her unconscious was pushing back against her forced attempts to purge the day's events from her memory.

Although the frequency of her nightmares was still manageable, she was worried that experiencing them nightly would affect her work in the daytime, and that was something to be avoided.

She sat silent for a bit.

There was no point in dwelling on it now. She wiped off only the sweat that had beaded off her brow, and pulled the covers over her once more.

She prayed that she would not see the nightmare this time.

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A week had passed since Chloe became Lloyd's housekeeper.

"I like this." Lloyd said, heaping a spoonful into his mouth.

Though his face was as impassive as always, Chloe couldn't help but think that it had softened around the edges, just a little.

"I'm glad!" she said in response.

This morning, like every morning, the two sat around the dining table, enjoying Chloe's homemade breakfast.

"I've never had scrambled eggs before," said Lloyd.

"Really? It's quite the simple fare, I would think..."

"I never really thought to cook eggs, to be honest."

"...You eat them raw?"

"Simple, right?"

"In that case, you can look forward to a different egg dish every day starting

today.”

“You certainly sound...motivated?”

They dined over light banter and idle conversation. The morning’s menu consisted of bacon, sausages, croissants—all part of a balanced and calorically-dense breakfast; there was salad too, for good measure.

Ever since that first day, Chloe partook in the exact same menu as Lloyd, though in much smaller portions. As she munched away, she noticed that Lloyd had been staring at her. “Is...there something on my face?”

“No, it’s nothing important.” Lloyd’s gaze swept from Chloe’s face down to her torso. “It’s just that you’ve been looking a lot healthier lately.”

“Healthier?”

“You’ve put on some weight.”

Chloe let out a shrill whimper. “I-I have?!”

“That’s a good thing. You’re almost average now,” nodded Lloyd, a sincere look on his face.

Chloe let out a small sigh of relief. “I suppose I *have* been eating three square meals a day now.”

“A positive development.”

“Well, it’s not like me being average is going to be much of an improvement at all,” said Chloe in a self-deprecating tone.

Lloyd slightly furrowed his brow and lowered his voice to a whisper. “You should really learn to see yourself in a more objective light.”

“Hm? Did you say something?”

“No, nothing.”

Lloyd’s expression flicked back to normal, much to Chloe’s confusion.

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After breakfast, Chloe followed Lloyd to the entrance as he got ready to leave for work.

“You know you don’t need to see me off every day, right?” Lloyd said.

“I don’t need to, yes. But I want to, so I do.”

“I suppose that’s fine, then...”

“I’m not being a bother, am I?”

“Not at all, I was just thinking it’d be a hassle on your part.”

“In that case there’s nothing to worry about! It’s no hassle—in fact, it’s become a little bit of fun that I look forward to every morning.”

“Seeing me off is fun? That’s a bit strange.”

“I think so too!” Chloe said with an embarrassed smile.

Lloyd reflexively scratched at his cheek. “I’ll be home by evening.”

“Of course! Same time as usual then? I was thinking we’d fry up some pork this evening, so if you wouldn’t mind, could you...?”

“Cleave it for you? No problem. I’ll make mincemeat of it.”

“Oh no, just bite-sized, please—for pork loins.”

“I see.”

Though his face didn’t change throughout, Chloe could tell from the tone of his voice that he was, in fact, a little disappointed. After having lived together for a week, she had learned to pick up on the subtle mechanics behind Lloyd’s unique sense of self-expression.

While her hyper-sensitivity to subtle changes in facial expression and tone of voice had originally developed as a way of navigating and surviving the hostile environment that was the Ardennes household, she never would’ve imagined it would find use in this very particular household run by this particularly stone-faced man.

“Alright, I’ll be on my way.”

“Have a good day!”

As Lloyd headed off to work, Chloe gave him a small wave goodbye.

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Just like that, another day peacefully approached a close.

Chloe had cleaned the house, done the laundry, bought groceries, and made dinner. The evening's menu was roasted pork loin glazed with a tangy sweet and sour sauce, which was well received by the relevant party.

Now it was midnight. Chloe was standing in the kitchen, a cutting board and knife set out in front of her, looking very determined.

Just what was she up to?

She took out a cucumber and placed it in front of her.

Not too firm, not too soft, the humble cucumber was the king of easily-cut foods.

A candle lit up the workspace in front of her—a measure to prevent injury perhaps.

"Okay, you can do this Chloe, deep breaths." With a few positive affirmations, Chloe stretched out a hand, grabbing the knife and— She winced.

An image of the silver blade flashed in her mind. A goosebump-inducing shiver ran down her spine. Her heart began to race, turning into palpitations, pulling her chest tight.

Her grip weakened, and the knife slipped from her hand, clattering back down on the countertop.

She stared down at her still trembling hands and sighed.

It had been a week since Chloe started her homespun attempt at rehabilitation. Though Lloyd had reassured her that she would be able to use a knife again one day, it didn't sit well with Chloe to just wait it out.

This was something she wanted to beat on her own terms.

So, ever since, she'd been in the kitchen every night after Lloyd had gone to bed, exposing herself to her feared stimulus, but so far...

"This is just not working..."

...Nothing. The act of simply gripping the knife was still enough to trigger flashbacks, shaking hands, and palpitations.

It hadn't gotten better at all. It seemed that the trauma ran even deeper still.

"Still...you've got to do something..."

She had tried her best to work around the use of knives in her cooking, but that was quickly proving to be very limiting—there were so many more dishes she wanted to make for Lloyd. Of course, while he did tell her to call on him for help when needed, her unusually sensitive nature provoked an overwhelming sense of guilt every time she did. *If only I could use this knife myself...* she would think.

Getting over her fear of knives was her top priority.

"Here we go." After reminding herself who and what she was doing this for, she managed to settle down. She looked down at her hands—the shaking had stopped.

"Again." She took a deep breath, then exhaled. This was it. This was going to be the time she— "What are you doing?"

Chloe jumped at the unexpected voice. She turned around slowly and hesitantly to see Lloyd in his nightclothes, standing there with arms crossed. She looked up at his face, and could barely make out a dubious expression in the dim candlelight.

She felt her back break out into a sweat. "I'm just preparing tomorrow's breakfast..."

"Were you using a knife?"

Chloe emitted a noncommittal grunt. It was already too late. Lloyd's gaze fell upon the knife and cucumber on the kitchen countertop.

Lloyd walked up next to her.

"I-I'm sorry." Chloe shrunk her body down, lowered her head, and uttered a trembling apology—like she used to do whenever her mother got angry at her.

Lloyd was utterly confused. "I don't follow. Why are you apologizing?"

"Huh?" Chloe looked up. She spied a puzzled expression on Lloyd's face. "You're not going to get angry at me?"

“Get angry at you? For what?”

“For...using the kitchen every night to practice my knifework?”

“Why would I get angry at you for that?”

“Well, because...”

Wait, why would he? She thought about it. There was no reason she could think of. She had apologized entirely by reflex. She had thought Lloyd would be angry at her if he found out she had been using the kitchen in secret, but never stopped to consider why—her body had reacted before her mind.

As Chloe grappled with this newfound realization, Lloyd opened his mouth. “To tell you the truth, I know you’ve been using the kitchen late at night.”

“What?! Since when?!”

“Since the beginning.”

Chloe was temporarily at a loss for words. “Of course you would, you’re a knight...”

“A first-rate knight must be aware of even the slightest changes in presence. It’s something you come to learn in the jungle, once the guerrillas catch your scent. You can never know when the next attack will come.”

“That awful jungle again...” said Chloe. “Wait, does that mean I’ve been keeping you up? I’m so sorry!”

“Not at all. After I figured out it was you, I slept soundly. Though I will admit I have been a bit curious as to what you were doing. At first I thought you were prepping for the next day, as you said.” He shot a glance towards the knife. “I’d never have thought you were training with a knife...”

Chloe forced out a dry laugh. It wasn’t training per se, but rehabilitation. Well, close enough, actually?

“I know you said to lean on others when it comes to things I can’t do, but...” she paused, mustering the courage to bare the truth to Lloyd. “But I can’t. I want to be able to use a knife again, and—”

An unexpected, gentle pressure descended upon her head, then lifted, then

returned.

“You’re so strong,” Lloyd said. An uncharacteristically gentle tone adorned his voice.

Another two delicate strokes graced her head. As she realized what Lloyd was doing, her cheeks broke out into a fever. “M-Me? N-No...I’m just...”

“Just what? Trauma can be crippling. Getting over it is not easy. I know because I’ve...gone through it myself.”

Chloe looked up at Lloyd. His gaze was distant, and his face fixed in a grimace, as if he was recalling a difficult past.

She remembered being held in his tight embrace. Before she could ask what Lloyd meant, he continued first, “I see you’ve been at it alone.”

“Y-Yes.” Her voice trembling, Chloe nodded.

She realized that this was his way of trying to console her. The way he clumsily stroked her head, the stilted speech that spilled from his lips—all that—was an effort to recognize her efforts.

She had tried so many times before tonight. She had failed just as many. No matter how hard she tried, the flashbacks, the palpitations, the shaking—it all just wouldn’t go away.

Her own helplessness had even driven her to tears.

And here was Lloyd. Stroking her head, telling her she did well, vindicating her efforts, proving to her that they were not in vain.

Tears of happiness welled up in her eyes. She blinked them away over and over until they were all gone. Except one—a single tear rolled down her cheek. *Thank heavens it’s the middle of the night*, she thought. This way, Lloyd wouldn’t be able to see just how pathetic she looked.

For a while, the two remained in silence, and Lloyd continued to gently stroke her hair.

Afterwards, they moved over to the living room sofa.

“Would you like to tell me about it?” Lloyd asked Chloe, more serious than

usual. “If I know what happened, I might be able to help you.”

As desperate as she was to open up, a singular voice of reason tugged at the back of her mind. *I... Should I? This is such a heavy matter.* Her hesitation dispersed, however, the instant she glanced at Lloyd’s face. It was as serious as it always was, but his eyes were filled with an unfamiliar determination. A determination to accept her, no matter what had happened to her, no matter what she had done.

Chloe took a deep breath, let the air settle in her chest, and let the words fly out into the room. “My mother... Sh-She came at me with a knife.”

Lloyd’s eyes widened in shock. He sent power into both fists, clenching them tight.

“I managed to dodge the first swing, but the knife...the knife got stuck in the ground right where I was. If I hadn’t...If I hadn’t dodged it, I...shudder to imagine what would’ve...”

As she put the day’s events into words, the memories flashed back in her mind. Her voice began to tremble and her words began to lose coherence, but she pushed through. “Then I got scared and I...ran. But my mother chased after me with the knife. I made it back to my room but she was there, slamming on my door and yelling ‘open up, open up, open up.’ I-I still hear her voice in my head. It just—it just won’t go away...”

Chloe continued on, knowing full well that her rambling had long since escaped the scope of Lloyd’s initial question. She told him about the nightmares, about the memories that wouldn’t stay repressed, about the fear and the helplessness and the distress she felt. “...That’s when I began to be afraid of knives. So long as I can see one, all I can think about is how it might hurt me, and I just can’t... I’m so terrified—of seeing them, of using them.”

After Chloe finished talking, she felt...lighter. Now that her experience wasn’t hers alone to bear, now that Lloyd knew what she knew, the burden on her heart had lifted somewhat.

“What a joke.” Lloyd uttered his first words since Chloe had started speaking. “I don’t know what happened, and frankly I don’t care what happened. What kind of parent points a knife at their own child? Unforgivable.” A tinge of barely

repressed anger colored his speech.

“Lloyd...”

He suddenly realized he had been clenching his fists. “Sorry.”

“No, that’s...fine, please.”

It would’ve been unreasonable to expect Lloyd not to feel anger at what he just heard. In fact, Chloe felt happy—happy that he was willing to get angry on her behalf.

Lloyd took a deep breath to regain his composure. “In any case, first we need to find a way to help you conquer your fear. In brief, your fear stems from your belief that a knife will be turned on you, correct?”

“I believe so.”

“Which means what we need to do is show you, in some manner, that a knife will not be used to hurt you.”

“I suppose that makes sense, but...”

It was simple enough logic leading to a simple enough conclusion, but...

“...How do we do that?”

Both of them struck a pensive pose and ruminated for a few moments.

“Quite the hard problem, isn’t it?” said Chloe. A knife is, after all, inseparable from its power to cut and to wound; remove these qualities and it ceases to be a knife.

“My apologies. It seems that I have nothing to show for all that bluster earlier. I have disgraced my Order.”

“No, no, no! Of course not! This is a personal matter after all, and besides...” Chloe glanced upwards at Lloyd and infused her voice with conviction. “You’ve already done much for me by just listening. I feel much better now, thank you.”

“I see. That’s...good, then.” Lloyd awkwardly scratched at his own head. “Then I suppose the question at hand is *what made your mother point a knife at you?*”

Chloe’s breath faltered. An innocent and pertinent question, perhaps, but it

dug too deeply and precisely at the root of the issue—the root from which all of Chloe's most tender vulnerabilities burst forth.

"That's...because..." Her words also faltered. She felt her back start to prick and burn.

You are a cursed child! You bring nothing but disaster and misfortune! You can't be allowed to live! Even now, her mind reproduced the words loud enough to rupture her eardrums. She reflexively clutched at her chest, her heart beginning to flutter again.

Lloyd was not so dense as to overlook the signs of her panic. One more time, he placed his hand on her head. "It's getting late. Let's call it a night."

The sensation of his weighty hand on her head once more, Chloe realized that he had intentionally cut the conversation short. "R-Right. You've got work tomorrow too. Thank you—for all your concern tonight."

"I apologize for overstepping just now."

"No, there's nothing you have to apologize for." It was her own fault for being unable to face the issue, after all.

"Um, Lloyd?" She spoke again. There was one final thing she had to make sure of. "In the future...when I've sorted it all out...I'll tell you everything."

Lloyd nodded, and gave her one final pat on the head. "Take your time. I'll be here."

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A week came and went. The noonday sun hung over the royal castle's training grounds.

"Haaah!"

With one fluid motion, Lloyd deftly evaded the wooden sword that hurtled towards his head.

"Wha—?!" His opponent's eyes bulged in astonishment as his blade cleft the air and a swift retaliating strike connected with his side, forcing a pained yelp out of him. "Ack!"

"Game!" The judge raised his arm and declared an end to the sparring session, his voice booming across the training grounds. "Lloyd wins!"

"Damn it. I thought I had you."

Lloyd politely bowed towards his fellow knight and sparring opponent—who was still wincing—and walked away.

"Hey, did you see that?"

"No! How did he even dodge from that position? He was at such a disadvantage."

"Who knows. That's just the *Ebon Reaper* for you..."

As nearby spectating knights filled the air with their thoughts, Lloyd made his way back to the standby area—cool, calm, and collected. As he sat down to take a breather, there was not a soul about him.

"You've found a woman, haven't you?"

Correction: there was one soul about him.

The First Order deputy commander, Freddy, had seemingly appeared out of thin air next to him.

Lloyd shot him a quizzical glance. "What's this all of a sudden?"

"You move with such grace and power—it's nothing like before. It's almost like you're a new man—who's found someone to protect!"

"That is simply the result of my daily training."

“Really? And that glowing complexion of yours? That thanks to your daily training too?”

“Glowing?” Lloyd reflexively put a hand to his face.

“Don’t touch, look! Look at a mirror—a mirror!” said Freddy as he produced a small pocket mirror from his breast pocket and pointed it towards Lloyd.

Lloyd stole a glance at it. He couldn’t deny that he looked somewhat healthier.

“Look at you, eating well! Your ol’ pal Freddy’s glad you took his advice to heart!”

Ignoring his smug deputy commander—who had his arms crossed, nodding to himself—Lloyd mulled over Freddy’s words for a moment. Diet had a profound impact on physical condition, there was no denying that. Lloyd historically tended to favor physical and mental conditioning and neglect his diet, so much so that his deputy commander regularly reprimanded him for it—also no denying that. The bulk of the recent changes in his condition occurred in the past two weeks, and if there was one major change in the past two weeks he could speak of, then it would have to be...

Chloe?

Since she had become his housekeeper, she had prepared almost every meal for him. Her menu was regularly nutritious and calorie-dense, perfect for a working knight like him. She also made sure to include heaping servings of vegetables. He found he had been sleeping better too.

I can think of no other reason.

“Come now, it’s your girlfriend, isn’t it?”

“She’s not my girlfriend.”

Lloyd realized his gaffe a split second too late. There was nothing to be done. The cat was out of the bag.

“*She*?! Not a girlfriend, so a *wife* then?! You work fast, you dog, you. Where was my invitation to the wedding?”

“No. She’s my housekeeper.”

“Gasp! A tale of forbidden love between a knight and his housekeeper! The scandal practically writes itself!”

“Can it write itself off instead?” Lloyd heaved a deep, soulful sigh. “Just so we’re clear, she’s only a housekeeper, nothing more.”

“And how old is this housekeeper of yours?”

Lloyd hesitated before answering, “Sixteen.”

“So what’s the problem?!” Freddy interjected. “All right. We have a lot to talk about, we’ll save the rest for over dinner at my house and—”

“No thanks.”

“Darn, I thought I could get you with that one.” Freddy let out a satisfied sigh and gave Lloyd a few love taps to the shoulder. “Well in any case, I rest a little easier knowing you have such an attentive and responsible housekeeper taking care of you.”

“That much is...correct.”

Indeed, Chloe had been a huge help. His house was now spotless, his routine frictionless, and his meals nutritious, delicious, and arranged for him. His quality of life had increased dramatically—there was no denying that.

“I’m sure you’re paying her a fair wage, but you should consider getting her a present too, you know? As an extra token of your appreciation,” Freddy said.

“A present?”

“What, don’t tell me you’ve never heard of a *gift* before.” Freddy shrugged his shoulders in mock exasperation. “Between something practical and something fun, I’m sure you can find something for a sixteen-year-old girl. There are plenty of shops on the way home; you should look into it.”

“That’s certainly a challenge—not sure I’ve dealt with anything similar.”

“Oh stop exaggerating. Don’t overcomplicate it. All you need to do is think about who she is as a person and—” Freddy paused mid sentence, and a mischievous grin flitted onto his face. “Hm. Yes, that does seem a little challenging for you...”

Lloyd's competitive spirit roared into life at his wanton provocation. "Very well, consider it done."

"I told you, it's not all that seriou—you know what? That probably works better for you, so never mind!" A wry smile on his face, Freddy shrugged his shoulders once more. "Oh, right! Almost forgot. We'll be on patrol together tomorrow. That's what I came by to tell you in the first place."

"That doesn't sound like something you should be forgetting."

"Sorry, sorry! When I smelled love in the air, I couldn't help myself."

"I don't smell anything, though."

"You think you're funny, don't you?"

Freddy tried to explain the figure of speech, to no avail.

"...Enough about that. Unless I'm mistaken, I believe I wasn't supposed to be on patrol duty tomorrow," Lloyd said.

"I've heard chatter from the guards that the hoodlums down in the South District have been acting up lately. They've been trying to gather their numbers in preparation for...something. The top brass have told us to up our patrols."

"I see. South District, is it?"

Lloyd felt a slight tinge of unease. It was their job as knights to protect the citizens before harm could come to them, and regular patrolling, of course, was one of their honorable duties in that regard.

"Understood, I'll see you tomorrow, Deputy Commander."

"Yes, I'll be seeing you." Freddy nodded, his usual glib smile replaced with a more somber expression.

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"Welcome back!"

"...I'm home."

That evening, just like every other evening, Chloe greeted Lloyd at the door when he arrived home.

“How was your day? You’re quite late today.”

“My apologies, I had to finish up a few things at work.”
“Oh no that’s fine, please! Would you like dinner first? Or perhaps your bath?”

Lloyd remained silent.

“Lloyd?” Chloe asked.

“Apologies, my mind was elsewhere. I suppose my bath, then.”

“Very well.”

As Lloyd stepped into the corridor, Chloe stretched a hand out to help him with his belongings. Alongside his usual load, there was an additional paper bag, which Lloyd hurriedly shifted behind his back.

“What have you got there?” asked Chloe.

“That. Right. I stopped by the store on the way home—buying essentials for work.”

“I see. That’s all right, I can carry that for you as well!”

“No, that’s all right. It’s very light, I can handle it.”

“Oh, okay...?”

Leaving Chloe behind in her confusion, Lloyd quickly slipped by and made a break for the bathing room.

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Something feels...off, Chloe murmured internally.

Lloyd had been acting strange ever since he got home. He seemed rather dispirited, or fidgety, or jumpy, even.

It was almost like he was...*hiding something.*

Even now, at the dinner table, which was usually lively with light banter and idle conversation, it was deathly quiet.

For dinner, Chloe had prepared a salmon and clam *acqua pazza*. This one-pan dish of poached seafood was something she made quite often back home, and was something of a specialty of hers. After only offering her a modest word of

praise for the meal, Lloyd had set to munching away quietly.

Something was clearly amiss.

Perhaps Lloyd was under the assumption he was doing a good job of hiding it, but he was hopelessly outmatched in this battle of wits. To Chloe, hugely empathetic and hypersensitive to even the slightest fluctuations in the energy of others as she was, his shift in attitude was as plain as day.

“Did you...have a rough day today?” asked Chloe.

“No. Training was per usual. Nothing special.”

“Oh, okay... It’s just that you seem a bit more tired than usual is all. Or is it perhaps that you have something on your mind?”

“I’m not particularly fatigued, and there’s...nothing on my mind,” said Lloyd.

Something is *off...*

Propelled by her brand-new conviction that something was wrong, Chloe’s thoughts quickly began to spiral out of control. *Is it me? Have I done something to upset him? Was the food not to his liking? Is it his room? Did I not clean it satisfactorily? I mean, I did abbreviate it slightly today for lack of time...*

A cold sweat broke out across her back. The pessimism festered and festered and festered away, until by the end of dinner, Chloe was all but convinced that this was her fault.

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“I have done you a great disservice.”

“Excuse me?”

After dinner, Chloe approached Lloyd as he sat on the sofa and lowered her head in a deep bow, leaving him utterly bewildered.

“My actions have caused you undue distress, and for that I sincerely apologize... I-I’m wholly deserving of any punishment you deem fit.”

“I—what? Wait, wait, wait, what’s going on?” Taken aback by the sudden apology, Lloyd shot back, flustered.

“Y-You’ve been acting strangely ever since you got home. I thought for sure I

had done something to upset you!” Chloe replied, almost on the verge of tears.

After taking a moment to process her words, Lloyd covered his face with a palm and looked up at the ceiling in frustration. “Sorry. This is all my fault.”

With that, Lloyd stood up and wordlessly left the room, much to Chloe’s confusion. He came back a moment later, and motioned for her to sit down next to him, to which she complied, hesitantly.

“When I said there was nothing on my mind, I lied,” he said to Chloe, whose eyes were still heavy with unease. “I was thinking about when to give this to you.” In Lloyd’s hand was the paper bag from earlier. The one he had said was for “work.”

He handed the bag to Chloe, his expression betraying a sense of perplexity. “Go on, open it.”

Obediently, Chloe opened up the bag and took out a small, round wooden container, just big enough to rest on her palm. “What’s this?” she asked.

Upon opening it, she was greeted with a lovely floral scent, wafting from a cream of some sort.

“This is hand cream, or so they called it. It’s an oil extracted from fruit flowers. It’s effective in preventing your hands from drying out. I figured this would be useful to you, since you work with water so much when cooking, doing laundry, and such.”

Chloe nodded along in earnest as she listened to Lloyd’s explanation. “How nice...”

While she continued to examine the cream, Lloyd worked up the courage to add an additional statement, “There should be one more in there.”

“One more?” She fished through the bag once more, and pulled it out. “Wow...”

A pair of delicate ornaments, each in the shape of a flower, dangled from a tiny ring—she had seen these before.

“These are called earrings. They’re accessories you wear on your ears. I’ve heard they’re quite popular among women in the capital.”

“B-But the price on these! Why would you...?”

Lloyd sheepishly scratched at the back of his head. “I truly appreciate everything you do for me—I know I pay you, but I wanted to give you a little gift regardless. I couldn’t decide whether to get you something fun or something practical, so I ended up getting both...”

Chloe blinked her big eyes in surprise. Her gaze darted between the hand cream, the earrings, and Lloyd. Then another series of blinks followed.

This reaction disturbed Lloyd. *Are these not to her liking?* The temperature in the room seemed to drop, and a heaviness settled in his chest. His shoulders drooped slightly as he said, “If they’re not to your liking, or if you won’t use them, feel free to throw them away.”

“I-I’d never!” Chloe exclaimed, reaching a volume Lloyd had never heard from her before.

“I didn’t know you could be so loud...” he said, visibly taken aback.

“Ah! Sorry. I just—I thought I was dreaming. I didn’t know what to say...”

“I see...” he said, pausing. “So? What’s the verdict?”

“Um, let’s see...” Chloe pinched her cheeks and tugged, the skin stretching out like firm dough. “It hurts. This is real.”

“Very good.”

“Which means...these gifts are also real,” Chloe said, her face softening into a warm expression of joy, much to Lloyd’s relief. “Thank you very much. I’ll treasure these dearly.”

She embraced the gifts against her chest as if they were the most precious treasures of her world. “I had my eye on these earrings the moment I saw them, so thank you.”

In that moment, she pictured Lloyd, in all his grandeur, strolling into the women’s section to purchase these for her. The sheer absurdity and preciousness of it all swept her off her feet.

“I’m glad to hear that,” Lloyd replied.

“Can I try them on?”

“Of course.”

With some fumbling around with the earrings’ unfamiliar construction, she managed to put them on.

“They look great on you,” Lloyd remarked, his reaction reaching her ears before she even had a chance to ask for it.

Chloe giggled. “Thank you, you’re very kind,” she said, brimming with joy. If happiness were on a wavelength visible to the naked eye, Chloe’s radiance would outshine any star in the night sky.

Even Lloyd could tell. When he laid eyes upon that brilliant smile that seemed to well forth from the most intimate corners of her heart, he felt his own nearly leap out his chest. He felt his cheeks burn up, and his composure wavered. Instinctively, he averted his gaze, fearing that if continued to watch her, something within would reach a fever pitch and boil over.

“On my next day off, let’s go into town and pick out a dress for you,” Lloyd blurted out. He wanted Chloe to have a few options for special occasions in addition to the many sets of casual wear she already had—

—Which is what he *would* say. In truth, he simply desired to see Chloe dolled up in new and elegant ways. The newfound sentiment stirred in his chest and spilled out from his lips.

“A dress?” Chloe echoed.

“We still haven’t made good on that promise to go into town, after all.”

“B-But, I don’t know if—”

“It’ll suit you, I promise.”

Lloyd had no doubts. He had watched the girl before him transform into a beautiful young lady—compared to the day he met her, she was almost unrecognizable. All it took was two weeks of good food, proper rest, and a safe environment where her true self could flourish.

“If you say so, Lloyd...” Chloe said, flustered at Lloyd’s proclamation.

Flustered, but, of course, happy.

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At the entranceway to Lloyd's home, the next morning, they spoke again...

"I'm on patrol today, so I might be a bit late tonight."

"Of course! In that case, I'll be starting dinner a little later."

Lloyd nodded in response to Chloe, who seemed to be in higher spirits than usual.

"Is something the matter?" she inquired—he had been keenly staring at her.

"Nothing, I just noticed you're already wearing the earrings."

Indeed, dangling off both ears were two shiny earrings, each in the shape of a flower.

Chloe giggled sheepishly. "I've taken a liking to them."

"It hasn't even been a day."

"The heart wants what it wants! I'd wear these all the time if I could."

"I see. Very well then." Looking at the bashful Chloe, Lloyd felt his own face soften. "You're aware you're free to spend your wages on whatever you like, right? You haven't been holding back, have you?"

"I-I might have been..."

"Indeed, eh? I gathered that perhaps you might have been, due to your previous circumstances. But here, there's no need. If you see something you want, buy it."

"Yes, I'll keep that in mind; thank you for your concern," Chloe said, dipping her head in a curt bow—which Lloyd was quick to take advantage of, petting her head.

The sense of security and wellbeing of the heavy, firm hand on the top of her head was almost enough to summon forth a tear. Noticing how often it'd been happening of late, Chloe posed a question to Lloyd.

"Do you like petting my head?"

"Sorry, do you not like it?"

“No, no, I do! In fact...” Chloe said, fidgeting. “I like it very much indeed...”

Lloyd hesitated. “That’s...good, then...” He looked away from Chloe, whose cheeks were lit up in bright strawberry red. “I don’t quite understand it myself, but when I see you...the urge just comes naturally,” he continued, his tottering cadence betraying his own perplexity.

“Well, if we’re both fine with it, there isn’t really a problem, is there?” Chloe replied.

“Yes—yes, exactly.”

They exchanged nods, and a brief silence settled between them.

“...I should get going,” said Lloyd, breaking through the tense mood.

“...Yes, of course, have a great day.”

With that, Chloe saw Lloyd out of the house. Now alone, she crouched down to the floor, curling into a little ball, and shook her head, which was now beet red from ear to ear.

That was so embarrassing, that was so embarrassing, that was so embarrassing, that was so embarrassing, she thought, thrashing about in her mind.

Lately, Chloe had found it increasingly difficult to keep her composure around Lloyd.

From the moment they met, she had been acutely aware of the emotions stirring within her heart and what they meant. *But let’s face it*, she thought. She was a freeloading runaway working as a housekeeper, and he was an elite and distinguished knight of the royal capital. What good could come from any romance blossoming between them? Her wavering self-esteem acted like venom, tainting her thoughts with its persistent, insidious whisper.

She had tried her best to suppress those feelings, to bury them deep within, but after yesterday’s events, the emotions were growing stronger, and were becoming harder to ignore.

Alas, what was a girl to do? The status quo—the current distance between them, their relationship, their daily lives—it was all so perfect, so pure. She’d

like to indulge in it just a little bit longer, she thought.

She brought a hand up to her head, feeling the spot that Lloyd's hand had been just a moment ago. The ridiculousness of her own behavior suddenly dawned upon her, and her cheeks flushed even hotter still.

What are you doing, Chloe?! Pull yourself together!

With a single, vigorous shake of the head, she chased all worldly desire from her head. Taking a deep breath, she rose to her feet, clenching a fist in front of her chest.

"Okay. Time to start cleaning."

And thus began yet another ordinary day.

...Or so she believed.

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It was a perfect day for chores. The sun was out, the sky was blue, and the temperature was pleasantly mild. Chloe hummed a cheerful melody to herself as she swept the floors, cleaned the house, and did the laundry. What a great mood she was in.

After finishing up everything at home, she set out to do some shopping. Her outfit of choice was yet again her sister's dress—it had practically become her outdoor uniform at this point. The scuffs and frays and cuts and scrapes were becoming increasingly hard to ignore, and she could certainly do with an additional outfit by now, but she figured that this would suffice until her day out with Lloyd. Heaving her rucksack on her back, she set out for the merchant quarter.

Main Street was as bustling and lively as always. The atmosphere alone was enough to raise her spirits even higher. For the time being, she first headed over to the market to replenish their stock of household consumables.

"Chloe! How's it going? Out shopping?"

"Hello Mister Arnoido! Yes, just doing my daily shopping and buying some groceries for dinner tonight!"

"Hey Chloe! What a lovely dress you've got on!"

“Hello, Miss Snow! Thank you very much!”

As Chloe strolled down the street, she exchanged the occasional pleasantry with some of the shopkeepers. Having found herself in the Merchant Quarter quite often over the past two weeks, she had become something of a regular herself, due in no small part to her affable and modest nature, no doubt.

“Chloe! Welcome, welcome!”
“Miss Ciel, hello!”

She made her way over to a familiar stall, run by a familiar Miss Ciel—the kind older lady who had helped her with dinner on that very first night. Her stall had quickly become Chloe’s favorite, owing to her phenomenal service and high-quality produce.

“What do you have for me today, Miss Ciel?”

“Thanks for askin’ sweetie! We just got in this most amazing beef. It’s tender and beefy and just delicious, you gotta try it!”

“That sounds wonderful! May I get enough for two, please?”

“You got it! I’ll throw in some ginger for you, free of charge. You throw that together in a light braise and it’ll be *mm, mm, mmm*!”

“Wow, that sounds amazing! You’re always giving me the most wonderful ideas, I can’t thank you enough...”

“The pleasure is all mine. Oooh, in fact I’ve got something else for ya.” Ciel rummaged around and took out something yellow and otherwise unfamiliar.

“What’s this?” asked Chloe.

“This is a fruit called *banana*. It’s sweet and yummy and nutritious, ya know?”

“Banana! I’ve never heard of it...”

“Want a little try-before-you-buy?”

“May I?!” said Chloe, eyes positively sparkling.

“Course!” replied Ciel, proffering up some pre-cut samples to Chloe.

She took a bite, and a hand immediately shot up to her cheek. “This is delicious!”

The banana was soft, creamy, and predominantly sweet, with just a hint of tartness. She couldn't think of a single food that tasted anything like it.

"I never knew such a delicious fruit existed!" Chloe said.

"Well, it's not something you see up here that often. It's a tropical fruit that only grows down south in the Manzora region, you see."

"I've never heard of such a place." Born and raised in the far north, Chloe hadn't the foggiest.

"Well, that's not hard to believe. Ferocious beasts and venomous snakes claim *that* jungle. Ordinary folk like us aren't allowed anywhere near it. It took a licensed trader quite a lot of trouble to get us these."

"A jungle?" murmured Chloe. The word tickled the back of her mind.

Back in the jungle I went without food or water for three whole days quite often.

That jungle? she wondered.

Was it possible that Lloyd had been in this highly dangerous, forbidden jungle Ciel had mentioned? Chloe's thoughts wandered for a moment, before Ciel's voice brought her back down to reality. "So? How about it? Want these?"

"Oh! Yes, please!"

"Thanks again!" said Ciel, wrapping up a bunch of bananas. "Oh, and by the way..." She pointed a finger at the earrings dangling from Chloe's ears. "Those earrings, who gave 'em to ya?"

"Y-You noticed!" Chloe stammered back.

"Wouldn't last long in this business if I couldn't!" Ciel heaved a hearty laugh. That pesky trademark merchant shrewdness again.

"It was *him,* wasn't it?" she continued, propping up a suggestive pinky finger.

"Y-Your pinky finger?" Chloe replied, confused. "It was from the gentleman I had previously mentioned, as a gift..."

A gleeful four-syllable laugh escaped Ciel's lips. "Well if that isn't perfectly sweet-and-sour I don't know what is!" she said, nodding in agreement to

herself. “They look great on ya. He’s got taste, that one.”

“Thank you!” Chloe said, her heart swelling with warmth and contentment. It felt wonderful to be complimented for something that she also adored.

“Thanks again sweetie, I’ll be seeing ya!” After finishing up at the till, Ciel bid Chloe farewell with a warm smile. Smiles begetting smiles, Chloe, too, walked away with a big grin. *Well, I’ll have to pay her another visit soon,* she thought.

Her arms full with the evening’s groceries, Chloe dawdled around for a bit before setting out on the way home.

“Oh my...”

Noticing something, she planted her feet in front of a city park, not far from home. There was Millia, the girl from two weeks ago, frolicking around with a familiar little kitten.

“Ah!” Millia exclaimed. It seemed that she had noticed Chloe. She trotted up to her, the kitten following closely behind. “Hello Miss Monkey Lady!”

“Hello, Millia!” Chloe said. “Hold on a minute. I’m not a monkey, you know.”

“But, but! You can climb trees, and monkeys can climb trees, so I thought...”

Chloe crossed her arms and tilted her neck in thought, seemingly unconvinced. “Well, you’re not wrong about that, but...”

“Meow!” The kitten, now wrapping around her ankles, interrupted her train of thought.

“Look! Othello thinks you’re a monkey too!”

“It’s Othello now, is it? Have you made a new friend?” asked Chloe. The little black and white kitten, its fur impeccably arranged in a dapper tuxedo pattern, was unmistakably the same kitten she had saved two weeks ago—just a little bit bigger now.

“Yep! We’re keeping ’em now! Its fur is black and white, so we named it Othello! It followed us home that day! Mother said I wouldn’t be able to take good care of a cat, but I said ‘I can! I can! I can!’ until she let me!”

“Really? Good for you, Othello!” Chloe said, crouching down for a pet. The

warm, fluffy sensation of its fur graced her fingertips. Othello purred and butted its head against the offending hand—seemingly still recognizing her as its savior.

“Oh aren’t you just the cutest!” Chloe couldn’t help herself. What with its big, round eyes, soft fur, and precious smallness, the adorable creature was simply too much for her.

“Your face is melting, Miss Monkey Lady!”

Monkey lady, mover lady, shopper lady, whatever lady! No longer a coherent thought to her name, Chloe’s face drooped as she continued to fawn over the adorable little kitten, when suddenly—

“Ah! Daddy!”

—Millia raised her voice behind her.

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Somewhere in the North District...

“Thank you for yesterday.”

Walking next to his deputy commander, Lloyd bowed his head and uttered a few words of gratitude.

“So? Did she like them?” Freddy said back.

“Yes, she was already wearing them by morning.”

“Interesting, interesting... Well, I knew that much—it was I that picked those out, after all!” Freddy crossed his arms and let out a self-satisfied grunt.

Though this usually would have Lloyd knitting his brow and rolling his eyes, he couldn’t deny the results of Freddy’s handiwork. Yesterday’s Operation: Gift had been a smashing success.

“But still, imagine my surprise when you asked me for help!” Freddy continued.

“It felt wrong not to follow my own advice.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Nothing, it’s a personal matter.”

After Freddy had planted the suggestion in Lloyd’s mind, he had thought long and hard. *What do I get her? What would make her happy? Something fun? Something practical? What’s the difference? I don’t know... I don’t know, I don’t know!*

He had been frantic.

Hoping that perhaps some exercise would stimulate his mind, he put in a request for another sparring session. As he parried, dodged, bobbed, and weaved his way around his opponent, he strained every mental muscle he had in a quest to come up with something—anything!

But alas, no dice. His hopelessness manifested in the form of a torrential cold sweat, pouring from every inch of his body.

Someone’s fired up today! Freddy had exclaimed—apparently mistaking the source of his sweat for something else entirely.

Woah, look at Lloyd. He usually doesn’t even break a sweat, but look at him now! What did you do to him?!

Hah! I don’t know, but I’m kinda feeling it today, boys!

After the above conversation between sparring partner and company, the former, brimming with overconfidence, jumped into another session, only to be laid out in no time flat.

Back to the matter at hand. Lloyd was in a pinch. His time in the jungle never prepared him for something like this. This was without a doubt the most difficult task he had ever been prescribed, and he saw no way out of it...

...At least, not alone.

At his wit’s end, Lloyd dragged himself over to Freddy and popped the big question: “...Would you mind helping me pick out a gift after work?”

Freddy gladly accepted.

If you were lucky enough to be at a particular jewelry shop on that particular evening, you would’ve happened upon a most peculiar sight: two full-grown, burly men in the ladies’ section, turning the place inside out, in a desperate

search for the perfect accessory.

In the end, credit had to be given where credit was due; Freddy had managed to pick out the perfect gift, overshooting all of Lloyd's most lofty expectations.

Now, back to the present.

"Still, it had been a long while since I'd been at a jeweler's. Oh, what it is to be young!" said Freddy.

"You're still plenty youthful yourself, no?"

"Fool! Make no mistake—though it won't age you physically, marriage changes a man. I was so aggressive back then, always on the offensive, trying to get my own feelings through, and now? Here I am, learning to be empathetic to my wife and her needs, on the back foot, playing defense."

"So you switched from attacking to defending? I suppose that makes sense."



“Mmm, no I don’t think that’s quite it,” Freddy shot back, stifling a grin at Lloyd, who was looking mighty conflicted. “Well, you’ll come to understand when you have a family of your own. It’s a wonderful thing, family! You know my daughter brought a kitten home the other day. It has black and white fur—like it’s wearing a tuxedo. Quite adorable if I do say so myself. Just yesterday my wife...”

There he goes again, Lloyd thought. He let out an internal sigh—though not at all out of annoyance. While he envied those blessed with abundant human connection, he did not loathe those who were more fortunate than he. In fact, he enjoyed it when Freddy shared; it felt like he was letting him in on a little bit of his happiness.

Family is a wonderful thing?

Perhaps that *was* true. These past two weeks with Chloe had shown him that much, or so he thought.

He no longer came back to an empty home.

He came back to Chloe.

There she was, every day, like clockwork. Having lived alone for as long as he could remember, Lloyd remembered feeling uneasy at the onset, but now, it felt comfortable—it felt...right, like it had always been this way.

“...As I was saying, my precious wife and daughter are just too much!”

“Yes, as you’ve said many times before.”

“I’d rush home and see them now if I could! You know, I was secretly hoping we’d run into them today on patrol, but I guess life doesn’t always go the way you want it to...”

“Do you live nearby?”

“I do! Just a little further down this block, actually. There’s the park my daughter usually frequents, but...”

“You didn’t plan this patrol route on purpose, did you?”

“Please! I’m a professional! I wouldn’t—oh!” Freddy’s face lit up like a

lantern, like that of a lost child who had just found their mother. “Millia!” he shouted while waving his arm around.

“Ah! Daddy!” A young girl shouted back. And next to her was....

“L-Lloyd?!”

“Wha—?!”

...a certain petite, beige-blonde housekeeper in a pretty little dress.

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Chloe was in a pinch. The unthinkable had just happened. On the way home, after accidentally running into Millia, she stumbled upon Lloyd, of all people.

“Lloyd?! What are you doing here?”

“Me? I’m on patrol and happened to pass by, that’s all.”

“Oh that’s right! You did mention that. What a coincidence!” Chloe’s face brightened up.

“Who’s that, Miss Monkey Lady?” Millia said, butting into the conversation.

“Oh! Yes. This is my employer... Or my master? I suppose? For lack of a simpler word...”

“I didn’t know you were into that kind of thing, Lloyd.”

“Please don’t.”

Freddy flicked his gaze from Lloyd to Chloe before a broad, shameless grin broke out on his face. “I see, I see... So this is that little housekeeper of yours...”

“...Yes,” Lloyd replied with a great sigh.

There was no way around it. Dangling from her ears were the pair of earrings that Freddy had picked out.

“Would you mind introducing me, Lloyd?” said Chloe.
“Yes, this is—”

“It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I’m Freddy, deputy commander of the First Order of the Royal Knights Rose, at your service.”

Chloe hastily bowed her head in response to Freddy’s most courtly introduction. “P-Pleased to make your acquaintance! I’m Chloe, Lloyd’s housekeeper. It is an honor to meet you!”

“Please, there’s no need to be so formal. We’re out here on private terms after all; let’s keep it casual,” replied Freddy.

“I believe we are out on official business, are we not, Deputy Commander?”

“No, no, we’re simply taking our five-minute break as mandated in proper patrol procedure.”

Lloyd heaved a deep sigh. “...Very well.”

“Daddy! The man in black! Who is he!”

“This man right here? This is Lloyd, my trusty subordinate.”

“Hi Lloyd! I’m Millia. Nice to meet you!” Millia said, with a polite bow.

“Hi there. I’m Lloyd. I work with your father,” Lloyd curtly replied, visibly uncomfortable at having to interact with such a young child.

Chloe turned to address Freddy next. “Are you Millia’s father, by chance?”

“Indeed! That’s my daughter dearest!”

“Well, I can definitely see who she got that beautiful blonde hair and pretty little face from!”

“Lloyd, I’m getting her a gift too. She’s a keeper, this one.”

“Please don’t complicate things.”

Right on the heels of Lloyd’s verbal jab, Chloe spoke up, as if remembering something, “Would Miss Sara be your wife, then?”

“Oho! You’ve met Sara too? She is my darling wife indeed.”

“She’s such a lovely lady! You two must make the most perfect couple!”

“Lloyd, we’re going for a gift, right now.”

“Please spare me just this once,” Lloyd replied in a state of total exasperation, to which Freddy responded with a cheeky smile.

Remembering something, Freddy then directed his attention to his daughter. “Millia, do you know Miss Chloe here?”

“She’s the Miss Monkey Lady! The one who saved Othello! The one I mentioned!”

Freddy gave an inquisitive hum as if everything had clicked into place.

“I see, I see...” He turned to address Chloe. “So *you’re* the infamous ‘Miss Monkey Lady...’”

“I-I suppose that nickname stuck, did it?”

“Miss Monkey Lady? What’s that all about?” interjected Lloyd.

“It’s a long story...” Chloe blushed. She never imagined this embarrassing nickname would ever make its way back to Lloyd.

“Five minutes is up, Deputy Commander.”

“An anal one, aren’t you...” Freddy said, shrugging his shoulders.

He then bent down to give Millia one final pet on the head. “Millia. Your father has to go back to work now. Be kind to Chloe for me, okay?”

“Okay! Good luck at work, Daddy! Keep the streets safe!”

“Oh, now you’ve done it! Don’t you worry; together with Lloyd, your father will patrol every single street in town.”

“No I won’t. I’ll be going home when my watch is over.”

Chloe sensed a heartwarming camaraderie between Freddy from the way they bantered back and forth without reserve.

Freddy then turned to bid farewell to Chloe. “Chloe, it’s been a pleasure. I thank you for being so kind to my daughter once again.”

“The pleasure’s all mine. My apologies for bothering you while you’re on duty,” Chloe replied with a deep bow.

Freddy’s next utterance was too quiet for anyone else to hear.

“...What a perfect little lady.” Then he spoke up to address Chloe once more. “Now, I know Lloyd can be dense...stubborn, and a little clueless at times, but he’s a nice man at heart, so please, I hope you won’t give up on him.”

“I-I would never! Lloyd’s kind and gentlemanly... He’s done more for me than I could ever do for him! I’m honored to be his housekeeper, sincerely.”

“Hear that?” Freddy prodded.

Lloyd remained silent and averted his gaze. His previous feistiness had all but vanished.

“Well, we still have a ways to go, don’t we?” Freddy heaved an exasperated sigh. Suddenly, as if just remembering, he exclaimed, “Oh, right! Chloe, how about joining us for dinner one of these days? Lloyd’s invited too, of course.”

“Really?! You would have us?”

“Of course! I mean, what a lovely little coincidence this turned out to be! We’ve welcomed a brand new member of our family thanks to you, and we’ve yet to properly thank you for it!”

Chloe’s eyes were positively glittering in anticipation. But this wasn’t her call. She turned to the man in black.

“What do you think, Lloyd?” Ignorant of the many times Lloyd had declined Freddy’s invitation, she looked at him expectantly.

“...Yes, sure,” he replied. He no longer had the option to refuse.

“Yay! Thank you very much!”

Chloe hopped for joy, Lloyd sighed in acceptance of his fate, and Freddy puffed out his chest in victory. “What brought about the change of heart, I wonder?” he murmured suggestively to Lloyd.

“Miss Monkey Lady’s coming to our house? Yay!” Millia celebrated, as a disinterested Othello gave a big yawn at her feet.

And so it was set in stone.

In three days, Freddy would host a dinner party, with Chloe and Lloyd in attendance.

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“I see, so that’s why you’re ‘Miss Monkey Lady.’”

“Y-Yes,” Chloe said, groaning in embarrassment.

Later that night, over braised beef and onions, Chloe re-told the story of her encounter with Millia to Lloyd.

“In addition to housekeeping, you can climb a tree like no other. It seems your list of talents never ends,” said Lloyd.

“Is that a compliment?” shot back a wary Chloe.

“Of course. Knowing how to climb a tree increases your survival rate in the jungle exponentially. You can escape from wild beasts, scout out enemy positions, and forage for fruit... See? It’s a life skill.”

“It’s always the jungle with you, isn’t it?”

Curious as she was about the origin of this jungle, she still couldn’t bring herself to ask about it. She got the feeling that she shouldn’t broach the topic so casually—that it was off-limits, somewhat.

“Still, what a coincidence that was!” she said instead.

“Indeed, I’d never have imagined you were acquainted with the Deputy Commander’s wife and daughter.”

“Me neither. What a small world...” Chloe said. Next, she dropped her voice low. “But, I feel a little better knowing you have someone like Freddy as your superior.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Um, I’m not sure this is the best way to put it, but...” Chloe’s gaze drifted towards the ceiling as she paused to gather her thoughts. “I’d been afraid you were alone.”

In these past two weeks, Chloe had never heard Lloyd talk about other people. He had never mentioned the names of family or friends, which led her to surmise that perhaps they didn’t exist.

That would’ve been so...sad, she thought. A projection of her own feelings about herself, perhaps.

“I owe a great debt to the Deputy Commander,” Lloyd said, as if toasting to the distant past. “He keeps an eye on me—makes sure that I’m not left out.”

“I see. You’ve a lot to thank him for, then.”

“That’s...very true.” A wave of guilt washed over Lloyd, and his speech wavered.

Freddy had been a constant pillar of support, yet Lloyd had never found the words to thank him. Although he respected Freddy as a commanding officer and as a swordsman, Lloyd had kept his deepest and most personal vulnerabilities locked away.

His repeated refusal of Freddy’s dinner invitation had stemmed, not from disinterest, but from the fear lurking within him. Lloyd couldn’t bear the

thought of his less-than-stellar social graces being put on display. He had no doubt in his mind that his peculiarities would stand out all the more in the company of a warm, loving family.

He was aware that this was entirely a personal issue—one that he had been running from. The invitation was something he would have liked to accept eventually, so on this occasion, he was not at all unhappy with the way things had turned out.

“I have to thank you as well,” he said.

“For what?” Chloe replied.

“A lot of things.” Feeling a tinge of embarrassment, Lloyd knew his words came out muddled. Something else on his mind, he spoke again as Chloe looked on in puzzlement. “As you may have guessed, I don’t have a lot of connections outside work besides you.”

“I suppose that means I’m special.”

“You look oddly happy about that?”

Chloe let out a small giggle. “Must be your imagination,” she teased. “Well, strictly speaking I’m a work connection too, am I not?”

Lloyd didn’t say anything.

“...Lloyd?”

He rested his chopsticks, and slowly opened his mouth. “I...don’t think of you that way.”

“Huh?” Chloe said, blinking her eyes in surprise. “What do you mean by...?”

“...Nothing, forget I said anything.”

Lloyd picked up his chopsticks and resumed chipping away at the rest of his dinner. Chloe seemed unconvinced, but obliging Lloyd’s request, she returned her attention to her food as well.

Family.

The word that Lloyd had attempted to say lost its momentum somewhere along the way and stopped short just of his lips.

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“Lloyd, here.”

After dinner, Chloe cut up a banana and proffered a plate to Lloyd, much to his surprise.

“A banana?”

“You know of it?”

“Of course.” Nostalgia colored his voice as he gazed at the yellow fruit. “These things saved my life more than once in the jungle. They’re portable and highly nutritious. I could fight for three days on one banana alone.”

Chloe remained silent. She recalled what Ciel had told her that afternoon: *Ferocious beasts and venomous snakes claim that jungle. Ordinary folk like us aren’t allowed anywhere near it.*

Until now, she had found Lloyd’s sporadic jungle anecdotes charming and entertaining, but the possibility that they were actually painful memories for him pulled her lips tight.

“Mm, delicious,” Lloyd remarked, nodding in enjoyment with a mouthful of banana.

After his third piece, he noticed that Chloe had been oddly still. “You’re not going to have some?”

“Oh! Yes, thank you.” Snapping back to reality, she hastily popped a piece into her mouth. With her thoughts elsewhere, the same sweet, delicious banana from the afternoon tasted somewhat subdued.

Chloe gingerly opened her mouth. “Um...”

“What is it?” Lloyd shot back, munching on yet another piece of banana.

What happened to you in that jungle? she wanted to ask, but with her courage faltering, she quickly swallowed the words on the tip of her tongue. “...Nevermind, it’s nothing.”

“...Sure.” Lloyd’s brow furrowed for an instant, but he quickly let it go.

Opposite him, a troubled Chloe struggled to enjoy the banana that, for some

reason, tasted like nothing at all.

Chapter Five: An Evening Soiree

The next day, Chloe and Lloyd found themselves at a dress shop in the Merchant Quarter.

Since Lloyd was off duty, they had taken the opportunity to make good on their long overdue promise to go into town together. Their mission today: to buy Chloe a dress for their upcoming dinner party.

A gasp of admiration escaped Chloe's lips.

Rows upon rows of stunning dresses in every hue imaginable were spread out before her. She felt as though she had just stepped into a fairy tale.

"I've never seen so many dresses in one place!" she exclaimed.

"According to the Deputy Commander, this is the largest dress shop in the district."

"Th-That's very impressive!" Chloe's eyes sparkled with excitement, like those of a kid in a candy shop.

"Feel free to look around," Lloyd added.

"Yes! Then if you'll excuse me, I'll be right back!"

Chloe pranced towards the row of dresses and began to browse. She picked out a lovely little pink number, cooing in adoration. Next she discovered a brilliant, bedazzled piece, gasping in surprise. Then she came across a camisole-style dress with a daring, low neckline that instantly turned her cheeks a bright shade of red.

Her reactions ran the gamut. The sophisticated dresses of the capital made the country styles she was used to seem utterly drab in comparison.

Meanwhile, Lloyd quietly observed her the entire time, wearing a curious expression as if he were watching an exotic animal. Having never accompanied a woman to a dress shop, he was—in truth—quite nervous.

Or at least, he had been. As he watched Chloe prance around in absolute joy, dancing between one dress to the next, a warm smile slipped onto his face.

After making her rounds, Chloe returned to Lloyd.

“Have you found one you like?” asked Lloyd.
“I can’t decide...” replied a dejected Chloe.

Lloyd let out an inquisitive hum.

“They’re all so equally lovely, I don’t know which one to choose!” said Chloe. “And besides... someone like me could never do these dresses justice...”

“Is that so?”

Lloyd’s fashion sense—or lack thereof—wouldn’t be of any help here. Fortunately, Freddy had taught him what to do in this exact situation.

“Here.”

“O-Oh, okay!”

Lloyd guided Chloe to a female shop clerk who was hanging up dresses.

“Excuse me, can you help her choose a dress?” Lloyd asked the clerk, gesturing at Chloe.

“Why yes, of course,” the clerk replied with a warm smile. As she flicked her gaze to Chloe, her eyes widened, and time seemed to pause as she stood, transfixed.

“Wh-What is it?” asked a nervous Chloe.

“...A diamond in the rough...”

“Excuse...me?”

Oh my. With the perfect outfit and a touch of makeup, I can transform this young lady into the belle of the ball! What a find! A true diamond in the rough! As the clerk’s imagination ran wild, Chloe looked on in confusion.

“Nothing, nothing at all, miss. I can assist you, no problem.” The warm smile returned to her face, and she turned to face Lloyd. “And what function will the lady be needing the dress for?”

“Something suitable for soirees and parties, if you would.”

“Of course! Just leave it to me. Miss, I’ll have you looking your best in no

time!”

“Y-Yes, thank you very much?” Chloe replied, a little taken aback. *Did her eyes just sparkle or was that just me...?*

“If you would wait right here, sir. We’ll be just a moment!” The clerk said to Lloyd.

“Thank you.”

With the shop clerk leading the way, Chloe vanished into the depths of the store. As they departed, Lloyd thought he heard someone say, “...Finally, a mark worthy of my time!”

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“Sorry to keep you waiting!”

A little while later, somewhat longer than expected, the shop clerk addressed Lloyd as he turned to see a stunning beauty.

There, standing out even amongst the dazzling array of dresses, stood Chloe, adorned in a gorgeous, light-pink gown.

“For her dress, we have this lovely little pink number. It brings out that beautiful, beige-blonde hair of hers without overshadowing it. I think you’ll find it suitable for both soirees and parties alike.”

Just as she described, the dress was captivating without being overly ornate, accentuating Chloe’s natural beauty and youthful features in a way he had never thought possible. The only accent of note was a delicate-looking ribbon above her chest that tied the whole look together.

But, it was evident the transformation went beyond just the dress.

“I also took the liberty of applying some light makeup—powder, blush, and soft pink lipstick. We washed her hair with conditioning oil—it’s quite popular in the capital these days. It took a bit longer than expected, but I think you’ll find the end result was worth it.”

“S-Sorry, I know we came to pick out a dress, but she kept offering additional services for free...” Chloe said, sheepishly fidgeting with her hands. She glanced upwards at Lloyd, her gaze expectant. “H-How do I look?”

Lloyd found himself speechless, his eyes fixed on her in awe. A noble grace radiated from her very presence. He was certain that if she were to step out onto the street, she would effortlessly captivate the attention of all who passed by.

“L-Lloyd? It looks weird, doesn’t it...”

“N-No, not at all. Sorry, I was...captivated.”

“Capti—!”

“You look stunning.”

The words tumbled out of Lloyd, unbidden. Over the past two weeks, Lloyd had witnessed Chloe’s metamorphosis from a frail, worn figure to a beautiful young woman. To see her natural beauty amplified by an expert’s touch sent a thrill through him—it was akin to discovering fire. Even his iron resolve faltered in the face of such overwhelming emotion.

Upon hearing Lloyd’s reaction, Chloe giggled shyly, her expression melting into one of joy.

“I’m glad to see it’s to your liking,” the clerk said.

“Yes, very well done indeed,” Lloyd replied.

“Please, when you’re working with such splendid material... Might I ask which house the lady is from?”

Chloe twitched. Unable to bring herself to voice the truth, she mustered a brittle laugh and stammered out, “Y-Yes, thank you...”

Lloyd shot a quizzical look her way before being interrupted by the clerk. “Shall I tally this up for you, then?”

“Yes, thank you. It would be nice for her to have a few spares as well, so please, pick out a few more at your discretion.”

“Very well. We’ll just need a little more of your time, if you don’t mind.”

“I’m fine, but how are you? Tired?” Lloyd asked Chloe.

“No, thank you, I’m fine! It’s just...”

“It’s just?”

“I, um... I didn’t really budget for multiple dresses...”

“Oh, money, is it?” Lloyd replied. “No worries, I’m paying here.”

“What?! N-No! I couldn’t possibly!” Chloe exclaimed, the gifts from the other day still fresh in her mind.

“We’re here on my request, so please, allow me,” Lloyd insisted, face as straight as a plank.

With a keen eye for opportunity, the clerk interjected smoothly, “We also sell the cosmetics and hair oil used today. Would you like to add those to your purchase?”

“Of course. We’ll take everything. Put it all under my name.”

“Thank you very much!”

“W-W-Wait, wait, what?! Huh?!”

“Why hesitate? It’s more efficient to buy everything at once. Besides, you’ve already tried everything, so you should be convinced of their quality.”

“Th-That’s not the problem here! I-I mean, at least allow me to buy the cosmetics myself...”

“I’ve been looking for a way to rid myself of some excess salary. This is a good opportunity. Besides, I’m buying these because I want to, so pay it no mind.”

Chloe grumbled, seemingly unsatisfied. She ruminated for a moment before dropping her head in resignation. “All right, then. Please, and thank you.”

Lloyd grunted in affirmation.

“I truly appreciate it. I’ll be sure to repay the favor.”

“No need,” Lloyd replied, smiling subtly as he graced her head with a stroke.

The clerk’s face softened at the heartwarming scene. “Now then, miss. If you’ll follow me, we have more work to do! I’ll be teaching you how to apply the makeup yourself,” she said, punctuating the end of her sentence with a suggestive giggle.

“I’m not sure I like where this is going...” replied a hesitant Chloe.

“I’m looking forward to it.”

“Not you too, Lloyd!”

It seemed that both Lloyd and the clerk wished to see the diamond polished to its maximum shine.

Her pleas falling on deaf ears, Chloe was once again dragged into the depths of the store.

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“That’s not too heavy, is it?” Chloe gingerly asked Lloyd.

The two strolled down Main Street after leaving the dress shop; Lloyd had both hands full.

“Not at all. Compared to the time I trekked through the jungle in full gear, this is as light as a feather.”

“Nothing fazes you anymore after that jungle, does it?” Chloe retorted. The jungle line was practically a slogan at this point. “I’m really sorry—for making you buy all this...”

“No need for an apology. As long as you’re happy.”

“I am very happy. Thank you.”

Lloyd expected nothing in return for a favor—from their past two weeks together, Chloe had at least learned that much. *Which means I should just be grateful here, right?* Acting accordingly, she slipped on a warm smile and sidled closer to Lloyd.

“Anywhere else you’d like to visit?” asked Lloyd.

“Could we stop by the market stalls? I’d like to pick up a few items for dinner, if you don’t mind.”

“Of course. What’s for dinner?”

“I was hoping to decide when we get there, to be honest. Is there something in particular you had in mind?”

“Meat, fish, eggs, soy.”

“Right! I should’ve known...” Chloe flashed an apologetic smile as they made a turn for the street stalls.

“Chloe! Out shopping? I—whoa! You goin’ somewhere fancy tonight?”

“Hello, Mister Arnoido! No, we just went dress shopping, and we’re about to buy some groceries for dinner! The makeup is just a...trial, you could say!”

“Hey Chloe! ...Wow! Look at *you!*”

“Hello, Miss Snow! No, no, it’s nothing!”

Lloyd watched on in fascination as Chloe exchanged greetings with the occasional shopkeeper and passerby. “You’ve only been here for two weeks, no?” he said.

“Everyone’s just so kind, you see!” Chloe replied without so much as a hint of self-awareness, sending a shiver down Lloyd’s spine.

“No, I’d say it’s you. You must be very special to have people take to you like that—I’d call it a skill, even. Most impressive...”

“P-Please don’t just say things like that out of the blue! M-My heart...”

“I’m saying what comes to mind. It’s only out of respect; you can do something I can’t.”

“P-Please...” Blushing from Lloyd’s bold remarks, Chloe hid her face behind her hands and shook her head from side to side. But a thought struck her. Was it true? Did she possess the power to befriend anyone? Was that her unique talent?

The environment she had grown up in was anything but conducive to the development of social skills. Meaningful conversations were scarce, whether they were with family or servants. Yet, upon arriving in the capital, she had effortlessly connected with not only Lloyd but the townspeople too.

Shirley, as Chloe’s sole lifeline in that desolate home, deserved some recognition for teaching her the art of bonding with others. But that was still only part of the story; Chloe’s innate affinity for people and her love for conversation were the true catalysts behind her charm.

“But, Lloyd! You have a lot of admirable qualities too!”

“Me? I can’t think of any.”

“We’re often blind to our own virtues, even when others point them out.”

“Really? I had no idea...”

“Absolutely, you have plenty to be proud of! For example—”

Suddenly and without warning, Lloyd yanked Chloe into a tight embrace against his chest. Startled, she stammered, “L-L-Lloyd?!” As the solid contours of his chest pressed against her and the soothing scent of his presence tantalized her senses, her heart raced uncontrollably. “Wh-Wh-Wh-What’s gotten into you?!”

Casting his eyes over their surroundings, Lloyd let out a tense sigh. “Must’ve been my imagination.”

“Your imagination?!” asked Chloe, bewildered.

“I felt an unwelcome gaze...as if we were being watched.” Lloyd’s words hung in the air, heavy with unease.

Chloe looked up, still held in his embrace, and saw the concern etched on his face. She felt herself tense up as well. “I-Is everything okay?” she asked.

“I’m on guard, but it doesn’t seem like anyone is following us... I’m seeing threats where there aren’t any, it seems.”

“That’s good to hear.” Chloe let out a sigh of relief that quickly turned into a puff of hot air; she remembered that Lloyd was still holding her.

Realizing this, he promptly released her and bowed his head in apology. “Sorry for pulling you in like that. I must have frightened you.”

“Th-That’s fine...” Chloe stammered back, her eyes fixed on the ground. “Y-You were looking out for me, and um... Thank you...”

Driven by a powerful protective urge stirring inside him, Lloyd blurted out a flurry of hasty words. “I did nothing exceptional. A knight’s primary duty is to protect. In fact, it’s our very purpose, so please, don’t think anything of it.”

“Yes, but did you have to say that so quickly?”

“I don’t know.” That was the truth; he had no idea.

Sometimes, when he was with Chloe, he lost track of himself. His body would burn up, his pulse would race, and his mind would falter—and along with it, his good judgment.

He had never experienced anything of the sort in his nineteen years, and it unnerved him greatly. To make matters worse, the rate at which these episodes sprang upon him seemed to have increased as well.

“You’re an odd one, aren’t you?” Chloe teased gently.

Even her playful remark hit Lloyd like a tidal wave, and his resolve wavered. Seeking respite from his current predicament, he asked, “Are we still buying groceries?”

“Oh, yes! Right! I forgot! We should hurry.”

“Is it just down this way?”

“Yes! Well, I had hoped to take you to my favorite stall, but they’re closed today. The lady there is so kind! I wanted to introduce you.”

“Is that so? That’s unfortunate. If they’re closed, then that’s that.”

With their conversation back on track, Chloe and Lloyd continued on their way.

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“Th-That was close... How did he notice me from that far?! Just what is this guy?!”

In a distant alleyway, a certain man with a bowl-shaped haircut cursed under his breath in between ragged gasps. He had just sprinted all the way from the Merchant Quarter, where he had been searching for someone.

“So? Is it ’im?”

Approaching him were his two fellow thugs: Alan and Giusto.

“Absolutely. I’d never forget the face of that onion-slinging bastard.”

“Nice one, Mush!” Giusto said, slapping him on the back.

“You find out where he lives?” asked Alan.

“N-No... I tried to tail him, but he noticed me right away. I ducked clear in time so I don’t think he saw me, but that means I didn’t see where he went either...”

“I see. A sharp one, ain’t he,” Alan said, grinding his teeth in frustration. “But that’s all we needed. According to our info, there’s a knight’s dorm of some kind near that merchant district. That’s where he lives, no doubt.”

Giusto and Mush nodded their heads in agreement.

“We got you. We got you now, you bastard,” said Alan. “Damn that Morgan prick.”

Their informant, Morgan, had played them for fools. Alan had paid fifty thousand Crowns just to learn his name and status. For the rest, Morgan had demanded additional payment, but Alan had bitterly refused.

He needed to hold onto as much remaining capital as possible to hire extra help. The three of them were no match for a First Order knight—they knew that all too well. To that end, they’d even been searching for Lloyd by themselves.

If they’d put their heads together, they might have devised a more clever way to narrow down his location without combing every street corner, but it seemed that this time, brute force had paid off.

“Word on the street is he’s a big deal, even for a First Order knight, but that won’t matter...” The three men had not only suffered physical injuries but also wounded pride, leaving them with nothing more to lose. “Our people are almost ready. We’ll jump ’im when nobody’s around and beat ’im to a bloody pulp.”

“Yeah!”

“Hoo-ah!”

The alleyway echoed with their raucous cheers.

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“I’m sorry for troubling you again...”

After returning home, Chloe uttered a small word of apology to Lloyd, who was hard at work in the kitchen, cutting up some chicken.

“No problem,” Lloyd replied curtly, before returning his attention to the knife in his hand.

Tonight, as with every other night, Lloyd stood in for knife duty—a duty which he took very seriously.

Having finished with the chicken, he reached for a head of cabbage.

Chop chop chop chop!

To the satisfying beat of Lloyd slicing cabbage, Chloe let out a small giggle.

“You’re in a good mood today,” remarked Lloyd.

“I am!” affirmed Chloe, her face lighting up with the warm smile she usually reserved for cuddling cats. “We went out together, shopped together, and now we’re cooking together... It all sounds very plain, but it feels kind of...nice, don’t you think?”

Lloyd’s chopping hand paused. “I see,” he said, striking a contemplative pose. “I can’t say I don’t understand,” he added simply before resuming his task, the rhythmic sound of chopping filling the room once more.

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The night’s main dishes featured succulent deep-fried chicken karaage and a refreshing cabbage salad, accompanied by sides of seasoned poached spinach and a beautiful, golden-brown miso soup.

Enticed by the aroma of sesame wafting from the spinach, Lloyd eyed the delectable spread before him with eager anticipation. After giving thanks, he reached for a piece of fried chicken.

With a satisfying crunch, he sank his teeth into the golden-brown crust, unleashing a cascade of rich, savory flavors that enrobed his taste buds. He chased the salty soy sauce and zesty ginger hints with a mouthful of steaming, freshly cooked rice.

“...Delicious,” he murmured.
“Yay!” Chloe exclaimed, her face lighting up.

“This is...novel cuisine. There’s an elegance to the flavor. Rice has never been my staple of choice, so I never realized how delightful it could be.”

“This lovely shop owner I recently met taught me the recipe! It originates from a country in the far east. Apparently, they use a lot of soy sauce and fish stock in their cooking.”

“Is that so? Your repertoire never ceases to amaze.”

“No, no, it’s nothing,” Chloe replied modestly.

They continued to dine over light-hearted conversation. Lloyd seemed to have developed a fondness for the karaage; his appetite was more voracious than usual. As he devoured his meal while nodding along in obvious enjoyment, Chloe looked on with a tender smile, pleased that her efforts had paid off.

“...It still doesn’t feel quite real,” she murmured as Lloyd refilled his bowl with rice.

“What doesn’t?” Lloyd asked, after savoring another piece of karaage.

“All of this. This life—this...happiness,” Chloe said, casting her eyes across the living room. “Where I came from, no one spared as much as a single thought for me. I struggled my way to the capital with no relatives, no money, and suddenly I’m here, living out a fulfilling life? It still feels like a dream, sometimes.”

“Would you like to pinch yourself again?”

“I... No, I’m okay, now.”

“That was a joke.”

Chloe offered a faint chuckle at Lloyd’s dry humor. “I’m very glad the first person I ran into in the capital was you,” she said, their eyes meeting. “Again, thank you so very much.”

She dipped her head in a display of gratitude, catching Lloyd off guard. “...I should be the one thanking you.”

“Huh?” Chloe’s large, bright eyes widened in surprise.

“The deputy commander told me the other day that I had a ‘glow’ to me.”

“...Now that you mention it, you have been a bit more lively, and your cheeks are rosier too. Ah! Not that they weren’t rosy before...”

“No need to flatter me.”

“I wasn’t! I mean it!”

Chloe puffed out her cheeks in protest, but ignoring that, Lloyd continued, “Before you came here, my diet was a mess, my house was in shambles, and all my days blurred together as one. But ever since you arrived, everything has changed for the better. I know now that there’s pleasure in good food, comfort in a clean home...” Lloyd held Chloe’s gaze as he spoke his true feelings, “That’s why *I* should be the one thanking you. Thank you.”

Chloe stared, momentarily frozen in time, as Lloyd dipped his head low.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to bring the mood down.”

“Oh, no, no! Not at all! I was just a little surprised, that’s all!” replied Chloe, fervently shaking her head in denial. “If I’ve been able to have that kind of effect on your life, then...nothing could make me happier.” Encouraged by Lloyd’s candid confession, Chloe allowed her own emotions to pour forth as well.

As dinner began to wind down, guilt tugged at the back of Chloe’s mind. *But that’s precisely why he deserves to know*, she thought. She longed to tell him everything—about the treatment she endured at home, about the circumstances surrounding it all, about her cursed nature; it felt wrong to keep such secrets from someone who had shown her nothing but kindness.

Yet, as she mulled it over, her back grew hot and tingled with unease. *I-I can’t...* Her mind raced with doubt and fear. What would she do if he rejected her? If the truth repulsed him? If he called her a cursed child?

She tried to push those thoughts away. She knew Lloyd was righteous, that he would never do anything of the sort, *think* anything of the sort, but her fear sprung from a level deeper than her rational mind could reach.

“What’s wrong?” asked Lloyd.

“Oh, no, nothing at all! My mind was just elsewhere.” Chloe let out an unconvincing laugh. “I can’t wait for the dinner party.”

“...Yes, indeed.” Lloyd’s eyebrow gave an upward twitch, but he decided not to press the issue.

I-I'll tell him everything soon, she thought, her resolve wavering in the face of the cozy evening ambiance.

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The day of the dinner party arrived, and Chloe and Lloyd found themselves standing in front of Freddy's residence, in a noble neighborhood not far from the city park where they first met.

"Wow, what a house!" Chloe exclaimed.

The house was nearly the size of an estate, befitting a deputy commander's stature. Given Freddy's noble background and his married status, the residence provided to him was exceptionally grand.

As they passed through the ornate marble entrance, Millia came flying out to greet them. "Miss Monkey Lady! Welcome!"

Trailing behind her was an aloof-looking Othello.

"Good evening, Millia! Well, I suppose I won't be shedding that nickname anytime soon, will I?"

As Chloe flashed a wry smile, Freddy, resplendent in private attire, stepped out to greet them. "Welcome, welcome! Chloe! What a stunning dress!"

"Thank you! We bought it just for the occasion!"

"Very nice. Lloyd's choice?"

"N-No, the store clerk picked it out."

"Really, now... Is that so?"

"Something on my face, Deputy Commander?"

"Not particularly, no—oh?" Freddy's gaze fell upon the sword hung on Lloyd's hip. "You came armed today, Lloyd?"

"Yes. I heard rumors of unsavory folk about."

"Leave it to you to bring a sword to a dinner party... Just make sure you keep that thing away from the dining table, we wouldn't want you to mistakenly carve up the roast beef now, would we!"

"I would never."

"Good! Good. Now please, come in!"

“Please excuse us!”

“Excuse me.”

Following Freddy, the two made their way inside.

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Freddy’s family, Lloyd, and Chloe seated themselves around a grand dining table laden with an impressive assortment of dishes.

“First things first—Lloyd, Chloe, it’s our pleasure to have you both here tonight,” said Freddy, apéritif in hand.

“The pleasure is entirely ours! Thank you for having us,” Chloe responded.

“Thanks for having us,” echoed Lloyd.

They both bowed their heads respectfully.

“And Chloe, I must thank you. I’ve lost count of how many times Lloyd’s found his way out of my invitations. He’s quite weaselly, that one.” Freddy remarked, his earnest gaze fixed on both of them.

“Oh no, please! Think nothing of it. By the way, Lloyd, why *did* you always decline?”

Faced with Chloe’s innocent stare, Lloyd sheepishly averted his gaze. “...I am poorly equipped for it.”

“I-I see...”

“Well, that’s Lloyd for you,” Freddy quipped, a wry smile on his face.

That was the simple answer. Lloyd chose to keep the more complex, delicate explanation to himself.

“Daddy, can we eat yet? I’m starving!” Millia interjected.

“Sorry, Millia! Well everyone, you heard the princess!”

They all raised their glasses in a toast, gave thanks, and commenced dinner.

Eyeing the feast before her, Chloe decided to begin with the evening’s pièce de résistance: roast beef with a balsamic glaze. She took a bite and—“My goodness, this is delicious!” —was left in awe. The well-marbled slab of beef

was cooked to perfection, its rich flavor pairing exquisitely with the tart and fruity reduction.

Next, she turned her attention to a bowl of luscious cream stew, brimming with vivid, colorful vegetable chunks. She heaped up a spoonful and brought it to her mouth. “How exquisite!” The silky soup enveloped her palate with its sumptuous flavor, leaving a delightful, lingering creaminess. Piling her next spoonful atop a slice of warm, crusty baguette, she savored each and every bite; she was nearly swept away by the sheer decadence of the experience.

“...And this as well...” The next dish she tried was a sautéed garlic shrimp accompanied with a side of fried potatoes. Chloe, still reeling from the one-two emotional punch of the previous two dishes, was almost moved to tears—the opportunity to eat so much delicious home cooking was simply too much for her to handle.

Lloyd, on the other hand, wasn’t as easy to read as Chloe, but was undoubtedly enjoying the meal all the same. As he moved from dish to dish, his head subtly dipped in agreement, accompanied by barely discernible mumbles of “Mmm, mmm.” His damp outward manner might be mistaken for disinterest, but one only had to observe the rate at which he conveyed his utensils between plate and mouth to be convinced of his appetite.

“You both are such wonderful dinner guests. It warms my heart to see you enjoying the meal!” commented Sara, smiling warmly with a palm on her cheek.

“Everything’s just delightful! Especially this tomato pasta! Turning a traditionally sauce-based dish into a soup-based one is an interesting idea—and just what is this flavor? It has a bitterness to it, with just a hint of spice; I could certainly get used to this!”

“My! You noticed? It’s paprika—my secret ingredient. It goes wonderfully well with basil.”

“Paprika! Really? I’ve certainly never tried that before.”

“I could teach you the recipe, if you’d like.”

“Really?!”

“Yes, of course!”

“Please, I’d love to!”

As Freddy watched the ladies converse, he posed a question to Lloyd. “Chloe’s a little too perfect, don’t you think?”

“I agree,” replied Lloyd. “And it has me worried, somewhat.”

“You too, eh?” Freddy said, shrugging his shoulders. “That being said, that’s a remarkable housekeeper you managed to pick up. Not many girls like her left in this day and age. Come to think of it, I never did ask how you two met.”

“That’s...a long story.”

Lloyd followed up with a brief explanation of key events: About Chloe being a runaway from the distant countryside, about how she ended up in the capital all alone, and about how he rescued her when she collapsed. Everything except his encounter with the three thugs—he withheld that little episode; he wasn’t sure how his superior would react.

“So that’s what happened...” muttered Freddy, digesting everything Lloyd had just told him in earnest. “Still, never would have pegged you to be the type to bring a girl straight back to your place.”

“Are we still on topic?” interjected Lloyd. “At any rate, she was exhausted. It was an emergency; I acted accordingly. After I learned that she had nowhere to go, I suggested she work as my housekeeper. I had just been looking for one, so it all worked out.”

“That’s a helluva story,” remarked Freddy. “Well, I’m just glad she was of age. Otherwise this could’ve ended up much differently.”

Lloyd felt more at ease after hearing Freddy’s words.

“Chloe, you’re only sixteen?” Sara asked Chloe, apparently having listened to bits and pieces of Freddy and Lloyd’s conversation.

“Yes, I’m sixteen as of this year. Oh—um, Miss Sara?”

Sara had wordlessly stood up, walked over to Chloe, and wrapped her arms around her in a tight embrace. “How difficult it must’ve been—to have gone through what you have at your age; you poor girl.”

She gently stroked Chloe’s head as tenderly as she would her own child’s, her

face displaying a poignant mix of heartrending sympathy and concern. “If you’re ever in trouble—if you’re ever in need of anything, please, you can always come to us. We’ll do whatever we can to help.”

Caught off guard by the sudden hug, Chloe stammered back a choppy reply. “Oh! Um, yes! Th-Thank you very much...?”

“Me too, me too! I wanna hug Miss Monkey Lady too!” A confused but enthusiastic Millia rushed over and wrapped her arms around Chloe’s hips.

Overwhelmed by the suddenly doubled physical contact, Chloe hesitated briefly before surrendering to the soothing warmth enfolding her, her expression easing into one of relaxation.

“I dare you to find someone with a bigger heart than my wife’s.” Freddy crossed his arms and nodded in self-satisfaction.

“You’re very right about that,” remarked Lloyd.

“Oh? Someone’s oddly honest today. What’s wrong? You didn’t trip and hit your head, did you?”

“What kind of person do you take me for?” Lloyd retorted gently. “I am, in fact, very grateful.”

“Is that so?” Freddy replied with a small smirk.

Lloyd wasn’t privy to the entirety of Chloe’s past; he knew only that it was bitter and laden with suffering. But you’d never have guessed looking at her right now. As Lloyd beheld her joyous face, he felt the corners of his mouth gently curl into a smile.

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“I’ll be the dad, and you be the child!”

“Yes, Father.”

“And Othello! You’re the mom!”

After dinner, off in one corner of the living room, Millia, Lloyd, and Othello were engaged in a casual game of house.

Utterly unconcerned, Othello heaved a large yawn before trotting off.

“Father, what do we do? Mother has committed child abandonment.”

“Child...a-ban-donment?”

Chloe and Freddy observed their rowdy game from the living room sofa, as Sara busied herself in the kitchen, cleaning up the aftermath of the meal. Chloe, of course, had offered to help, but was politely yet firmly rebuffed.

“I must apologize for taking Lloyd away from you, Chloe.”

“Oh no, not at all! It seems they’re having fun, those two.”

“That’s...Lloyd having fun?”

To Freddy, it was altogether surreal to witness Lloyd, child’s doll in hand, earnestly attempting to play along with a five-year-old. But to Chloe, apparently that was him having fun.

“Millia’s going through a bit of a phase, you see. We’ve been playing house a lot together, us three. Before Othello, Sara was the dad, Millia was the mom, and I was the child.”

“My, that sounds lovely. And after Othello?”

“I became the family pet.”

“Oh, Freddy...” Chloe gazed upon Freddy with pitiful eyes.

“Well, ever since Othello came along, Millia’s had one more friend to play with, so I can’t complain. Speaking of, it was you that rescued Othello, was it not?”

“Y-Yes, I did. On my way back from the market, I ran into Millia, and it looked like she was in a pinch, so I...”

Chloe looked away in embarrassment. Before she could continue, Freddy jumped in to fill in the blanks for her. “Millia told us all about it. About how you scampered up the tree in no time.”

Chloe let out a strained laugh. “I-I guess you could say I’m somewhat of a climber...”

“Yes, we owe you a great deal, ‘Miss Monkey Lady.’”

“N-Not you too...” Her cheeks flushed bright apple red. She never imagined a

single off-hand display of her bumpkin skills would earn her such an embarrassing nickname.

“On a more serious note,” said Freddy. “I do have a lot to thank you for.”

“For climbing a tree?”

“No, no, not that.” Freddy shook his head. “I’m talking about Lloyd.”

“Lloyd?” Perplexed, Chloe cocked her head to one side.

“I’m old blood; I’ve been in the Order a long time—long enough to be promoted to deputy commander, anyway.” Freddy narrowed his eyes, as if reminiscing on the distant past. “Lloyd, I’ve watched over since the day he joined. You live with him, so you’re likely aware, but he’s...not one for expressing himself. He’s got his quirks—he’s a bit of a lone wolf, for sure. I’ve nothing to say about his skill in combat, but when it comes to being a team player he’s... Well, let’s just say he’s been the source of many a great headache among the top brass—including me.”

“Really, now...” Chloe could see where Freddy was coming from. His quirks and awkward nature, as much as she found them endearing, could certainly be construed as problematic in a professional environment.

“He’s a good man; strong, purposeful—driven. But...given his upbringing, I suspect we can’t expect too much from him socially after that.”

“Lloyd’s...upbringing?”

“He hasn’t told you about it?” Freddy inquired. “Never mind then, it’s not my place to say.”

Chloe had never once heard Lloyd talk about his past—not even his family. The only key word she had to work with was “the jungle.”

“In any case, you’ll have to hear it from him,” continued Freddy. “But enough about all that. What I was getting at is, Lloyd’s changed recently.”

“He’s...changed?” echoed Chloe. *Lloyd did indeed mention something along those lines the other day...*

“Yes, he’s more...proactive in conversation, let’s say? He’s less prickly—like he’s been defanged, somewhat,” said Freddy. “I find that he’s been playing

nicer with others, and I think I have you to thank for that, Chloe."

A peculiar, prickling warmth tickled at Chloe's chest. "Me? I don't—I haven't done anything special, really. In fact Lloyd is the one that's always helping me."

"That's it! That might just be what he needs—you, the way you are, without doing anything special."

"What do you mean by that?" asked a confused Chloe.

Freddy held back a small chuckle. "Well, that cluelessness may just be a part of it as well. There's no need to spoil all the fun, is there? Never change, Chloe."

Freddy might as well have been speaking gibberish. Chloe looked on in utter confusion, imaginary question marks popping up above her head.

"At any rate, you've managed to soften up that hard head of his a little, and *that* is a good thing, both to me and my team."

Chloe hummed along in thought, seemingly unconvinced. "I'm still not quite sure what I've done but...if it's a good thing, then I'm glad!"

"Indeed. Thank you."

The prickly warmth in Chloe's chest swelled, responding to the sincerity of Freddy's gratitude.

"I hope you'll continue to stay by his side," added Freddy.

"As long as I don't get fired for making a mess of things, I will."

"Fired? That wouldn't happen. You don't have a bad bone in your body, do you, Chloe?"

"I suppose you're right. I don't think I do," Chloe said with conviction. She was all too intimate with the cruelty people were capable of. She knew in her heart of hearts that she would never inflict on others the pain that was inflicted on her.

Just then, Lloyd shuffled over to the sofa with a dissatisfied look on his face. "Tag in, Deputy Commander. I have apparently been disowned for being a bad son."

"How did you manage *that*?" shot back Freddy, shrugging his shoulders in

exasperation.

“Hurry up, Daddy!”

“I’ll be there in a second, princess! Watch closely, Lloyd. Let me show you how a one-year veteran of house does things!”

“Oh! Mama’s back. You can be the pet, daddy!”

“Oof!” Freddy made a sound as if the wind was knocked out of him.

As round two of house began, Lloyd took a seat next to Chloe.

“How was playing house? Did you enjoy yourself?”

“It’s a very nuanced game. I was doing what I thought was expected of me, but my father apparently disapproved.”

“And what was it that you were doing?”

“I wanted to build up my body to become strong, so I ate all the food in the house.”

Chloe let out a small giggle. “That’ll do it.”

“You think so?” Lloyd replied, blinking in confusion.

“Family...” Chloe muttered under her breath. As she observed Freddy, Sara, and Millia reveling in their happiness, a trace of envy flickered in her eyes.

Meanwhile, Lloyd observed her, a somber expression settling on his face.

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The dinner party extended into the late hours of the night. As things drew to a close, Lloyd and Chloe prepared to take their leave.

“Thank you for having us, Deputy Commander,” said Lloyd, bowing deeply, eliciting a hearty laugh from Freddy.

“Lloyd, please! We’re off duty; I have a name, you know? Thank *you* for coming.”

“Chloe, you too! Thank you so much for coming,” added Sara.

“Thank you, Sara! I had a wonderful time. Dinner was amazing, and—oh! Thank you for all this produce as well,” replied Chloe, glancing at the large

paper bag she clutched.

“Oh, it’s nothing. You’re actually doing us a favor by taking them. My family sends us a boxful every month; we weren’t sure if we’d finish it all!”

“In that case, I’ll gladly take it off your hands. Oh! If it’s all right with you, I’d love to learn a few more of your recipes.”

“Of course, dear! I have plenty more to share. You’re always welcome to drop by any time.”

“Yay!”

Chloe and Sara exchanged warm smiles, their friendship having solidified throughout the evening.

Millia then popped her head out from behind her mother. “Bye-bye, Miss Monkey Lady!”

“Good night, Millia. We’ll see each other again soon, okay?” Chloe said, crouching down to pet her head, when suddenly, a surprise Othello appeared out of nowhere and flopped down between them.

“Othello says ‘bye-bye!’”

“Sooo adorable!”

With its fluffy belly temptingly outstretched, Othello emitted a deep, resonant purr. What had happened to the aloof, disinterested feline from before?

Lloyd watched Chloe melt into a puddle of joy—and observing him was Freddy, wearing a most mischievous grin. “You’re staring, Lloyd.”

“I am not. I am merely taking note of her intriguing reaction.”

“Riiight. Well, I’ll admit Chloe’s warmth is quite a delight—unlike a certain someone.”

“Who are you to say what that ‘certain someone’ is into?”

“Oh, why do I even try with you?” Freddy shook his head in exasperation before becoming serious. “Take good care of Chloe, you hear me? You’re the only one who can protect her now.”

“Of course. What is a knight if he can’t defend others?”

“No, that’s now what I—” Freddy interrupted himself with a deep sigh. With a shake of his head and a shrug of his shoulders, he turned his attention to Chloe. “Well, this block of wood is all yours, Chloe. Take good care of him as well.”

“Y-Yes, of course! I’ll keep his house to the best of my ability! I won’t let you down!

“You’re a bit wooden in your own way, aren’t you, Chloe? Oh well.”

“If you’ll excuse us, Deputy Commander.”

“Yes, yes, I’ll see you tomorrow. Careful on the way home; it’s dark out.”

“See you later, Miss Monkey Lady!”

And with that, Chloe and Lloyd made their leave.

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The sun had long vanished beyond the horizon when Lloyd and Chloe departed. They strolled, side by side, beneath an unusually bright full moon that cast a gentle glow on the path before them.

“Did you enjoy yourself?” asked Lloyd.

“Yes, very much!” Chloe replied with an enthusiastic nod. “The food was amazing, the company delightful... All in all, I had a great time.” Her voice grew quieter and quieter as she continued, “How about you, Lloyd?”

“I... I’m not sure.”

“Did you...not enjoy yourself?” inquired Chloe.

“No, I think I did, it’s just...” Lloyd’s voice trailed off. He furrowed his brow, grasping at a feeling too airy and shapeless to get a proper hold of. “I’ve never known anything like the Deputy Commander’s family—a normal family, I suppose? It was...uncomfortable, in a way. I can’t quite explain it but I’m...not sure how I’m supposed to feel.”

“I-I see...” Chloe took a moment to let Lloyd’s words settle. “I think I understand the feeling.”

Lloyd brought his gaze down to Chloe.

“Millia has wonderful, loving parents... She gets to eat and laugh and play... As

I watched all three of them play house, I couldn't help but feel how much they loved her, and it... Well, it made me a little envious."

Lloyd caught a trace of loneliness haunting Chloe's features. "I thought you looked a little tired towards the end there."

Chloe let out a dry chuckle. "You could tell? Sorry. How rude of me it is to think ill of our gracious hosts like that."

"Don't apologize. I feel the same way."

"Thanks; that makes me feel a little bit better."

The nameless feeling they both harbored stemmed not, of course, from any malice towards Freddy and his family. The dinner party had very plainly and unexpectedly laid bare the stark reality of what they had both missed out on.

Freddy's statement from earlier tickled the back of Chloe's mind. *He's a good man; strong, purposeful—driven. But...given his upbringing, I suspect we can't expect too much from him socially after that.*

His...upbringing...

"Lloyd..." *What happened to you?* she wanted to ask. Struck with a sudden sense of impropriety, she shut her mouth as fast as she had opened it; it didn't feel right to pry when she was being so tight-lipped herself.

"What is it?" he asked.

"N-Nothing. Never mind."

A slight look of doubt crossed Lloyd's face, but he decided to not question her further. "...All right."

It's not like it's now or never, Chloe thought. They spent a significant amount of time together; surely an opportunity would present itself, right? There was no need to force the issue. A little more time to mentally prepare couldn't hurt.

Content with her conclusion, Chloe tucked her thoughts away when Lloyd abruptly stopped in his tracks. They had arrived in front of a city park not far from their home—the very place where Chloe first met Millia.

"Is something the matter, Lloyd?" she asked.

After a moment of indecision, he answered, “Can we talk?”

It seemed the opportunity would reach Chloe much sooner than she had anticipated.

Chapter Six: Love

Underneath the pale moon's glow, Chloe and Lloyd found themselves seated side by side on a wooden bench in the familiar city park, next to the very tree where Othello had once been rescued.

Feeling the weight of the silence, Chloe spoke first. "You mentioned you wanted to talk about something?"

Lloyd answered after a brief pause, "I thought it'd be best if I told you a little about my past."

"Your past...?" Chloe swallowed. She couldn't believe what she was hearing; this was exactly what she'd been waiting for.

"If you'd rather not hear it, just say so. I'm sure my life story isn't particularly intriguing, and...it might be a heavy tale."

"No, please!" Chloe blurted out. "I'm...interested. I've been waiting for the right moment to ask, actually."

Lloyd allowed himself to relax slightly. "...Is that so?"

"But why now?" asked Chloe.

Lloyd echoed her question, deep in thought. "Why now? I suppose I realized that while you've shared so much about yourself, I've barely told you anything in return; it hardly seems fair."

"I...I certainly haven't told you everything either..."

"That may be true, but you've shared at least some of your story; I've shared none."

"Yes, but..." Chloe's voice trailed off. She knew she couldn't argue her way out of this. Lloyd had never so much as hinted at anything about his upbringing or family, save for that one mysterious word: the jungle.

"And I don't quite understand it myself, but after spending time at the Deputy Commander's house, I'm...in a mood to share—but, not to just anyone." Lloyd's gaze met Chloe's. "I want *you* to know."

“I see...” Chloe murmured, a sense of warmth blossoming within her chest. Being chosen like this made her feel truly special. *He trusts me*, she realized.

With a determined expression, Chloe urged him on. “Please, tell me about your past.”

Lloyd opened his mouth to speak, but quickly shut it again. He tilted his head, lost in thought. “Apologies, give me a moment. I need to organize the timeline in my head.”

“Take all the time you need. I’ll be here.”

“Thank you.”

It occurred to Chloe that perhaps Lloyd had never shared this part of himself with anyone before. It wouldn’t be surprising if he needed time to gather his thoughts.

Moments later, Lloyd began his tale, his voice heavy with solemnity. “My parents died when I was very young. I don’t remember much, but from what I was told, it was a carriage accident, and I was the sole survivor.”

A wave of sorrow crashed over Chloe—how terrible it must be to lose your parents before you even had the chance to know them.

“I escaped death, but was instead swept away by the fallout. My parents came from different social classes, and had eloped to be with each other. As a result, neither side of the family would take me in. The state usually takes custody of orphans, but that...wasn’t what happened to me.”

Lloyd continued softly. “I ended up in an entirely different institution.”

“A...different institution?” echoed Chloe, her curiosity piqued.

“I was taken in by the Revolutionary Guard. This I came to know later, as well.”

A shiver ran down the length of Chloe’s spine.

“The Revolutionary Guard, as the name suggests, was not a state-sanctioned organization—quite the opposite. They were an ultranationalist faction that sought to overthrow the monarchy.”

“Does that mean you were...”

“I was raised as one of their own.” Lloyd’s gaze drifted towards the ground. “The Guard needed fighters for their cause. Their most effective method of recruitment was to groom children into ruthless, natural-born warriors—it was crucial to start them young, before they could develop a conscience. Orphans like me were an...easy target.”

Chloe reflexively covered her mouth. “That is...horrible...” She couldn’t believe such inhumanity existed without her knowledge. She cursed her own ignorance.

“They took me to their jungle compound, far to the south, where they trained us. There, it was a struggle just to survive.”

Chloe felt the pieces finally fall into place.

This is nothing compared to the time in the jungle when I ran out of provisions and subsided solely on mud water.

In the jungle I often went without food or water for three days and three nights.

It’s something you come to learn when you face off against guerilla fighters in the jungle. You never knew when they would attack.

All of Lloyd’s allusions to the jungle had been allusions to his own cruel childhood.

“Did you...never try to escape?” Perhaps an innocuous question in hindsight, but Chloe felt compelled to ask regardless.

“Never. We were indoctrinated—convinced the monarchy was the enemy, that they deserved to be overthrown, that we were doing the right thing. We were children. All of us truly believed we were fighting for a righteous cause—and I, more so than anyone else. It was my purpose in life, and my devotion to training was unmatched.”

Chloe realized that it was perhaps Lloyd’s overserious nature that sustained him for so long; the irony was not lost on her.

“I spent eight years there. We were pushed to our mental and physical

breaking points daily. They threw us in the jungle with nothing more than a knife to survive—forced us to fight dangerous beasts and monsters...” Lloyd’s face contorted in discomfort. “Forced us to fight and kill each other...”

Chloe recalled what Lloyd had told her the day he took her in, when she asked him why he was so kind towards her:

It’s because you had the eyes of a dead man.

The eyes of a dead man?

A long time ago, I was in a place where I was made to train without relent, day in and day out. There, I was surrounded by men who had forsaken their dreams and all hope; their eyes were like those of corpses.

So that’s what he... The revelation struck Chloe like a bolt of lightning, and her words left her. Lloyd’s combat skills, which she had witnessed when they first met, were the product of blood, sweat, and more blood.

“Every day, we lived alongside death. Older comrades, younger ones, peers... They all died the same. The weak were denied food and left to rot. I don’t have to wonder if hell is real—hell is *there*. Hell is *that*..”

Lloyd paused to collect himself. “Fortunately, I had a smidgeon of talent for the sword and a strong will. I came close to death many times, but by pure, *sheer* luck, I survived.” Irritation laced his voice, and his face, bathed in the moon’s soft glow, twisted into a pained expression Chloe had never seen before.

“What...happened next?” she asked.

“It all ended without incident. When I turned twelve, the Guard gathered their most elite warriors, proclaiming that the revolution was upon us. At the same time, the royal knights had sniffed out the location of the compound and launched a raid.”

Chloe felt the tension in her chest dissolve in an instant.

“They attacked at night, and the compound was subdued almost instantly. I awoke and took up my sword in battle, but was defeated by the Sword Saint and captured. It was...a good duel. Our swordwork was evenly matched, but the

advantage of experience was not in my favor.” Lloyd reminisced as if it had just happened yesterday. A hint of frustration laced his voice—perhaps the master swordsman within him found shame in the memory.

“After my capture, I spent two years at a facility in the capital. There, they purged me of my programming, and with it, my purpose. As I grappled with my newfound freedom, the Sword Saint approached me and invited me to join the knights.”

Slack finally returned to Lloyd’s face as he began to talk about his savior.

“At the time, there were many who were outraged that the Order would even consider a boy from a rebel faction joining their ranks, but the Sword Saint fought to secure my place, citing my fighting prowess and talent for the blade. Eventually, I was allowed in, and now you know the rest; I’ve been with the knights ever since.”

Eyes still fixed on the ground, Lloyd prepared to conclude his story.

“That...was a rough approximation of events, but it should explain everything,” he said, his words trailing off into a deep, soulful sigh. “I warned you it wouldn’t be the most compelling tale, didn’t I—”

Before he could finish, Chloe sprang to her feet. In the blink of an eye, she closed the distance between them, wrapping Lloyd in a warm, unexpected embrace, her arms pressing him tightly to her bosom.



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She didn’t know what came over her. Before she knew it, Chloe found herself standing before Lloyd, her arms tenderly cradling his head in a heartfelt embrace.

“...What are you doing?”

“I don’t know...” Chloe shook her head vehemently; her voice quivered, thick with emotion. She hadn’t a clue what had possessed her to do this.

Lloyd’s story had torn a gaping hole in her chest. Her eyes glistened with unshed tears, as the torrent of emotion surging inside her raged to find an outlet. Overwhelming her, they seized control and propelled her into the fervent embrace that now held him.

“Sorry, I’ve upset you. I’ve said too much; it wasn’t my intention.”

“No! Please, don’t apologize...” *This is all my fault,* she thought; *Lloyd has nothing to be sorry for.* “You had to relive your suffering due to my thoughtless request. I’m sorry.”

“That’s not something you need to concern yourself with. I shared of my own volition. There’s no need to apologize.”

Lloyd’s voice was close enough to tickle her ears; Chloe felt his warmth between her arms. His presence before her was tangible proof that his hellish past was real, and that the man before her had persevered through years upon years of torment to be next to her now.

The realization further sent Chloe’s emotions into turmoil. Her heart ached for him. The emotions she had striven to suppress now cascaded from the corners of her eyes.

“...Are you crying?”

“I am not!”

“That sounds like crying...”

Chloe could no longer halt the tears that rolled down her face. Lloyd’s history was so inexplicably irrational and so irredeemably cruel. He deserved to be

raised in a warm home, doted on by loving parents, knowing nothing but happy memories at that age. Instead, he was made to suffer, made to fear, made to struggle just to survive.

His story had cloven her heart in two.

Lloyd tried to console Chloe. “It’s in the past. I’ve already found peace with it all—my parents’ deaths, my time at the compound... You don’t need to grieve on my behalf.”

“Still...” Chloe pulled her arms even tighter still. “It’s all so...all so...” Her words evaporated, leaving the sentiment unspoken. She couldn’t say it—she shouldn’t. Lloyd hadn’t told her his story just to be pitied; it wasn’t her place to project her own anguish onto him.

“You’re...very kind,” Lloyd murmured as he tenderly wrapped his own arms around Chloe’s waist, causing Chloe to emit a shrill whimper in reflex.

“Sorry, should I not have done that?”

“N-No... No, that’s fine, I was just a bit surprised...”

“I see.”

The arms that he had gingerly retracted from behind her back wrapped around her once more. Chloe melted into the reciprocating embrace in an instant. As she felt the strength of his large arms, the reassuring pressure of his hold, and his soothing scent, a separate, different kind of warmth surged within her heart.

“I know this is pathetic, coming from a man, and...unbecoming of a knight, but...” Lloyd said, in a vulnerable tone that Chloe had never heard before. “I’ll let go—I promise, just...stay like this with me for just a little while longer.”

“Oh, Lloyd...” Chloe gently raised a hand and rested it on his head, tenderly stroking his soft, silky hair just as he had always done to her.

When she spoke next, her voice took on an affectionate note. “Man or not, knight or not, you’re still only human. I don’t know one person who could endure everything you’ve been through unscathed. I understand—it’s all okay.”

Chloe’s heart ached for Lloyd; she knew the depths of suffering all too well.

Her own days of torment and abuse connected her to his story in a way that perhaps no one else could. But for Chloe, whenever things got unbearable, whenever she was driven to tears, she always had somebody to run back to—Shirley had always been there for her.

It's okay, young lady, it's okay... I'm here for you.

Shirley would hold Chloe in a warm embrace and stroke her hair, assuring her that everything would be all right. Chloe always had someone to depend on, but what about Lloyd? What did he have? Was there anyone to comfort him?

Most likely, no. He didn't have anyone.

As if soothing a small child, Chloe mustered her gentlest tone of voice. "So please, you don't have to hold back. I'm here for you. Take all the time you need—in fact, I'm not going to let go until you do."

In her heart, Chloe hoped Lloyd trusted her enough to rely on her for at least this much. Thinking back, Lloyd had never shown Chloe an ounce of weakness during their life together. He played the part of the knight in shining armor, resolute and undaunted, an unwavering iron will in spite of the world. But now she saw the boy standing behind the facade—the boy made to feel this way, made to act this way not by choice, but by discipline.

Here was the boy—and with him, his curse.

I know this is presumptuous of me, but if I could be his solace...

Lloyd likely had never let his guard down, not even for a moment—had he ever allowed himself the slightest opportunity to breathe easy and just relax? Chloe yearned to be that sanctuary for Lloyd, if not for forever, then at least for now.

Had Lloyd sensed Chloe's intentions? It was unclear. He uttered a simple word of thanks and, with a profound release of tension, melted into Chloe's arms.

For a while, he entrusted himself entirely to Chloe's embrace as she continued to tenderly stroke his hair.

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A few moments later, Chloe returned to her seat next to Lloyd. She bowed

her head low, though a faint expression of satisfaction graced her face. “I’m sorry; that was unseemly of me.”

Lloyd, too, hung his head, his gaze fixed on the floor. The experience of being embraced and caressed like a child by a younger woman seemed to have been a brand new experience. “No, I...I should be the one saying that.”

He felt strangely uncomfortable in his own skin, as if the layers of identity he’d built throughout his life had suddenly crumbled around him.

He felt—in a sense—stripped down and utterly exposed.

“But... Thank you. I’m not sure what it is, but my chest feels lighter now.”

“No, no, please. I...didn’t do a thing.” Chloe waved her hands in front of her in a dismissive gesture. “I’m...glad to hear that, though...”

As Lloyd gazed upon her bashful face, a question escaped his lips. “Are you sure you’re okay being with me?”

“What—um, what do you mean?” Chloe replied.

Lloyd hesitated for a moment. When he spoke, a bitter tinge crept into his voice. “I’ve come to realize—after having dinner with the Deputy Commander, playing house with his daughter—that I’m...deficient in many ways. I’m far removed from what it means to be ‘normal.’ I can’t do what normal people do, I don’t feel the way they feel... And I’m sure I’ve caused you no end of trouble for it. That’s why I believe...it’d be wrong of you to keep living with me—to remain by my side.”

“That’s not—!” Chloe fought the urge to reject Lloyd’s claim outright, and chose instead to suppress it. *I see...* she realized. *He just doesn’t understand...that at heart, he’s a delicate and kind person...*

After learning Lloyd’s past, not a single doubt remained in her mind. *Lloyd and I... We’re alike...* The phrase “birds of a feather” grazed her mind.

Unable to know what others know, unable to feel what others feel—Chloe could sympathize deeply. She was the “cursed child,” ostracized and abused, starved of love and affection, denied even the right to pursue happiness. She too was “far removed from what it means to be *normal*.”

She recalled Freddy's words from earlier in the night, *He's...not one for expressing himself. He's got his quirks—he's a bit of a lone wolf, for sure. I've nothing to say about his skill in combat, but when it comes to being a team player he's... Well, let's just say he's been the source of many a great headache among the top brass—including me.*

His inability to form connections with his comrades had surely been a long-standing source of distress for him. What he needed now was not another judgmental lecture, but a compassionate and understanding presence.

Chloe spoke calmly and with measure, "You know, I don't think you're deficient in anything."

Lloyd lifted his head and looked at Chloe.

"Yes. It may be true that compared to most people you're more different than not, but...is that really so bad? Sometimes we lack what others have, and other times, the opposite is also true; it's only natural. There's no point trying to reject who we are; we have to meet these things where they wait for us. The only question you need to ask yourself is *how do* I *cope?*"

Earnestly meeting Lloyd's gaze, Chloe continued, "Take me for example. I'm untrusting, weak...jumpy, and always reading too deeply into others. But when I'm with someone like you—someone who's honest, sincere, kind, straightforward, and...yes, so endearingly awkward—I feel at ease."

"You...don't dislike being with me?"

"Have I ever indicated otherwise?"

"...I'm not sure. I think you at least tolerate me, but I can't say for certain. And this is not just you—I always have a hard time telling what anyone else thinks."

"Fine. In that case..." Chloe let her head fall and rest onto Lloyd's shoulder. "If I disliked you, would I be doing this?"

"...No."

"Good."

An apologetic look flickered onto Lloyd's face, and he averted his gaze. "Sorry, I've made you worry."

“Pay it no mind.” Chloe said, sidling closer to Lloyd.

Lloyd remained silent for a while, basking in her comforting warmth, before slowly opening his mouth. “You’re...more than just a housekeeper.”

Chloe gently tilted her head up, catching a serious look etched on Lloyd’s face.

“You’re...someone very important to me.”

She felt her heartbeat surge; her body grew hot and a lump formed in her throat, making her breath hitch.

Without thinking, she pulled herself away from Lloyd.

“Is something wrong?” Lloyd’s brow furrowed in perplexity.

Chloe found herself unable to respond, overwhelmed by the exhilaration in her chest.

From the moment they met, she had been aware of the feelings she harbored for Lloyd. But she had always told herself that she was merely a housekeeper—one of unknown origin at that—and he was a distinguished knight of the Kingdom. *There’d be no point. Smother that fleeting hope of yours. No good could come from such a gallant knight falling for someone like you.* The cruel whisper of her insecurities had kept her feelings at bay, until now.

Chloe’s mind echoed Lloyd’s words: he had said she was someone important to him.

She couldn’t be sure what he had meant by that; in fact, there might have been no deeper meaning at all, but it was still enough to send her heart soaring.

I want to be even closer to Lloyd.

I want to accept Lloyd for all that he is.

I want to be there for him—protect him from all the cruelty and unfairness of the world.

These thoughts proliferated, racing through her mind. Feign ignorance all she could, the feelings were there, raw and undeniable.

“T-Talk to me. What’s wrong? Did you hurt yourself?” Lloyd’s voice held a note of helplessness as he looked at her with concern.

Oh, Lloyd... Even that.

I love him.

I love every single part of him.

Chloe could no longer deny the truth that had been building up inside of her. As she surrendered to the realization, a far greater wave of feeling crested over her: her heart pounded in her ears, seemingly loud enough for Lloyd to hear, and a dizzying heat suffused her head, setting even her ears aflame.

After all, there she was, sitting side by side, face to face with the first love of her life.

How could she not?

“Are you really fine? This is quite unlike you.”

“...Sorry, I was just thinking about something.”

“Thinking about something?”

Chloe looked up at Lloyd’s bewildered face.

There it was, gallant and tremendously handsome as ever, a faint trace of a child’s innocence still clinging there—his strong, chiseled nose and his tightly pursed lips, his loose-trimmed hair, darker than night...

His features lit up one after the other, like constellations in the night sky.

This...this is bad...

Her mouth threatened to slacken into a sloppy, disheveled grin, which she managed to stop just in time.

A primal urge to confess her feelings nearly took hold of her. Chloe battled fiercely with herself, exerting every ounce of willpower she possessed to prevent the words from spilling over her tongue and slipping past her lips.

No, not yet, Chloe. She thrashed her head from side to side. *If you’re going to tell him...you need to tell him everything about yourself first.*

You need to tell him that you're the daughter of a margrave.

You need to tell him about the birthmark on your back.

You need to tell him that you're a cursed child, the contempt, the abuse, all of it.

She had kept these topics hidden from Lloyd, and for good reason: What if he couldn't accept her? Rejected her outright? The doubt had long taken root in her heart.

Just as he wanted me to know about him, I want him to know about me...

Though the fear of rejection still lingered, it was now overshadowed by the growing dread that everything would remain the same between them. Her desire overpowered her fear and gave her courage.

She stared Lloyd deep in his eyes, and opened her mouth. "Lloyd? I also had something I wanted to—"

Before she could finish, Lloyd surged to his feet and positioned himself in front of Chloe, taking on a defensive posture.

"L-Lloyd...?"
"Stay behind me. Do not leave my side."

Lloyd's quiet, tense voice caused Chloe to straighten her back instinctively. As she followed the direction of his focused gaze, several shadowy figures emerged from the darkness.

"Long time no see, Sir Lloyd Stewart... Or should I say...Mister *Ebon Reaper*?"

Chloe's mind went blank upon hearing the voice, recognizing it all too well. Her mind took her back to her first day in the royal capital, when she had encountered the three hoodlums who had tried to abduct her.

Standing out in front of the group was the large man with the clean-shaven head—Alan, licking his lips like a predator before his prey.

Chapter Seven: Lloyd Stewart, Swordsman

Leading the pack was Alan, followed closely by the blonde-haired Giusto and the man with the bowl cut, Mush.

Behind them were a crowd of unfamiliar faces, wicked-looking men brandishing metal clubs and small knives—clearly spoiling for a fight. Seeing the weapons in their hands sent a shiver down Chloe's spine.

"Are you okay?" asked Lloyd.

"Y-Yes, somehow..."

So far there were no flashbacks and no palpitations; the men were still at a fair distance, and the weapons were yet obscured under the dim moonlight. Perhaps her midnight training sessions, too, had inoculated her slightly.

Alan glared at Lloyd with disdain. "Remember me, Mister Lloyd?"
"You're back—and with help. Not very subtle of you."

"Subtle? Who gives a rat's ass about bein' subtle?! All I care about is getting to beat yer ass down, you punk!" Alan roared, spittle flying from his mouth. "Do you know how much shit I had to shovel, how much coin I had to spend on intel and manpower, how much time I spent staking you out to get you here? Huh?!"

"I don't care about any of that, but... I see. So it was you that had the South District all riled up."

Twelve more men stood behind the leading trio, bringing the total to fifteen. It was unclear where and how they managed to scrounge up such a formidable fighting force, but it was apparent they resented Lloyd enough to put in the effort to do so. As a knight, Lloyd was no stranger to making enemies—it came with the job. But he had never faced such a tenacious band of thugs before.

Alan spread his arms wide, like a proud military leader displaying his forces. "Heard you were some hot shot knight, so I had to hire some help. Hope you don't mind..."

In the face of so many hostile presences, Chloe looked up at Lloyd with

unease. “Lloyd...”

“Don’t worry.” He struck out a hand in front of Chloe, signaling his intent to protect her. “How fast can you run?”

“Um... Faster than most?”

Lloyd hummed in thought.

“Hey! Pipe down over there and listen up! I’m giving you two choices!” Alan raised two fingers. “The first choice is you resist, and we beat you to death. As for the second...” Alan’s face curved into a broad, toothy leer, his gaze shifting to Chloe. “The second choice is you hand over the girl—peacefully—and in exchange, we beat you until you only *wish* you were dead.”

Chloe whimpered and took a step behind Lloyd, who clenched his fists tight.

“Now, what’s it gonna be?”

“Neither.” In a single, swift motion, Lloyd scooped Chloe up in a princess carry; his clear, resonant voice boomed across the park. “I choose to send each and every one of you to hell. Then I’m going home with her.”

The pale blue vein in Alan’s temple bulged in rage. “You got some nerve kid... Boys, you heard ’im! Bring me back his head on a—”

Before he could finish, Lloyd spun around and sprinted away. Momentarily speechless, Alan shook off his surprise and barked at his men, “Well don’t just stand there! After ’em!” at which the men rallied behind Alan and broke out into a stampede.

As they pursued, Lloyd raced ahead, carrying Chloe at a remarkable speed.

“Lloyd?! Where are you—?!”

“They’ve blocked off the entrance. If we try to escape, it’ll only cause unnecessary collateral damage. I’m going to let you down there; this is where we make our stand,” said Lloyd, his breathing steady and composed.

He brought Chloe to one of the park’s four corners and set her down. Here, in Lloyd’s tactical mind, he could easily defend her.

“Stay here, and whatever you do, do *not* shut your eyes. If I let one slip past

and you see one coming after you, yell as loud as you can."

Chloe looked up at Lloyd, her eyes swimming with worry. "B-But..."

Lloyd clasped Chloe's shoulder. "Don't worry about me. I'm not new to fighting outnumbered." He reached into the bag Sara had gifted them and pulled out an onion and a potato. "But...on the off-chance the unthinkable happens—I'm sorry, but run away as fast as you can."

Without giving pause, Lloyd turned around.

"Lloyd!!!"

Ignoring Chloe's cries, he charged headlong towards the rapidly approaching mob.

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As Lloyd hurled himself towards the oncoming attackers, his mind raced, rapidly analyzing the situation and his surroundings. The likelihood of protecting himself *and* Chloe while defeating fifteen armed thugs, while being unarmed himself, was...

Fifty percent?

If Lloyd were able to maneuver freely, he had no doubt he could effortlessly rout this pitiful band. But in this particular engagement, not all factors were in his favor; the wide-open park offered little in the way of cover, and this time, the stakes were different—he had to keep Chloe safe, first and foremost. Despite his experience and exceptional battle prowess, the uncertainties and unique challenges of the situation weighed his chance of success down.

No matter. I just have to do what I can.

Lloyd was a professional soldier and seasoned fighter. His adversaries were an unruly gang of thugs, likely lacking any formal training. If he could scatter them and force one-on-one engagements, victory would be his. He strained his mind in assessment of the situation. He needed to consider the build, weapon, and attack pattern of each foe to devise the best strategy.

His first opponent charged towards him. With a snap of his wrist, Lloyd flung the potato at the man.

Catching a tuber to the face, the man cried out in pain. Before he could react, Lloyd followed up with a swift kick arcing into his groin.

An ungodly sound escaped the man's lips. His eyes rolled back into his head and he crumpled to the ground.

One down.

"Hyaaah!" Next up was Mush. The mushroom-haired man rushed at Lloyd, wooden club in hand.

Unfazed, Lloyd unleashed his remaining projectile, striking Mush squarely between his eyes.

"Aghhh! Another onion?! How?! Why?!" Mush collapsed, clutching his face and writhing in pain.

If Lloyd had known the trauma he had inflicted on the poor man from their previous altercation, he might have shown mercy. Sadly for Mush, fate did not will it so.

Two down.

"Hahhh!"
"Yaaargh!"

Next came a coordinated assault from two men, one wielding a metal club, the other relying on his fists.

Lloyd closed the distance between himself and the club-wielding man, slipping beneath his reach. He dropped low before springing upwards, landing a devastating uppercut to the man's chin.

"Ack!" the man cried, losing his grip on the club.

Snatching the airborne weapon, Lloyd spun around and thrust it at the second assailant, intercepting his incoming fists.

The man yelped in pain, withdrawing his hands to inspect them. In doing so, he took his eyes off the metal club that now swung at his neck. With a heavy thud and a muffled groan, he crumpled to the ground.

Catching a break in the action, Lloyd jerked his head around to check on

Chloe. She gazed back at him, her eyes brimming with worry, but there was no sign of danger near her; it seemed none of the thugs had slipped past him.

Reassured, Lloyd turned around to catch another man on the approach. Without a second's hesitation, he flung the club at the man—opting to use it as a projectile rather than wield the clunky, unfamiliar weapon. Catching a club to the shins, the man yelped and fell to the ground.

That was five down. Discounting the chance that some of the downed men might recover and rejoin the fight, ten opponents remained.

With that in mind, Lloyd once again dove headfirst into the fray.

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"My...goodness..."

Chloe watched in disbelief as the scene before her spiraled into pandemonium. A relentless stream of thugs charged at Lloyd, only to be expertly dispatched and cast aside one by one.

In the blink of an eye, five men lay face down in the dirt.

Impressive, but... *Why isn't Lloyd using his sword?*

Was it because he was confident he could defeat them without it? Or was it because...

"...Of me?"

Chloe felt the blood drain from her face. She glanced at Lloyd's sheathed sword as it swung about on his hip. Lloyd was choosing to fight barehanded; an act driven not by his capability, but by a deep-seated concern for Chloe's well-being. This was the only explanation that made sense to her.

Chloe's heart sank, and a sharp pang of guilt stabbed at her chest.

"Quit going in one by one! Group up and finish him off!" The blond-haired Giusto yelled.

The remaining men exchanged glances and nods before forming up and charging at Lloyd.

Lloyd let out a strained grunt, his brow furrowing. Fighting off multiple

enemies simultaneously was far more exhausting than taking them on one at a time. Moreover, he'd been fighting in a fixed position, attempting to maintain a buffer zone between him and Chloe. His opponents would surely start to box him in. If only he could use his sword, the situation might not be so dire.

"What's wrong, Lloyd?! Not gonna use yer precious sword?!" Alan cackled as he rushed towards Lloyd, brandishing a large saber.

As Lloyd's composure began to waver, Chloe gritted her teeth in frustration.

This is all my fault! It-It's me! I'm the problem! Before the sight of the saber could trigger any trauma, such were the thoughts that raced through Chloe's mind.

Lloyd was out there risking his life, and here she was doing nothing.

No, she was doing less than nothing. She was actively holding him back.

What are you doing, Chloe?! Didn't you say you wanted to protect him? To be there for him? You're doing a real great job of that right now, aren't you?! How is this helping him in any way?! Trauma...? "Does that *really* matter right now?!"

Chloe summoned the whole of her vigor, clenching her fists tight. Even as the fetters of the past threatened to chain her down and condemn her to inaction, she fought them off through sheer force of will.

She no longer cared what happened to her.

She just couldn't bear to see Lloyd get hurt...or worse.

Lloyd was now undeniably on the back foot. He had done his best to disarm and incapacitate as many foes as possible, but by now, the enemies he had taken down at the beginning of the melee were starting to rise again.

As the oncoming human wave cornered Lloyd, Alan raised his saber and swung down at him. "I got you now, you bastard!"

Lloyd shifted to the side just in time, narrowly escaping a grisly end, but was now pinned down completely.

Alan readied his saber for the coup de grâce when suddenly—

“Lloyd!” Chloe’s voice rang out across the battlefield. “Take up your sword!”

Lloyd spun his head around. Their eyes met.

He gave her a look that clearly meant *are you sure?*

Without a sliver of indecision, Chloe screamed at the top of her lungs, “Yes—I’ll be fine!”

“Die, Lloyd!”

The saber once again plummeted towards Lloyd’s head.

SHING—CLANG!



The crystalline sound of an unsheathing sword and the thunderous clash of metal on metal reverberated throughout the park.

Fending off Alan's saber with his own, Lloyd turned around to look at Chloe, saying "Thank you for your bravery," before a shockwave burst forth from him, engulfing his surroundings in a gale-force wind.

"Wh-Whoa!" Thrown off balance by the force of Lloyd's parry, Alan staggered back several steps.

With his weapon of choice now unleashed, fear struck the hearts of the remaining thugs. The long, slender blade glimmered softly under the pale moon's glow.

Though his sword was now out in full view, Chloe did not avert her gaze, and yet, there were no palpitations or flashbacks. In fact, she couldn't tear her eyes away from Lloyd—there he was, sword in hand, poised and at the ready: her knight in shining armor. The blade wielded to protect her, oh how brilliant did it shine.

A wave of hesitation washed over the thugs as the sheer presence and authority emanating from Lloyd overwhelmed them.

"What are you all afraid of?! He's just one man! We still got numbers on our _"

Before Alan could finish his sentence, Lloyd lunged towards the group of thugs, his form a blur.

It was over in the blink of an eye.

"Gah!"

"Ack!"

With yelps of pain, they collapsed, one after the next.

"Wh-What's happening?! What the hell is going on?!" Before he realized what had happened, Alan was the last man standing.

His entire team lay on the ground. They suddenly clutched at their legs, screaming and howling in agony as if the pain had only just caught up with them

—Lloyd had deftly inflicted non-lethal but incapacitating injuries, slicing open Achilles, hamstrings, and other tendons. There had been no time for them to react or counter—it was complete and utter domination.

“You still have *what* on your side?” Lloyd asked, now standing in front of Alan.

“Th-That’s impossible...” Alan couldn’t believe his eyes. Had the evidence not been right in front of him, he would have never accepted it.

“I’m going to give you two choices.” Lloyd raised two fingers in a mocking manner. “The first choice is you surrender peacefully and let the guards take you in. Or—you resist, and I beat you until you only *wish* you were dead.” Lloyd’s voice dripped with cold indifference. “Pick one.”

“You...you little shit...” Alan’s fighting spirit still smoldered. The man before him had humiliated him not once, but twice now. The first time he was caught off guard, but the second time, he had bided his time, gathered his forces, set up a perfect ambush, and still came up short.

Channeling his last shred of pride, Alan let his rage consume him. “Don’t fuck with me!” In a frantic, clumsy attempt, he swung his saber at Lloyd, but such a haphazard attack stood no chance of finding its mark.

“How foolish.” As if swatting away a fly, Lloyd effortlessly batted the saber out of Alan’s hand.

With a sharp cry, Alan clutched his hand and toppled backwards, hitting the ground hard as the gleaming point of Lloyd’s sword loomed over him. He looked up to see Lloyd glaring down at him, his eyes seething with ferocity. Alan’s heart ran cold, and he squealed in fear. “I-I’m sorry! Please! Forgive me! I-I’m gone! You’ll never see me again! D-Do you want money? Here! Take it—take it!”

“You *really* think that’ll work? Tell me: if I had apologized earlier, would *you* have let *us* go?”

Alan choked on his words.

“I was going to spare you, but I’ve changed my mind.” Lloyd’s voice seethed with atypical rage. “You tried to hurt someone very important to me, and for that, you’ll pay.”

Lloyd lifted his sword high above his head.

“S-Somebody, help!!!”

“Suffer the consequences.”

CLONK.

The dull, hollow sound of Lloyd’s sword—the flat side striking Alan’s head—rang out into the night. Losing consciousness, Alan slumped over and collapsed.

“Though I wish I could deliver you to hell myself, I am but a knight, and personal vengeance is not our way.”
Alan lay supine, limbs twitching, sprawled on the cold earth.

With all opponents accounted for, Lloyd exhaled deeply and sheathed his sword.

He strode past Alan, retrieving the spent potato and onion, and headed towards Chloe.

“Lloyd!” At the same time, Chloe rushed to meet him, her face stained with anxious tears.

“Sorry, that took a while—oomph!”

Chloe flung her arms around Lloyd’s torso. “Are you okay? Are you injured anywhere?! Show me where it hurts!”

“Relax,” Lloyd said, gently peeling Chloe from him. “I’m fine. No major injuries to speak of.”

A deep sigh of relief escaped Chloe’s lips, and her voice quavered with emotion. “Th-Thank goodness. You have no idea how glad I am to hear that.”

Touched by her genuine concern for his well-being, Lloyd felt warmth blossom in his chest. “Sorry for making you worry.”

“No—no please. I’m just so glad you’re okay...” Chloe offered a shaky laugh and shook her head.

Stirred, Lloyd surrendered himself to the urge within and pulled Chloe into a tight embrace, catching her by surprise. Her shoulders twitched once, before she relaxed completely and returned the gesture, her arms encircling his back,

as if to confirm his presence.

Out of all my near brushes with death, have I ever felt this grateful to be alive before...? thought Lloyd as he held Chloe in his arms.

“Halt!”

“What the hell’s going on here?!”

Their tender moment was interrupted by the arrival of a third party—city guards, by the looks of things, no doubt alerted by concerned residents. Spotting Chloe and Lloyd in a corner of the park, they rushed towards them—the two of them would surely be taken in for questioning.

“Looks like you won’t be able to go home just yet. Sorry.”

“That’s fine with me,” said Chloe, her arms still wrapped around Lloyd. “You’ll be right there with me, after all.”

Lloyd gazed down at Chloe’s soft smile—her face was so close. His breath caught in his throat, and on reflex, he averted his gaze.

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“And what of today? Still nothing?”

“...No, milady. Please...accept my sincerest apologies.”

The head maid of the Ardennes’ estate prostrated herself in front of Isabella, uttering a few words in apology. Her head kissed the ground and her body trembled in fear.

“Honestly. What else can I say that hasn’t already been said? Your incompetence never ceases to amaze.”

“M-Milady, with all due respect... We’ve searched everywhere, questioned everyone—we haven’t a single lead to pursue! I beg you to consider the possibility that she is no longer here!”

A month had passed since Chloe’s disappearance. At this point, even Isabella would have no choice but to carefully consider the head maid’s words.

The Ardennes’ domain was a valley basin flanked on all sides by mountain ranges. On top of that, it was winter. The journey to the outlying plains was

treacherous by carriage, let alone on foot—still, Isabella was out of options. She could no longer discount the possibility.

Isabella's face contorted with disdain as she spoke. "Say I believe you—say she left our domain. Where would she *possibly* go? Enlighten me."

"M-My guess is as good as yours, milad—"

The head maid's words were cut short by the shattering of glass beside her head. She merely winced, having grown accustomed to her mistress's punctuation of her demands with improvised missiles.

"Broaden your search! Find a clue—something, *anything*! I don't care how you do it, just get it done!"

"Y-Yes, milady!"

With Isabella's final words of reproach ringing in her ears, the head maid hurriedly left the room.

Isabella let out a frustrated groan. "Honestly, honestly, honestly, honestly!"

The source of her stress was—what else—Chloe's disappearance. She had vanished without a trace, leaving the cooking substandard, the paperwork unfinished, and the cleaning shoddy. To make matters worse, their servants were quitting in droves.

This outcome was hardly surprising, given Chloe's pivotal role at the estate. The once idle servants, addicted to a life of leisure, found themselves overwhelmed by the tasks she had managed with ease. Struggling with the intricacies and various responsibilities involved in running an estate, they departed one by one, unable to fill Chloe's shoes.

Hiring additional help was a pressing concern. Harry, as the head of the estate, was responsible for recruiting new staff to fill the gaps, but candidates were few and far between—it seemed that word of the estate's poor working conditions had spread.

The decline in quality of life at the estate directly translated into increased stress for Isabella, whose rage was swiftly reaching a breaking point.

"Are you okay, mother? You must be under so much stress." Chloe's sister

Lily, who had been present throughout the conversation, consoled Isabella.

“Oh, my dear Lily. You are the only one who understands my pain.”

“I more than understand, Mother. She took my dress—my favorite one! We raised her all these years and this is how she repays us? Unbelievable.” Lily’s voice trembled with rage as she clenched her fists tight.

“I couldn’t agree more. How dare she trouble me so...”

“Speaking of, I had a request, Mother, if you don’t mind.”

“A request?”

“Yes. The esteemed son of House Gimul is holding a little get-together and has extended me an invitation. I was hoping to travel to the royal capital to attend.”

“My, the marquis!” Isabella’s irritation instantly vanished. “Good for you, Lily! The snow’s just about gone, too. Go, with my blessing.”

With a “Yay! Thanks, Mother!” Lily skipped out of the room.

“The capital...” Isabella muttered under her breath. The possibility skipped across her mind. They once had a handmaiden... What was her name again? Shirley? She used to talk about the capital a lot, didn’t she...?

“Preposterous.”

She dismissed the thought. It was impossible. It took weeks to reach the capital by carriage, and that was under the auspices of summer. Chloe would never make it there in this frozen season. They would surely find her somewhere closer.

Isabella’s thoughts once again drifted towards the path of least resistance.

Epilogue

After Lloyd and Chloe triumphed over Alan and his band of mercenaries, the city guard swooped in, arresting the defeated criminals and escorting Lloyd and Chloe to their facility for questioning. By the time the authorities finished their inquiries, the night had grown late.

Upon returning home, Chloe, weary from the night's events, welcomed a deep, well-deserved slumber. Yet, true to her nature, she was up bright and early the following morning, diligently attending to her housekeeping duties.

"Good morning, Lloyd!"

"Morning."

Having exchanged their usual pleasantries, the pair settled at the dining table, which was laden with an assortment of dishes.

"This seems more lavish than usual," observed Lloyd.

"You can tell? In all honesty, something very good happened and...I got a little carried away..."

"Something very good?"

Chloe glanced down at the breakfast spread. "Do you notice anything different?"

Lloyd carefully considered her words for a moment, before his eyes widened. "The cucumbers—they're sliced."

"Indeed, Sir Knight!"

"You're cured?"

"Thanks to you." Chloe gave a brisk nod. "I noticed while making breakfast this morning—I could look at the kitchen knife and hold it! All without tremors. I was so excited I ended up making all this."

On the dining table were a sliced cucumber salad, sausages cut into bite-sized pieces, and a soup brimming with an assortment of cut vegetables.

Lloyd recalled his past remark: *Which means what we need to do is show you, in some manner, that a knife will not be used to hurt you.*

“It must be that last night, after you let your sword come out for my sake, I recognized that a blade can *protect,* not just hurt.”

“That...makes sense.” Lloyd gave a deep nod of his head. “I can’t say it was my intention, but I’m glad it worked out.”

“Yes! I must thank you, Lloyd.”

“Please, allow me.” Lloyd locked eyes with Chloe. “If you hadn’t given me permission to use my sword then, I doubt I would’ve been able to come out of that unharmed. Had I been unarmed, I would’ve surely caught a scrape or two.”

“Oh, wow... Even then, still just a scrape?”

“I’m a knight,” Lloyd declared. “At any rate, it was your own courage that allowed you to act—which means—in mastering your trauma, you have nobody to thank but yourself.”

Oh Lloyd, how are you able to say these things with a straight face first thing in the morning? As if they had a mind of their own, the corners of Chloe’s mouth quirked up into a lax grin, and her cheeks flushed ever so slightly warmer.

“Thank you, Lloyd.”

“For?”

“Anything and everything.”

Lloyd cocked his head to the side in confusion.

“Now, let’s eat while everything’s still hot!”

Lloyd hummed in agreement, kicking off yet another delightful breakfast—more so even than usual.

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“By the way, you wanted to tell me something?” Lloyd asked as they went to the front door after breakfast.

“I did? When?”

“Last night, right before we were attacked.”

Chloe paused for two beats, and on the third, let out a high-pitched, noncommittal noise. “Th-That was, um... You see...”

As she stumbled over her words, she recalled all too clearly what she had tried to tell him—her origin as a margrave’s daughter, the birthmark on her back, her nature as a “cursed child,” and the abuse she endured as a result.

While she had resolved to share this information the night before, bringing up such a topic during such an offhand, casual conversation in front of the door felt a tad off-beat. Besides, the particular course of events and circumstances that gave her courage last night were but a memory at this point—this was not something she could mention out of nowhere.

But still, cold feet? Now?

As Chloe combed through her thoughts, she arrived at her conclusion.

“...A knight shall repay a favor in kind.”

“That is one of the tenets of knighthood, yes.”

“Do you remember when you said that, Lloyd? I, um... I have a favor to ask of you, if you don’t mind...”

“Oh?” Lloyd turned to face Chloe, an air of almost-giddiness about him. “If I can do anything for you for a change, please, speak your mind. As long as it’s within my power, of course.”

“...My name.”

“Your name?”

“You’ve never called me by my name... It’s always been *you, you, you*...”

“Really? I hadn’t noticed.”

“You said, ‘If I can do something for *you,*’ just now, didn’t you?”

“...I suppose I did.”

“It always felt kind of impersonal...and cold, and...I didn’t really like that.”

“My apologies, that wasn’t my intention.”

“No, no, I’m not mad or anything! It’s just... If you could...” Chloe flicked her gaze up at Lloyd. “I’d like you to call me by my name...”

A brief pause followed. Lloyd silently gazed upon Chloe with his trademark face of stone.

Then, a hand dropped onto her head. “I’m heading out, Chloe.”



Lloyd turned to leave, his fingers stretching out toward the door handle. As Chloe's eyes traced his back, she thought she saw a faint blush of red gracing his cheek—or was that just her imagination?

As the notion crossed her mind, a radiant smile blossomed across Chloe's face. "Have a good day, Lloyd!"

While the door swept to a close, Chloe stood still, gently waving goodbye in his direction.

"All right! Let's start with a little cleaning, shall we?"

So began another day in the life of Chloe, once of the house of Ardennes—one not too different from the day before or the day before that. It promised seasons still to come in much the same shape, here in the city of her dreams: keeping house for a noble knight, all in good company, warm and welcome, safe and sound.