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


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Safe & Sound in the Arms of an Elite Knight: Volume 2 [Complete]

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Prologue

In the heart of Liberta, the royal capital city of the Kingdom of Rose, Chloe Ardennes stirred awake within a stately home tucked away in the city's esteemed North District. As the caretaker of the house, her days began early. After a drawn-out stretch and a contented sigh, she hopped out of bed at the exact same time she always did. Her refined features, resembling those of an exquisite doll, included soft, compassionate eyes, a flawlessly shaped nose, and a complexion as pale as alabaster. Her voluminous beige-blonde hair, silky and flowing, cascaded past her waist, veiling a svelte yet balanced figure. Hers was an appearance so naturally beautiful that it belied her past—a time when she was so disheveled and bedraggled, she could have been mistaken for a stray waif.

Striding over to her bedroom window, Chloe flung it open to invite the crisp morning air inside. She paused for a moment, savoring the brisk breeze and the gentle warmth of the rising sun. "Okay! Time to get to work!" she declared, punctuating her words with an energetic cheer. She shed her nightwear, donned her day clothes, tidied her bed, then left her bedroom and descended the stairs to begin her day.

In the bathroom, she freshened up, cleansing her face with cool water. After picking up a hairbrush, she meticulously combed through her locks, ensuring that not a single strand was out of place before heading to the kitchen. "Breakfast, breakfast, breakfast..." she muttered, mulling over her options. She retrieved a few items she had purchased the previous evening: bread rolls, salad greens, sausages of a rather large variety, and... "Eggs... Fried eggs, yes! Let's keep it simple today."

Lately, the master of the house had developed a fondness for eggs. Imagining his contented face brought a warm smile to her lips. With a practiced motion, she cracked several eggs into a hot pan. As they sizzled and popped, Chloe turned her attention to a handful of bright red tomatoes. Her kitchen knife glided effortlessly through the ripe fruit, reducing them to bite-sized pieces.

Once upon a time, she couldn't even bear the touch of a knife, haunted by the

traumatic memory of her mother wielding one against her. That, however, was in the past; she was better now, and far removed from that dark period of her life. Since overcoming her fear, the act of chopping and dicing, slicing and mincing, had become a source of profound satisfaction. This morning was no exception.

"All right!" Her voice, though soft, held a note of triumph as she declared breakfast ready. Surveying the steaming-hot spread before her, she felt a swell of pride.

Thump, thump, thump. The familiar echo of heavy footsteps approaching the living room door reached her ears. *Always right on time,* she mused. His punctuality was nothing short of impressive, befitting of a royal knight. Chloe hurried to the door, her step light and eager, like a child rushing to greet an overdue friend. With a click, the door swung open before her.

"Good morning, Lloyd!" Chloe greeted him with enthusiasm, which momentarily caught Lloyd—the master of the house—off guard, as she had preempted his own salutation.

"Morning."

As Lloyd echoed her greeting, Chloe found her gaze lingering on him. *I'm still not used to this,* she admitted to herself. Towering over her by two heads, Lloyd's presence was impressive—a fact not diminished by his casual pajamas. His robust physique, a testament to years of disciplined training, paired well with his strikingly handsome face, defined by a strong, chiseled nose and a set of tightly bound lips. His jet-black hair, darker than night, had grown slightly longer since their first meeting. He was a man so gallant as to attract the attention of numerous admirers wherever he went—and, amidst the surprising turn her life had taken, Chloe had yet to fully come to terms with the reality that he was now an everyday part of her existence.



Before she could shake off her enchantment, Lloyd shifted his gaze towards the dining table. “Is that breakfast?” he uttered simply as he walked towards his seat. His expression was impassive, and his words rang brusque, but Chloe knew him better. She noted his long, eager strides towards the table—that was all she needed to confirm his anticipation.

Contrasting his stoic demeanor, Chloe wore a warm smile as she took her seat opposite him. “I cooked these eggs a bit more than usual; I think you’ll find the texture slightly different from what you’re used to.”

“I can’t wait to try it...”

With a few playful exchanges, they clapped their hands in gratitude for their first meal of the day.

Chapter One: Halcyon Days

Chloe's path from her desolate days in the border region of Shadaf to the royal capital was fraught with twists and turns. Born as the second daughter of a margrave, Chloe's life began under a cloud of despair. The prominent birthmark on her back coupled with the tragedies and famine that seemed to coincide with her birth led her family, under the matriarchal rule of Isabella, to brand her a "cursed child." Verbal abuse, physical torment, and emotional neglect were her daily realities; she had been treated no better than a dirty, worn-out rag, condemned to a life of servitude. The tipping point, however, came on the day her mother attempted to take her life. Fearing for her safety, Chloe fled the only home she knew, setting her sights on the royal capital.

Upon her arrival in the capital, fortune smiled upon Chloe in the form of Lloyd, a compassionate First Order knight who took her in, providing shelter and offering her employment as his housekeeper. The encounter marked a turning point in Chloe's life. In the two months that followed, their relationship deepened—they shared meals, exchanged morning and evening greetings, gave and received gifts, and even stood together against a gang of miscreants in a city park. Formality gradually faded, and they began addressing each other by their first names.

Chloe's social circle expanded within the capital, where she forged friendships with the locals, including the kind-hearted proprietress of a certain grocery stall in the merchant district, and Lloyd's superior, Freddy, along with his family.

Life in the capital was tranquil and fulfilling, a stark contrast to the torment she had endured in her past.

While she was engaged in her post-breakfast dishwashing duties, a question that had been gnawing at Chloe surfaced. "Lloyd," she began, "I've been meaning to ask... What do you usually do for lunch?" Though she was responsible for his breakfast and dinner, Lloyd's midday meal remained a mystery.

As Lloyd busied himself with preparing for the day's work, he replied, "I

usually go without it, I suppose. That, or I have a meal bar."

"Really? And you don't grow faint from hunger?" Chloe knew that the meal bar Lloyd mentioned was a dry and bland concoction, intended primarily for sustenance rather than enjoyment. It could be made palatable with a bit of effort, but it was hardly appetizing on its own.

"Hunger peaks—once you're past it, the rest is easy. There's a cafeteria close to our training grounds for knights, but I don't usually bother with it. Too much hassle," Lloyd explained.

"Really? I see..." Chloe responded, aware of Lloyd's strenuous training regimen. She had spent many an evening watching him practice his swordsmanship, and if that was any indication of the level of his daytime activities, she found it hard to believe that he could function without a decent lunch, no matter how accustomed to it he might've claimed to be.

Feeling compelled to intervene, she halted her dishwashing and retrieved a small wooden box. It was brand new, polished to a shine, and roughly the size of two palms. "Wait one moment, please! Before you leave," she said as she placed it on the kitchen counter and busied herself.

After about five minutes, Chloe finished her task. She carefully wrapped the container in a large cloth and handed it to Lloyd. "Here you go!"

"What's this?" he inquired.

"It's your lunch! I had a hunch you were skipping it, so I bought this lunch box yesterday."

"Is that so?" Lloyd nodded, a touch of admiration in his eyes. "Your intuition is most impressive. With some training, you might even be able to anticipate and evade attacks."

Chloe offered up a brittle laugh, uncertain but amused to see Lloyd's typical off-kilter humor alive and well. "I'm not so sure about that..." she said, "but um, it's nothing fancy; it's just leftovers from last night, so..."

"Leftovers from last night? So the pork roast?"

"Yes! I managed to get my hands on some affordable cuts yesterday and

ended up making too much. There should also be some bread and salad in there."

"That's more than enough. Your pork roast is one of my favorites, you know?"

"Well, thank you! I'm glad you like it. But really, it's Miss Ciel you should be thanking; I'm always impressed by the quality of her cuts."

"True, good ingredients matter," Lloyd agreed. "But isn't preparation just as crucial? Seasoning, the cooking process... All of that reflects your own skills, doesn't it?"

Chloe blushed at his words, casting a shy smile his way and offering a faint giggle. "Thank you, it's... I'm glad you think so; it's just, when you put it like that..."

Lloyd felt his pulse quicken as he caught sight of her bashful smile, and a warm flush crept up his cheeks. He averted his gaze quickly. More frequently of late, his body had been reacting strongly around Chloe, and he struggled to understand why—there was an inexplicable hesitation in his gaze and a restless stirring in his chest whenever she was near.

"I've said this before," he began, "but it's like magic to me, what you do."

"I'm just doing what I've always done," Chloe responded, "so I've become rather good at it. To me, the way you swing that sword of yours around seems far more magical."

"It's not magic. Just muscle memory honed through years of repetition and practice."

Chloe's heart ached as his words struck a familiar chord. Her mind flashed back to the evening of Freddy's dinner party when, on their way home from the city park, Lloyd had confided in her about his past. He'd shared the story of his parents' untimely death in a carriage accident, his subsequent trafficking to a hidden facility deep in the southern wilds where he was trained as a child soldier for the revolution, and the unimaginable suffering he endured during those days.

The story weighed heavily on Chloe's mind, stirring up grief whenever she was reminded of it. Yet, she was determined to not let it show—Lloyd had made it

clear that he had moved on from that painful past. Behind a cheerful smile, she masked her emotions. “Well in that case, I’m just the same—all muscle memory.”

Lloyd’s eyebrow gave an upward twitch, as if he sensed something amiss, but he chose not to pursue it. “Is that so? Very well,” he said, tucking the lunch box into his shoulder bag. “In any case, thank you for lunch; I’ll be sure to enjoy it.”

“Great! Work hard, eat well!”

As their conversation drew to a close, the two found themselves by the door. Lloyd put on his heavy-duty knightly boots and said, “Chloe.”

“Yes?” She felt her face relax into a soft grin.

“What is it?”

“N-Nothing,” she stuttered, “I’m just...not quite used to you calling me by name yet.”

While she didn’t mind when others called her by her first name, Lloyd was different. She had a hunch why she felt this way, but chose to keep it to herself, quietly reveling in the joy of hearing the man she loved call her by her name.

That man then placed a comforting hand onto her head. “I’m off then.”

“Take care; have a good day!” she called out, gently waving as the door shut behind him.

“All right, then.” Now alone, she clenched a fist out in front of her chest in determination. “Time to get some work done!”

Her resolve shone brightly, betraying a past only a few months gone where she was treated no better than a slave, made to toil, prostrate, and shed blood, sweat, and tears.

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Chloe plunged into her daily chores, sweeping the floors, doing laundry, and airing out her and Lloyd’s mattresses. Once she finished, she hoisted a rucksack onto her back and headed to the door.

“Off to shop!” she announced, stepping out into the sunlight. The sun’s rays

bathed her in gentle warmth. “What a beautiful day,” she thought, reaching out to the clear blue sky in a full-bodied stretch. There wasn’t a cloud in sight, signaling an end to the harshest part of winter and the arrival of spring just around the corner. Chloe found this particularly novel, as her hometown of Shadaf, nestled in the north among the mountains, spent the better part of the year locked in deep winter.

With a brisk stride, she soon found herself in the bustling Merchant Quarter. She weaved through the usual crowd of shopkeepers peddling their goods, the lively ambience putting a spring in her step as she ventured deeper into the quarter.

“Let’s see... We’re out of...” Chloe murmured, pulling out her shopping list. It detailed the household items she needed to restock and where to purchase from. Methodically, she made her way through her list, visiting each designated stop. Once finished, she turned her attention to the vibrant open market.

“Chloe! Good to see ya. Lovely day, ain’t it?

“Hello, Mister Arnoido! Yes, indeed! The sky couldn’t be bluer, could it?”

“Hey, Chloe! Love your outfit today!”

“Oh hello, Miss Snow! Oh, this old thing? It’s nothing special...”

Over the past two months, Chloe had become a familiar face in the market, making friends with many of the stall owners. As a young woman amidst mostly middle-aged proprietors, her presence was something of a rarity. Her natural charm and modesty only added to her popularity, making her a bit of a local star.

Before long, Chloe arrived in front of her favorite grocery stall.

“Chloe! C’mere, c’mere!”

“Hi, Miss Ciel!”

Ciel’s grocery stand had been Chloe’s go-to since she arrived in the district.

“Miss Ciel, I’m thinking of making something with fish tonight. What do you recommend?”

“I’ve got just the thing—fresh trout, shipped in from Riedel, you know that

port town up north? You cook it up with a little butter, a little soy sauce, and you'll do just fine. The tender, flaky meat will do most of the work for ya!"

"Trout! That sounds wonderful!" *Trout season is...now, isn't it?*, she mused. "I'll take two, please!"

"Thank ya very much, sweetie!"

"Do you have any suggestions for side dishes, if you don't mind?"

"Sides? Let's see..."

After a bit of the usual exchange, Chloe had her dinner plan sorted.

"Thanks again, Chloe! See ya soon!"

"Thank you, Miss Ciel! I appreciate it!"

Leaving Ciel's, Chloe rejoined the bustle of main street. As she strolled along, an enticing, mouthwatering aroma wafted through the air, arresting her attention. Her stomach growled in response.

"Is it lunchtime already?" she wondered.

Her eyes darted around like those of a lost puppy looking for its owner as she scanned the scene, until she spotted the source of the tantalizing scent: a street stall featuring a large piece of meat roasting on a vertical spit. She watched as the vendor shaved off slices, tucked them into a round wheat flatbread with some lettuce and tomato. It was a dish she'd seen before but hadn't had a chance to try yet. A kebab, was it?

"I think I'll have that for lunch..."

With a gulp, Chloe pivoted towards the kebab stand.

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Just as Chloe was savoring another delicious bite of her kebab, in a different part of town at the royal castle's training grounds, Lloyd unwrapped a cloth-covered wooden container. While his fellow knights streamed into the cafeteria, he was all set to enjoy Chloe's homemade lunch.

His face remained its usual stern and unapproachable self, but internally, Lloyd's heart fluttered with anticipation. Opening the container, he found a

thoughtfully arranged assortment of dishes: pork roast, salad, bread, and a fried egg, just as Chloe had promised.

"Look's good," he murmured. The lunch may have been last night's leftovers and this morning's extras, but for Lloyd, used as he was to meager meal substitutes or nothing at all, it was a veritable feast. "Thanks for the—"

"L-L-L-Lloyd!!!"

A familiar voice interrupted Lloyd just as he was reaching for a piece of pork roast.

"...Deputy Commander."

Freddy, the First Order's blond-haired, blue-eyed deputy commander stared at Lloyd's lunch box, his mouth agape. His usual carefree grin was absent, replaced by a look of pure astonishment. Pointing at Lloyd's lunch box, he almost shouted, "I know a love-packed lunch box when I see one!"

"Love didn't pack this lunch box, my housekeeper did."

Freddy dropped his shoulders in an exaggerated slump, deflating at Lloyd's parched response. "Oh Lloyd. Would it kill you to play along, just once?"

"I apologize, but I don't know how."

"I know, I know," Freddy chuckled as he leaned over to peek at Lloyd's lunch box. "Wow, look at that! Chloe's handiwork, I presume?"

"Who else would pack lunches for me?"

"I suppose no one! But still, lunch now too, eh? She knows, all right—the fastest way to a man's heart is through his stomach!"

"I'd rather you speak more plainly, Deputy Commander; she's just doing her job."

"Is she now...?" Freddy teased.

"...What is it?"

"Nothing, nothing..." Freddy said, grinning widely.

Seriously, what? Lloyd thought. Freddy's personality was far too different from his own; it was nearly impossible for Lloyd to predict what was going on in

that man’s mind.

With a quiet sigh, Lloyd, ever the stern figure, asked, “Can I eat now?”

“Oh I’m sorry, of course! But wow, lunch with Lloyd... Mind if I join?”

“I can’t exactly say no to my deputy commander, can I?”

“Sure you can.”

With a deep sigh, Freddy sat next to Lloyd and pulled out his own cloth-wrapped lunch box. Freddy firmly clapped his hands together, the two of them gave thanks, and began to eat.



Picking up where he left off, Lloyd popped a piece of pork roast into his mouth. *Delicious*, he thought, savoring the flavor internally in an effort to avoid any extraneous comments from Freddy. Despite not being fresh, the meat was still tender and juicy—the cold pork was surprisingly tasty, a testament to Chloe's culinary skill. He chased another bite of pork with a piece of bread, relishing in the wondrous alchemical wedding of starch and meat.

His stomach, empty from a morning full of activity, grumbled appreciatively. As confident as Lloyd was in his ability to maintain his performance for at least three days and three nights without food, he had to admit a good meal was a welcome morale boost. He felt more energized than usual, ready to take on the afternoon's training.

His musings were interrupted by a sharp poke to his shoulder. "But still, Chloe's homemade lunch?! I want some too! No fair, Lloyd!"

"Doesn't your wife always pack your lunch, Deputy Commander?"

"Oh? How'd you figure?"

"What's that in front of you right now?"

"A wife-packed lunch box!"

"Permission to remain silent, sir."

Freddy's specific aesthetic tastes evoked a certain sense of free-spiritedness, but Lloyd knew him on a deeper level. He understood that Freddy was a devoted husband and a loving father who often gushed about his wife and daughter. The love he held for his family was palpable. Freddy was also a watchful commander, well aware of Lloyd's tendency to keep to himself within the Order. He looked out for him, a gesture for which Lloyd was sincerely grateful.

"So? Any progress?" Freddy asked, as Lloyd finished his meal.

"Progress? With what?"

"With Chloe, of course! Any new developments?"

"I'm not sure what you're getting at; she's just my housekeeper."

"*Just* your housekeeper, eh?" Freddy's lips curved into a mischievous smile.

Lloyd, on the other hand, simply stared back in silence, his brow furrowed in confusion.

"A young man and woman living under the same roof and nothing's happened? I find that hard to believe."

"I apologize if I'm not meeting your expectations, Deputy Commander," Lloyd paused. "But there was one thing..."

"One thing?!"

"We've started addressing each other by our first names."
Freddy deflated once again. "What are you, schoolchildren?! Lovers should be more, you know—like *this*."

"Our relationship isn't romantic to begin with, it's professional."

Frustrated by Lloyd's calm and measured response, Freddy threw his hands up in the air, exclaiming, "Hopeless, utterly hopeless..."

Should there be something happening? The exchange left Lloyd pondering. Their relationship was indeed professional, but it was also true that they were a young man and woman living together—it wouldn't be unreasonable to expect things to progress. In their case however, they both had set boundaries—invisible lines between them that neither dared cross.

But then again...

They were lines they found themselves inching ever so slightly towards, every single day.

Lloyd was stern, cold—feared even, as the *Ebon Reaper*, his moniker within the Order. Despite that, Chloe treated him with a warm smile and a gentle demeanor, without so much as a hint of trepidation. Their shared days were comfortable and peaceful, they had nothing in the way of disagreements, and there was no denying that the distance between them had gradually shrunk. Furthermore, the night they left Freddy's house, Lloyd had even confided his dark past to Chloe, and she'd accepted it without batting an eye. He'd be dishonest if he claimed his feelings for her hadn't deepened.

Still, there's no romance. She's only my housekeeper, and I'm only her employer, he reminded himself. On one hand, Lloyd was a firm believer in the rigid hierarchy between superior and subordinate, a principle ingrained in him during his time in the jungle compound. On the other hand, Chloe's words, smiles, and actions often whipped his emotional state into a frenzy. When he was around her, his cheeks would warm, his pulse would quicken, and a peculiar heaviness would grip his chest. For now, he had been appeasing these stirrings by merely petting her head, but how much longer could that continue?

Suddenly, a loud voice snapped him out of his reverie.

"Like I said, how you gonna walk into me when I'm just standin' here?!"

"*You* walked into *me.* If you're going to take up so much space, the least you can do is be aware of where all of you is!"

"Why you little..."

A heated exchange echoed nearby.

"What's that all about?" asked Freddy.

"Some sort of disagreement, Deputy Commander?"

Their faces shifted in unison, hardening into grave expressions. Freddy and Lloyd promptly headed for the source of the commotion. There, on the path leading from the training grounds to the cafeteria, two men were embroiled in a verbal spat.

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Freddy quickly approached the quarreling pair and asked with an air of calm authority, "What seems to be the issue here?"

Meanwhile Lloyd positioned himself just behind his deputy commander, ready to assist if needed.

"D-Deputy Commander, sir!" stammered one of the men. Lloyd recognized him as Daz, a fellow knight. In his early thirties, Daz was a burly, heavyweight fighter who specialized in offense, known for often throwing his hefty weight behind his attacks.

"My apologies sir, just a bit of conflict resolution," said Daz, lowering his head

in a hasty show of deference.

Lloyd's gaze moved to the other man involved in the dispute. *He's young*, he mused. The stranger appeared even younger than his own nineteen years, which would make him still a student. He radiated an imposing aura that belied the youthful innocence gracing his otherwise potent features. His platinum blond hair was cut short and impeccably arranged, casting a shadow over a pair of striking amber eyes. He stood just shy of Lloyd's impressive height, and was dressed, not in the standard uniform of a knight, but in a navy blue blazer.

"And? What's the conflict?" said Freddy, scrutinizing both men.

The young man spoke first, "I've been rudely jostled by this ape here, simple as that."

"What did you say?!" Daz's face flushed with anger. "You were the one who wasn't paying attention to where you were going!"

"Oh, I made an honest attempt to dodge you! And I would have succeeded, had you not been so damn wide!"

"You...little... That's it!" A vein in Daz's temple bulged in rage. "This whelp needs to be taught some respect!"

"Oh? And you think you're the one to teach me?"

The tension in the air boiled over. Daz lunged at the young man, who was grinning in anticipation of a fight. Lloyd, feeling the hairs on his arms stand on end, instinctively reached for his sword, but before anything could happen, Freddy intercepted Daz's reaching hand. "Enough, Daz. Is this how grown men conduct themselves?"

"But—sir!"

"Do not make me repeat myself." Freddy stared down Daz, his tone firm. "Don't disgrace the uniform with your behavior—have I not already made myself abundantly clear on that front? You think it appropriate to let a child provoke you?"

The young man's eye twitched at the word "child."

Freddy's words seemed to bring Daz back to his senses. "My sincerest

apologies, Deputy Commander. I...lost my head."

Freddy flashed a smile and dropped a hand on Daz's shoulder. "Easy there, Daz. We know it's all muscle beneath that armor of yours."

"Deputy Commander..." Daz said, genuinely moved by the comforting gesture.

"...Completely ridiculous," spat the young man under his breath. But not quietly enough to escape Lloyd's sharp ears.

Having settled Daz, Freddy turned his attention to the young man. "And you. Who might you be? Where'd you come from?" His voice was soft, but it held an undeniable command.

The young man flashed a cocky grin and pointed a thumb at himself. "The name's Luke Gimul, top of my class at the Knight's Academy, and...your soon-to-be star recruit!"

"Luke Gimul..." Freddy repeated, his brow furrowing.

"Do you recognize the name?" asked Lloyd.

"Mmm... I recall seeing the name on the list of this year's cadets."

"A new cadet..."

The First Order, as the most elite warrior unit in the kingdom, chose its members with meticulous care. Members underwent evaluation upon entry, and then over and over throughout their term of service. All members were ranked according to strict criteria, and each year, those who placed at the bottom would be discharged and replaced with promising new recruits. Their efforts ensured the organization's continued strength and vitality.

While most cadets were veterans from other knightly orders, transferred in after having spent years gaining experience and honing their craft, there were also special provisions and the occasional exception, such as in the case of Luke Gimul. As the top graduate from the Royal Knights' Academy, he, like others who had reached his position before him, were granted the privilege to join the First Order directly.

Lloyd was another such exception. He had been admitted to the Order under

the strong recommendation of Sword Saint Laius, the Kingdom's most renowned swordsman.

"You. Are you the one in charge around here?" Luke said, looking Freddy up and down.

Daz started to speak, "You will address the Deputy Commander with respect __"

Freddy cut him off with a raised hand. "Second-in-command, I suppose? I serve as the First Order's Deputy Commander."

Luke flashed a provocative grin. "No kidding? So you must be pretty strong then, huh?"

"As far as deputy commanders go, I'd like to think so. I certainly put in the work," Freddy said, maintaining his composure. "So, Luke, is it? What brings you here? Your induction ceremony is not for some time, as far as I'm aware."

Luke gave a snort, as if Freddy had just asked the most inane question imaginable. "I'm here to size up the place, obviously. I want to see where I'll be working, what kind of names I'll be rubbing elbows with. Well, I say that, but..." His gaze flicked between Freddy, Lloyd, and Daz. "It doesn't look like anyone here can pose me a challenge. What a total disappointment."

Daz bristled with anger, Lloyd observed in silence, and Freddy stuck a hand to his chin. "I see, I see..." he said while nodding his head. "Would you prefer to cancel your induction, then?"

"What?! Who said anything about canceling?" Luke blurted out in a moment of agitation.

"Insulting others, blatant disrespect for your superiors, threatening violence... While I can appreciate a can-do attitude, here in the First Order, we value respect and civility above all else. We have no need for you or your petulance."

Freddy's voice was calm and measured, but carried weight. Luke pulled a look of annoyance. "You think you can dismiss me, the top graduate of my class, just like that? My father will hear of this."

"Oh? All that bluster but you'd rather run crying to daddy? I must have

misread your character.”

“Why, you...!” Luke, fuming with indignation, took a step towards Freddy, but Lloyd quickly stepped in between them.

“That’s enough,” he commanded.

Luke shifted his gaze to Lloyd and spat, “And who are you supposed to be?” Then, a grin spread across his face. “You. You’re different from the rest.”

“Me?” Lloyd responded.

“Yeah, you. You’ve got a look about you. You seem like the kind of man who’s been to hell and back.”

Lloyd let out a hum of acknowledgement, seemingly impressed.

Suddenly, Luke’s eyes lit up with realization. “Of course... You must be the ‘Ebon Reaper.’”

“My name’s Lloyd. I don’t care for the nickname.”

“That so?” Luke looked Lloyd up and down, as if finally meeting a legend in the flesh. “Either way, that makes you the big dog here. That makes things simple.”

With a dramatic point of his finger, he targeted Lloyd as if he’d just found his ultimate rival. “I’m going to defeat you and claim the title of ace!”

“I see.” A faint smile tugged at the corner of Lloyd’s mouth. “Your enthusiasm is commendable, but remember where you are. If you’re keen on inciting trouble, know that I must respond in kind.”

“Oh? Just my luck.”

Clink. Luke reached for the sword sheathed at his hip when suddenly—

“Hey, hey! Knock it off! No impromptu duels on my watch!”

—Freddy batted away Lloyd’s hand which had also been reaching for his weapon.

Lloyd immediately turned to face Freddy and bowed his head. “My apologies, Deputy Commander. It seems my negotiations have failed.”

“Um, don’t worry about it. It was my mistake letting you get involved in the first place.” Freddy flashed a wry smile, then turned to face Luke again. “You, go home. Lunch is almost over and afternoon training is about to start.”

“W-Wait, at least let me have one round with him!”

“You’re not a knight yet, which makes you nothing more than a civilian, and knights are forbidden from engaging in private duels with civilians.”

“Really? That’s how you intend to treat me? You’ll regret this, you know!”

“Sure, sure, whatever,” Freddy responded, unfazed. “I don’t care who your father is; he holds no power here. The only authority on these grounds is mine and the commander’s.”

Luke ground his teeth in response to Freddy’s bold declaration.

Freddy continued, “You might strut around the academy like you’re king, but that won’t fly here—this isn’t a playground. If you want to do as you please, I suggest you start a knight’s club with all your buddies and do it there.”

Luke’s glare met Freddy’s steady gaze. It was clear to everyone present that Freddy wouldn’t yield.

After a tense moment, Luke clicked his tongue in annoyance and turned to leave. He paused, spinning on his heel to face them again. “Once I’m in, you three are at the top of my list. Just wait for me, will ya?”

And with that, Luke made his exit.

Freddy exhaled. “Well, all’s well that ends well?”

Daz, looking somewhat sheepish, spoke up, “My apologies, Deputy Commander! I didn’t mean for you to get dragged into this mess.”

“Don’t worry, Daz. I fear a storm like that one has to be weathered, not avoided. I’m surprised you held out as long as you did—you’ve been working on your anger management! Color me impressed.”

“Th-Thank you, sir!”

“*However*,” Freddy’s tone hardened and he placed a firm hand on Daz’s shoulder, “as your Deputy Commander, I still can’t overlook the fact that you

almost instigated an incident on First Order grounds."

"S-Sir?"

"A thousand push-ups, before the end of the day."

"Sir, yes, sir!"

With a fervent cry, Daz sprinted towards the far end of the training grounds and dropped down to the ground to begin his punishment.

"Well done, Deputy Commander."

"Yes, you too, Lloyd. Seems like we have a problem cadet on our hands, don't we?"

"Indeed. It's worth mentioning that it seems he's more than just talk. I didn't see his form waver once."

"Yes, I've no doubt he's skilled, it's just too bad he left any semblance of courtesy or decorum at the door." Freddy gave a shrug. "If I'm not mistaken, he's the son of some marquis and brought up with the best education money can buy. Just a hint of talent, and he's let it all go to his head."

"It's clear he was raised without much in the way of boundaries."

"I hear that. But his academy grades are the real deal—no matter how influential his family might be, they can't fake those." A mischievous grin flitted onto Freddy's face. "So? Think you can take him?"

"His sword is a child's plaything."

"That confident, eh?" Freddy's grin turned wry. "Still, he does remind me a bit of you when you first joined."

"I was never that brash."

"But you *were* a bit prickly."

"I... My sword was all I had."

Noticing Lloyd's expression cloud over, Freddy clasped a hand onto his shoulder. "You've come a long way, Lloyd."

"...What's that supposed to mean?"

Freddy didn’t answer. He only stood in silence, his trademark smile playing on his lips.

Chapter Two: What Do I Want to Do?

“A butterfly...” Chloe murmured, cradling a cup of afternoon tea on the patio overlooking Lloyd’s yard.

A yellow butterfly leisurely weaved a path around her, and as she traced it with her eyes, a feeling of reassurance settled within her chest; spring was indeed just a breath away.

This one’s yellow. Weren’t the butterflies back home...blue?

Chloe was no stranger to insects. Shadaf, nestled amongst rolling hills and towering mountains, teemed with a variety of insects every spring and summer. Loath to cause any destruction to life, she would often gently guide any insects she found within her estate to a window, releasing them back into the wild.

“Insects...” Her musings reminded her of a conversation she once had with Shirley about a particularly unpleasant species of insect that plagued the capital:

“Now listen, young lady. We don’t have them here in Shadaf because of the cold weather, but the capital is infested with a kind of insect so repulsive you’d think them devils in their own right.”

“Really? What do they look like?”

“They’re big, flat, and brown... Catching sight of one will force your hairs to stand on end and a scream to escape your lips.”

“Hmm... I’ve never seen one before. What are they called?”

“They’re called—”

“What was its name again...?” She drew a blank. She hadn’t yet encountered such a creature. As it wasn’t a matter of pressing importance, the memory seemed to have been filed away to a remote corner of her mind.

Her thoughts subsided and the quiet moment stretched on, broken only by

the soft clink of Chloe picking up her teacup for another sip.

“I’m so bored...”

The time was three hours past noon, and she’d already finished all her chores for the day. The floors were swept, the laundry done, and she’d even bought groceries for the evening’s dinner. Now, she was at a loose end.

Back in Shadaf, the concept of leisure was foreign to Chloe. The unending task of cleaning her family’s colossal estate was already enough to keep her occupied for days on end, and yet, that ceaseless cycle was never all that awaited her. Whenever a rare moment of respite would present itself, the other servants, as if conspiring to keep her busy, would conjure up an assortment of nonsensical tasks for her to undertake. Then, when night fell and she thought her day to be finally winding down, Lily would invariably approach her with another request for an embroidery, extending her hours well into the night. With a workload as herculean as hers, long days and sleepless nights had been simply part of her routine.

That all changed, however, when she became Lloyd’s housekeeper. His home was modest in comparison to the Ardennes’ estate, requiring less than half a day to fully clean. It was also absent of anyone breathing down her neck, creating meaningless tasks to occupy her. As she settled into her new routine, Chloe often found herself with free time by the early afternoon.

Being diligent by nature, she initially sought to create tasks for herself. She would give overlooked areas, tight spaces, and other hard to clean places a thorough once-over, or she would try to anticipate Lloyd’s needs and go out of her way to purchase items she thought he might appreciate. But even this approach was unsustainable, and she soon ran out of ideas.

“Do as you wish...just like everyone else, huh?” Chloe recited what Lloyd had once said to her.

Back then, all she wanted was to be useful, to earn Lloyd’s approval through her work; that was how she ended up in this position to begin with. But now that she had comfortably settled into her new role, she found herself at a loss for what to do in her leisure hours.

Lloyd wouldn’t be home for a while yet. Perhaps she could go for a walk? The

idea held little appeal. She'd resorted to aimless strolls to pass the time lately, and it was quickly becoming monotonous.

A sense of emptiness seeped into her. Here was all this time at her disposal, and nothing to spend it on. She watched as the butterfly landed on a flower and busied itself collecting nectar.

"Must be nice having your path set out for you."

Feeling her self-worth slip below that of a common insect, her emptiness deepened into a void.

"What do I want to do..."

She tilted her head up to the sky. Her thoughts were as vacuous as the cloudless expanse above.

"What, indeed..."

Having lived a life of subservience, she'd never had the chance to explore her likes and dislikes. What did it mean to be Chloe Ardennes, truly? Contemplating the unexpected profundity of the empty space where her personality was supposed to be, Chloe let out a deep sigh.

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Later that evening, Chloe and Lloyd sat around the dining table, enjoying their meal.

"I like this," muttered Lloyd , taking a bite of the trout cooked in butter and soy sauce.

Chloe giggled. "I'm glad to hear it."

Lloyd hummed in thought. "I've never had the chance to eat cooked trout before; it's quite nice. Once I ate them straight from the water."

"Straight from the water?! Raw?"

"I'd been operating on nothing but water for a week at that point, and I was growing weak. I was out of options, so I improvised a simple fishing rod and made do."

"Really..." The story carried all the hallmarks of another jungle anecdote, but

Chloe pushed the thought aside. “And your stomach held up after that?”

“I suffered from sharp lower-abdomen pain for about three days afterwards.”

“Oh. Well, that doesn’t sound like it held up at all.”

“Hm, really?” A seemingly oblivious Lloyd mumbled as Chloe chuckled to herself.

“Let’s forget about all that and focus on dinner, shall we?”

“Yes, let’s do that.”

Lloyd dove back into his meal, taking another generous bite of trout. He nodded along in enjoyment, his troubled memories momentarily painted over by its rich flavor. Though his face was as impassive as always, Chloe noticed a slight softening beneath his eyes. This subtle shift was something she had become adept at picking up over the last two months, mastering the art of deciphering the enigma of Lloyd’s mood.

“The trout itself is good, but it’s the flavor I like; I could get used to this,” said Lloyd.

“I fry the trout until crispy, then add the soy sauce and butter. Once it’s all nicely combined I squeeze a little bit of lemon juice over top.”

“No wonder it’s good then. The mushrooms pair well with it, too.”

“You can’t go wrong with butter, soy sauce, and mushrooms,” replied Chloe with a gentle smile. Back home, cooking had been a chore forced upon her, and her efforts were met with empty silence at best and scathing criticism at worst.

Get this disgusting slop out of my sight!

Make it again!

Their harsh words of reproach and memories of full plates of food thrown to the ground haunted her still. But it was precisely these painful recollections that made Lloyd’s genuine praise of her cooking all the more heartwarming.

Chloe giggled. “Looks like we can add another dish into the rotation.”

“There isn’t a dish you’ve made that I don’t like.”

“Oh, you.”

“I mean it.”

She knew that Lloyd was not one for empty flattery. If he said he liked her cooking, then that was the truth. A warmth flooded in her chest. To be praised for her cooking... *It really is a joy in itself...* she thought.

“Thank you, Lloyd,” Chloe whispered, her voice too soft for Lloyd to hear.

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“There’s been an odd question I’ve been meaning to ask, if you don’t mind...”

“Hm?”

Chloe ventured the question as they both lounged on the sofa, resting after their meal.

“What do you usually do in your free time, Lloyd?”

Despite sharing the same house, they each had their own private quarters. The moments between dinner and Lloyd’s evening training routine were largely the extent of their shared time. Once Lloyd stepped outside to train, Chloe would either watch him or retire to her room. As for what Lloyd did beyond that, she realized she didn’t really know.

“In my free time?” Lloyd echoed, striking a pensive pose. “Well, I tend to my sword, polish my armor, and train.”

“Oh...”

“Judging from the look on your face, you regret asking.”

Chloe shook her head. “No, no, not at all!” But internally, she did—just a tad.

Unfazed and remaining pensive, Lloyd continued, “The way you asked suggests you’re looking for ideas for what to do in your own free time, correct?”

“Y-Yes, exactly...” replied Chloe, casting her eyes downward. “I haven’t found much to do outside of my housekeeping duties, and it’s...left me feeling a little lost...”

“I see.” Lloyd fell silent for a beat, then dropped a hand onto Chloe’s head.

“Lloyd?”

“Just take it easy,” Lloyd said, gently stroking her head. “You’ve probably never had this much time to yourself before. There’s no need to rush. You’ll find something you enjoy. ”

“Thank you, that’s...reassuring to hear. You’re right. I have plenty of time—I shouldn’t rush.” Chloe’s words sounded assertive, but her tone hinted at a lingering uncertainty.

“For what it’s worth, I speak from experience. I understand your feeling of not knowing what to do with yourself all too well.”

Chloe’s curious gaze met Lloyd. “Really?”

“After I moved from the compound to the capital, I lost sight of my purpose for a time.”

Chloe’s body tensed at the mention of the “compound.”

“Until then, my only focus was becoming stronger—combat was all that was required of me, so I knew nothing else.” Lloyd’s eyes narrowed, lost in the memory. “It took a lot of trial and error—a lot of listening to the people around me, to find that for myself. It wasn’t fast, but it did happen.”

Lloyd met Chloe’s gaze with his own. “Of course, I can only speak for myself, but...I’m sure you’ll be fine. You’ll find your way.”

Chloe listened intently. She understood that he spoke out from a place of concern, yet his words stirred an aching in her chest—Lloyd talking about his past still caused her a measure of agony by proxy. Gently reminding herself that Lloyd had moved past his history and she didn’t need to dwell on it, Chloe cleared her thoughts and said, “Thank you. I think I’ll go about it at my own pace then.”

“Good.” Lloyd offered a subtle smile, then perked up with a new thought. “How about reading?”

“Reading...” As Chloe mulled over the suggestion, her mind drifted back to the family estate—they did have a library. She had, of course, never been allowed inside—not that she would’ve had the spare time to read to begin with. “That sounds like a great idea. Perfect for a breather.”

If Chloe had to say whether she was an indoor or outdoor sort of girl, she'd answer the former. Reading, thus, seemed a fitting choice. "You enjoy reading sometimes, don't you, Lloyd?"

"In the compound, they never bothered to teach us how to read or write. I was only taught after I was taken into custody in the capital—as part of my induction into the Order." Lloyd's eyes narrowed once more as he dove into the memory. "At first, I found it tedious, but as I got better at it, I started to appreciate it. I find it's a great way to hone your mind; it offers a glimpse into worlds your own mind would never conjure. It's quite fascinating."

"Really... So that's how you..." Chloe's voice trailed off, her chest once again assaulted by the familiar heartache. Nonetheless, she held her poise. "Do you have any books that you'd recommend?"

Lloyd sheepishly scratched his head in response, his face scrunched up into an expression of perplexity. "I don't think I have anything I could recommend. I mainly read manuals on combat tactics or novels about warring swordsmen."

"I see... That would be a little...*intense* for me."

"You should visit a bookstore and find something that interests you."

"A bookstore!"

"It's hardly that exciting of a place."

"S-Sorry, it's just that back home, there wasn't anything in the way of bookstores..." Shadaf, in fact, didn't have much in the way of anything except natural splendor. Few of its residents could even read, let alone show an interest in books.

But now, things were different. Shadaf was far away, and the royal capital lay all around her.

Chloe clenched a fist out in front of her. "All right! Tomorrow, I'm gonna pay one a visit!"

"Very good." Lloyd nodded.

"Thank you for hearing me out; I really appreciate it," said Chloe, her head dipping in a polite bow.

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The following day, Chloe saw Lloyd off in the morning, finished her chores, then set out for the Merchant Quarter. After finishing up her errands—and taking the opportunity to ask Ciel about the nearest bookstore—Chloe set out once more, in high spirits.

Ciel's directions led Chloe to a quaint corner of the Quarter, where, tucked away from the hustle and bustle of the market area, a charmingly antique and cozy-looking storefront sat nestled among the others.

As she nudged the door open and stepped inside, an alien aroma greeted her—the heady blend of paper and ink. She stopped to take a deep breath, her lips unfurling into a broad smile. The scent was relaxing and strangely intoxicating. *How delightful...* she thought.

"Hello...?" she called out. Her voice echoed in the silence of the shop. She ventured further in, hoping for a reply, but none came. Perhaps it was the weekday midafternoon lull, she reasoned, as the bookstore appeared devoid of patrons or personnel.

"Anyone there...?" Wary that perhaps she might be unwittingly violating an unknown protocol or custom by walking in unannounced, she called out again, her voice softer this time. Met with silence once more, she concluded she was free to explore. As she walked through its labyrinthine interior, she marveled at the towering wooden shelves, each one stuffed from floor to ceiling with books of all shapes and sizes, and a soft gasp of admiration escaped her lips. Spanning from wall to wall were enormous hardcovers the size of her head, tiny novels the size of her palm, and loosely bound papers and scrolls reminiscent of research or reference material—the sheer variety made her head spin. She didn't even know where to start.

But, how...soothing, she mused. The silence struck her the most; it was as if she had stumbled upon a tranquil forest glade, a sanctuary hidden away from the world outside. She harbored no aversion for the liveliness of the city, but this was pleasant in its own way.

Her hand reached out with a mind of its own, grabbing a volume. It was a substantial hardcover, teeming with pages—an immersive epic rather than a

light read. As she scanned the initial pages, she realized it was a novel—one about a grand, globe-trotting adventure in pursuit of forbidden treasures.

As she delved beyond the opening chapter, she gave silent thanks to the handmaiden who had taught her how to read and write. The more she read, the more her awareness of the world beyond the book diminished.

“Might I be able to help you find something?”

Chloe jolted, startled by the sudden voice. She turned to see a young man flashing a friendly smile.

“I beg your pardon, I didn’t mean to startle you,” he continued, a hand sheepishly ruffling his flaxen hair. He appeared to be a few years older than Chloe, with pale skin betraying a life mostly spent indoors. Perched on his nose were a pair of round, antique-looking glasses, framing two serene, emerald eyes that seemingly sparkled with a wisdom beyond his years. His hair was mid-length, neatly styled and parted down the middle, with each side gracefully falling to just above his shoulders. Compared to Lloyd’s broad, tempered physique, he was a touch shorter and a stroke slimmer, dressed in a crisp button-down shirt and a cream-colored cardigan. His was an elegance so profound, one could easily imagine him ensconced in a regal armchair by a sun-dappled window, immersed in a hardbound classic.

“Oh, um, hello! My name is Chloe—how do you do?” Chloe introduced herself with a flurry of hasty words and a courteous bow.

“Why, thank you for that charming introduction. My name is Ian, and I am the proprietor of this establishment.”

“The owner! I do hope it was all right for me to just walk in without notice...”

Ian’s eyes widened in surprise. “We’re but a simple bookstore, and as bookstores do, there are no requirements to enter. As long as it’s within our opening hours, anyone is welcome to explore at their leisure.”

“Oh! Right! Of course! What was I thinking...” Chloe’s face flushed a bright pink, her naiveté surfacing yet again.

Ian countered with a polite, “No, not at all, please,” before clearing his throat and revisiting his initial question. “Is there something specific you’re looking

for? I'd be more than happy to help you find it if there is."

"Really? How very kind of you! But to be honest, I can't say I'm after anything in particular... I'm just here to browse, really..."

"I see. Could it be you've not had the chance to indulge your literary interests much?"

"I did read a few books when I was younger, but besides that..."

"I see, I see..." Ian responded, nodding and stroking his chin thoughtfully. "Are there any genres you'd rather avoid?"

"I guess I'd like to avoid anything too frightening or violent if I can help it... One time, I had a scary story read to me, and I was so petrified that night I couldn't even go to the bathroom by myself..."

"I can certainly relate to that." Ian slipped into a warm, understanding smile. "Now, I hope you won't find me too predictable, but may I suggest a romance novel? There's a series that's been quite the hit among women with a taste for belle-lettrism here in the capital."

"A romance novel...?" Chloe repeated. The words carried a certain allure. Although she had never delved into the genre, a glimmer of curiosity danced in her eyes.

"Is it safe to assume you're interested?"

Chloe responded with a couple of rapid-fire, enthusiastic nods.

A soft chuckle escaped Ian's lips at Chloe's overt reaction. "Please, come with me. I'll show you to our collection of romance novels."

Guiding Chloe to a particular shelf, Ian gestured towards an extensive collection of books. "Everything from here to there is our romance section."

"Wow, there are so many! Thank you!"

"And this," Ian continued, "is the novel that has captured the attention of the entire capital. It's about a noble-born girl who becomes embroiled first in war and then in bondage, until a knight from the enemy country rescues her and takes her in. It's a classic tale of love that transcends boundaries."

“A knight...” The words slipped out of Chloe’s mouth, and a fuzzy image of the dark-haired man she lived with floated through her mind. She felt an uncanny connection to the setting—a tale of love between a former noble and a knight? Where had she heard that one before?

That was all she needed to make up her mind. She picked up the book. Emblazoned on its hardcover were the words *Love & Knight* in elegant lettering. Despite its simplicity, the title resonated with something deeply personal inside her.

“How much is this?” she asked.

“The price on that is...”

As an object of leisure, the book was a bit on the pricey side. But, considering her wages, it wasn’t exactly an extravagant purchase.

It’s not like I have anything else to spend my money on...

And besides, the book told a timeless tale of a love between a slave and a knight—a romance that transcends all boundaries!

“One copy, please!”

“Thank you for your purchase.”

“Would you mind recommending another? Since I’m already here...”

“It would be my pleasure. If you’re interested in another well-regarded title...”

Following Ian’s suggestion, Chloe picked up another romance novel that piqued her interest. It spun the tale of a boy and girl, childhood friends born into aristocracy, who suddenly find themselves betrothed at the whim of their parents. They often squabble, concealing their genuine feelings, until they both enroll at the royal academy, where the distance between them gradually starts to shrink. It was a plot more experienced readers would dismiss as commonplace, but not to Chloe. To her, it felt like a whole new world had just opened up before her.

After selecting her two new books, Chloe moved to complete her transaction with Ian.

“And here’s your change,” said Ian.

Behind the counter, Ian carefully wrapped each volume in paper before passing them to Chloe. She savored the hefty weight of her purchase in her hands, a smile tugging at her lips. The thrill of purchasing something with her own hard-earned money was a unique delight.

“Thank you! And thank you for the recommendations. I don’t know what I would’ve done without you!” said Chloe.

“The pleasure is all mine. Nothing brings me more joy than seeing young folk like yourself show an interest in reading.”

“You were so good at describing the books that you had me thinking, ‘I want to read that!’ even though I’m not much of a reader myself!”

“Your words touch this humble peddler’s heart.”

“Once I finish these, I’ll definitely come back.”

“I eagerly await your return.”

With that, Chloe stepped out of the bookstore.

What a delightful atmosphere, *what a friendly person, what a wonderful little store!* she reflected as she began her journey home. With her new books, she wouldn’t have to idly pass her time on the patio; she now had something meaningful to do.

I’ll definitely be back, she thought, hugging her new acquisitions close to her chest.

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“Ah! Miss Monkey Lady!”

Just as she passed the familiar city park, Chloe’s ears pricked up at a familiar voice. Turning in its direction, she spotted a young girl, no more than five or six, rushing to greet her. She had fluffy, soft-looking golden blonde hair that ran down the length of her back, and a pair of big blue eyes. Her frilly dress, as endearing as ever, twirled with every step she took.

“Hello, Millia!” Chloe stepped into the park to meet her young friend halfway.

“Hello! Say hi, Othello!”

As if responding to Millia’s command, a soft meow emanated from around her feet. Chloe glanced down to see a small kitten, its black-and-white fur impeccably arranged in a dapper tuxedo pattern. The creature scurried towards her, brushing against her legs affectionately.

Chloe let out a delighted squeal. “Othello! How are you?”

Responding, Othello playfully flopped onto its side, revealing a plush, fur-covered belly. The cat seemed to beckon her: *Pet me, pet me!*

“Aren’t you just the fluffiest and most adorable creature ever!” Chloe bent down, reaching out to pet Othello’s outstretched belly. Her hand was swallowed up by the softness, and a comforting warmth ran through her fingertips, which was soon followed by a gentle, soothing vibration—Othello had taken to purring in contentment. That was all it took to rob Chloe of her senses. “Hi cuuutie! Hi cutie! Hi cuuutie!” she cooed over and over again.

As Chloe reflected, she realized it’d been only two months since she’d rescued Othello from the tree, setting in motion a string of extraordinary events. With that one spontaneous act, she’d managed to meet the young Millia, earn herself an endearing nickname (against her best wishes), and befriend Sara, who later turned out to be the wife of Lloyd’s boss. With each passing day, their bond steadily deepened, their encounters graced with leisurely conversations and cordial dinner invitations.

“Why, Othello, you’ve grown, haven’t you?” teased Chloe. She couldn’t help but notice that the kitten was a size bigger than when they first met—no doubt Othello was enjoying a contented life with Millia.

Meanwhile, Millia pouted, her cheeks puffing out in displeasure. “Why doesn’t Othello ever roll over for me!”

“That’s just how cats can be. If I were as devoted to Othello as you are, I probably wouldn’t be indulged so either.”

“B-But, I want to pet the tummy too! No fair, Othello! If that’s how you're gonna be, I’m just gonna keep feeding you until you listen to me!” Millia huffed.

“I’m not sure that would be the healthiest decision...” Chloe said, her fingers

gently scratching Othello's chin. A question then floated into her mind. "Millia, is your mother not with you today?"

"Oh, she's right here."

"Hueh?!"

Following the direction of the new voice, Chloe turned to see a beautiful young woman, a gentle smile gracing her face. "M-Miss Sara?!" she yelped, jumping to her feet. "H-H-Hello!"

"Hello, Chloe. I hope you won't hold it against me. I didn't want to interrupt your fun," Sara replied, her hand stifling a giggle.

"I-I was just, well, you see! Othello rolled over, and I just had to..."

"It's okay, Chloe, don't worry. I didn't see anything until after that point."

"Wait, that...that means you saw everything!"

Chloe panicked. She'd been petting someone else's cat without so much as a care in the world. What kind of face had she been making? What kind of noises had she let out? She felt her cheeks burn red hot.

"I-I'm so embarrassed..."

"There's nothing to be embarrassed about, Chloe. No one can resist such a downy trap, and that's a fact," Sara stated in her usual calm manner.

The implication that Sara, the housewife to end all housewives, would likewise dote on Othello in the privacy of her home mollified her somewhat. Chloe felt the shame recede—

"Ha ha ha! You're funny, Miss Monkey Lady!"

—and come crashing back over her again. Chloe's cheeks once again flushed bright red at Millia's raucous follow-up attack.

"Oh my, what do you have there?" Sara's gaze fell upon the paper bag clutched against Chloe's chest.

"Oh, these? These are books! I just bought them," Chloe replied, holding them up proudly.

"Books! Really. How wonderful."

“Do you also like to read, Miss Sara?”

“A little, I suppose. Which titles did you decide on, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“One of them is a novel called *Love and Knight;* the other one is—”

“*Love and Knight!*” Sara’s voice suddenly boomed.

Chloe then felt an iron claw grip her shoulder. “M-Miss Sara?”

“I hope you know that’s a true classic you have on your hands, Chloe! Read it with all the love and care it deserves!”



“O-Oh! Of—Of course!” stammered Chloe, taken aback by Sara’s sudden intensity.

Noticing Chloe’s nervously shifting gaze, Sara quickly composed herself. “Excuse me. I don’t know what came over me.”

“No, no, it’s totally fine!” Chloe shook her head and laughed. “It definitely seems like you enjoyed it, if anything, so I’m kind of excited now to get home and start reading.” Seeing the ever-calm Sara whipped up into a frenzy over the mere mention of the title raised Chloe’s expectations tenfold.

“Indeed, indeed. I won’t spoil it for you, but I guarantee you’ll never be the same once it’s over.”

“Wow, really...”

“And when you’re done, we can talk all about it! I’m sure it’ll be a hoot!”

“Yes, of course...” Having come this far in her life without much of anything in the way of friends, Chloe let Sara’s words linger in her ear. “That sounds lovely. I can’t wait.”

Clutching her new acquisitions even tighter, Chloe could barely contain her eagerness to dive into the books. She just couldn’t wait to get home and start reading.

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“Hmm...”

“I see...”

“Ah!”

“No!”

That evening, after dinner, Chloe nestled on the sofa in Lloyd’s living room with her newly acquired book in hand.

“What!”

“So that’s why...”

“Wah, I told you!”

Every line she read set off a ripple of emotion within her and forced a unique vocalization from her lips. Chloe had always been the type to become utterly absorbed in any book she read, but *Love & Knight* was a riveting experience like nothing else. Sara's enthusiastic endorsement of the story now made complete sense to her.

Observing Chloe from his place at the dining table, Lloyd glanced up from his own book and chuckled quietly.

"Is something the matter, Lloyd?" Chloe asked. She looked up from her book, her head tilted in curiosity.

"No, not at all. It's just that your reactions stand out a great deal."

"Oh! I'm so sorry! Was I being too noisy?"

"That's nothing to worry about. It would take more than a bit of noise to break my concentration."

Chloe let out a sigh of relief internally.

"In fact, it's nice seeing you have so much fun. Carry on."

Chloe emitted an odd whimper. "I'm so embarrassed," she added, holding up the book in front of her now beet-red face, in a show of shame much like that of a guilty child whose naughty handiwork had just been discovered.

Lloyd felt his heart skip a beat. Had he been seated on the sofa beside her as he usually was, he knew his hand would've instinctively reached straight for her head.

"Lloyd?" Chloe ventured from behind her book.

"Ah—um, it's nothing." Lloyd quickly said, clearing his throat. "More importantly, what kind of book are you reading?"

"This is a romance novel! Or so I'm told."

"Or so you're told?"

"That's what the shopkeeper at the bookstore said! He told me it was very popular with the ladies in the capital."

"That so? Romance is not my forte. Is it interesting?"

“Yes, very much so! It’s a story about a girl from a distinguished noble family who ends up enslaved amidst a war, only to be rescued by a knight from the enemy faction who spirits her away to his home!”

Lloyd’s interest piqued and he hummed inquisitively. “A knight, you say?”

“I know, it reminded me of you when I was at the store! It seemed like the perfect choice for my first purchase, and it didn’t disappoint! The heroine is so sweet and pure, but also strong! She never gives up, even at the worst of times, and then—”

Caught mid-sentence, Chloe’s eyes widened as she realized she had let her enthusiasm get the better of her once again.

“I...I did it again... Sorry...”

“Don’t be,” Lloyd reassured her kindly. “You’re enjoying yourself, and that’s all that matters.”

“Thanks...”

“And then?” Lloyd said, urging her on.

“Oh! And then, they face all kinds of challenges due to the difference in their status, but when it truly matters, the knight stands tall and defends her with all his might—he’s so incredibly heroic!”

“Well, of course. A knight *must* be capable and powerful.”

“Hearing it from a true knight like you does lend it a certain gravitas...” Chloe’s eyes softened in admiration. “But you know, you’re quite heroic yourself, Lloyd.”

Lloyd, misunderstanding her, believed Chloe to be commending him for his past deeds of rescuing her. He failed to realize that her praise extended to his character—both inward and outward aspects of it—and not just his actions. He was simply not the type to think of himself in such terms. Nonetheless, he still felt a twinge of embarrassment and awkwardly scratched at his head. “I’ve only done what was expected of me as a knight,” he replied.

Chloe froze. *Wh-Wh-What did I just say?!* she thought, realizing that she, engrossed in the romantic atmosphere of the novel, had just let slip something

rather bold.

With a jolt of embarrassment, she once again hid behind her book.

A lull in the conversation ensued, and they both returned to their reading. Finally, Lloyd broke the silence. “Pardon my only saying this now, but Chloe,” he began, “you can read.”

“I can! In fact I’d like to think I’m quite good at both reading *and* writing,” Chloe said with a touch of pride.

“Really,” Lloyd replied, furrowing his brow.

Observing Lloyd’s reaction, Chloe suddenly realized the true intent behind his comment. Literacy rates in the Kingdom were not formally recorded, but it was all too likely that they were not very high. The ability to read and write was typically a privilege of the aristocracy and merchants. Commoners who could read were quite unusual.

Having yet to divulge to Lloyd her aristocratic origin, Chloe scrambled to explain herself, “Um, you see! I was taught how to read and write when I was a child! And, um...”

“I see,” Lloyd replied, falling into a thoughtful silence. “Your teacher must’ve been someone truly remarkable.”

Lloyd didn’t probe further. He seemed to understand that Chloe was reluctant to share, but his accommodation only provoked a further aching in Chloe’s chest. It wasn’t the sympathetic sorrow she felt whenever Lloyd spoke of his past, but the guilt of having kept her own history a secret. When would she be able to tell him the truth about her origin, or about the birthmark on her back? Even now, her hesitation took hold of her.

“Yes, indeed... She was smart, wonderful, and kind...” Chloe said, mustering an uneasy smile.

Lloyd deserved to know the truth—she *wanted* Lloyd to know the truth, but the timing never seemed right. The more she pondered it, the more the dread of rejection plagued her. What would she do if he rejected her? If the truth repulsed him? Despite her conviction that Lloyd would never react harshly, her battered self-esteem kept her from taking that final step. Thus, she continued

to postpone this moment of truth.

Enough... As her thoughts spiraled out of control, an intense self-loathing grabbed her by the guts. Outwardly, she tried to maintain her composure. *I want to tell him. I* need *to tell him, and then...*

She would bare her heart to Lloyd. She would confess the feelings that had blossomed on their way home from Freddy's dinner party that night.

Even though she believed her love would remain unrequited, the seed had already been sown, and it sprouted stubbornly within her heart. Perhaps the story she'd been reading—a tale of a forbidden love that should've never come to pass—mirrored her own longing and intensified the heartache gnawing at her.

On the one hand, she yearned for her feelings to be heard. On the other, she treasured the comfortable rapport they shared and feared upsetting that delicate balance. Trapped within this dilemma, Chloe felt her resolve wavering, her courage teetering on the brink.

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And just like that, Chloe found herself ensnared in the enchanting realm of literature. Seated comfortably, a hardcover book nestled in her lap, she diligently scanned the page, painting the author's vivid tale in her imagination. More introverted than not, Chloe found meaning in immersing herself within a story meticulously woven by another's hand.

She hungrily consumed their narratives whenever a fragment of spare time presented itself—after completing her chores, in the quiet lull after dinner, or right before bed. But, as conscientious as she was, she was careful not to let her newfound passion encroach upon her responsibilities as housekeeper.

After a few days of reading at a steady pace, she'd finished both books Ian had recommended, with *Love & Knight* emerging as her favored pick. While it wasn't as world-shattering as Sara had promised, certain scenes did find Chloe tossing and turning in her bed, a radiant smile on her face.

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“It was amazing!” Chloe declared one afternoon as she returned to Ian’s bookstore to share her thoughts.

Caught in the midst of organizing a bookshelf, Ian turned to greet Chloe. “Ah, I see you’ve finished.” The satisfaction radiating from her brought a smile to his face. “It fills me with joy to hear that.”

“I *loved* it,” Chloe said, her eyes sparkling like diamonds. “The setting, the plot, it was all perfect—right up my alley, and the main couple—they were just the sweetest! I couldn’t help but be happy for them. I was in bed when the climax approached, and when it hit—wow! I shot straight to my feet. And, my goodness, the last page: perfection.”

Ian’s eyes seemed to shimmer with a shared delight in Chloe’s excitement. “Your words truly warm my heart. To hear you appreciate the book so immensely makes my efforts worthwhile.”

“You couldn’t have picked a better story! So...” Chloe’s voice trailed off, her eyes slowly wandering around the store as she spun her words, “I was hoping...that you might recommend me another...”

“But of course, it’d be my pleasure. What genre piques your interest now?”

“Thank you! I adored *Love and Knight*, so perhaps something similar to that...”

“Very well. Please, follow me.”

With Ian taking the lead, the two found themselves in front of the romance section once again. There, Ian selected an array of novels, from revered classics to contemporary bestsellers. This time, she chose a single volume, once again involving a female protagonist and a heroic knight.

“Will it just be the one today, Miss Chloe?”

“Yes! Please, and thank you.”

“Your total comes to...”

Chloe retrieved her wallet. “By the way, Ian,” she ventured, “what kind of stories do you like to read?”

“Me?” Ian pondered, midway through packaging her new purchase. “A good

question indeed...” He paused in reflection, his hand resting pensively on his chin. “I can’t quite claim a singular favorite. I’ve spent all my years in the company of books, and ventured far afield among them. Perhaps this isn’t the answer you were hoping for, but I hold an equal fondness for them all.”

“No, no, that’s a great answer! To grow up surrounded by books... How wonderful that must’ve been..”

“Perhaps I’m a bit of an oddity among the common folk, but it has been my life since birth.”

“Really?”

Ian’s gaze roved the quaint bookstore, his eyes gently caressing every detail. “Indeed. This establishment once belonged to my father. Since his passing some years gone, I’ve taken up the mantle.”

As Ian mentioned his late father, Chloe’s expression clouded over. “Oh, I see. I apologize. That was rather thoughtless of me.”

“You have a kind heart, don’t you, Miss Chloe.”

“K-Kind? Me?”

“Please, pay it no mind. I’ve reconciled with the past. Although I do find myself missing him at times, the reading brings me solace. It is all I do, and all I seem to need, and so my cares are few.”

Ian’s voice remained devoid of melancholy, easing Chloe’s concern. “Thank you for your patience with me,” she said, a gentle smile warming her face as she dipped her head in a respectful nod. At the same time, she felt a new emotion weaving itself into her heart—an ember of envy. Ian not only had something he enjoyed in life, but he knew it inside and out. He had a clear identity and could lose himself in his sole passion, and for that, Chloe envied him.

Suddenly, Ian’s voice interrupted her train of thought. “Ah, I think I can summarize my taste in stories, now that I’ve dwelt on it a moment.”

Intrigued, Chloe urged him on, “Oh! Do tell!”

“I appreciate stories with happy endings—stories that leave one bathed in

warmth, where all conflicts are resolved and everyone gets their heart's desire. I find myself averse to strife; a cozy read warms my soul."

Chloe's head bobbed in agreement. "I like those kinds of stories too!" She too cherished peace, shied away from discord, and craved the soothing balm of tranquility. Perhaps it was the easy rhythm of Ian's speech, or the way he carried himself, but she felt that they could become fast friends.

"My apologies for the delay," Ian said, presenting her the carefully wrapped book.

"Thank you very much!" Chloe responded, accepting the book with an air of triumphant joy, her face radiant like that of a child receiving a long-awaited toy.

"When you finish with this one, I'd be keen to hear your thoughts."

"Of course! Oh! And, I hope you won't find this too forward of me..."

"Yes, what is it?"

Chloe rummaged through her belongings before pulling out a small paper bag and offering it to Ian. "These are for you!"

"And what might this be?" Ian asked.

"Cookies! I ended up baking a little too much at home. If you're one for sweets, please accept them as a token of gratitude for your recommendations," Chloe said, her face lit with a sincere, carefree smile.

Though her gesture was innocuous, a mere token of thanks...

"Ian?"

"Ah. My apologies," he stammered, quickly masking his surprise and adjusting his glasses, a faint flicker of discomfort flashing across his gaze. "I'm not accustomed to receiving gifts, you see, so I was taken aback," he clarified, his composure returning along with his smile. "I am fond of sweets. Thank you." He gracefully accepted her gift.

"I find that reading often stirs up a craving for something sweet, at least for me. You can try it for yourself!" Chloe suggested with another brilliant smile.

"Thank you, that sounds delightful indeed," Ian replied, his gaze quietly

slipping towards the floor.

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After Chloe departed from the store, Ian sank back into his chair, his gaze drifting towards the ceiling.

“You’re very kind, aren’t you,” he whispered into the quietude.

He surveyed his store, and after ensuring solitude was his companion, he carefully opened the small paper bag Chloe had given him. *Just one cookie couldn’t hurt, could it?* he thought. His fingers gingerly retrieved a circular cookie, and he took a tentative bite.

A soft “wow” slipped from his lips as a delicate sweetness danced on his tongue, chased by the aroma of butter. The cookie was an exercise in balance—not too sweet, not too dry, just right and addicting to the very last bite.

Despite his silent vow of “just one cookie,” Ian’s hand was drawn once more to the bag. One cookie became two; two became three. Shaking himself from his stupor, he declared, “That’s enough of that,” and sealed the bag once more. It would be quite the disservice if he devoured them all here.

Re-adjusting himself in his chair, he let out a deep sigh. “Miss Chloe, eh?”

As her name escaped his lips, a curious sensation fluttered in his chest, a fragile mix of warmth and wistful melancholy. The feeling was somewhat foreign to Ian, having spent most of his life cloistered away with books rather than in the company of people.

“I wonder where she lives,” he muttered, his lips curving into a smile—a smile decidedly different from the professional one he reserved for customers.

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The next morning after returning from Ian’s, Chloe smothered a sizable yawn at the breakfast table.

Lloyd, observing her from across the table, noted, “You look tired.”

“Oh, so sorry about that.” Chloe fluttered her eyelashes in an effort to fight off the remnants of sleep. Then, she rubbed her eyes thoroughly before giving her head a determined shake. “And...awake!”

“There’s no need to force yourself,” said Lloyd. “Were you up late last night?”

At Lloyd’s words, a sheepish whimper slipped from Chloe, her eyes cinching shut as another apology tumbled out. “I got caught up in the book I bought yesterday, so...yes, I was...”

“You have nothing to apologize for,” Lloyd interjected gently. “Sometimes we find ourselves up later than usual; it’s only natural. In fact, your commitment to a regular sleep schedule up until now has been quite impressive.”

“Thank you. But that’s nothing—just part of the job,” Chloe deflected.

“Well, I’m of the opinion that you often go above and beyond.”

“That’s not true! I’m a creature of habit is all. After you leave, I sweep the floors, do the laundry... Then, it’s off to the market for groceries. When I get home, I prepare dinner. Every day, just like that.”

“I see...” Lloyd’s voice faded as he fell into thought. After a moment, he emerged with a gentle reassurance, “Either way, your diligence doesn’t go unnoticed. You’ve more than earned yourself some slack.”

“Lloyd...” Chloe’s gaze slipped towards the floor, a blush creeping into her cheeks. “That means a lot...”

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As she busied herself with her post-breakfast dishwashing duties, Chloe asked, “Lloyd, are you not a touch underslept yourself?”

Lloyd, in the midst of dressing himself for the day, stopped in his tracks. “What makes you say that?”

“I just thought I saw a hint of a shadow beneath your eyes,” Chloe pointed out, her tone concealing a hint of apprehension.

Lloyd’s eyes widened in surprise. “You have a sharp eye, Chloe. You really do have what it takes to be a knight. That very trait is indispensable in predicting an adversary’s next move. Would you consider becoming a—”

“Oh no, I don’t think I’m cut out for that, sorry,” Chloe said, cutting him off with a wry smile.

Looking a little deflated, Lloyd muttered, “Oh, I see...”

Once the dishes were dealt with, Chloe moved over to the sofa and took a seat. “Did you not sleep well last night?” she asked.

“No, it’s just that I was inspired by you and picked up a book of my own last night. I ended up staying up later than I’d intended.”

“Oh my, you too, Lloyd?” Chloe couldn’t help but stifle a giggle.

“That wasn’t meant to be funny,” Lloyd replied, straight-faced.

“I wasn’t laughing at you. It was just kind of...nice to think that we were both awake reading at the same time.”

“Your mind truly works in mysterious ways.”

“You think so? I have my own doubts sometimes,” Chloe said, stifling another giggle.

Lloyd, slightly flustered, sheepishly scratched at his cheek and changed the topic, “Despite knowing I had an important ceremony to attend today, I still let myself get distracted by that book. As a knight, I have a lot to reflect on.”

“Ceremony? Now that you mention it, you *have* been rather meticulous with your dress today.”

“Today’s the induction ceremony for the new cadets. Full dress is required.”

“Oh! An induction ceremony! Spring really is upon us, it seems.” *Come to think of it, new servants did often join us around this time of year...* mused Chloe. Spring, the season of new beginnings, sees many say their goodbyes and embark on fresh journeys. In her mind, Chloe conjured up an image of a grand and elaborate ceremony befitting this season of change. Lloyd’s breast, adorned with an array of polished medals and badges, seemed to echo her thoughts.

Abruptly, Lloyd heaved a deep sigh.

“Is something the matter?” asked Chloe.

“It’s just that there’s a certain cadet among this year’s recruits who seems overly...zealous. I have a bad feeling that today might not proceed as smoothly as planned.”

“Th-That’s quite the rare statement, coming from you...”

“I can’t help but feel I’m in for a challenging day.”

“Lloyd, I know you’ll do just fine! I believe in you!” Seeing Lloyd’s furrowed brow, Chloe pumped two fists in front of her chest in an encouraging gesture.

“Thanks, that’s heartening to hear.”

As Lloyd finished up his preparations, he moved to the door, Chloe trailing closely behind.

“After the ceremony, there’s a mandatory lecture for all the new cadets. I might be late coming home tonight.”

“That’s all right. Don’t worry about me; I’ll be just fine,” she said, putting on a strong face in spite of the tinge of loneliness that was currently creeping its way into her heart.

Lloyd paused to study Chloe momentarily. Then, his face drew close to her ear.

“L-Lloyd...?”

“I’ll try to get home as early as I can.” He dropped a firm hand onto Chloe’s head. “Okay, I’m off then.”

“Take care, and have a good day!” Chloe replied, waving him off.

As the door swung closed behind her, she sank down to a squat. “Wh-What was that?!” she exclaimed.

That, of course, referred to the combination of Lloyd’s close proximity, the firm yet comforting pat on her head, and that sweet, low baritone whisper in her ear, all of which contributed to her current state of agitation.

Clasping her flushed cheeks, she let out a silent scream to vent her surprise.

Having composed herself, Chloe straightened up and cleared her throat. “Now then,” she said aloud. It was time to get to work.

Yawn.

Or perhaps not just yet—it seemed she was a touch more sleep-deprived than she’d thought. Maybe a short nap couldn’t hurt? In her current state, she hardly

felt capable of performing her duties. The idea flitted across her mind—an idea that would've spelled out a death sentence at the Ardennes'. Had she dare napped, the servants would've surely reported her to her dear mother and sister, who would've given her more than an earful.

"No, no, you can't," she scolded herself, shaking her head. How could she laze about while the master of the house was out working?

But wait, the devil on her shoulder whispered. Back at home, the other servants *did* just laze about.

No, the obligatory angel said. If she were to fall asleep now, it was more than likely it would push her bedtime even later, creating a vicious cycle.

"Pull it together, Chloe!" she cheered herself on.

Ultimately, her better side won. Her fatigue wasn't magically gone, but with a bit of willpower, she knew she could push through the rest of the day. After all, she had endured far worse in the past—compared to the time she worked tirelessly for three days and three nights, this was a walk in the park.

She gently clapped her hands to her cheeks a few times and set to work. She went for the laundry first, humming a cheery tune to keep herself awake. Then, it was on to the floors. After sweeping the living room, she moved to the kitchen, where—

"Ahhh!"

Chloe's loud cry echoed through the empty home. There, on the kitchen counter, was Lloyd's lunch, unmoved from where she had left it earlier in the morning.

Chapter Three: To the Royal Castle!

Chloe picked up the lunch box and moved it to the dining table. There, she stared at it, a monument to her failure.

“You’ve really done it now, Chloe...”

She’d forgotten to give Lloyd his lunch. Perhaps it was the residual grogginess from lack of sleep, but the task had entirely slipped her mind. Had Lloyd not been similarly tired, perhaps he would’ve remembered to take it himself.

All in all, this was a failure on both parties, but Chloe—

“This is all my fault...”

—took the responsibility entirely upon herself.

Head in her hands, shoulders slumped, she was the picture of disappointment. Had Lloyd been present, he might have comforted her, saying something like, *Everyone makes mistakes every now and then*, but sadly he was absent, leaving Chloe to her self-recrimination.

“What to do now...”

After weathering the initial wave of despair, Chloe considered her options. She felt terrible for Lloyd, but what was done was done; perhaps she could just eat the lunch herself?

I can’t help but feel I’m in for a challenging day. Lloyd’s voice echoed in her mind and she shook the idea from her head. If he didn’t have his lunch, he would have to settle for a dry, flavorless meal bar—and she was not about to let that happen. He had a big day ahead; a good lunch was crucial.

She glanced at the clock—there was still time until noon. If she left now, she could make it to the royal castle with time to spare. Even if she couldn’t meet Lloyd directly, she could at least leave it with someone at the castle. “Time for a trip to the royal castle,” Chloe said with a determined nod.

Having made up her mind, she hurried to prepare. First, she opened up the lunch box and added an extra side dish as an apology. Then she wrapped it in a

large cloth and placed it in her bag. “There, all set.”

All ready for her trip to the royal castle, she started to make her way over to the front door when she skidded to a halt. She glanced downwards at herself. “Dressed like this?”

She was currently in her casual, everyday wear. While it was something of a personal favorite, a go-to outfit for short trips around town, it seemed a tad informal for the most dignified place in the entire kingdom.

Moreover, despite the brief nature of her trip, she might still run into Lloyd’s fellow knights. Lloyd was supposedly renowned as the most formidable knight in all the Order, how would it reflect on him if his housekeeper were dressed so sloppily?

I’d humiliate him!

Chloe felt the blood drain from her face, a chill running down her spine. She was glad she realized her oversight before it was too late.

“Now where did I put that dress...”

Regaining her composure, Chloe went to her room and threw open her closet.

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As Chloe busied herself with her new outfit, the royal castle’s event hall was abuzz with activity, as knights and helpers scrambled in preparation for the day’s ceremony.

“Ouch!”

While carrying a stack of chairs, Lloyd heard a yelp and felt a slight bump from behind. “You okay?” he turned to ask.

“So sorry, I wasn’t watching where I was—eek!” The man froze as he caught sight of Lloyd’s face.

Lloyd didn’t recognize him. *A new cadet?* he thought.

“P-Please forgive meee!” The young man bowed his head in rapid-fire apologies before dashing away.

Lloyd knew what this meant; rumors must have spread amongst the cadets

already.

“Hey, check it out, Lloyd’s hazing the newbies.”

“Sheesh, that’s a great way to get traumatized on your first day.”

A few knights had noticed the incident and were whispering amongst themselves.

I wonder what kind of stories are going around this time... Lloyd mused. He let out a sigh and glanced over at the gossiping knights. They quickly straightened themselves and scattered.

Lloyd sighed again.

The most formidable swordsman in all the kingdom—being bestowed with such a title usually commanded respect, but not in the case of Lloyd. His quiet demeanor and stern, brooding appearance had earned him the intimidating nickname the *Ebon Reaper*, a title born more out of fear than admiration. Well aware that the distance that existed between him and his fellow knights was more of a personal failing than not, Lloyd had never minded it until recently.

Why do I feel so...hollow?

That was the sentiment that had begun to plague him. The more time he spent in the company of Chloe at home, the lonelier he felt outside of it. Apart from Freddy and a handful of other knights who would interact with him, Lloyd found himself contemplating the growing chasm between him and his peers.

My lunch...

As Lloyd’s thoughts wandered to Chloe, they then inevitably turned to the lunch box she had prepared for him that morning but he had completely forgotten to take.

“You look awfully depressed, Lloyd. What’s wrong?” Freddy suddenly appeared, catching Lloyd in the middle of his brooding.

“I’m doing just fine, Deputy Commander.”

“Hogwash. Come on, out with it.”

Lloyd chose silence in response to Freddy’s allegation.

“Ah, I see, I see... Had a fight with Chloe, did ya?”

“I did not.”

“In that case...she ran away from home, did she?”

“No, she’s still there. Why do you keep suggesting something bad happened with Chloe?”

“Because! What else could possibly get you so down?”

“There are plenty of reasons.”

“Okay, then what *is* bothering you? Hit me with it,” Freddy goaded.

Lloyd decided to come clean; it would be bothersome if Freddy continued to misinterpret the situation. “...I forgot my lunch.”

Freddy burst out into a bout of knee-slapping laughter.

“Is that really so hilarious?” asked Lloyd.

“Absolutely! You, a full-grown man, the *Ebon Reaper*, the most feared and formidable swordsman in all the kingdom, are upset because you forgot your love-packed lunch box! If that isn’t hilarious I don’t know what is!”

“Again, it’s not a love-packed lunch box, it’s packed by my housekeeper.”

“Stop with that!” Freddy shot back before heaving an exasperated sigh. “In all seriousness, though, I have to give her credit—she’s made lunch for you every day since then, hasn’t she?”

“Yes, she’s a very excellent housekeeper.”

“No, no, you’re not getting it. Why would she go through all that trouble if she didn’t care about you?”

Lloyd’s hand suddenly froze. “What are you implying?”

“That no matter how you look at it, she has feelings for you, Lloyd. It’s *love.*”

“Love? Who is loving whom now?”

“Chloe’s in love with you, Lloyd.”

“There’s...” *no way that’s true.* Lloyd began, but the words didn’t come. He opened and closed his mouth, trying to reject the idea, but he couldn’t.

Somewhere within, he knew—these past months living with Chloe had started to influence him, guiding him to the truth.

"You can be quite dense about these things, Lloyd, and that's why I'm spelling it out for you. It might be time to take Chloe and her feelings more seriously."

Lloyd fell into silence, mulling over Freddy's words. It was indeed accurate that he was emotionally stunted. He had lived his life by the sword—there had been no time or opportunity for him to learn about romance or love. He was at a loss: uncertain about Chloe's feelings, uncertain about his own. Yet...

Chloe...has feelings...?

He couldn't move past that statement. It was plausible that some degree of affection had developed; Chloe wouldn't have agreed to be his housekeeper without it. But Lloyd had always assumed that any affection from Chloe was purely platonic. He had rescued Chloe when she was on the run, saving her from a group of thugs. To put it simply, he was her savior—she owed her life to him. Moreover...

...*For someone like me?*

Lloyd had long accepted that he might never be loved—that perhaps, he was incapable of it. As his mind strayed into that territory, memories he thought long sealed away began to surface, and—

"You okay, Lloyd?"

Freddy's voice jerked him back to reality.

"You don't look so great," Freddy added.

"It's nothing." Taking a deep breath, Lloyd pushed the intrusive thoughts back into their corner.

"Just let me know if you're not feeling well. We can't afford you collapsing during the ceremony, now can we?"

"I'm fine. There's nothing wrong with me," Lloyd replied—his lack of sleep surely wasn't worth mentioning

"All right, I'll take your word for it. Anyway, if that problem cadet of ours decides to stir up trouble again, I'll be counting on you."

“Shouldn’t you be the one to handle him, Deputy Commander?” Lloyd said, furrowing his brow.

At that moment, a new voice cut through their conversation. “Is this the place? What a dump!” A grating, disrespectful voice, at odds with the solemn surroundings, sawed at Lloyd’s nerves.

Turning, Lloyd saw the problem cadet himself swagger into the grand hall: same short platinum blond hair, same pair of striking amber eyes, but now dressed not in the navy blue blazer from before, but the uniform of a knight—or at least, it was supposed to be. Ostentatious pieces of jewelry and flashy metallic accents studded its surface, transforming the once dignified uniform into a tacky statement piece more suitable for the tastes of the nouveau riche. Behind him strode two young women, similar in age, wrapped—perhaps more accurately, partially *unwrapped*—in clothing that left little to the imagination. As they sauntered into Freddy’s line of sight, his gaze hardened.

As Luke strode further into the hall, asserting himself like the lord of the manor, Freddy stepped into his path.

“Ah, greetings, Deputy Commander, sir,” said Luke, placing a hand on his chest and bowing his head in a shoddy imitation of a knight’s salute. His show of the bare minimum respect required was obvious to the watchful eyes present.

“Hello, Luke. I am heartened to see you adapting so swiftly to our codes of conduct.”

Luke’s eyebrow twitched at Freddy’s backhanded compliment. “Please accept my apologies for my behavior during our previous encounter. I was...in over my head.”

“Think nothing of it. We all have our less than stellar moments, don’t we? But, more importantly...” Freddy said, glancing pointedly at the two women trailing behind Luke. “Will those two lovely ladies be participating in today’s ceremony?”

“No, not particularly. They fancy themselves my admirers—they’ve been doggedly tailing me since my academy days.” Luke sighed in mock exasperation. “Popularity has its fair share of burdens, I must admit.” he continued, his voice transparently unburdened—his earlier decorum had completely evaporated.

“Admirers? You flatter us, Master Luke.”

“We’re simply smitten with you, with all our hearts!”

Their voices dripping with adoration, the two young women affectionately laid their hands on Luke’s shoulders.

Lloyd’s face hardened in response. If this were any other cadet, the act of bringing along two outsiders to such a ceremonial occasion would have warranted immediate dismissal and a review of their induction. Luke, however, was the son of the nation’s most powerful marquis, making heavy-handed action politically unwise.

It seemed Freddy had also considered this, and said, “In that case, might I ask those two to take their leave?”

The temperature in the room seemed to plummet.

“My apologies, but spectators are not permitted in today’s ceremony,” Freddy added.

“Are you serious?” Luke’s beady gaze fixed on Freddy. “They’re here to celebrate this momentous day of my induction into the Order. Surely they can be allowed to stay?”

Freddy’s friendly demeanor instantly faded. “Surely they cannot. Rules are rules.”

Luke clenched his jaw in annoyance. He already knew from their previous encounter that Freddy was not one to bow to the influence of his parents. After a brief but tense exchange of glares, Luke loudly clicked his tongue in frustration and turned to the two women behind him.

“Camilla, Jeffrey, I’m sorry my lovelies, but it seems this Knights’ Order isn’t quite as accommodating as the Academy. Please, accept my apologies.”

“Please don’t worry about us, Master Luke.”

“We’ll wait for you at the usual spot.”

In a nauseatingly affectionate tone, the two women reassured Luke, each gave him a peck on the cheek, and then departed the hall.

“Will that be all?” Luke asked.

“Thank you for your cooperation,” Freddy replied.

“No need to thank me; they left because I wished them gone—nothing more.”

“Is that so?” Freddy began, utterly unconcerned. “All right, the ceremony’s starting soon, so hurry along and take your place.”

Luke delivered a final salute and walked away in silence.

“I have to admit, I’ve seen a lot, but inviting your lady friends to the ceremony is a first,” Freddy said to Lloyd, sounding exasperated.

“He’s the epitome of all the worst aspects of the nobility.”

“I hear you on that.”

“Again, I don’t believe I’m fit to handle him. If he tried that attitude with me, it’d be swords drawn, no questions asked.”

Freddy chuckled lightly. “Has our *Ebon Reaper* finally found where he left his taste for blood?”

“That’s not a joking matter, Deputy Commander.”

The ceremony hadn’t even begun, and Lloyd was already feeling drained. Luke’s brash attitude was difficult for even the more libertine sort of knight to tolerate, and Lloyd was anything but.

Sensing Lloyd’s rising irritation, Freddy offered a wry smile. “Let’s hope his swordsmanship is as formidable as he boasts.”

“I’m not expecting much,” Lloyd responded curtly.

Freddy shrugged, “All right, I’ll catch you on the other side.”

“Good luck, Deputy Commander.”

With that, Freddy took his leave. Left alone, Lloyd exhaled a deep sigh. As the ceremony approached, he couldn’t dispel his concern that allowing someone like Luke to join would bring nothing but trouble.

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Not long after the ceremony commenced, Chloe, elegantly attired and impeccably made-up, arrived in front of the royal castle, “Wow... how grand...” she murmured, standing in the shadow of the colossal structure that soared into the sky. Often she had viewed the castle from afar, but up close, it inspired entirely different emotions. This was truly something she could never experience back in Shadaf. “The king of the whole country lives here. I guess I shouldn’t be surprised...”

As she neared the entrance, her nerves began to fray. “You can do this!” She gave herself a little pep talk and walked towards the guardhouse. “Excuse me!” she ventured.

Two gatekeepers, clad in knightly uniforms akin to Lloyd, spotted Chloe. Their eyes widened in surprise. “Wh-What a beauty...” one of them muttered.

“Were we expecting someone? Did you hear anything about this?”
“No, I didn’t. Wait, if she’s a noble, where’s her escort?”

“Excuse me...?” Chloe ventured again, interrupting the guards’ private conversation.

They immediately snapped to attention. “A-Ahem, excuse us, milady. You were just so lovely, we couldn’t help but be momentarily stunned.”

Chloe flashed a warm smile, and said, “L-Lovely? Thank you, I’m honored.” Though her outer demeanor was calm and gracious, inwardly, she breathed a sigh of relief, comforted to know that her appearance was acceptable enough to elicit a compliment that was *surely* no more than a courteous exaggeration.

Meanwhile, Chloe’s smile held the two gatekeepers captive. As royal castle guards, they had met their fair share of attractive young noblewomen, but Chloe was of a different breed entirely. She had an air of distinction that had them mistaking her for a noble, which wasn’t too far off—she was, after all, the wayward offspring of a margrave. With her noble-like beauty, Chloe could easily blend in among the upper crust of the capital when properly attired and adorned, and yet, she was blissfully unaware—conditioned to think low of her looks after years of snide remarks about her appearance.

“So...” she probed once more.

“A-Ah! My apologies, milady. So, what brings you to the royal castle on this fine day?” One of the guards stepped forward to address her.

Somewhat thrown off by the guard’s peculiar blend of formal and casual mannerisms, Chloe gave her message, “My name is Chloe, housekeeper to Lloyd, the knight. He left without his lunch this morning, which I’ve come to deliver.”

“Lloyd’s housekeeper you say. No probl—Wait, Lloyd’s?!” Both guards’ eyes widened in disbelief, as though physically staggered by the shock.

“Yes, are you acquainted with him?”

“Of course we are!” The guard’s tone shifted to one of awe, “We may not be First Order knights, but the legendary feats of Lloyd, the most formidable knight in all the kingdom, have reached even our ears...”

“I-I see... Lloyd truly is remarkable, isn’t he?” Chloe managed to say, taken aback by the grandeur attached to Lloyd’s name. Yet, alongside her astonishment, a touch of joy—a hint of *pride* burgeoned within her. *I suppose he’s more renowned than I realized*, she thought. However, she’d misunderstood one crucial detail: it wasn’t Lloyd’s fame that startled the guards—it was the fact that he had such a stunning housekeeper.

“So,” Chloe started once more, “about this lunch... If I’m not allowed to enter, perhaps I could trouble one of you to deliver this to him?”

“No, no, please, a portion of the royal castle grounds is open to all citizens as a common area except in the case of an emergency.”

“Really? That’s great to hear...” Chloe said, sounding relieved. It seemed that she wouldn’t be denied at the door after all.

The guard’s expression softened at Chloe’s evident relief. “Please allow me to escort you to him. The induction ceremony should be concluding, and they should be returning to the training grounds shortly.”

“Oh, thank you very much! I appreciate it.”

After that, Chloe underwent a simple security check and entry process before being granted access to the castle grounds.

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Guided by the castle guard, Chloe ventured deep into the castle complex to reach the First Order training grounds. She couldn't help but marvel at the extensive facilities stretching out before her, a testament to the considerable investment poured into their construction. A gasp of admiration escaped her as she surveyed the scene.

Usually, access for outsiders was a more involved affair, but Chloe was allowed in without much of a hassle. Her unassuming presence, unarmed and appearing as harmless as a passing butterfly, disarmed their wariness.

"If I could ask you to kindly remain here, please," the guard urged Chloe, indicating a seat in the waiting area adjoining the grounds.

"Of course! Thank you for so very graciously showing me the way. I'm afraid I would've been lost without you," she replied, bowing her head in a show of gratitude.

Surprised by her courteous response, the guard momentarily softened before resuming his professional demeanor. "You'll have to excuse my continued presence. I'm obligated to stay with you until Lloyd arrives."

"Oh no, of course not! Your presence is welcome. It would be improper to leave a visitor unattended, after all."

"Your understanding is most appreciated. If you ask me, a lady such as yourself hardly requires surveillance, but rules are rules." The guard then saluted and moved a few steps back, standing at attention.

Chloe let out a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding. The relief of successfully reaching her destination was palpable. "So this is where Lloyd works..." she murmured, the faint, sharp scent of metal tickling her nose. The sight before her was imposing: towering barracks encircling a central training area, at the heart of which lay a grand circular space, with rising spectator stands wrapped around it like an amphitheater. It was clear where the knights engaged in their martial bouts.

Chloe's wandering gaze, like that of a curious kitten discovering new terrain, didn't go unnoticed by the guard. "If you're curious, feel free to explore," he

suggested.

“May I?”

“Absolutely. The grounds are vacant at the moment. As long as you remain within my line of sight, feel free to wander.”

“Thank you! In that case, I’ll be right back...” she replied. Taking the guard up on his offer, Chloe began her exploration of the training grounds. After all, she reasoned, one doesn’t receive a tour of a knight’s training facility every day. As she perused each area, her eyes sparkled with unadulterated curiosity, despite her limited understanding of their actual purpose.

As the guard observed her—as was dutifully required of him—a smile spread across his face without him noticing.

Soon, Chloe found herself venturing toward a path that led beyond the grounds when a stranger’s voice halted her in her tracks, “Who are you?”

Whirling around, she found herself face-to face with a man dressed in a white knight’s uniform. His platinum blond hair shimmered under the light, and his gaze bored into hers, tinted with caution and suspicion.

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How young... Chloe mused—her first impression upon seeing the newcomer before her. He was young, of course, not in comparison to her own sixteen years, but for a knight of the First Order. His face housed a pair of striking amber eyes, topped by short, platinum blond hair, impeccably arranged. He stood a smidge shorter than Lloyd, but still tall enough to dwarf Chloe. His uniform was white, much like Freddy's, but was bedecked in an array of ostentatious flourishes and metallic accents which made it a most garish sight to behold.

"Well? Who might you be? You with the Order?"

Chloe, reflexively assuming him to be one of Lloyd's colleagues, quickly dipped her head in a courteous bow. "P-Pleased to meet you. My name is Chloe. I'm here on an errand for—"

"Chloe? Cute name." Luke interrupted dismissively, clearly disinterested in her words.

Caught off guard by his audacious demeanor, Chloe stepped backwards. "Um, forgive me for asking, but may I know your name?"

"The name's Luke, Luke Gimul. Graduated top of my class at the prestigious Knight's Academy, and the First Order's new star recruit."

"S-Sir Luke, then, is it? A pleasure to meet you." Appending a "sir" for good measure, Chloe bowed her head respectfully again.

At that, Luke's eyes widened in surprise.

"Is something the matter?" broached Chloe, tilting her head in confusion.

"Luke Gimul, as in House Gimul. Surely you've heard of us before?" Luke said, an air of nonchalance about him.

Taken aback by his sudden shift in attitude, Chloe felt her shoulders shudder. "I must apologize. I'm afraid I haven't..."

"Really? And here I thought everyone in the capital would know our name by now. Are you sure you're from around here, Chloe?"

"Y-Yes, I am..." Chloe responded, flustered by his forward attitude. She surmised that he must belong to a high-ranking noble house.

Luke hummed thoughtfully. “Then...you couldn’t have possibly just moved here from some forgotten corner of the kingdom, could you?”

Chloe twitched again. “N-N-No, of course not! I’m simply a commoner, my knowledge about the nobility is...limited.”

“You, a commoner? With a face like that?!” Luke exclaimed in astonishment. His surprise, in all fairness, was not completely unwarranted. Standing before him was Chloe, immaculately dressed and beautifully adorned, her striking beauty rivaling even the most sophisticated noblewoman of the capital. High society would undoubtedly be set abuzz at the discovery of such a gem. “What an absolute pity.” His gaze traveled from her eyes down to her feet. “Not bad... Not bad at all...” he murmured.

I’m not so sure I like this person... Chloe thought. Even with her endless capacity to see the good in people, she couldn’t suppress a certain revulsion towards Luke—his gaze reminded her far too much of the disdainful stares she received back home. To put it kindly, his demeanor sat opposite to the decorum and grace of Freddy and Lloyd, but in all honesty, he simply seemed vulgar. The brash, volatile temperament that she sensed from him was ominously familiar.

Paying no heed to the alarm bells ringing in Chloe’s head, Luke continued, “You’re an interesting one... I’ve taken a liking to you. If I hadn’t decided to cut that tedious induction ceremony, we would’ve never crossed paths...”

“Is-Is that so... Thank you very much?”

“To think that such a beautiful face hid behind a commoner’s guise... You know...I could make room for an additional mistress...”

“Mistress?” Chloe repeated, entirely bewildered. Unfamiliar with such relations, she didn’t understand what the word entailed. She only felt a compelling urge in her gut to reject the idea with all her might.

“How about it?” Luke took a step forward.

Chloe took a step back. “Um, I don’t... I don’t...” She glanced at the guard for help.

Fortunately, the guard immediately caught on to Chloe’s distress. “H-Hey. That’s enough of that. Miss Chloe is clearly uncomfortable with—”

“Silence, lowborn filth.” His demeanor flipped—his voice was low and dangerous, his glare malevolent as he turned to the guard. Chloe instinctively shrank down, despite not being the target of his ire. “You dare address me, you wretch? Do you really think that I, the heir to House Gimul, can’t have you thrown out onto the streets with a snap of my fingers?” Luke, brimming with arrogance, advanced on the larger and more senior guard.

The guard hastily bowed his head low. “Please...forgive me. My mistake.”

“A wise choice,” Luke said, huffing dismissively.

The way Luke so blatantly used his position of power as a cudgel chilled Chloe to the bone. Her impression of him plummeted.

“Now, where were we?” Luke turned back to Chloe, flashing a smile that, under different circumstances, might have won over a young maiden’s heart. But after witnessing his outburst, Chloe couldn’t help but fear what lurked beneath. “Let’s take it slow for now, shall we? Why don’t we get to know each other over a cup of tea?”

Luke’s hand reached out towards Chloe.

“N-No, please—” The revulsion overwhelmed her, a strangled whimper escaping her lips. She wanted to flee, but her legs betrayed her, holding her frozen in place. *Help me, Lloyd*! she silently screamed when suddenly the voice she most yearned to hear resounded in her ears.

“Chloe, is that you?”

Lloyd’s voice, warm and familiar, acted like a spell, melting the fear that had immobilized Chloe. His figure brought comfort amidst the storm.

“Luke! Don’t tell me you skipped out on the ceremony to flirt with a girl. What on earth were you thinking?” A gruff voice cut through the air.

Luke clicked his tongue in annoyance. Sensing her chance, Chloe made her escape towards Lloyd. She called his name, her excitement leading her to nearly throw her arms around him before she thought better of it.

“Why are you here?” Lloyd asked simply.

“I’m so sorry for showing up unannounced, but you forgot your lunch, so I

thought I'd bring it to you," Chloe replied, carefully retrieving the lunch box from her bag.

Understanding dawned on Lloyd's face, and he nodded. "Ah, I see. Sorry to put you through so much trouble."

"Not at all!" Chloe began, "I'm...sorry too, for forgetting to give it to you earlier." She lowered her head as a silent symbol of her apology.

"It's fine," Lloyd assured, "I'd been wondering about my lunch situation, but that takes care of things. Thank you."

"Lloyd..." Chloe murmured, the warmth of his gratitude filling his heart.

"Well, well, well, if it isn't Little Miss Chloe; how've you been?" chimed a familiar voice.

"Freddy, hello! How are you?" Chloe greeted, dipping her head again as Freddy approached from behind Lloyd.

Freddy took one glance at Chloe and said, "Wow, look at you, what's the occasion?"

"Oh! Um, thank you. I just thought since I'd be coming to the castle I should be dressed appropriately."

Freddy laughed lightly, shrugging. "Please, take a look around you. Nobody here but us rough-and-tumble men. What do we care?" Behind him, Chloe noticed a handful of men in uniform beginning to gather, each of them robust and radiating an aura of unmistakable strength—they were undoubtedly the kingdom's defenders.

Attracted by the commotion, the men began to cluster around Freddy, their eyes falling on Chloe as they wondered aloud what was happening.

Feeling the pressure of all those eyes, Chloe mumbled, "S-Sorry, I must be intruding. I'll leave you all to your work."

"I wouldn't say you're 'intruding,' but..." Lloyd replied, deliberating her statement, "we *are* scheduled for training after lunch. I assume that wouldn't interest you."

"Scheduled training..." Chloe's echo of his words held a trace of intrigue. The

prospect of observing Lloyd's training—the parts she didn't get to see at home—sparked her curiosity.

"Are you interested?" Lloyd asked.

"Oh, no! Not at all, not at all!" Chloe hastened to say, shaking her head vehemently. If she'd said, "I do" here, no doubt Lloyd would feel obligated to keep her around, and right now, overstaying her welcome was the last thing she wanted to do. "Well, since you have your lunch now, I'll take my leave. Don't worry about me, Lloyd, and have a good rest of your day!"

"I see," Lloyd replied, his voice betraying a tinge of disappointment on an otherwise stoic face.

"Hold on." A low voice interrupted their conversation. "You two know each other?" Luke asked, his face a mask of indifference.

"Chloe's my housekeeper," Lloyd replied.

Luke glanced at the wrapped item Chloe had delivered and said, "Oh, your *housekeeper!* I see, I see..."

"Is there a problem with that?" Lloyd continued.

"Problem? No problem—I was just thinking about how opposites attract a little too much sometimes, you know what I mean?"

"Opposites?" Lloyd furrowed his brow.

A delighted smile on his face, Luke approached Chloe. "A gorgeous housekeeper such as yourself is surely wasted on the likes of a mere knight. If you come work for me, I could offer you wealth unimaginable, way beyond what that impoverished knight could afford."

Luke's bold words triggered a storm within Chloe. *The likes of a mere knight? That impoverished knight?* He was clearly belittling Lloyd. The storm quickly evolved into a whirlwind, and traces of anger—an emotion alien to her otherwise gentle demeanor—began to stir within her.

Lloyd, however, was unruffled by the comments. "Do you know this person?" he asked Chloe.

"No, I only met him just now," Chloe responded tersely.

“I see.” Lloyd sighed regretfully upon detecting the tension in Chloe’s voice. “Sorry, it seems I made you go through something rather unpleasant. This one has a bad habit of chatting up every woman he comes across. I apologize on behalf of the Order.”

“That’s all right. It’s not like he actually did anything...” Chloe affirmed. As displeasing as the episode was, she was mature enough to let bygones be bygones.

“We’ll deal with him internally. You should head home, Chloe.”

“Y-Yes, thank you. If you’ll excuse me—”

Chloe hurriedly attempted to make her exit, only to be arrested by Luke’s voice. “Now hold on just a moment, we weren’t done talking!”

A hint of irritation now coloring his features, Lloyd turned to Chloe once more, “Did you have anything else to say to him?”

“No, absolutely not.” Chloe reflexively retorted, realizing too late that she had unintentionally exposed her true feelings.

As Freddy observed the exchange, a grin stretched across his face. His shoulders rocking in barely suppressed laughter, he quipped, “Now *that’s* a rejection if I’ve ever seen one.”

His comment kindled amusement among the knights, who followed suit, sharing chuckles and wry smiles. The unspoken sentiment was clear: *ouch*.

Luke’s prideful face reddened with indignation. “Wh-Why you...” His rage at the sheer audacity of the commoners to mock him was etched in his expression. Unable to restrain his fury, he unsheathed his sword dramatically, pointed it at Lloyd and roared, “Lloyd Stewart! I challenge you to a duel!”

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“This has turned into quite the spectacle...” Chloe murmured from her seat in the spectator stands surrounding the arena.

Only ten minutes had passed since Luke had challenged Lloyd to a duel, and events had rapidly unfolded from there. Lloyd initially retorted, “The training grounds are not for settling private scores,” to which Freddy interjected, “An

exception can be made—it's lunchtime. Think of it as extra practice on behalf of the cadets."

With Freddy's approval, Lloyd headed towards the arena, a somewhat sour look on his face. Though accustomed to his superior's whimsicality, he was still taken aback by Freddy's blatant disregard for the rules. However, when, on his way to pick up a wooden training sword, Freddy had encouraged him with a slap on the back and the words, "I'm counting on you," Lloyd discerned that there was more to the decision than met the eye.

And so, as fellow knights looked on in blank amazement, Lloyd and Luke stepped into the arena.

"Is this really happening? Lloyd versus Luke?"

"Any bets on who's gonna win?"

"I mean, it's gotta be Lloyd, right?"

"You think? I heard this Luke kid was decorated for distinguished service while still in the academy; he might be no slouch."

"Distinguished service—you're kidding?"

The spectators surrounding Chloe buzzed with anticipation, their excitement resounding through the air. It seemed the duel between the *Ebon Reaper* and the year's most promising cadet had overtaken lunch as the main attraction.

Chloe, on the other hand, was a bundle of nerves. *Is Lloyd going to be okay...?* Her hands were clenched tightly in front of her in prayer, her trembling lips pressed together nervously. She could only hope that Lloyd would emerge unscathed.

"Relax, Chloe. Lloyd will be fine," Freddy, seated at her side, assured her.

"But, but..."

"There's nothing to worry about. They're using wooden swords, so there's no threat of serious injury. And besides..." He paused, narrowing his eyes and lowering his voice, "Lloyd really is *that* strong."

Chloe reflected on Freddy's words, recalling the day she arrived in the capital. She remembered how Lloyd had so courageously saved her from the trio of

thugs, and how he'd done it again the night of Freddy's dinner party in the city park. She also knew how diligently he trained every night. Lloyd wasn't just a fighter; he was a relentless warrior, never to be bested easily. "You're right," Chloe conceded, her clenched hands forming into determined fists. "*Go, Lloyd.*"

Hearing her heartfelt cheer, a soft smile graced Freddy's face.

Meanwhile on the field, an impassive Lloyd faced off against a smirking Luke. Both had changed from their heavy, rigid uniforms into flexible training gear.

"How commendable of you to accept this challenge instead of fleeing," Luke gloated, grinning provocatively.

"I had a big breakfast this morning; this is just a chance to work some of that off before I enjoy my lunch."

Irritated by Lloyd's nonchalance, Luke clicked his tongue. "Underestimate me, will ya? I'll see to it that you'll have to be tube fed for the rest of your days."

"Perfect. I've *also* been wanting to knock that rotten smirk off your face."

Their faces were taut, their gazes locked. Suddenly, Luke threw his attention to the stands. "How about we make this interesting? If I win, I get that housekeeper of yours all to myself."

"Sure."

Luke raised an eyebrow, taken aback at Lloyd's immediate acceptance. "Are you sure? It doesn't kill you to part with her?"

"It doesn't matter what you want," Lloyd retorted, his voice determined, "since you won't be winning."

"Hah! I like that," Luke said, grinning ever wider.

"If I win, you will pledge absolute obedience to me," Lloyd proposed.

"Fine."

"Are *you* sure?"

"You see, I, too, do not intend to lose."

Their gazes intensified. The tension between them was palpable, like sparks flying through the air.

Finally, the referee entered the stage and began with an explanation of the rules. “Before we begin, let’s establish a few ground rules,” he began, “the game will continue until a weapon breaks or one of you surrenders. I reserve the right to terminate the game at any point if I foresee risk of serious injury or death. Gentlemen, are you ready?”

“I was born ready.”

“I’m good.”

“Very well; assume your positions,”

Following the referee’s instructions, Lloyd and Luke made their way over to their starting positions, marked by a white line. Once both drew their weapons, the referee raised his hand high and slashed it down with all his might.

“Begin!”

At the referee’s signal, Luke exploded into motion, barreling towards Lloyd. Tactics dictated caution, a careful appraisal of the opponent in the opening moments of a duel. But Luke cast aside convention, launching an immediate and swift opening strike.

“A surprise attack? Not bad,” Lloyd murmured, acknowledging his opponent’s prowess. His sword ascended to meet Luke’s with precision. A parry, Lloyd decided, was a better option than dodging, given the ferocity of the attack.

Their wooden blades clashed, sending a thunderous crack throughout the arena. Sparks showered from their point of contact, the air distorting in a shockwave.

His opening salvo thwarted, Luke sprang back, putting distance between them. His eyes slid to Lloyd’s feet, which remained firmly planted at the starting position. *It’s like swinging at a giant tree trunk...* he thought. Despite their similar weight class, and Luke’s momentum behind the attack, Lloyd stood as immovable as a mountain. Even if his initial strike had been meant to hit fast more than it hit hard, Luke couldn’t help but be amazed by his defensive prowess.

A cold sweat broke out across Luke’s body as Lloyd’s voice reached his ears.

“Good hit. It seems you really are the top graduate of your class.”

“Thanks...” Luke retorted, his grin melting away. Despite his blithe nature, his competence had never been in question, his confidence never wavering until now.

“What’s wrong, not going to come at me again?”

“You don’t have to tell me twice!” Luke snarled, hurling himself back into the fray. This time, he was going for a full-bodied strike. With a warrior’s bellow, he directed all his strength into a vicious swing, only for Lloyd to effortlessly sidestep the attack.

“That’s what happens when you sacrifice speed for power.”

Luke’s lips twisted into a grimace. Lloyd was predicting his every move, his maneuvers as transparent as glass. Seeing red, he quickly repositioned himself and launched a second, then a third strike, each as fruitless as the last.

“Textbook form. You must’ve spent hours perfecting it in school.”

“You still have breath to banter, huh?”

“I could be enjoying my lunch with my other hand right now and still keep up.”

“Why, you...!”

Enraged, Luke unleashed a flurry of attacks at Lloyd, each meeting nothing but empty air. Lloyd danced around his onslaught, dodging vertical strikes with a single step, evading horizontal slashes with a short hop, and deflecting inward stabs with a flick of his sword.

“Coward! Quit playing around and fight me!”

“Give me a reason to and I will.”

“You...!”

The stark disparity in their skill was glaringly apparent to all who watched. Luke’s strikes were a force to be reckoned with—swift, powerful, and precise. Yet Lloyd’s avoidance was a spectacle of another caliber. He evaded Luke’s relentless assault with a minimalist elegance akin to a well-choreographed

dance.

But even the most talented warriors had their limits. Each of his forceful strikes drained Luke's stamina, and every one of Lloyd's graceful evasions chipped away at his composure. Luke's fervor began to wane, his energy sapping away.

Exhausted, Luke dropped to his knees, his chest heaving with labored breaths and sweat dripping down his face. He stayed there, gasping for air, a vivid picture of defeat.

"Is that all you've got?" Lloyd asked, looking down at Luke. He stood composed, not a single bead of perspiration marring his flawless countenance.

In the stands, Chloe was fixated on the duel, her gaze locked onto the combatants as musings of nearby spectators filled the air.

"See that? Lloyd hasn't moved since the start of the duel."

"Holy smokes, you're right...is that guy even human?"

Intrigued by their murmurs, Chloe focused his attention on Lloyd's position, and indeed, the white line that demarcated the starting position still stood by his feet—he had countered all of Luke's attacks without displacing himself an inch. "W-Wow..." Chloe murmured. Even she could tell that Lloyd was toying with his opponent. The fight appeared as effortless as an adult holding a child at arm's length mid-tantrum.

A breath of both admiration and exhilaration escaped Chloe, and she felt her heart swell. She'd witnessed Lloyd's prowess before, but this was a starkly different demonstration of his might. His movements weren't flashy or overbearingly technical. Yet his methodical, meticulous evasion of every attack hummed with an understated power that commanded respect—and was oh-so-attractive. Caught in the throes of awed fascination, her heart was set aflutter.

"Hey...don't you think this duel is as good as over?" a spectator chimed in.

"Yup, just further proof that Lloyd's the strongest," another concurred.

"Top graduate of the Academy, huh? Seems he's not all he's cracked up to be."

The whispers weaved their way through the stands, solidifying the audience's perception of the duel. The spectators were Luke's future comrades-in-arms, the ones he would share battles with, and now he'd become the fool under their scrutiny. His dignity splintered with each passing moment, his composure dwindling.

"Are you in or out, Luke?" Even the referee seemed to have declared the contest over.

"This can't be happening..." Luke uttered quietly, his fingers white-knuckled around the hilt of his sword. "This can't be happening, this can't be happening, this can't be happening!"

His voice crescendoed into a furious roar. His face twitched and shuddered, his heart pounding wildly in his chest as his rage threatened to consume him. "I...am the heir to House Gimul, and I will not be defeated by the likes of you!" His words were steeped in defiance, a battle cry that pierced the air. Summoning the last vestiges of his strength, Luke forced himself back onto his feet.

A half-smile played at the corner of Lloyd's lips. "Impressive. I applaud your spirit," he uttered, his voice carrying a note of genuine respect. He curled his hand around the hilt of his sword, reassuming a defensive stance, as if daring Luke to challenge the fortress that was his defense once more.

Luke took a step towards Lloyd, then another. His hand moved to his breast, drawing forth a concealed weapon—a dagger, glinting dangerously as it caught the light.

A soft grunt escaped Lloyd, his eyes narrowing at the sight of the new threat.

Luke assumed a thrower's stance, coiling his body up for a pitch.

"Th-That's cheating!" a spectator cried out in indignation.

"L-Lloyd!" Chloe's voice rang out, a shriek of alarm.

"Foolish, just foolish," Freddy remarked, his chuckle lacing the air with a note of mockery.

"Chew on this!" Luke snarled, sending the dagger airborne. It whistled

through the air, hurtling towards Lloyd with deadly precision. In tandem, Luke prepared to strike—the projectile was but a feint. If Lloyd attempted to dodge the incoming dagger, he would have no choice but to break his stance. That momentary vulnerability was all Luke needed to then follow-up with an easy hit.

A smirk played at the edges of Luke's mind, the sweet prospect of victory within his grasp. But then the unthinkable happened.

With a guttural grunt, Lloyd swung his sword.

CRACK.

Wood and steel collided. Lloyd's sword now bore an unusual ornament—Luke's dagger, lodged halfway into the wood. The dagger's tip protruded menacingly but remained ensnared in the blade. Had Lloyd been off by even an inch, the dagger would have surely found its home in his torso.

"What?!" Luke's body screeched to a halt and his mind slammed into a wall, struggling to comprehend the superhuman feat he had just witnessed. Interception of a dagger in mid-flight with a sword? The spectators mirrored his disbelief, their shocked silence filling the arena. Even the referee stood dumbstruck, his duty to halt the duel temporarily forgotten in the face of the surreal spectacle.

"That's a violation of the rules." For the first time since the duel began, Lloyd abandoned his starting position. His form morphed into a blur as he charged towards Luke, hands gripping his weapon in a clear offensive stance.

A strangled sound escaped Luke as he scrambled to lift the sword in his defense, but his surprise had cost him precious moments. In the split second of his hesitation, Lloyd had closed the distance between them.

Like a lightning bolt, Lloyd unleashed an attack too swift for the human eye to track. His sword found its mark, striking Luke with the embedded dagger's hilt.



“Nghaaa!” Luke’s cry of anguish reverberated through the arena.

The strike was a just punishment, apt retribution for his audacious breach of conduct. The hilt of his own dagger dug cruelly into his unprotected flank, leaving Luke writhing in agony. “That hurts—that fuckin’ hurts!” His voice became a desperate howl as he clutched his torso, his body contorting in torment as he collapsed to the ground.

Staring down at the spectacle, Lloyd addressed the referee with icy detachment. “What’s the verdict, ref?”

“Oh—right!” Startled into action, the referee shot his right hand into the air. “Lloyd wins!” His voice boomed, echoing across the arena.

The venue detonated into cheers. The thrilling sequence that had just unfolded—the superhuman interception of the dagger, the lightning-fast counterattack, the decisive takedown—had ignited the knights’ fervor.

“He did it! He won! He actually won!” Chloe sprang to her feet, her hands clapping along in applause.

“Do you know what it is that makes Lloyd so unstoppable?” Freddy’s voice cut through the clamor, “It’s not his physical condition or his skill with the blade—but his absolute aversion to *death*.”

“Aversion to...death?” Chloe said, tilting her head in confusion.

“Exactly. It’s an instinctual rejection of it, a gut reaction whenever the risk of harm or injury is imminent. It’s a part of him now, but no doubt it’s not something you learn without looking the reaper in the eye long enough to tire of it.”

Freddy’s words gripped Chloe’s chest tight. She’d known that Lloyd’s strength was the result of his upbringing, the days which saw him live in the shadow of death. But realizing that it was his horrific past that allowed him to outmaneuver his opponents sent a sharp pang of discomfort through her heart.

Meanwhile, on the arena floor, Luke battled his own discomfort, his hand clutching his throbbing side. “I-Impossible. I-I lost? Me...?”

“Use of a deadly weapon—that’s a severe violation of conduct,” Lloyd’s words

were crisp and cold.

At Lloyd's remark, Luke spat out a resentful click of the tongue, turning his face away in shame.

"I'll leave your punishment to the deputy commander. But apart from that, this was a decent pre-lunch workout. Good duel."

"Bullshit. You weren't even trying," Luke let out in a strained whisper.

"As seniors, it's our role to guide your growth. That duel allowed me a good glimpse of your abilities," Lloyd responded, mentally dissecting the sequence of their bout. "Your strikes are swift, above average; your strength, below average; your stamina...poor. Endurance training will be your first order of business."

"Are you implying I'm unfit to be a First Order knight?"

"I am," Lloyd said, a ghost of a smile creeping onto his lips, "But you have a strong appetite for victory. That's a quality indispensable to any swordsman. Stay with me, and you'll certainly reach the mark."

Luke's gaze darted away from Lloyd once more. "Don't think this means I submit to you."

"Here." Unfazed, Lloyd stretched out a hand. "The name's Lloyd."

Reluctance etched on his face, Luke nonetheless clasped the proffered hand and hauled himself shakily to his feet.

"I'm prepared to mold you into a soldier, no matter what it takes. Ready yourself."

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Afterwards, Luke was restrained and led away by several men. His reckless display had harmed no one, but his use of a deadly weapon in mock combat was still a severe breach of conduct. Though his familial ties were likely to shield him from any formal punitive measures, a more-than-stern verbal berating from his fellow knights surely awaited him.

"Lloyd!" Meanwhile, as Lloyd returned from the arena, Chloe came flying out to greet him, almost as if she was preparing to fling her arms around him. "Are you okay? A-Are you hurt? Even a twisted ankle or—"

“Calm down.”

“Ow!” she yelped as Lloyd’s finger made contact with her forehead.

“I’m fine, unharmed.”

“Thank goodness...” Chloe massaged her forehead, her voice tinged with emotion.

Lloyd looked closer at her face—unshed tears pooled in the corner of her eyes. As he realized the depth of her concern, a wave of warmth washed over him. “I’m sorry for making you worry,” he said softly, brushing the tears from her eyes with a gentle touch.

“No, no, please...” Chloe shook her head vigorously before giving him a radiant smile. “I...I *knew* you would win.”

Her statement was so sincere, the conviction behind her words so powerful, Lloyd felt his heart flutter. The urge to place a hand on her head welled up, but he quickly suppressed it. He couldn’t allow himself to, not in the company of all those present. Instead, he mustered the biggest smile he could manage. “Thank you.”

An eruption of whispers broke out amongst Lloyd’s comrades, all of whom had been intently observing their intimate exchange.

“Lloyd...can smile?” one of them said.

“I guess there really is a first for everything,” another bantered back.

“Have we misjudged him all this while?”

Just like that, Lloyd’s fellow knights’ impression of him began to thaw. Who would have guessed that the Kingdom’s most formidable swordsman could sport such a tender smile? Who could have imagined that the stoic and aloof *Ebon Reaper* speaking with such warmth? Who knew beneath that harsh, icy exterior dwelt a man of kindness and affection?

Feeling the subtle change in the knights’ attitudes, a knowing smile stretched across Freddy’s face. “Well, would you look at that...”

Whether the man himself was aware of his transformation remained up for debate, but Freddy believed that living with Chloe had changed Lloyd for the

better. It was his theory that the enduring exposure to Chloe and her compassionate, kind nature had softened his demeanor. It had allowed him to form a deep bond with her and in turn, sparked a newfound understanding and appreciation for relationships.

The Lloyd of today was starkly different from his former self. He was no longer wary and distrustful of others, the lone wolf of old.

“You win, Chloe.”

In just two months, she had achieved what he had failed to do over many years. Suppressing the slightest hint of melancholy, Freddy raised his figurative glass in a toast to Chloe.

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After returning home from her day out at the castle, Chloe wrapped up the rest of her chores and prepared dinner. Once everything was in order, she settled down with a good book, awaiting Lloyd’s return.

He arrived home late that night, looking more tired than usual, and went straight for his bath. Afterwards, they shared their evening meal before relaxing in the living room, their customary post-dinner routine. Chloe, in a display of atypical slovenliness, let herself sink deep into the sofa’s plush cushions.

“Sorry for today,” Lloyd abruptly said, sitting next to her.

Caught off guard by his apology, Chloe tilted her head in confusion.

“I put you through a lot of trouble and discomfort today. If only I hadn’t forgotten my lunch this morning, none of this would’ve happened.”

“Oh, that?” Chloe responded in a gentle tone, trying her best to sound unbothered. “Please, don’t let it weigh too heavily on your mind.”

Lloyd stared at Chloe in silence.

“After all, forgetting lunch was partly my fault, too. As for Luke, well, I won’t deny I was a little shaken during our encounter, but it’s not like things got *too* out of hand. In fact...I actually found today quite fun. I got to see your workplace, I got to say hi to Freddy, and I...”

A warm smile spread across Chloe’s face.

“I even got to see you do what you do best. It was, um, quite the delight!”

Her voice was laced with the exhilaration of the day’s events as she reminisced. Lloyd scratched at his head, looking somewhat uncomfortable. It was a gesture all too familiar to Chloe at this point—an adorable tell of embarrassment.

“I should be apologizing as well,” Chloe suddenly said, dipping her head in a bow.

This time, it was Lloyd looking on in puzzled silence.

“Lloyd, you...deliberately put yourself in front of that attack, didn’t you?”

“Which attack?”

“The one near the end, when Luke threw the knife at you. With your skill, you surely could have dodged it, even at that distance, but...you didn’t.” Chloe paused. “You didn’t because...you knew I was behind you.”

Memories of the duel flashed through Lloyd’s mind. Chloe had been seated behind him. If he had evaded the dagger instead of intercepting it, it would have surely continued its trajectory past him and towards the spectators. Regardless of how slim the chance of Chloe being directly hit might have been, Lloyd couldn’t take that risk—not to mention the other bystanders who might have been harmed.

The calculus behind Lloyd’s decision was clear to him, but to Chloe, she felt as if she’d forced Lloyd into a dangerous situation yet again.

“You noticed?” Lloyd said, letting out a sigh of admiration. “You don’t need to apologize for that. I was merely prioritizing the safety and well-being of the people—as is my duty.”

“That...that doesn’t change the fact that you put yourself in harm’s way. If you had been even slightly off...”

“But I wasn’t, so why worry?”

“You’re right... You’re right—just...” Chloe reached out, grabbing the hem of Lloyd’s sleeve, her eyes glistening with tears. “Just promise me you won’t do that ever again, okay?”

Lloyd didn't respond immediately. He lapsed into silence, Chloe's pleading words echoing in his mind. Finally grasping the depth of her concern, he softly replied, "Sorry for making you worry."

His hand found its way to Chloe's head, tenderly stroking her silken hair.

"I should've called for an immediate stop to the duel when I saw the dagger, but I wasn't quick enough. My decision to intercept it was...made in haste." His hand gravitated down to her shoulder. "However, I don't believe it was the wrong one. If the unthinkable had come to pass, and you were hurt, I..."

His face pulled into a grimace as the thought cast a shadow over his heart.

"I don't know if I could ever forgive myself."

"Lloyd..." Chloe's hand covered his. In a soothing voice, as if lulling a child to sleep, she said, "Please, it's alright. I'm fine, aren't I?"

"Yes. Yes you are," Lloyd said, pulling Chloe into a heartfelt embrace.

"Thank you for protecting me," she whispered softly.

"Think nothing of it."

The two leaned into one another, their bodies overlapping in the silence. After a while, Lloyd spoke, "Thinking on it now, that duel should've never happened. If I hadn't risen to his provocations—if I had let you go, the situation could've been avoided."

"It did seem a touch unusual. Even with Freddy's consent, it still felt rather...inappropriate."

"No, you're right," he conceded. "This might be difficult for me to express, but I'll try..." Lloyd slipped into a momentary silence before continuing, his tone wavering with uncertainty. "When I returned to the training grounds after the ceremony and found you there with Luke, it...upset me. I don't know what it was, but it felt like my stomach was in turmoil."

"You felt...upset?"

Scratching his cheek, a sign of his discomfort, Lloyd admitted, "I can't quite make sense of it myself. I don't feel the same way when you talk to Freddy, but with Luke, I...couldn't keep my composure." Lloyd paused. "When he

challenged me, I found myself torn: my rational side wanted to dismiss the duel, to put an end to it, but another side, a more vengeful side, wanted to see him suffer, to see him put in his place. In the end, it was that side that drove me to accept."

Lloyd sounded out his conflict, the affect of a deeply lost man hanging over him. His exploration seemed fruitless, akin to seeking buried treasure amongst the clouds.

"Sorry, that was a strange thing to say."

"No, no... I understand... I think..." Chloe heard herself say, her voice trailing off with a strange utterance of her own. But inside, her mind was racing. Her ears felt as if they'd caught fire, and her heart pounded in her chest. A man feeling uncomfortable seeing a woman talk to another man—it reminded her of a plot beat that'd just come up in *Love & Knight*.

In the book, the heroine had felt something similar when the brave knight was approached by another woman. That emotion, what was it called again? It had been clearly written on the page. Was it...

Jealousy?

The word popped into her head, and a wave of exhilaration washed over her—a sense of joy filled her heart to the brim, and she thought she might faint from the overwhelming emotion.

"What are you smiling at?" Lloyd asked.

"Oh—ah!" Instinctively, she placed her hands on her cheeks, an attempt at controlling her wayward face; a faint warmth had spread there. "Nothing—nothing at all," Chloe said as she turned her face away.

Lloyd looked on in puzzlement. "Are you sure?"

Chloe remained facing away; she wouldn't dare to meet his gaze right now.

I-I'm so embarrassed...

For she feared that if she did, a phrase containing a certain four-letter word might've been her next utterance.

Chapter Four: A Shadow Cast Over the Day

The afternoon following the showdown between Lloyd and Luke, a horse-drawn carriage clattered its way down an avenue in the royal capital.

“Finally...”

Lily, Chloe’s elder sister by three years, expelled a profound sigh of relief. As she peered out from the carriage window upon the brick-laden cityscape, her own reflection stared back at her.

Her skin was porcelain-white, and her hair fiery red, its length cascading down her back. Her features, though already endowed with beauty and grace, were smothered by a layer of gaudy cosmetics—an earnest yet overzealous display of vanity that served more to mar than to enhance. She wore an opulent crimson dress, a garment that mirrored the hue of her mane, enveloping a curvaceous body that was the height of feminine allure.

Indeed, she was the spitting image of a noblewoman’s daughter.

“This is what I get for being born out in the middle of nowhere,” she grumbled, fatigue haunting her voice and her visage. It’d been a year since she last journeyed to the capital, and the trip was every bit as exhausting as she remembered. On this occasion, she’d come to attend a dinner party at the behest of the son of a powerful marquis. Though securing both the invitation and her mother’s permission had been a relief, she’d been far less enthusiastic about the journey that followed.

Tucked away in the northernmost regions of the kingdom, Shadaf was flanked on all sides by mountain ranges and blanketed in snow each winter, isolating it for the season. Her two-week trip was timed to coincide with the spring melt, taking her through treacherous mountains and sweeping valleys in a bone-jarring carriage ride. The journey was far from uneventful, the carriage frequently swerving and skidding on icy, partially melted paths. Many nights, she found herself too far from civilization to rest at an inn, forcing her to endure the freezing temperatures within the cramped confines of the carriage.

All those distressing memories, however, vanished the moment she laid eyes on the bustling city streets. Replacing them were the excitement, the joy, the anticipation of spending a few days in the big city. For Lily, this was a treat she only got to relish once a year at most.

A quiet giggle slipped past her lips. “How exciting,” she murmured. Her brand new evening gown was prepared and her manners were drilled to perfection. Her preparation for the dinner party had been meticulous. But, there was just one missing piece to speak of...

“If only I could’ve had my new dress embroidered... Just where did that stupid Chloe run off to?” she mumbled, grinding her teeth in frustration.

Although she would never dare let slip to her sister, Lily knew that Chloe’s embroideries were beautiful, one-of-a-kind creations. They never failed to draw the eye of admirers at soirees and dinner parties, and she’d always looked forward to showing them off.

“Why, *I* stitched this, of course!” she would invariably proclaim in the loudest voice she could muster and without so much as a shred of guilt, in a proud boast of her own femininity. In her mind, she was doing Chloe a favor, showcasing her talent to the masses in an act of kindness towards her otherwise unremarkable sibling.

The upcoming event at the marquis’s was where she most wanted to flaunt one of Chloe’s designs, but unfortunately, she’d been missing for over two months.

“I’m losing out on a chance to show off... How vexing,” she grumbled. There was no hint of concern in her voice for her baby sister, only anger—anger towards Chloe for disappearing, and for daring to abscond with one of her dresses.

“Well, there’s no point thinking about it now, is there?” she chided herself gently. Turning her focus to the present, she said, “First up, some sightseeing. Oh, what fun!”

With a day to spare in the royal capital, Lily decided that shopping and tourism were on the agenda. She gave a firm nod of approval at the idea, the excitement of her upcoming adventures lifting her spirits high.

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“Chloe, sweetie, welcome! How ya doin’? We have pork on special today!”

One afternoon, Chloe arrived at Ciel’s for her usual shopping.

“Oooh, pork!” she replied.

“Mushrooms are fresh as well; throw ’em both in a pot, stew ’em together with a little red wine, it’ll be delicious, I guarantee it!”

“Wow, that *does* sound delicious!”

Ciel’s meal idea once again stimulated Chloe’s imagination and appetite, when suddenly, a familiar voice called her name.

Chloe turned around, met with the sight of a pale-skinned man with flaxen hair and emerald eyes peering at her from behind a pair of antique round glasses. “Oh! Ian, hello!” she said. The bookstore owner held a shopping bag in his hand.

“Welcome Ian, what can I get for ya today?” Ciel asked.

“Hmm... I’m in the mood for fish again, I think.”

“You sure do love your fish, don’t ya, Ian—no worries, I gotcha. How about some amberjack filets—straight from the North Sea! How about it? Goes great with butter!”

“That sounds divine. I’ll take that then.”

“Right away, sweetie!” Ciel moved over to the fish counter, leaving Ian and Chloe alone.

“Do you also shop here often, Ian?” asked Chloe.

“I do, yes. I almost always purchase my groceries from here. You too, Miss Chloe?”

“Yes! Miss Ciel’s amazing; she’s always so warm and friendly—and her recipe suggestions are a lifesaver. I don’t know what I’d do without her!”

“I understand all too well. She is quite a treasure, isn’t she?”

“Hey! I heard that. Talkin’ about me behind my back, are ya?” Ciel shot back,

half teasing. “All in good fun, I hope.” She returned, proffering the packaged filet to Ian. “Just so ya know, Chloe, Ian’s one of my regulars too. Here’s your fish, Ian, and thank you.”

“Thank you kindly,” Ian replied as he exchanged the fish for a few coins.

Chloe couldn’t help but giggle as she watched their interaction.

“Is something the matter?” Ian inquired.

“No, nothing really. I was just thinking about how you seem...different, today.”

“Ah, do I now? Well, it is my day off, so I am dressed rather casually,” Ian replied, glancing down at the simple sweater he wore in place of the exacting button-down shirt and cardigan combo he usually sported in the bookstore. His gaze then shifted to Chloe. “What about yourself, Miss Chloe—that’s quite the lovely dress.”

“Really, you think so? Thank you!” Chloe’s face lit up, taking the compliment in stride. She was wearing her sister’s dress—the one she’d taken that fateful day. She still wore it occasionally for errands.

Ciel leaned in to get a better look at the dress. “I’ve been meaning to ask ya, but where’d ya get that embroidery done? It’s awfully pretty.” Her eyes were drawn to the intricate design in the shape of a small bird.

“Oh, that? I did that myself.”

Ciel’s eyes widened in astonishment. “Ya did that yourself, Chloe?” She examined the embroidery more closely. “That’s amazing... I thought for sure ya had that done at one of the high-end shops here in the capital. The detail in the stitches, the color choice and balance—the craftsmanship’s exquisite!”

Ian, too, leaned in to examine the embroidery. “Exceptional...” he murmured.

“Th-Thank you! I’m very flattered. I suppose the long night of hard work paid off...” As genial and kind as their words were, Chloe couldn’t quite reconcile them with the critiques she was used to. Her only critic up until now was Lily, who had never once complimented her for her work. *Hideous. What’s that supposed to be? Tasteless.* Those scathing lines were more her speed.

Ciel, lost in thought, stroked her chin, drawing Chloe's attention. "Um, Miss Ciel?" she ventured.

Suddenly, Ciel's hands reached out, gently clasping Chloe's, a serious look on her face. "Chloe, sweetie, I have a huge favor to ask of ya."

"Oh! Um, if it's something I can do, then...sure."

"There's a dress I've been meaning to wear; could you embroider it for me?"

"Yes—of course!" Chloe replied. "It's just, um, I might not be able to get it to you by tomorrow morning if that's okay..."

"Tomorrow morning? What are you, crazy?! Who in their right mind would expect such intricate work to be done overnight?!"

A wry smile crept onto Chloe's face, a nervous laugh trickling out. "Y-Yes, indeed..." Her mind drifted towards her tyrant of a sister, and the glib, flippant way she would foist last-minute work onto her in the middle of the night. After adjusting to life at Lloyd's, even Chloe had come to understand the absurdity of her former circumstances. Turning her thoughts back to Ciel, a question crossed her mind. "Is this for some kind of special event?" she asked.

"Actually, yes. I've been invited to a party hosted by a certain nobleman."

"A-A nobleman?!" Chloe exclaimed, her eyes shot wide. "Forgive my forwardness, Miss Ciel, but are you...?"

"A noble? Goodness, no. Y'ever see a noble as ragged-looking as I am?"

Another nervous laugh escaped Chloe's lips. "O-Of course not..." Her mind wandered back to her own appearance of just a few months ago, when she'd arrived in the capital—disheveled and tattered, like a worn-out rag.

"Ya see, I'm a merchant by trade. I manage the procurement of goods for the region," Ciel explained. "That role has me keeping a lot of the nobility in my company; that's why I was invited."

"I-I see... I had no idea you were so powerful, Miss Ciel!"

"Powerful? Me? Hah! I just happened to inherit the family business, that's all. Gotta thank those ancestors of mine."

“But, wow... You run this stall and manage a business at the same time? That’s very impressive!”

“Why, that’s sweet of ya to say,” Ciel responded, looking around her lively stall fondly. “Running this stall is my escape, you could say. I started it ’cause I find interacting with customers much more my speed than running a company.” She let out a hearty chuckle before steering the conversation back. “But enough about that, Chloe. How about that embroidery? I think it would be the perfect touch for my dress. I’d of course pay you for your work. As long as you think you have the time I’d—”

“I would love to!” Chloe interrupted, unable to contain her eagerness. She’d been wanting to accept Ciel’s offer from the moment it was made, seeing it as a wonderful way to thank her for her exceptional service.

“Well, thanks, Chloe! Come around tomorrow or the day after and I’ll have the dress ready for you.”

“Sure! And we should also discuss what kind of design you’re looking for.”

“You’re such a dear, Chloe. Here, take these and these, consider them a little tip in advance.”

“Oh my, all this? Thank you so much!” Chloe glanced down at her now overflowing grocery bag, and bowed her head in appreciation. Her face beamed with a mixture of joy from the unexpected additional groceries and the thrill of getting to work on a dress once more.

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Walking home from Ciel’s, Chloe hummed a cheerful melody as she and Ian amicably strolled side by side—their homeward paths conveniently coinciding.

“You must be in a good mood,” remarked Ian with a gentle smile.

“Ah! Sorry.” Chloe mumbled back, instinctively scratching at her reddening cheeks. “I guess I’m just a little excited. It’s been a while since anyone’s asked anything of me outside my housekeeping duties.”

“You’re a housekeeper, Miss Chloe?”

“Oh, yes, I am! I work as a live-in housekeeper for a knight. I thought I’d

mentioned it."

"A knight..." Ian mused. "That would explain your interest..."

"Oh, in *Love and Knight*? Yes—exactly. That must be why. Indeed..." Chloe squirmed under the precision of Ian's observation, a shy discomfort etched into her features.

"What is he like? This knight of yours."

"He's so incredibly handsome!" Chloe gushed, her words ringing with adoration. "Not only that, but he's also strong, and always calm and fearless and resolute... Granted, he can be a little blunt or awkward about things at times, but if you ask me, that just adds to his charm. Above all else, he's the kindest man you'll ever meet! He even hired me when I first arrived in the capital all lost and—" She paused, a soft gasp escaping her. "I-I'm so sorry, I did it again, didn't I? I babbled on and on..."



“No, not at all,” Ian let out a deep breath. “You must love him dearly.”

“L-Love? I-I certainly...wouldn’t...” Chloe’s ears flamed a vivid red, her hands rising to meet her burning cheeks. Her words denied, yet her face spoke volumes.

Ah, I see... Ian concluded. He hadn’t seen her knight, nor did he know anything about him personally, but Chloe’s heartfelt reaction told him everything he needed to know.

His face softened with wistful acceptance as he admitted, “I suppose that’s hardly surprising. He does sound like a remarkable man.”

“Ian?”

“Ah, it’s nothing—nothing at all,” Ian replied, quickly pasting on a bright expression. “Speaking of which, thank you for the cookies from last time, they were a delight.”

“You’re very welcome! I’m glad you liked them.”

“The hint of almond and the subtle sweetness made them wonderfully moreish,” Ian continued. “Embroidery, baking, housekeeping... There’s no end to your talents, is there, Miss Chloe?”

“No, no, of course not...” Chloe shook her head dismissively, yet unaccustomed to praise. While Lloyd had somewhat bolstered her self-esteem in the line of her work, she was still traversing the long road to full self-assurance. Time and time alone could heal the deep scars inflicted by the years of abuse from her family and servants.

As they talked, they soon found themselves in front of a familiar city park.

“Miss Monkey Lady!” A familiar voice called out.

Chloe turned to see Millia, adorned in yet another frilly dress, trot up to them. “Hello, Millia!”

“Hello!” Millia swiveled her head towards Ian. “Who are you?”

“Hello, young lady. It is a pleasure to meet you. My name is Ian.”

“Hello, Ian! My name is Millia! Nice to meet you, too!” Millia greeted, offering

a spirited curtsy.

Witnessing her genteel behavior, Ian gave an approving nod. “What a polite little lady.”

“She really is,” Chloe agreed. “You’re a very good girl, aren’t you, Millia?”

Millia giggled, her shyness a charming cloak. “I’m a good girl!”

A warm smile graced Chloe’s face as she stooped to pat Millia’s head. “Othello isn’t here with you today?” she asked.

“Nope! I invited Othello to come to the park, but he just sat on the sofa and wouldn’t budge...” Millia replied, puffing out her cheeks in sulky displeasure.

Chloe chuckled. “That’s just how cats can be sometimes...”

Suddenly, a new voice broke into their conversation from behind. “Hello, Chloe.”

“Miss Sara, hello!”

Advancing towards them, wrapped in her customary aura of grace and maturity, was Millia’s mother. Ian stepped forward and offered a respectful nod. “Long time no see, Miss Sara, how have you been?”

“Oh, hello Ian; it’s been too long.”

“This lovely little girl must be the daughter you’ve spoken of.”

“Yes, indeed. She’ll be turning five this year.”

“Well, she is extraordinarily polite and well-behaved.”

“Why, thank you,” Sara returned, a light giggle punctuating her words.

Observing their friendly rapport, Chloe asked, “Do you two know each other?”

“Miss Sara is one of my regular customers,” Ian replied.

“Indeed. Ian’s bookstore is one of my favorite haunts.”

Chloe nodded along. “Really? I had no idea.” As her thoughts darted between Sara, Ian, and books, the intersection of all three formed a clear picture in her mind. “Ah, that reminds me! Sara, I read *Love and Knight*!”

“My!” Sara spun towards Chloe. “It’s about time! Alright, quickly now, what

did you think?”

“It-It was really good!” Chloe stammered back, caught off guard by Sara’s tripling volume.

Sara’s head nodded in rapid-fire agreement. “What did I tell you? I told you, didn’t I?” Her typically serene eyes now shimmered with a fervor akin to the brilliance of all the stars in the night sky.

“The characters were interesting, the story was captivating—especially that last part, it was so... Ah, if only I knew the words to articulate my thoughts better...”

“Don’t worry, Chloe. Words are not necessary between us—our hearts resonate through the bond that is *KnightLove*.”

“Oh, is that the shorthand?” Chloe said. She gazed fondly at Sara—seeing the dignified lady morph into an infatuated maiden over the mere mention of the book was a heartwarming sight.

Sara then shifted her attention to Ian. “I presume you’ve read *KnightLove* yourself, Ian?”

“I have indeed—picked it up on the day it was released.”

“My! I expected nothing less. Say, are we all free right now? I’d love to hear both of your thoughts!”

“Yes! That sounds delightful!” Chloe replied.

“I’d be honored.”

Propelled by Sara’s enthusiasm, the trio relocated to a nearby bench to commence their impromptu book club. First to share was Sara. Chloe listened attentively as she divulged details and speculations about the book that only a veteran of multiple readings could discern.

Then came Ian, a bookstore owner blessed with a vast reservoir of literary references and knowledge, who relayed his thoughts in a way that was both articulate and relatable. Chloe nodded along, thoroughly enjoying his insightful commentary.

When it was her turn, Chloe tried her best to express her thoughts on

KnightLove. Despite her limited knowledge of literary terminology and vocabulary, Ian and Sara listened intently, encouraging her with their approving nods.

This is...really fun, Chloe realized. The joy, the excitement, the novelty of sharing thoughts and moments with fellow enthusiasts—she felt it keenly. Paying no heed to the pace of the setting sun, she lost herself to the world of *KnightLove.* The trio continued their animated discussion until their voices grew hoarse, only concluding when an impatient Millia tugged at her mother's sleeve, asking, "Mom, can we go home yet?"

"It's been a long while since I've had such a lively literary discussion," Ian said, a playful lilt to his voice.

"Ian, Chloe, thank you. That was absolutely delightful."

"Thank *you*, this was so much fun!" Chloe replied.

"Chloe," Sara continued, "the book you're on now is also a winner; when you're done, we can talk all about it!"

"I'm looking forward to it!"

With that, the impromptu gathering disbanded. Sara and Millia took their leave first, followed by Ian, each splitting off from Chloe as their paths diverged. Now alone, Chloe felt a buoyant spring in her step, a lively energy coursing through her. "I think I might actually love reading..." she mumbled quietly to no one in particular.

Relishing in the sheer joy of sharing her newfound passion with like-minded people, Chloe continued her homeward journey, her heart still brimming with the warmth of their shared camaraderie.

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A few days later, after dinner, Chloe sat on the sofa, needle in hand, stitching away at a dress on her lap.

"What are you doing?" Sitting next to her, a curious Lloyd asked.

Without tearing her gaze from her work, Chloe responded, "Embroidery."

A noise somewhere between understanding and bemusement hummed from

Lloyd.

“It’s for Miss Ciel,” she added.

“Is that the stall owner you’re always talking about?”

“Yes, exactly!”

“I see.” Lloyd watched in fascination as her hands worked expertly. “I may not know much about embroidery but even I can tell—those are the seasoned hands of a master.”

Chloe’s hand continued to weave around with the precision and grace of a maestro conducting an orchestra. “It’s nothing so impressive—just muscle memory; I’ve been practicing since I was young,” she said, as the silhouette of a flower blossomed beneath her nimble strokes—a white bloom symbolizing “prosperity” in the royal capital.

“Like I said, sewing is one of my great personal failings—I tried once, and it was miserable. Watching you at it, I can’t help but be amazed.”

Chloe giggled. “Thanks. Still, it’s a bit embarrassing when you put it like that.”

Towards her grinning visage, Lloyd stretched out a hand but halted halfway, releasing an equivocal grunt.

“Ah...?” Chloe sensed his hesitation. Perhaps he deemed it risky to touch someone engaged in needlework, she reasoned, and paused her hands. Shifting slightly, she inclined her head towards Lloyd with a hint of expectation.

Yet Lloyd, instead of taking her up on her wordless invitation, scratched at his head sheepishly and mumbled, “I’m...sorry.” His hand reached out again, this time to pick something from her shoulder. “There was some lint on your shoulder; I thought I’d get it for you.”

“...Oh.” Chloe’s face and neck heated. “I-I’m so sorry. How silly of me...”

“No, the fault is mine. My actions were misleading.”

A deafening silence fell.

“So...are you not going to pet me?” Chloe’s soft voice was the first to pierce the stillness. Her eyes pleaded, reflecting the longing of her request as she

inched closer to Lloyd, leaning into him.

Her words were so innocent, her actions so pure, like that of a kitten beseeching its owner, that Lloyd felt his resolve nearly waver. Without a word, he moved his hand—this time, towards her head.

The touch of his rough, calloused hand against her head elicited a satisfied giggle from Chloe. Each gentle stroke of his hand drew her eyes into a softer focus until they finally closed completely, a portrait of tranquility.

“You really enjoy this, don’t you?” asked Lloyd.

“Hmm... I suppose I do,” Chloe murmured back, nuzzling her head further into Lloyd’s hand. “Consider it...making up for lost time.”

Lloyd detected a trace of melancholy, a sliver of desolation buried in her voice. The mysteries of Chloe’s past remained unknown to him. He was aware she had fled to escape her knife-wielding mother, but as for the circumstances leading up to that moment, the nature of her life prior to their encounter, he could only speculate.

Even so, he was certain of it.

The apparent lack of self-esteem, the distant, lifeless looks that she exhibited from time to time—it was all too clear that Chloe’s family circumstances had been anything but normal. Rather than being nurtured and encouraged, she’d been belittled and undermined. Instead of experiencing unconditional love, she’d been forced to depend solely on herself.

The hand that had been resting on Chloe’s head now drew her into a gentle embrace.

“L-Lloyd?” she stammered back, feeling a sudden surge of heat in her cheeks and a pounding in her heart.

As if to assuage her panic, Lloyd’s soothing voice washed over her. “Take all the time you need to make up for what’s lost; whenever you need me, call and I’ll answer.”

Lloyd’s heartfelt words sent Chloe’s stomach aflutter. Her emotional resilience stood as a testament to her strength, yet even she had moments

when she longed to succumb to the frailty of her feelings. All the past instances when she had no choice but to suppress such yearnings only fueled her desire to experience them now all the more. A stalwart figure had finally come to her true rescue, and she found herself swept up in a wave of gratitude towards the man who had bravely stuck out his hand.

“Thank you, Lloyd.” she muttered, her eyes welling up with tears, her voice thick with unshed tears. Accepting his generous offer, Chloe allowed herself to bask in the comforting warmth of his embrace for a while longer.

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The next morning, Chloe made her way down to Ciel’s stall to deliver her newly embroidered dress. Arriving before the stall officially opened for business, she found Ciel busily preparing for the day, arranging goods in anticipation of the bustling hours ahead.

Catching sight of Chloe, Ciel said, “G’morning, Chloe, how are you?” Her gaze then fell upon the dress Chloe was holding. “Oh! I think I know why you’re here!”

“Indeed! All done!” Chloe replied jubilantly, presenting the dress to Ciel.

Ciel’s eyes immediately shot to Chloe’s creation, a gasp of awe slipping past her lips. Chloe had woven into the fabric an exquisite white flower, its pristine beauty framed by elegant stitching dancing rhythmically all around it. The attention to detail was striking, with vibrant colors that captured the eye and left a lasting impression. Even at a cursory glance, the quality was clear: this was the work of a professional.

“H-How is it?” Chloe ventured nervously.

“Th-This is beyond incredible!” Ciel exclaimed.

Chloe found no reason to question Ciel’s sincerity. The proprietress was darting from one spot to another, examining the dress from every conceivable angle, each shift in her position eliciting yet another gasp of admiration.

“Thank goodness... I’m so glad you like it,” Chloe replied, her relief escaping in a heartfelt sigh.

“You blew my expectations outta the water! I knew asking you was the right choice.”

Chloe responded with a light giggle. “Thank you. I enjoyed making it too; it’s been a while since I’ve touched a needle.” Her words were sincere, her gratitude genuine. For all the embroidery she’d done for Lily, not once had her work received the praise it deserved. Ciel’s exuberant reaction was a welcome change from her sister’s usual criticisms, inflating Chloe’s heart with pride.

“Gimme one second, sweetie. I got somethin’ for ya,” Ciel said, momentarily disappearing behind her stall.

Is she going to give me more produce? She’s already been so generous...

Such were the thoughts running through Chloe’s mind when Ciel returned, holding out a small pouch. “Here, take this,” she offered.

Chloe held out her hands, and the pouch landed in her palms with a surprising thud. Sensing its considerable weight, Chloe peeked inside to discover a hefty sum of coins. “Th-This is too much!” she exclaimed. The contents of the pouch were equivalent to her entire month’s wages. “Th-There must have been a mistake, I can’t accept this! Not when you already do so much for me!”

“Nope, that’s all yours.” In the face of Chloe’s flustered state, Ciel maintained a firm countenance. “Chloe, *never* let anyone undervalue your work—and that includes yourself. I’m only paying ya what ya deserve and not a penny more.”

“But...still! My embroidery can’t possibly be worth this much!” Chloe dismissed.

“Of course it is—who do ya think you’re talkin’ to? Believe me when I say it—*you* have done something truly exceptional. Hold your head high, ya hear?” Ciel punctuated her sentence with a bright smile and firm nod.

Realizing that Ciel, a seasoned merchant who likely saw more money in a day than she did in a year, was more than qualified to assess the value of her work, Chloe’s reluctance began to fade; she could think of no reason for Ciel to exaggerate purely out of kindness. A brief internal struggle later, Chloe let out a resigned sigh. She concluded that declining such a fair reward might be more discourteous than accepting it. “I...understand. Thank you very much, Miss

Ciel.”

“There ya go, I knew you’d come around!” Ciel affirmed with a nod.

“I truly mean it—thank you so very much.”

“I know, I know,” dismissed Ciel. “I’ll let ya know if I’ve got something else for ya.”

“Of course! Anytime.”

After wrapping up their conversation, Chloe decided to pick up a few items for dinner before heading home. The weight of the coins in her pocket seemed to match a new, distinct heaviness in her heart—a fusion of gratitude, accomplishment, and pride.

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That night, over a delicious herb-roasted chicken—compliments of Ciel—Chloe hummed a joyful tune, delighting in every mouthful.

“You certainly seem to be in a great mood,” remarked Lloyd.

Caught off guard, Chloe replied, “Y-You can tell?”

“It’s hard to miss your cheerful humming. I think anyone could tell.”
“I-I was doing that?”

“You didn’t realize?”

Chloe’s cheeks flamed in embarrassment. Clearing her throat, she said, “Miss Ciel praised my embroidery—she said it was beyond incredible. That alone made my day, but...” Chloe got up and fetched the pouch from earlier. With the pride of a child showcasing their painstakingly built sandcastle to their parents, she revealed its contents to Lloyd. “Look at what she paid me. Can you believe it?”

Lloyd’s eyes subtly widened. “That is very impressive,” he said with a sigh of admiration and a nod of acknowledgment.

A sudden realization dawned on Chloe. “I should’ve told you sooner, shouldn’t I? That I was getting paid for it. I’m so sorry; that wasn’t my intention.”

“That’s fine,” responded Lloyd. “I have no issue with you taking up other work as long as it doesn’t interfere with your job here. But knowing you, that’s hardly a concern.”

“Thank you. And yes, the last thing I would ever do is neglect my responsibilities here.”

This assurance, of course, wasn’t empty rhetoric. Compared to her time at the Ardennes state, her current workload was significantly lighter. Having moved from an environment where cleaning occupied her days and embroidery her nights, one additional task was hardly enough to break her back.

Lloyd held Chloe in his gaze. “I think it’s commendable you’re getting compensated for doing what you’re good at. You should keep at it.”

Chloe’s heart swelled. “Thank you, I will! That is, if I ever get asked again, or if I’m in the mood...” Suddenly, she struck her fist to her other palm, a spark of inspiration lighting up her eyes. “I know! How about I embroider something for you?”

“For me?”

“Yes! Your uniform probably isn’t the best choice, but maybe a casual piece of clothing...or a handkerchief! An extra piece of stitchwork will make anything all the more stylish!”

“Really? That sounds like a good idea; style *is* important, after all.” Lloyd crossed his arms and nodded his head deeply in agreement. “Very well, could I ask that of you?”

“Of course! I’ll start thinking about a design that would suit you.”

“I’ll leave it to you.”

With her mood elevated even further, Chloe returned her attention to her dinner.

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“Your technique is a beautiful thing to behold,” Lloyd commented post-dinner, sneaking a glance at Chloe’s handiwork as she diligently stitched away at a handkerchief. “Is that a sword?”

“Yes, it is! I thought, what better way to represent you...”

“A sword for a swordsman, makes sense,” Lloyd murmured, his eyes fixated on Chloe’s lap.

Feeling the intensity of his gaze, Chloe playfully protested, “You know, it’s just a tiny bit embarrassing to be watched so intently...”

“Sorry, am I bothering you?”

“No, not at all!” Chloe reassured quickly “You’re welcome to watch; that’s fine. I just figured this wouldn’t be all that exciting for you.”

“But it is. For someone like me whose sewing skills are about as good as a newborn’s, this is fairly fascinating.”

“Surely that’s not...”

“I bloody myself more often with a needle in hand than with a sword in battle.”

“...Or perhaps it is,” Chloe replied. “Well, strengths and weaknesses...”

“The more I watch, the more I’m convinced: your skill is truly exceptional. You must have spent years honing your craft.”

Lloyd’s observation was innocuous and fair, and yet, it struck a jarring chord within Chloe, stilling her once flowing hands. “Yes, indeed...” she echoed, her voice slipping into a whisper.

A flurry of thoughts erupted in her mind: when was she first made to hold a needle in her hand? It must have been at least six years ago—a time when she hadn’t even reached her tenth birthday, and her mother had commanded her to mend a torn dress. Her inexperienced and naive mind knew nothing of stitches or seams, and she could only wring her hands in a clumsy imitation of what her eyes had previously seen. Needless to say, her first attempt had been a disaster, resulting in a severe reprimand from her mother.

In the aftermath, Shirley took it upon herself to teach Chloe. Her aptitude flourished under this tutelage, her nimble fingers and agile mind propelling her to learn at an impressive pace, and before long, the entirety of the estate’s needlework had been entrusted to her and her alone. At that point, it was only

inevitable that her diligent work would catch Lily's eye, culminating in a request for embroidery, the first of many to come.

Back then, ignorant as she'd been of the absurdity of her condition, Chloe didn't think much of it, and only complied with Lily's unreasonable demands. All that remained of that era now were fragmented memories: the struggle to keep her heavy eyelids open, and the sharp bite of the needle puncturing her calloused, pruned hands. As the past unfurled, Chloe found her face pulled in a grimace, her teeth digging into her bottom lip.

"Chloe, are you alright?" Lloyd asked, noticing her clouded expression.

"Oh. Yes, no, I'm..."
Her cadence, wavering and uncertain, only confirmed his suspicions. "I'm sorry. I stirred up some painful memories, didn't I?"

Seeing Lloyd's shoulders sag in disheartened silence, Chloe blurted out, "N-No, don't apologize, please!" *This is my own fault for not telling you...* she chastised herself.

If only she was brave enough to lay herself bare, if only she wasn't so terrified of the truth shattering their comfortable familiarity, perhaps he wouldn't feel the need to tread so carefully around her.

She'd been running from it, and Lloyd, in his gentle consideration, had always unknowingly given her a way out. But she knew—things could not remain in stasis forever. She could not continue to turn a blind eye to reality.

She had to muster her courage and speak out, if not for her own sake, then for the man who had shown her nothing but kindness and understanding.

Say it...

Emboldened by this resolution, Chloe decided to lay bare the truth that she'd kept hidden.

"Um, Lloyd?"

"Yes?"

"There's something I need to tell you."

Lloyd hummed thoughtfully. The seriousness of Chloe's tone and demeanor

wasn't lost on him. Matching her solemnity, he braced himself for her impending revelation.

"In truth, I'm actually—"

Just as the words were about to leave her lips, a searing pain radiated through Chloe's body.

First, it was her chest, followed by a deep, aching pain in her lungs, as though they were being smothered by a slab of lead. Then, it was her back—her birthmark, the cruel brand of her cursed nature and the history of abuse she'd endured, felt as if it was ablaze.

You are a cursed child! You bring nothing but disaster and misfortune! You can't be allowed to live! Her mother's shrill, hair-raising voice rang in her ears; the world seemed to spin around her.

Why? She wanted to tell him—she *needed* to tell him. So why was this happening? Why won't the words come out?

Her trembling frame curled inward, and her eyes fell to the hard, cold floor.

"Chloe?"

Lloyd's voice, laced with anxiety, echoed beside her, but Chloe couldn't respond.

"What's going on? Talk to me."

At last, Lloyd's frantic tone jolted Chloe back to reality. As she surfaced from the episode, the pain disappeared. "N-Nothing—it's...nothing," was all she managed to say, far from a satisfactory explanation.

"That didn't look like nothing to me..."

"I'm sorry. I think I might be a little tired... That's all."

"I see." Recognizing her growing reticence, Lloyd refrained from probing further. Instead, he dropped a comforting hand on her head. "Don't push yourself too hard."

His thoughtfulness stoked a deeper ache within her heart. "Thank...you," she managed to whisper, pasting a strained smile on her face. She then put away

her sewing kit and rose to her feet. “I think I’ll retire for the day.”

“Sure. Have a good night; rest well.”

Those were the final words exchanged that night as Chloe climbed the stairs to her chamber. “Why?” she muttered, her hands covering her face, her words thick with emotion.

The question was rhetorical, the answer all too clear to her. This was another repercussion of her traumatic past, just as the episode with the kitchen knife had been—the painful legacy left by her knife-wielding mother.

Her body was rebelling against her attempts to confess her past. As she cursed her own frailty, a new anxiety sprouted in her mind: the fear that she might *never* find the strength to reveal her truth.

Little did she know that she wouldn’t need to find that courage—the opportunity to unmask her past would present itself to her, unbidden.

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In the most prestigious district of the capital, inside the grand ballroom of an extravagant mansion, an evening soiree was in full swing. A chandelier dangled from the ceiling, casting its exquisite, almost blinding glare upon the gilded walls of the ballroom. Beneath its radiant gleam men and women of noble rank milled about, draped in decadence. Their display of finery was not only a testament to their own wealth, but also a salute to the splendor and magnificence of their host.

In the company of the Marquis Gimul this evening were high-ranking dukes and princes, far-flung lesser lords and margraves, and every member of the aristocracy in between. It was a most opportune night for some of the less influential to ingratiate themselves with the more powerful.

Tucked away in one corner of the night's festivities, a particular scene was unfolding.

"Master Luke!" Lily called out, her approach impeccably timed to coincide with the departure of Luke's prior company.

As he turned towards the familiar voice, a genial smile rose to Luke's face. "Lady Lily, what a surprise."

Tonight marked only the second occasion the two had crossed paths, the first being at a similar function hosted by House Gimul in the capital just over two years prior.

"Thank you for inviting me to this splendid event," said Lily.

"Certainly. And thank you for making the trip. Traveling all the way from Shadaf must have been quite the journey."

"Oh, not at all!" she countered immediately. "Two weeks on the road is but a small price to pay for the chance to see Master Luke once again."

Luke chuckled. "Well, aren't you sweet?"

Spellbound by Luke's captivating smile, Lily ventured, "I must say, Master Luke, you are every bit as dignified and masculine as I remember."

"Thank you, Lily. I'm glad to see that you also remain...unchanged," Luke replied, his voice lowering to an intimate whisper.

“My! You flatter me,” Lily responded, a faint blush rising to her cheeks. “Incidentally, Master Luke, I heard you joined the esteemed First Order of Knights Rose, is that true?”

“Yes, that’s right,” he replied. “I *was* the top of my class at the Knight’s Academy, after all. It might as well have been fate itself that willed me into their ranks.”

“My! How impressive!” Luke’s shameless self-admiration didn’t seem to bother Lily in the slightest. Her eyes glimmered with adoration, her hands clasped together as though she were in worship.

Lily was no stranger to the First Order, their feats having reached even her ears in Shadaf. She knew them to be the chosen few, the elite warriors of the Kingdom, so to be among them was to epitomize strength. And strength, as it were, was her most desired trait in a suitor.

Luke was her perfect man, the handsome and stalwart knight she had dreamed of marrying since she was a little girl. Unfortunately for her, however, Luke thought of her as yet another uncouth backwater noble, hardly worthy of his attention—not that he would say so out loud. Maintaining relations with the country’s margraves, those who oversaw the kingdom’s frontiers, was of paramount importance, after all.

Oblivious to Luke’s personal sentiments, Lily continued to fawn over him. “Even the esteemed First Order would surely consider themselves lucky to have someone as promising and gifted as you in their ranks!”

Upon her words, a strange grunt escaped Luke’s lips, as if he was reminded of a bitter memory.

“Master Luke?”

“O-Of course! As the promising top graduate of the Knight’s Academy, it’s only a matter of time before I become their ace.”

Unmindful of the wavering conviction in his aura, Lily continued her effusive praise, “Indeed! You’re Master Luke, after all!”

“Pardon my interruption.” A third voice unexpectedly joined their conversation. An older woman, she dipped her head respectfully. “Good

evening, Master Luke. It is a distinct privilege to be here tonight."

"Ah, Ciel, I'm honored you could attend. Not a day goes by without hearing somebody mention the amazing work that you're doing."

"Likewise, Master Luke. Your accomplishments since graduating are—"

"That's quite enough about me," interjected Luke. "That painting that you procured for us last time, by the way—it has completely revitalized our parlor. I don't know how you do it, but you never cease to impress."

"Your kind words humble me. It is my honor to serve."

Seizing the lull in the conversation, Lily asked Luke, "Who might this be?"

Without missing a beat, Ciel dipped her head in a courteous bow. "It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I am Ciel, Managing Director of The Mericura Company, at your service."

"Good evening, I'm Lily, eldest daughter of the Margrave of Ardennes," Lily returned formally. "The director of The Mericura Company, you say? A pleasure indeed." *Ugh, a merchant? Well, this is a waste of time,* she grumbled internally.

Though The Mericura Company was ranked among the top three trading companies in the capital, a prestigious entity that had weathered generations and outlasted countless competitors, Lily could not see past Ciel's status.

As she searched for a tactful way to withdraw from the conversation, her eyes fell upon Ciel's shoulder—and the white floral embroidery adorning her dress. "Wh-What?!" she blurted out, momentarily forgetting her company. An intense wave of déjà vu washed over her. *That design... It looks exactly like Chloe's work...*

"Is there something wrong with the embroidery?" Ciel asked.

"Oh, um, no..." Lily stammered back.

Intrigued, Luke's attention also fell on the embroidered piece. He hummed appreciatively. "Such intricate craftsmanship. I would expect no less from the director herself; you certainly have a keen eye for quality."

"Thank you. Your compliments honor me."

“Where might one procure a similar piece, if I may ask?” inquired Luke.

Ciel’s face lit up, as if she’d been awaiting this question. “The dress is off-the-shelf, but the embroidery is custom-made.”

Luke hummed inquisitively, encouraging her to elaborate.

“I run a small business as a hobby. One of my regular customers there did this for me,” said Ciel.

“Well, that is quite something. They must possess extraordinary talent to craft something of this caliber,” said Luke.

“You are quite right about that,” replied Ciel. “She currently works as a housekeeper, but if you ask me, she could make a career out of this.”

While Luke and Ciel continued their pleasant chatter, Lily couldn’t keep her focus. Her mind was racing. “Miss Ciel, this customer of yours, could you describe her?”

“Oh, she’s the most adorable thing—light pink hair, rather petite.”

Even Ciel’s description seemed to align perfectly. Lily found herself desperate to know her name, but she bit back the question. Chloe’s disappearance was still a tightly guarded secret; there were undoubtedly those among the partygoers who would recognize her name. It wouldn’t do if rumors were to spread.

But that’s...just not possible, she chided herself. Yet, the striking familiarity of the design and Ciel’s given description seemed too compelling to be a coincidence.

This was the capital, she argued. It had taken her two weeks to travel here from Shadaf, and that was by carriage. Furthermore, when Chloe left, it’d been in the depths of winter. Could she have possibly escaped Shadaf’s mountainous confines and journeyed all the way to the capital under such treacherous conditions?

Two contradictions waged a war in Lily’s mind. She struggled to accept the possibility of Chloe making it here, yet the embroidery seemed to provide incontrovertible proof.

Finally, her mind settled on the one course of action that could resolve all of her doubts: “Forgive my forwardness, Miss Ciel, but could you share where your shop is located and when this customer of yours might be likely to visit? I find myself terribly taken with her work and would like to meet her.”

Chapter Five: I'll Tell You Everything

As the festivities at House Gimul carried on, Chloe emerged from her bath in Lloyd's home, releasing a deep, satisfied sigh. She patted herself dry with a towel before wrapping it around her body and stepping into the adjoining changing room.

The wondrous marvel that is the bath, as Chloe had once so enthusiastically described it, had quickly become a treasured part of her daily routine. Should anyone have inquired as to why she relished her baths so much, Chloe would have offered two reasons. The first was evident: baths provided a soothing respite from fatigue. Once enveloped in the hot water, the day's toll upon the body seemed to dissolve into its warmth. The second reason was the quiet space it provided for contemplation.

During the hustle of her daily routine, moments of quiet reflection were surprisingly rare. All the complex questions and philosophical ponderings she accumulated throughout the day, she would slowly and thoroughly digest in the tub's peaceful solitude.

Today, her thoughts were preoccupied with the previous night's incident—when she'd tried and failed to unveil her past to Lloyd. Even now, the shame was palpable.

Not all her musings, however, were steeped in despair and regret. She recalled her paralyzing trauma with the kitchen knife, and how she had slowly reduced her fear through persistent exposure over countless nights. Surely, this situation was more of the same. As long as she faced her fears head-on, she would find the courage to share her story.

Lloyd would never belittle her efforts, she reassured herself. Despite the fear that gripped her, despite the way the mark on her back—the origin of all her woes—pricked and burned, Chloe steeled herself. *Be brave, Chloe. Today is the day.*

Then, it happened.

SKITTER SKITTER SKITTER.

It was a sound Chloe had never heard before.

It was a sound that seemed to trigger alarm bells deep within her, as if rooted in her very biology. In her mind, Shirley's voice echoed:

Now listen, young lady. The capital is infested with a kind of insect so repulsive you'd think them devils in their own right.

Chilled with dread, Chloe slowly turned her head toward the disturbance. Every hair on her body pricked upright in fear.

There it was: big, flat, brown—and *alive*.

Oh, that's right, she remembered. They were called *cockroaches*.

SKITTER SKITTER. BZZZZ.

Chloe's scream pierced the silence of the home.

With a revolting buzzing of its wings, the cockroach launched itself into the air, landing on the changing room door.

Right on the heels of her scream, heavy footsteps approached, and the door swung open in front of her. "Chloe, what's wrong? Is it the enemy?!" Lloyd said, his tone anxious.

In that instant, the cockroach tumbled from the door, landing on its back, its spindly legs writhing and flailing in the air.

"C-C-C-Cockroach..." Chloe whimpered, pointing at the twitching creature on the floor.

"Ah." Comprehending the situation, Lloyd exhaled in relief. He bent down, picked up the cockroach, walked to the nearest window, and threw it out. Then, he washed his hands for good measure before returning to the changing room. "The problem has been taken care of—Oh!"

Chloe threw her arms around Lloyd like a lost child who had just found their mother. Her petite body, carrying the warmth from the bath, quivered against him. "That was...terrifying," she mumbled.

"The danger has passed. You're safe," Lloyd assured, reciprocating her

embrace. As a damp sensation brushed his fingers, the towel swathed around Chloe's body slipped and pooled on the floor—revealing, right before Lloyd's very eyes, the birthmark on her back.

Lloyd's eyes widened and he drew a sharp breath. The birthmark was too prominent, too conspicuous for him to feign ignorance. "Your back..." he muttered.

Chloe gasped. The mark on her back—the origin of all her persecution—he had seen it. The mark that she had carefully hidden from him all this time—he had seen it.

Her warmth evaporated; her mind plunged into a void.

She grit her teeth and shook herself free from Lloyd's hold. Scooping up the towel, she darted from the changing room.

Ignoring Lloyd's calls from behind, she sprinted up the stairs to the second floor and threw herself into her room. She dove onto her bed and pulled the covers over her, hiding away from the outside world.

Before long, Lloyd followed. "Can I come in?" he asked from beyond the door.

Chloe didn't say anything.

"I'm coming in."

The door clicked open; Chloe flinched.

Positioning himself on the bed next to her, Lloyd paused to compose his thoughts. After a moment, he gently inquired, "Are you okay?"

Hearing the concern in his voice, Chloe finally found her voice again. "I'm sorry you had to see that."

"I wasn't looking for an apology." Lloyd scratched at this head, his discomfort showing. Her apologetic reflex was all too familiar to him. "Will you tell me about it?" he asked, his tone earnest. "I want to know—more about you."

Yes, of course. Three words—three words and it would all be over, and yet Chloe's lips remained sealed, as if they'd been stitched together against her will.

To the mute Chloe, Lloyd said again, this time with greater conviction, "I will

accept you, no matter what kind of life you led.”

Chloe’s stomach fluttered. She forced herself to reflect once more: Lloyd was someone she could confide in. He would never reject her, scorn her, call her cursed. Despite their relatively short time together, she knew this to be true. Lloyd’s character was never in question. It was only her courage that was lacking.

And now, with him having seen it, could she really expect to continue like nothing had happened? Finding strength in acceptance, Chloe slowly gathered herself.

She popped her head out from her cocoon of covers, emerging like a creature of the night. “May I...get dressed first?”

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After slipping on her nightclothes, Chloe came down to the living room and plopped herself down on the sofa. Next to her, Lloyd patiently waited for her to speak.

She paused, her eyes distant, lips parting and closing as she rehearsed her story in her mind. “I suppose I should start by telling you my true identity.”

Chloe braced herself. Those dreaded words took shape, and yet she wasn’t wracked by pain as she had been the day before. What point was there in keeping up such plainly false pretenses?

Composing herself, she continued. “My full name is Chloe Ardennes. I am the second daughter of the Margrave of Ardennes.”

“I see,” Lloyd replied simply.

“You’re not surprised,” she remarked. It was a question but lacked the tone of inquiry.

“I had my suspicions,” Lloyd replied. “Your mannerisms, behavior, looks—all of it suggested a lineage beyond common birth.”

She gave a wry smile, her gaze settling on Lloyd.“Your insight shouldn’t surprise me by now, should it?”

From there, Chloe slowly began to unravel the complicated tapestry of her

past. She told him about the curse associated with the birthmark on her back, and the ostracization that came with it. She told him about how her mother relinquished her child-rearing duties, leaving her upbringing to a lone servant. She told him about the plague that afflicted their domain, leading to her father's and brother's demise and her mother's illness. She told him about how her mother changed, blamed her for their deaths, and the subsequent abuse she suffered at the hands of her mother, her sister, and the household servants. She told him about how she'd been worked like a dog all around the estate, before finally, she told him about the day she fled her home.

She told him about her failure to clean up the blood she'd spilled at her mother's hand, her mother's menacing knife, and her narrow escape from a deadly fate. She even told him about her harrowing journey through the mountains and wilderness to reach the capital, where she'd run into a group of thugs before her timely rescue.

She told him everything, and all the while, Lloyd sat in attentive silence, an unbroken thread of solidarity. His engagement was punctuated by the occasional nod, the crease of his brow, but never an interruption.

"...And that's my entire story," Chloe said, her breath leaving her in a long, tired rush. As her words settled, the crushing weight that had long plagued her began to lift. That sense of relief, however, was fleeting, soon replaced by a chilling dread. Her hands trembled, her heart hammered, her breaths shallow as she anticipated Lloyd's response.

"It all makes sense now," he muttered. His voice was its usual understated self, but underneath, a sliver of restlessness seemed to reside. "Your proficiency in sewing and household chores, your remarkable humility, the deep-rooted self-doubt—it was all a result of the life you led."

His voice now thrummed with a clear note of ire. *I-I knew it...* Chloe thought. *He must hate me...* Lloyd was upset at her for concealing her identity as a cursed child, a harbinger of misfortune—she was sure of it.

"Please... I'm so sorry," she pleaded, her voice choking back emotion. "I'm sorry for hiding my curse—for deceiving you all this time. I'm sorry—so truly sorry."

Words of self-condemnation poured from her lips uncontrollably. This was it for her; there was no turning back. She wanted nothing more than to disappear—to just vanish from existence. Her thinking spiraled into self-destruction.

“Someone like me doesn’t deserve to be around someone as kind and gentle as you,” Chloe declared, rising to her feet. “I’ll pack up my things and leave at once.”

“Wait.” Lloyd’s hand shot out and grabbed Chloe’s arm. “Leave? What are you talking about?” His voice was a mix of frustration and bewilderment.

“I-I thought you were angry...” Chloe stammered, shrinking back like a frightened rabbit.

“Sorry, you picked up on that?” Lloyd explained apologetically. “I wasn’t angry with you. I was angry at your family, at your surroundings.”

A sound of confusion escaped Chloe’s lips. Ignoring that, Lloyd continued, “I’ve said this before, but it bears repeating: I loathe what reason cannot justify. When I think about the people who’ve mistreated you, exploited you, used you since you were but a child, I... It makes my blood boil.”

Lloyd’s behavior reflected his words—his fists were clenched, his voice quivered, and his eyes blazed with righteous anger. The flames of his fury were stoked by the similarity of her circumstances to his own.

“Do you not find it repulsive, Lloyd?” Chloe asked, still grappling with Lloyd’s emotional state.

“Find what repulsive?”

“The birthmark,” Chloe mumbled. “On my back.”

“Repulsive? No, of course not.”

The sincerity in Lloyd’s voice pierced through Chloe’s self-doubt like a beam of sunlight through an overcast sky. But the warmth was fleeting. The cloud cover returned swiftly—years of being made to feel like a miscreant was like an unbreakable hex over her. “You’re—you’re lying,” Chloe shot back. “I’m cursed—misfortune incarnate, don’t you understand?”

“I fail to see how a mere birthmark could incite such misfortune. This sounds

like nothing more than local superstition to me," Lloyd replied.

Chloe opened her mouth to counter his statement, but couldn't.

"Besides..." Suddenly, Lloyd began to undress.

"L-Lloyd?! What are you—?!" Chloe blurted out.

Lloyd removed his top, revealing his bare torso. She clapped her hands over her mouth, gasping. Right in front of her was his naked, chiseled body—and the countless scars that marred its surface. They were what remained of former wounds, welts, and bruises—each a testament to a painful past.

"More mars my body than just birthmarks. Yours doesn't unsettle me in the slightest."



“May I...touch them?” Chloe said.

“They’re all old wounds; feel free.”

Chloe extended her hand, her fingertips delicately tracing his scars. Alongside the warmth of his skin, she felt the gnarled texture, tangible evidence of past trauma that had healed imperfectly. Whether these were from his days as a knight, or from even further before, traces of his grim past in that wretched compound, she couldn’t definitively say.

What she did know beyond doubt was that Lloyd’s past was also marked by torment and suffering. Here he was, making his best effort to ease her anguish over her body with shelter in his own battered form.

“There are so many...” Chloe whispered. “It must have hurt a lot, didn’t it?”

“Why do you say that, Chloe?” Lloyd asked.

Drawn by his solemn voice, Chloe lifted her gaze to meet Lloyd’s.

He began to re-dress. “Why do you say that when it’s you who’s lived through so much pain and hardship?”

“I...” Chloe began, trying to deny it. But she couldn’t. What were her days in Shadaf if not ones of pain and hardship?

What was there to be done about it? She used to ponder. She was cursed—this was her nature, her *fault*, she had been conditioned to think. Under such circumstances, her mind had locked the pain away, never allowing her to dwell on it—it had been the best course of action to protect herself.

But now, those unprocessed memories were surfacing, laden with all their emotional baggage. With a piercing crack, the barriers within her heart began to crumble. Hot, wet tears began to well up in the corner of her eyes. “I-I...”

“It was never your fault, Chloe.”

Those were the words she longed to hear the most.

“The people around you—they are the ones to blame.” Lloyd’s sturdy arms

cocooned Chloe in comfort and protection.

It was in that moment that Chloe realized that somewhere, deep inside, she'd known—she'd always known—that none of this was ever her fault. But that knowing had been buried, overwritten over and over again by the daily violence, the blame constantly thrust upon her.

It was as though she had been indoctrinated, and Lloyd, with one simple utterance—*it was never your fault*—had cut through it all, liberating her.

"Chloe," Lloyd went on, his hand traced soothing patterns across her back, "you needn't pick it over for some faint trace of fault leading back to you."

The warmth in her eyes began to overflow. Each stroke of Lloyd's hand, an offering of comfort, seemed to coax droplets from her eyes that trickled onto his lap. Her thoughts became fragmented, swirling incoherently.

"You've endured so much," Lloyd whispered into her hair.

An incoherent sound, half moan, half sob, escaped Chloe's quivering lips.

"You've done well to come this far."

And with that, the last barrier crumbled. Chloe's chest tightened, and she collapsed against Lloyd. With a tremor that ran to her core, she let out a soulful cry that pierced the air. Her sorrow unrestrained, her tears uncontrollable, she surrendered to the weight of her grief.

Lloyd now bore witness to the darkest corners of her past, those haunting memories she still carried with startling clarity. He knew everything. And yet, he'd told her she'd done well, had acknowledged her struggle. The dam that had been holding back a reservoir of pain had been irreparably shattered.

At the end of her arduous journey from Shadaf, through those long days filled with torment, she had finally found it: a haven where she felt safe, if not yet fully sound, a sanctuary where she could be vulnerable.

As she clung to Lloyd's chest, Chloe let the tears continue to flow, her sobs echoing through the house.

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How long had she cried, she wondered.

As her body finally began to conserve its moisture, diverting it away from her eyes, Chloe's sobs gradually subsided. She gently pulled away from Lloyd.

"Better?" he asked.

Chloe nodded.

Without a word, Lloyd presented her with a handkerchief—the very same one she'd stitched for him just days earlier.

"Thank you," Chloe mumbled. She dabbed at the damp corners of her eyes. "Sorry," she mumbled between sniffs. "I lost my composure."

"It's nothing to worry about," replied Lloyd, resting a firm hand on her head. "You've been holding it all in for so long. It's good that you finally let it out."

A whimper of embarrassment escaped Chloe. "Still, I wish it didn't have to happen in front of you."

Yet, just as Lloyd had assured her, Chloe felt *better.* It was as if a torrential downpour had washed away the pain, leaving her heart bathed beneath the sun's gentle glow. But at the same time, the shame of having cried like a child in Lloyd's arms quickly rushed in to fill the gaps.

Heat rushed to her face and neck, her ears feeling as though they might start emitting steam.

"Chloe? Are you okay?"

"D-Don't look at me right now!" Chloe shot back. "I'm a mess."

"I...see," Lloyd replied, picking up on her cue.

She was grateful for his understanding, but the silence that ensued was almost just as uncomfortable.

"But still..." After a few moments, Lloyd spoke again. "A noble's daughter, huh..." He struck a pensive pose, his thoughtful hum resonating in the quiet room.

Chloe could see the conflict brewing behind his furrowed visage: she was the missing daughter of a noble, and he was a royal knight. If her disappearance had been officially reported, his continued sheltering of her could be perceived

as nothing short of dereliction of duty.

“I won’t go back,” she declared. The last thing Chloe wanted was to be a burden to Lloyd. “But if my presence here poses a risk to you, I’ll leave at once.” She steeled herself to make one final appeal. “So please—”

“I’m not going to turn you in. You needn’t worry about that,” Lloyd interrupted, slipping on his best attempt at a reassuring smile. “Yes, my duties are important to me,” he continued, “but so are you, Chloe.”

A soft whisper of Lloyd’s name escaped Chloe’s lips, her vision once again blurred as fresh tears threatened to fall. Her tear ducts were still primed from her earlier breakdown, it seemed.

“Thank you,” she said, “for everything, again and again. I don’t know how I’ll ever be able to repay you.”

“No need,” Lloyd responded gently. “You’ve already done more than enough for me.”

“But that’s only because I’m your housekeeper...”

“No, it’s more than that. You’ve done far more for me.”

“More than that...?” Chloe questioned, her head tilting in confusion.

Lloyd averted his gaze, his lips pursed as if restraining unspoken words.

“In any case,” he said instead, “you’ve done so much for me.”

“I have...?” Chloe puzzled. Nothing in particular came to mind, but she chose to accept Lloyd’s words for what they were.

“However, there is one thing I must ask of you,” Lloyd continued.

“There is...? Wh—Wah!”

Without warning, Lloyd hooked his arms around Chloe, pulling her flush against his chest. Her pulse surged, her senses overwhelmed by his intoxicating scent, his inviting warmth, and the solid reassurance of his body against her own.

“L-L-L...Lloyd?” Her voice began as a nervous stammer but dwindled to a barely audible whisper.

“Don’t say you’re leaving—ever again.” His voice was barely above a whisper—it was pleading, almost, a stark contrast to his usual steadfast tone. “I can no longer imagine a life without you.”

He was so close; his breath brushed against her ear; Chloe almost felt her heart stop. Struggling to temper the rapid pounding in her chest, she managed to ask, “What do you...mean by that?”

She felt Lloyd’s body flinch against hers, but no reply came.

After a beat, he spoke. “You’ve improved my quality of life immensely. Whether it be cooking, or cleaning, or keeping the house well stocked and provisioned, you’ve been doing a better job than I ever could. If you were to leave, my life would fall apart once more.”

A tinge of disappointment cast a shadow over Chloe’s heart. “Oh. Is—is that so...?”

His response wasn’t what she’d dared to hope for. She knew she was being greedy—selfish for expecting it, but the hope flickered in her heart nonetheless.

Still, even that small assurance was enough to warm her soul—she was happy to hear that she was irreplaceable to him, even if only for pragmatic reasons.

Chloe gingerly reached her own arms around Lloyd, patting him gently on the back, much like how one would comfort a newborn. Lloyd let out a deep exhale in response, a response that tickled her somewhat.

Still locked in their embrace, Lloyd spoke, “Have you considered that your family may be searching for you?”

“I...I have, yes,” Chloe replied. “Knowing them, they’ve probably kept my disappearance a secret and are conducting a search in private.”

An image of her mother, eyes bloodshot and bulging as she screamed at her servants, flitted across her mind’s eye.

“In any case, I don’t think they’ll find me,” she added. “Shadaf is too remote from the capital; I doubt they’ll think to look for me here.” While she couldn’t say for sure, the possibility was, in her estimation, quite small.

Lloyd, on the other hand, seemed to have different thoughts. Perhaps it was

an occupational hazard, but his mind instinctively jumped to the worst-case scenario. “It may be a good idea to take a few precautions,” he muttered.

“Lloyd?”

“It’s nothing,” he dismissed. “We can save that discussion for later.”

With those words, Lloyd gently untangled from their intimate embrace, leaving Chloe in a warm, bewildered haze.

“You must be tired; let’s call it a night,” Lloyd suggested.

“Thanks,” Chloe paused. “Um, Lloyd?”

“Yes?”

“Could we...do that again sometimes?”

As soon as the words left her mouth, Chloe snapped back to her senses. She had no idea what possessed her to voice her desire so boldly—perhaps it was the whirlwind of emotions from the day causing her mind to fray.

“That? You mean a hug?” Lloyd looked puzzled, his brow furrowed.

Chloe hurriedly waved her arms in front of her dismissively. “Um! No, it’s just... I didn’t mean it like that! It’s just that when you hold me, it’s so comfortable that I— You know what? Sorry, I don’t know what came over me, just forget I said anything, good ni—wah!”

Without so much as a word, Lloyd silenced Chloe by enveloping her in his arms once more. She caught another deep breath of his scent. This embrace felt more potent than the last—he squeezed tightly, as if his hug alone could convey his determination to protect her.

He released her from his grip, then gently stroked her head. “My arms are yours, whenever you need them.”

His baritone whisper sent spirals coursing through her body, and she whimpered. “Th-Thanks...”

As Lloyd released her from his embrace once again, Chloe was the picture of serenity. The intense pleasure of the hug seemed to have transported her to the heavens.

When her vision refocused, she noticed it—Lloyd's face, cheeks, ears, all tinged with the slightest shade of rose.

"I-In any case, head to bed, Chloe. Leave the rest to me," Lloyd instructed.

Snapping back to reality, Chloe stammered, "R-Right—okay."

Lloyd rose to his feet and turned away from Chloe as fast as he could.

"Lloyd," she called out gently behind him.

"Yes?"

Wearing a smile as serene as the calm after a storm, Chloe said, "Thank you."

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“Birds of a feather...” Lloyd murmured to the silence of his room. He lay in bed, his unfocused eyes cast upon the ceiling above him. The house was draped in the quiet hush of night, and Chloe was already lost to the world of dreams. His own slumber, however, remained elusive—held hostage by the cyclone of thoughts whirling within him.

Chloe had finally bared the scars of her past to him. Though he’d suspected the grim nature of her upbringing, the truth was far darker than any shadow his conjectures could cast. Given the darkness that marred his own history, Lloyd understood the depths of her suffering all too well, compelling him to envelop her within his protective embrace. Just as she had comforted him, wept for him, accepted him on that night, he yearned to offer her the same.

“...Absurd,” he muttered, putting a cap on his thoughts. Even thinking about it now made his stomach churn, his blood boil. If those who had inflicted so much pain on Chloe, who had forced her into servitude, were before him at that very moment, he would cut them down where they stood—he was certain of it. Yet his knightly oath anchored him, creating a tumultuous storm of opposing emotions: his unwavering loyalty to duty and justice, and his burning desire for swift, vengeful retribution.

The ever placid lake of Lloyd’s emotions had been stirred into a raging tempest. He understood why, even if only faintly. Chloe, his housekeeper, this girl of incredible strength and kindness, had become irreplaceable to him.

His mind was catapulted back to their earlier conversation.

I can’t imagine a life without you anymore.

What do you...mean by that?

Because I’m in love with you—were the words that clawed their way up his throat, only to be swallowed down.

He recognized—maybe he had for some time now—that his feelings for Chloe had long outstripped the affection one might normally have for a housekeeper. If asked to pinpoint the source of this attraction, he could speak until the break of dawn and still have a thousand words left unsaid. But her kindness, resilience, and the virtues she possessed which he did not were the simplest

reasons he could offer.

And yet, Lloyd had bitten back his confession. It wasn't for a lack of courage, but for a far more sinister belief that had long taken root in his heart: *I am undeserving of love—of being loved.*

At the heart of this internal struggle was his burgeoning desire for Chloe—a longing quickly spiraling out of his control. If only he were truly free, he'd rush to Chloe's room this instant, just to behold her face, listen to her voice, caress her hair, and hold her in his arms.

And then, he'd confess his true emotions.

His senses quickly restrained these chaotic impulses. *What right do you have?* a whisper from the darkest corners of his consciousness cautioned. Behind a crimson-stained veil, a face—familiar, yet foreign—stared back at him from the shadows of his mind.

"Even still, I..."

Ensnared in his turmoil, Lloyd eventually slipped into an uneasy slumber. When morning light pierced through his window, he awoke feeling anything but refreshed, and yet blissfully unaware of the events that the new day would bring.

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The following afternoon found Chloe at Ian's bookstore once more. She sifted through titles with a hum of contentment floating from her lips.

"It seems the day is treating you well, Miss Chloe," noted Ian with a smile.

"Was it that obvious?" she replied, feeling her own mouth quirk upwards. "Something...good happened to me yesterday."

"Something good, you say?" Ian said. "Might this have anything to do with that handsome knight of yours, by chance?"

"It does, I think... Yes, I think it does."

"In that case, congratulations are in order," Ian replied, palms clapping together in a soft echo of applause.

“C-Congratulations?” she stammered. “It’s nothing like that!” she hastened to dismiss.

“I was only joking—well, half joking.”

“So you were half serious...”

“Well, you simply looked so radiant, dare I say.”

Chloe whimpered in protest, a sprite of restlessness dancing in her chest. “How embarrassing...”

But, she couldn’t deny her happiness. She had told Lloyd about everything, and he had accepted her unflinchingly. All the fear and anxiety that had once crippled her turned out to be nothing more than phantoms in the wind. Astonishingly, he even seethed with anger on her behalf against the family that had done her wrong. She’d intended to express her gratitude to Lloyd again this morning, but he’d rushed off before she had the chance.

What filled her heart with joy more than anything else, however, was Lloyd’s promise of wrapping her in his embrace whenever she wished.

My arms are open to you, whenever you need them. As the remnant of his sultry whisper skipped across her mind, her face fell into a dreamy, disheveled grin.

“Miss Chloe? Your face...”

“O-Oh, please excuse me.”

“Pay it no mind; it is a delight to see you so joyous.”

Wrapping up their benign conversation, Chloe settled on her pick for the day.

With a warm “Thank you for your purchase,” Ian saw Chloe off from his store. Clutching her purchase against her chest, Chloe headed towards the open market.

“If it isn’t my favorite little lady, Chloe! How’s the world treating you?”

“Hello, Mister Escardot. I’m quite well, thank you. How about you?”

After pausing to exchange pleasantries with Escardot, the ironmonger, Chloe continued on her way.

“Hey, Chloe, hittin’ the market today?”

“Hello, Miss Snow! Indeed! I’m off to Miss Ciel’s.”

“Well, enjoy! By the way, Chloe, rumor has it you were the one who embroidered Miss Ciel’s dress, is that true?”

“Oh, yes it is!”

“I saw it, and I gotta say it’s pretty darn incredible! I’m tempted to request one of my own, hint hint.”

“Of course, I’d love to!”
“Really?! You’re an angel! You can expect to see a commission from me soon.’

“Thank you, I’ll be looking forward to it!”

After another lively conversation with Snow, the florist, Chloe was on her way once again.

Two months since her arrival in the capital, Chloe had become a familiar face in the market. Her kindness, humility, and radiant beauty had cast a charming spell on all the locals. If only she were aware of the reputation she had unknowingly cultivated.

Looking up, Chloe noted the sun had already begun to dip into the horizon, painting the sky in an orange hue. “Oh dear, I should pick up the pace.”

If she continued to dawdle, Lloyd would return to an empty house.

“Welcome, Chloe!” Ciel greeted her warmly.

“Hello, Miss Ciel!” Chloe returned. “I want to prepare something special tonight. Do you have any suggestions?”

“Sure! What are we celebrating?”

“Oh, it’s nothing like that. I’m just in a good mood today.”

“A good mood?” Ciel replied, giving her a look and a smirk. “Has your knight finally...?” She left the sentence unfinished, her pinky finger raised suggestively, a gesture of companionship.
“N-No! It’s not anything like that! Something good happened to me is all! Let’s leave it at that.”

“It’s not?” Ciel replied. “Well, you’re in it for the long haul, ain’tcha, Chloe? In any case, if it’s a celebratory dinner you’re looking for...”

As always, Ciel expertly guided Chloe towards the choice of the evening: a succulent roast beef.

“And Chloe, thanks again for your work on my dress,” Ciel said while weighing a slab of beef. “It was the talk of the night; everyone was scrambling to find out where I got that done.”

“Really?” Chloe exclaimed, her face lighting up. “I’m so happy to hear that.” The residual anxiety of how her work would be received had been tickling the back of her mind ever since. Ciel’s comment quickly put that to rest.

“A few nobles seemed particularly interested in your handiwork,” Ciel went on. “How about it, Chloe? You ready to take on some more orders? Paid, of course!”

Chloe’s eyes shot open. “They want me to...?” *First Miss Snow, now the nobility?* she thought, as her lack of self-confidence began to rear its ugly head. “No, no, I couldn’t possibly! They’d be better off asking someone else...”

“Now, didn’t I tell you to hold your head high?” Ciel chided gently. “Your work has caught the eye of them aristocrats—I can vouch for that. Humility has its place, but not without confidence. If you don’t believe in your ability, how can others? Take pride in your work, Chloe.”

“Confidence... Pride...” Chloe echoed, her voice barely above a whisper. These concepts were distinctly foreign to her, and yet, Ciel’s words resonated deeply. Had her days of maltreatment back in Shadaf *not* been born from a lack of self-esteem, which others had so readily exploited?

Determined to rewrite her story, Chloe looked up, her eyes shining with resolve. “You’re...exactly right,” she affirmed, her voice steady. “I’d be honored to accept their commissions.”

“That’s the spirit!” Ciel applauded. “I’ll get back to you once I have more details.”

“Thank you very much!”

She gently balled up her fists, basking in her new reality. Not only were her skill and craftsmanship now being acknowledged and compensated, they were desired—appreciated, even. It was a flavor of joy she'd never once savored in her past life. Here, in the heart of the Kingdom, she felt as though she'd discovered her true calling, with each passing day unfurling a deeper sense of fulfillment than the last. An overwhelming feeling of gratitude for the capital and her decision to come here welled up from the depths of her heart.

"Oh, right, right, almost forgot," Ciel suddenly said, interrupting Chloe's train of thought. "There was one particular enthusiast who absolutely insisted on meeting you."

"They wanted to meet *me?*" Chloe responded.

"That's right. She was, um... Drat, what was her name again?"

"Hello, Chloe."

A shiver shot down her spine. Every hair on her body prickled in alarm. That voice—a haunting echo, tantamount to terror itself, a voice Chloe prayed to never hear again—chilled her blood.

No, no, no... she thought, denial thrumming in her veins. *This can't be happening... This must be another nightmare.*

Dread consumed Chloe as she slowly turned towards the source of the voice. Her heart leapt into her mouth.

There she was. A cascade of fiery-red hair tumbling down her back, porcelain-white skin stark against her crimson dress. Her eyes, a cold well of contempt for everything and everyone.

Her sister, Lily, stood in violent contrast to the mundane environs of the market.

"Ah, Lily! That's right." Ciel said. "Perfect timing."

"I heard that I might find you here..." Lily drawled, her words hissing out like venom.

A well-practiced smile adorned Lily's lips, but Chloe wasn't fooled. Her attention was riveted to the chilling indifference in Lily's eyes—and the impending storm that it signaled.

"Lily..." Chloe managed to breathe out, her voice so faint it vanished into the noise of the bustling market. She darted her eyes around, seeking an escape route. Instead, she found the two hulking figures shadowing Lily—her escorts, ready to thwart any attempt to flee.

"You two know each other?" Ciel questioned, observing them.

Chloe didn't answer; her thoughts smothered by fear. Lily remained equally silent.

The smile on Lily's lips contorted into something far more sinister as she reveled in their unexpected reunion. "You'll come with me, won't you?"

"Yes..."

Confronted with her sister's twisted visage, all Chloe could do was nod, a marionette bending to the puppeteer's whim.

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"Is that...Chloe?"

While he was sweeping the front of his store, the sight of an unusual quartet meandering down the street caught Ian's attention.

"Chloe in the company of...a noblewoman?"

Ian's gaze shifted to the two other men in their party. He couldn't discern their purpose, but their robust statures hinted at a role that demanded presence and physicality. Yet, it was not them that tied a knot of worry in his gut.

Something was amiss about Chloe. The contagious delight that had lit up her face just a few moments earlier was conspicuously absent, replaced by a gloom that seemed to cast her whole visage in shadow.

Perplexed, Ian watched as Chloe and her enigmatic companions disappeared into the distance, a lingering unease settling in his heart.

Chapter Six: Kidnapped!

“I’m back.”

That evening, Lloyd came home a little earlier than usual. As he crossed the threshold, he expected Chloe and her usual greeting of “Welcome home” to preempt his, but today, she wasn’t there.

Lloyd took off his boots and stepped further inside. “Chloe?” he called out, his voice echoing in the silence. No response from the living room, nor from any other part of the house for that matter.

Sinking into a dining chair, he crossed his arms and knitted his brow in contemplation. It’d been ages since he’d returned to an empty home. The silence was hollow, eerie; it wrapped around him like a cold, damp blanket. With every passing second, the unnerving echo of his disquiet grew louder and louder.

Something wasn’t right. He recognized this unease, a silent alarm forged from his past brushes with death and sharpened by the rigor of his knightly training. It was his sixth sense, a warning that struck him in moments of imminent peril—and it was currently screaming at him.

Chloe was a responsible and diligent housekeeper. As far as he knew, she’d never slipped up once in her tasks. Every night, he’d return to a home swept clean, meals prepared, and a bath drawn—unfailingly. The likelihood of her disappearing without so much as a note was as close to impossible as he could imagine.

The dreaded thought finally gnawed at him: *Something might have happened to her.*

Panic surged in his chest, and Lloyd shot to his feet. By the time his chair clattered onto the ground, he was already out the door.

Bursting from his home, Lloyd was propelled by a sense of urgency, his mind consumed with the compulsion to find her. A voice in the back of his mind tried to reason with him, suggesting he was overreacting. After all, it hadn’t been

long since Chloe had opened up to him, and her tragic history was still fresh on his mind. Was he reading too deeply into her sudden absence, letting his emotions color his judgment?

Yet, he couldn't shake off his fear. His training as a knight had taught him to always consider the worst possible outcome—and right now, that outcome was all that was on his mind.

So he moved. He moved because he was afraid, not of the possibility that he might be wrong, but of the unthinkable reality if he were right.

I'm a creature of habit is all. After you leave, I sweep the floors, do the laundry... Then, it's off to the market for groceries. When I get home, I prepare dinner.

That was what Chloe had once told him. Considering she would likely be at the market at this hour, Lloyd quickened his pace.

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Chloe, where are you?!

Lloyd scoured the Quarter, combing through all the major thoroughfares, but Chloe remained elusive.

Calm down.

He halted, realizing he needed a better strategy than mindlessly sweeping every corner of the Merchant Quarter's open market.

Think, Lloyd, think.

He strained his thoughts, trying to find any clue, any hint to follow.

Then, he remembered.

Well, I had hoped to take you to my favorite stall, but they're closed today.

Chloe had a preferred stall. She'd told him she usually bought all her ingredients from there. Then, another memory sparked in his mind.

It's for Miss Ciel.

Is that the stall owner you're always talking about?

Yes, exactly!

Now he had a lead. A grocery stall run by a Miss Ciel...

With renewed determination, he set off again. Luckily, Ciel was well known. A passerby was able to point him in the right direction instantly and before long, he arrived at her stall.

“Welcome!” Ciel said, noticing Lloyd. “By the looks of that uniform, you’re a knight. What can I get for ya?”

“Apologies, I’m not here to shop,” Lloyd responded. Realizing this rather robust, gregarious lady before him must have been Ciel, he cut to the chase. “Do you know Chloe?”

“Chloe? The only Chloe I know is...”

“A young woman, in her late teens, rather petite, with pink hair?”

“That’s her! Hold on, you must be”—Ciel surveyed Lloyd from head to toe—“that knight of hers, aren’t you?”

“I am a knight, and I do employ Chloe as my housekeeper, yes.”

“I’ve heard so much about you!” Ciel whistled. “Well, now we know why she’s so hung up on ya—can’t say I blame her,” she said, nodding appreciatively.

“Um.”

“Ope, sorry, sorry. What were we talking about again? Chloe? Are ya looking for her?”

“I am. She’s usually home by this hour, but she’s nowhere to be found.”

“That’s strange...” Ciel replied, “She was here just an hour ago, all bubbly and giggly, excited to cook up something fancy for the night.” She stroked her chin thoughtfully. “You know what? It could be her business with that lady that’s keeping her.”

“That lady?” Lloyd echoed.

“Right. A noblewoman—she wanted to hire Chloe to do some embroidery work. They met just out front here and left together.”

Lloyd felt a chill run down his spine.

“Excuse me,” a new voice interjected, “but I happened to see them.”

A nearby shopper approached. He wore a pair of round, antique glasses and had the air of a gentle soul.

“And you are?” Lloyd asked.

“My name is Ian, I own a bookstore. Chloe is a regular customer of mine.”

“Do you know anything, Ian?” Ciel asked.

“Yes. About an hour ago, I was out sweeping my storefront when I noticed Chloe heading down West Avenue. In her company was a lady, as well as two other men.”

“Right, right. I remember those guys,” Ciel replied. “That lady, by the way, is the daughter of the Margrave of Ardennes!”

“Ardennes...?” Lloyd murmured.

My full name is Chloe Ardennes. I am the second daughter of the Margrave of Ardennes.

“Shit!” Without warning, Lloyd seized Ian’s shoulders. “Did you see where they went?!”

Eyes wide, Ian stammered back, “I-I saw them head down West Avenue, but as for their exact destination, I’m afraid I...”

Lloyd clenched his jaw. “I see...”

The lady in question had to be her family—the same people who had abused and confined her for years. Chloe was in their grasp now. Realizing the gravity of the situation, Lloyd turned towards West Avenue. He was running out of time.

“Hold on,” Ciel’s voice rang out, the seriousness of her tone arresting him. “Tell us, Mister Knight, is Chloe in some kind of trouble?”

Ciel, the master merchant, displayed a keen perceptiveness akin to Lloyd’s. From his reaction, she surmised that something was awry.

“Is she? I can’t say for sure, but it is extremely likely,” Lloyd responded. “As for what kind of trouble she’s in, I’m afraid I...can’t elaborate.”

“Have you notified the city guard?”

“I opted not to; I have my reasons.”

“I see.”

Lloyd remained tight-lipped about Chloe’s circumstances. It hardly seemed like the appropriate time and occasion to divulge her history.

“Things are complicated, eh?” Ciel added.

“They are. Sorry.”

“In that case, you were right to come to me.”

“Excuse me?”

Suddenly, Ciel took a deep breath. “Folks, I need your attention, please!” Her voice echoed across the open market, the volume catching Lloyd off guard. The bustling din of the market receded, and all the various shop owners, customers, and passersby turned their focus to Ciel’s stand.

When she was certain she had everyone’s attention, Ciel thundered, “Listen up, we need your help! Our dear Chloe has gone missing! If you have time to spare, please assist us in finding her!”

“What?!” someone shouted. “Chloe’s missing?!”

“This is an emergency!” another cried out. “We gotta go look for her!”

“What can I do to help?”

In no time at all, a small crowd had gathered around Ciel’s stand.

“What is...happening? Lloyd said, utterly baffled.

“Think of it as calling in a few favors,” Ciel replied with a grin. She put her hands on her hips and laughed heartily.

“I...I can’t believe it. You’re incredible.” Lloyd confessed, his eyes glimmering with respect for the merchant woman.

“Well, to be fair, they’re rallying more for Chloe’s sake than for mine—they really do like her around here.”

Lloyd couldn’t help but acknowledge the truth in her words. Chloe possessed

a unique allure, a magnetic charm that ensnared the hearts of those around her. Of this, he was sure—after all, he himself had fallen under that enchanting spell.

“Thank you all for gathering on such short notice!” As Chloe aficionados convened around her, Ciel began explaining the situation: they were seeking information, eyewitness accounts, help in spreading the word, and a commitment to refrain from involving the city guard. Almost immediately, information began pouring in.

“Me, I saw her!” a female voice shouted.

“I saw her, too—while on a delivery run!” another added.

Hands flew up, one after another, as everyone eagerly offered their individual piece of the puzzle. With each account, a more coherent picture began to emerge: Chloe had been taken westward, to a hotel district frequently used by the nobility. That theory seemed to align with the nature of her company.

“I didn’t expect to gather all this testimony so quickly...” Lloyd remarked.

“Us North District market folk are a tight-knit community; we look out for our own,” Ciel responded.

A few more statements later, and they even had the name of the hotel Chloe had been taken to: The Hotel Revelion, as identified by a coachman.

“The Hotel Revelion... Now, that’s a fancy establishment. Even some counts stay there.” Ciel nodded in understanding.

Now that they had her location, there was but one thing left to do.

“Thank you for all your help,” Lloyd said.

“Don’t mention it. I owe Chloe one for the whole embroidery thing.”

“Then if you’ll excuse me.”

“Off you go, I’m sure she’s in need of her prince charming right about now.”

“I’m a knight, not a prince.”

“Is there an *ounce* of humor rattling around in that head of yours?”

After offering a bow to the smirking Ciel, Lloyd bowed towards Ian as well.

“Thank you as well for your information.”

“Oh, of course! I’m just happy to be of help. Now, go and find Chloe.”

Lloyd turned to leave when a thought occurred to him: *I’m up against a margrave...*

With the sudden realization that he might not be able to handle this alone, he turned back to Ian. “Could I ask one more favor of you?”

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“You stupid...stupid girl!”

A sharp slap echoed within The Hotel Revelion. A shriek tore from Chloe as she was sent flying across the spacious hotel suite. Lily, relentless in her fury, pursued the initial assault with a barrage of brutal strikes. “Just how much trouble—must you cause—before you’re satisfied?!” Her voice raw with rage, she punctuated every utterance with a kick, before finishing with a brutal stomp onto Chloe’s crumpled form.

Chloe lay sprawled on the floor. She whimpered in pain, rendered powerless in the face of her sister’s wrath. It felt like an eternity since she’d last been subjected to such violence. The idyllic days she spent in the capital seemed to have eroded her resilience; every punch, every kick landed with devastating force, crushing her body, fracturing her mind.

Is this...a dream? Chloe wondered, her teeth gritted against the onslaught of pain. The situation unfolding seemed absurd, the agony wracking her body all too surreal. Lily’s presence was simply unfathomable. She had left Shadaf so far behind—had she not escaped it once and for all? Had she not journeyed for weeks and weeks to reach the safety of the capital? How could this have happened... How?

A fragment of Chloe’s spirit clung desperately to the idea that this horror was a mere illusion. But the ceaseless waves of pain and the heart-rending despair refuted her wishful thinking with ruthless indifference. Her body throbbed in agony; her cheeks flushed as if they were ablaze. Each blow from Lily seemed to chip away at her hold on consciousness.

“How dare you, you cursed brat!” Lily roared, her leg winding up for another kick, tracing an arc aimed directly at Chloe’s face.

Chloe could barely manage a stifled scream as it connected, sending her tumbling across the room. She fought to lift herself from the floor, her arms trembling from exertion. Heat surged up her nostrils, then trickled back down.

Drip... Drip...

Dark crimson blossoms appeared in her field of view, staining the floor beneath her. The scene was a haunting echo of what her mother had done to

her on that fateful day. How long had it been since then?

Chloe braced for the next blow, but it never came. Summoning what strength she had left, she slowly raised her head. Her vision blurry and unfocused, she found Lily standing before her, chest heaving, eyes aflame, sweat beading her brow.

In contrast, Chloe was a picture of disarray. Her meticulously combed locks had been pulled and yanked into a tangled, bushy mess. Her nose bled freely, her cheeks swelled from the onslaught, and her once pristine dress tarnished with countless grimy shoeprints.

“I must admit it was clever of you to flee all the way to the capital. Never would I have imagined finding you here,” Lily taunted. “As curious as I am to learn what you’ve been up to these past two months, that’ll have to wait—*I must bring you back before* Mother*, after all.*”

At the mention of their mother, Chloe winced.

“Oh, and believe me when I say,” Lily added with a cruel drawl, “that *she has missed you, so very much*.”

She reached out to grab Chloe’s arm. “Get up. We’re leaving.”

“No,” Chloe replied, a tremor of defiance in her voice, as she shrugged off Lily’s grip.

“...What?” Lily stammered, seemingly unable to believe what she’d just heard.

In that moment, Chloe realized something profound. She hadn’t once groveled, hadn’t once uttered an apology to her sister. Before, she would’ve prostrated herself in submission, apologized on the heels of every blow, but today, the urge to yield would not come. If she submitted to Lily, if she allowed herself to be dragged back to the hellish confines of Shadaf, she knew escape might never again be within her reach.

A surge of emotions swelled within her—emotions once alien to her, emotions that she had once suppressed. Gone was the cursed child, the supposed harbinger of all misery. Gone was the powerless puppet to be tossed around, kicked and beaten, the battered doll without a voice. That was her past,

not her present, and it certainly wasn't going to be her future.

Her time in the capital had sown the seeds of change. With Lloyd, she had nurtured the sprouts of self-worth, discovered her individuality, and learned that she was her own person—a creature deserving of happiness, respect, and love just like any other. Her indignation crescendoed into a furious, white-hot rage. *I...I don't deserve this—to be treated like this.*

"What did you say?" Lily snapped, her gaze sharp as a blade.

"I'm not going back."

"*Excuse* me?"

"I said I'm not going back!" Chloe's yell echoed across the suite. For the first time in her life, she chose to defy her sister.

Momentarily stunned by her younger sister's sudden act of rebellion, Lily stood frozen. But her eyes soon narrowed, her mouth curling into a snarl of rage. "You dare defy me? You've grown bold, haven't you?" Lily raised her hand; the two henchmen standing by the door approached. "Restrain her. We depart for Shadaf at once."

"Yes, milady."

"Understood."

The brutes encroached on Chloe, their hands ready to seize her.

"No—no! Get away from me!" Chloe fought back, squirming and writhing in a full-bodied attempt to evade their grip, but the disparity in strength was too great.

"Yes—yes! Say goodbye to your fleeting dalliance with freedom, Chloe!" Lily's maniacal cackle filled the room. "How does it feel? To make it all this way, only to be dragged back! To taste liberty, only to have it ripped away! It stings, doesn't it—doesn't it?! Well, *too bad;* you'll get your just deserts!"

As Lily watched Chloe's futile efforts to resist, a malignant grin crept up her face. "Don't be so bitter, child. You have no one to blame for the cruel lottery of your birth but fate itself. Once we're home, I promise you will never see the light of day again! You'll be made to suffer until the mere thought of defiance

sends shivers down your spine!”

“I’ll...never...go back!” Chloe yelled. “Let go of me!”

“Ow! The bitch bit me!”

“Stop resisting, you little...!”

Despite their overwhelming strength, Chloe continued her struggle. *I’m not going back there! I am not going back to that hell!*

She twisted and writhed in their vice-like grip, every fiber of her being rebelling.

Not when I haven’t told him...

The image of the man she loved drifted into her mind’s eye.

Not when I haven’t told him I love him!

In a desperate plea, Chloe shouted at the top of her lungs, “Lloyd...help—!”

“Chloe!”

With a flurry of footsteps, the suite door burst open, and a third party entered the fray.

“Lloyd!”



The room plummeted into silence. Lily stood slack-jawed, so mesmerized by Lloyd's flawless beauty that she momentarily forgot that he was an intruder barging into her room.

Lloyd, you came... Chloe's eyes began to well up with tears. He had always been there when she needed him most, and this time his timing had been so perfect, so critical, that she felt as if her heart would explode with relief.

Lloyd, meanwhile, was drenched in sweat, perhaps from sprinting all the way from the Merchant Quarter, but all the more likely from being worried over Chloe's well-being.

He cast his gaze on Chloe; his face twisted with rage at the sight of her battered form. "Did you do this to her?" he said, his voice simmering with barely restrained fury.

Everyone in the room apart from Chloe flinched.

"Answer me!" His earth-shaking anger filled the room. Lily and her cohort recoiled once more.

The man standing before them wore a knight's uniform. At a glance, it was clear he was no ordinary commoner, and his stance and physique hinted at the formidable power lurking beneath. Yet, Lily wouldn't allow herself to be intimidated by such riffraff. Drawing on her sense of noble entitlement, she retorted, "Who are you to barge in here and make demands? I am Lily, daughter of the Margrave of Ardennes, and this is *my* suite. Just who do you think you are?"

"Lloyd Stewart, royal knight of the First Order of Knights Rose."

"F-First Order of...Knights?!" Lily's eyes shot open.

Her mind raced, stunned by the sudden turn of events. The First Order—they were the chosen few, the elite warriors of the Kingdom. This was the organization to which *Luke* belonged, the man who'd invited her to the capital in the first place.

"I'll apologize for intruding," Lloyd continued, "But understand that I heard screaming, so I entered, deeming the situation to be an emergency. As a knight,

it is my duty to protect the safety and welfare of the people—and besides." Lloyd glanced once more at Chloe and the unmistakable signs of abuse on her body. "It doesn't look like I was mistaken."

Lily's breath hitched. No matter how she tried to play it, this was not a good situation for her.

"Release Chloe immediately. You all stand accused of battery and wrongful confinement."

Lily's expression hardened. Accused? Did this man intend to take her into custody?

"You must be mistaken," she drawled. "Chloe is my sister. We are merely having a disagreement, as siblings often do. Surely you cannot arrest me for that?"

"If so, then why are you uninjured while these two men have their hands on her?"

Her two henchmen awkwardly averted their gaze, and Lily clicked her tongue in annoyance.

"She's lying!" Chloe suddenly cried. "Lloyd, she's lying! She's the only one who's—"

"Silence!" Lily interrupted with a slap to Chloe's cheek; she cried out in pain.

"Chloe!" Lloyd exclaimed.

Lily froze, realizing what she had just done.

"That's battery. I saw it with my own eyes. You won't argue your way out of this now."

Finally losing her patience, Lily's face darkened, contorting into a look of displeasure. "You're quite the pest, aren't you? What gives you the right to interfere in family matters?" Her eyes narrowed. "Just who *are* you to Chloe, anyway?"

"I'm her fiancé," Lloyd shot back, not missing a beat.

"You're her *what*?" Lily responded, flabbergasted.

Chloe’s mouth fell open, a sound of confusion escaping her.

“You’re...Chloe’s fiancé?” Lily continued, incredulous. “You...and...Chloe? That can’t possibly be—”

“You’re more than welcome to check our records.” Lloyd replied without blinking.

“Chloe, is this true?” Lily asked, still visibly recoiling from the shock.

Chloe, of course, had no recollection of being proposed to, but given that this was Lloyd, he wouldn’t say such a thing without reason. Realizing that he was trying to help her, she chose to play along.

She nodded her head. “Yes. Lloyd is...my fiancé.” A blush crawled up her face as she spoke, painting her a bright shade of pink. A new pulse of heat surged through her swollen cheeks.

Lily was speechless. Her little sister, the one she had always belittled, taunted and tormented, was betrothed to a First Order knight, and such a handsome one at that? Her pride took a direct hit.

“Chloe is to be my lawfully wedded wife,” added Lloyd. “Which means in harming her, you’ve just harmed a member of my immediate family. Do I need any other reason to arrest you where you stand?”

Lily still couldn’t speak, silenced by Lloyd’s bold proclamation. Her two henchmen, sensing the tide of the situation turning against them, exchanged uncomfortable glances.

“Unbelievable...” Lily hissed through clenched teeth. “Unbelievable.”

Nothing was going as planned. Everything that could have gone wrong had. There was only one option left to her—she had to take it.

Lily produced a small whistle from her pocket, blowing into it with all her might. The shrill, ear-piercing sound cut through the room, followed by the rumble of approaching footsteps. In an instant, a group of eight well-built men stormed into the room, each armed with a sword at their side. They formed up around Lloyd, surrounding him.

“What’s this?” Lloyd asked, eyeing the new arrivals.

“My personal guard,” Lily replied. “What, did you honestly think my mother would send me all the way from Shadaf without protection?”

“You intend to silence me?”

“Yes.” Lily smirked. “I do.”

One of the guards, looking visibly uneasy, ventured to question her. “Are you sure of this, milady?”

“Sure of what?” Lily spat back.

“He’s a royal knight. If we attack him, there could be repercussions—”

“Just kill him,” Lily interrupted. “If he’s dead, there’s no problem, is there?”

“But, milady—”

“Quiet! I’ll hear none of it! You’re my guard, aren’t you? You’ll do as you’re told!” Lily cut him off vehemently. Chastened, the guard hardened his expression. He opened his mouth to protest again, but thought better of it.

“Is she in her right mind?” Lloyd commented, his face tightening into a grimace.

“You, shut it!” Lily’s voice was a shrill shriek. “You dare speak...you—this is all your fault! Had you not shown up, none of this would have had to happen!” Her face flushed crimson in rage, spittle flew from her lips as she lashed out. Reason had all but deserted her. *Even if he is a royal knight, he’s alone! He couldn’t possibly overcome them all!* she thought. With quivering lips, she mustered a half-smirk. Her guards, all handpicked from Shadaf’s private border guard, ensured the odds were overwhelmingly in her favor—or so she believed.

“You still have a chance to back down,” Lloyd offered, his voice steady. “I won’t hold it against you.”

“Hah!” Lily scoffed dismissively. “Or what? You’re going to defeat all of them with only one of you?” A triumphant grin played on her lips. “Get him.”

At their mistress’s command, the guards released a sonorous war cry, lunging towards Lloyd.

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Oblivious to her fatal oversight, Lily reveled in her impending victory, when suddenly, Lloyd drew his sword—then disappeared.

“What—?” stammered a guard.

“Where did he go?!” said another.

In the next instant, three men lay incapacitated on the floor.

“Huh?!”

“Anyone have eyes on him?!”

Seeing their comrades sprawled out, the remaining guards hastily drew their swords—but it was too late.

The echo of screams and thumps of bodies hitting the floor reverberated throughout the suite as Lloyd reappeared. With a flourish, he began to sheath his sword. As it nestled into its scabbard with a click, the last remaining combatant toppled behind him.

“...What?” Lily’s mouth fell agape.

“Agh! It hurts... It hurts!”

“I can’t—I can’t feel my legs! Medic... Medic!”

The guards clutched their legs, writhing in pain.

Lily was at a loss, her mind unable—no, unwilling—to process what her eyes had just witnessed. Chloe was the only one who understood what had just happened: Lloyd had drawn his sword and, in a display of superhuman speed, hamstrung each combatant.

Lloyd’s gaze locked onto the two guards still holding Chloe. “Unhand her.”

They released Chloe immediately, hands flying up in surrender.

“Lloyd!” Liberated, Chloe flew past Lily and flung herself into Lloyd’s torso.

Suddenly, another rush of footsteps swelled, and several men in uniform burst into the room. “Hold it right there!” Leading the pack was the First Order Deputy Commander, Freddy, closely trailed by...

“Master Luke!” Lily’s eyes ignited with a glimmer of hope.

“L-Lady Lily?!” Luke responded, taken aback.

“Yes, it’s me, Lily!” She hastened towards Luke. “Help, Master Luke! That knight over there...”

Lily’s words fell on deaf ears as she continued her obsequious plea, jabbing a finger at Lloyd in accusation. Instead, Luke took a moment to assess the scene. There was Chloe, disheveled but safe in Lloyd’s embrace. Several men moaned in agony on the floor, and Lily, right beside him, was a frantic mess. Reconciling the sight before him with the message that’d been delivered to him—*Lloyd and Chloe are in trouble, they need your help!*—he pieced together the truth.

“Lily, did you hurt these people?” he asked, an icy chill lacing his tone.

“What? I... No—!”

A sharp backhand swiftly flew across her cheek, cutting her denial short. The echo of its resounding slap reverberated through the room. “Fool!” Luke roared, eyes blazing with fury.

“Owww! Luke, what are you doing?!” Lily cried, clutching her burning cheek, tears pooling in her eyes.

“What am *I* doing?! What are *you* doing?!” Luke yelled back. “Do you even know who that man is? That’s Lloyd, the strongest knight in all the Order—my *mentor*! What twisted logic compelled you to harm him?! I always knew you weren’t the sharpest tool in the shed, but this is beyond any foolishness I could have ever imagined! Oh, Lily, I am disappointed in you!”

Since his humbling defeat on the day of his induction, Luke had become a mere vassal under Lloyd. Yet, as he underwent Lloyd’s rigorous training and harsh guidance, his servitude transformed into a fervent devotion. His growth under Lloyd’s stern tutelage had turned him into Lloyd’s most committed protege—or perhaps more accurately, his most ardent disciple.

“Th-That can’t be...” With her last glimmer of hope extinguished right before her eyes, Lily sank to the ground.

Freddy interrupted with two resonant claps of his hand. “Alright, alright,” he began. “Let’s get a few things straight, shall we?”

His gaze settled on Lloyd. “Let’s start with you, Lloyd. You claim Lily here kidnapped and then assaulted Chloe, correct?”

“Correct, Deputy Commander.”

“Well, that settles it,” Freddy concluded. “Arrest her. Battery’s battery—we can hardly brush it off as a family matter.”

“Wh-What?!” Lily sputtered. “Battery? On what evidence?!”

Freddy’s patience was now razor thin, and his expression hardened. “Listen, dear. Lloyd here is my subordinate. I’ve known him for years—he wouldn’t dream of harming Chloe, not in a hundred million years,” Freddy paused, glancing around the room. “Which leaves us with the question—who else in this room would want to see Chloe suffer, to have her beaten *this* severely”—his icy glare bored into Lily—“but you?”

Cornered, Lily clenched her teeth as she simmered in the mess of her own making.

“Make sure we also apprehend those two over there and everyone on the floor,” Freddy barked. “Alright, let’s get moving, people!”

At Freddy’s command, the knights moved to restrain Lily and her cohorts.

“Unhand me, you brute! How dare you touch me! I am the daughter of a margrave!”

“Lest you forget, my dear lady, I hold peerage myself; that won’t work on me,” Luke said.

Lily clicked her tongue. “This is outrageous—an abuse of power! No one in Shadaf would have batted an eye at what I did! You’re the ones in the wrong!”

“Like I care about what goes on in that backwater. Here in the capital, we have our own rules.”

“No! Unhand me—I demand you unhand me! Unhand meeeeeeeee!”

Resisting in vain to the very end, Lily was hauled away by the knights, her shrill cries echoing down the hallways.

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As the last of Lily's guard were taken away, Freddy returned to Lloyd and Chloe. "You've caused quite the stir, haven't you, Lloyd?"

"Allow me to apologize, Deputy Commander."

"No, no, don't. If you ask me, you made the right call," Freddy responded. "After all, Chloe was in genuine danger. All in all, I'm just glad we managed to intervene before things got too out of hand."

Lloyd bowed his head deeply. "Thank you, Deputy Commander. I am in your debt."

"But, I must admit, I was taken aback when—what was his name again, Ian?—arrived, breathless, saying you needed our help. That was quite the surprise."

"Thank you for arriving in haste. I'm not sure I could've handled that situation on my own."

"Yes, calling for my assistance was wise. A margrave wields considerable influence; they're not to be trifled with. Judging from how hot things got, even the city guard might have struggled to defuse the situation."

Freddy then turned his attention to Chloe. "Chloe, how are you holding up? It seems you were put through quite the ordeal."

"Oh, I'm... I'm fine," she replied. "This was just an average day for me back home."

"An average day for you?" Freddy echoed, a little stunned. "Well, you have a lot going on yourself, don't you?" He managed a wry smile before addressing them both. "In any case, we'll need to collect both your statements—after Chloe receives medical attention, of course. I'll be in the lobby. Come down when you're ready."

"Yes, sir."

With that, Freddy excused himself from the room, no doubt to grant the pair some much-needed privacy.

Alone with Lloyd, Chloe felt the tension finally begin to leave her body.

Lloyd, noticing her sudden slump, swiftly reached out to steady her. "Are you alright?"

“S-Sorry,” Chloe murmured. “I just needed to let go for a second.”

“Of course,” he acknowledged softly. “You went through a lot.”

She’d been kidnapped, beaten, and nearly returned to her family. It was only now that Lloyd, privy to her story, fully grasped the fear she must have felt.

Gently, he enfolded her in his arms. Chloe nestled into his chest and reciprocated the gesture, holding onto him just as tightly. “If I’d only gotten her earlier,” he said, “you wouldn’t have ended up like this.”

“But you did make it,” Chloe replied, her voice muffled as she shook her head against Lloyd’s chest. “You made it, and that’s all that matters.” She let out a deep breath, feeling the final vestige of tension drain from her body. “Thank you...for saving me.” Her voice was quiet, wavering from emotion.

“I’m just glad you’re safe,” he whispered.

As the gentle pressure of Lloyd’s hand graced Chloe’s head, she strengthened her hold on him in response. “Could we, um...stay like this a little longer?” she ventured.

Lloyd’s smile was soft and reassuring “I thought I told you already.” He pulled her closer. “My arms are yours, whenever you need them.”

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“Thank goodness they made it in time.”

Ian lingered outside The Hotel Revelion, watching as knights led the subdued assailants out of the lobby. Freddy soon emerged, and in response to Ian’s inquiry, assured him of Lloyd and Chloe’s well-being. Relief washed over Ian at the news.

“They should be down shortly; feel free to wait here if you wish,” Freddy added. “Thank you for your help today. You’ve done admirably.”

With a salute, Freddy departed, leaving Ian alone with his thoughts.

Ian mulled over Freddy’s suggestion. Should he wait for them? An instinctive jolt of discomfort twisted in his gut at the thought, and he quickly discarded the idea. For reasons he couldn’t quite articulate, the idea of coming face-to-face with Chloe now was almost unconscionable.

Yes, the thought of intruding on their emotional reunion was awkward, but it was more than that. A roiling agitation pulsed within him, a swirling tempest of unfamiliar feelings that stirred in his chest—a tempest he feared would erupt uncontrollably at the sight of her.

"And here I thought I'd washed myself of that particular longing..." he muttered under his breath, his words lost to the wind as he turned his back on the hotel.

Earlier in the day, when the news of Chloe's abduction had reached him, a profound and unexpected agony had stabbed at his heart. Certainly, if he thought of her merely as a friend, his heart wouldn't have revolted so violently. Yet it did, and now, in the aftermath, he couldn't help but question why.

It was in this moment of introspection that the uncomfortable truth dawned on him: the feelings for Chloe he believed he'd vanquished still stubbornly clung to him. Yet before he could fully grapple with this revelation, another memory surged forth. *Did you see where they went?!* The echo of Lloyd's frantic plea, the image of his distraught face was reproduced with startling clarity in his mind, smothering his own thoughts.

Lloyd's raw emotion, laid bare in such a distressing display, had shown the profound depth of his attachment to Chloe. Ian saw something all too familiar in it—a mirror image of his own silent affection for her. But what cut deepest, what was more excruciating than anything else, was the awareness of the undeniable truth that Chloe returned Lloyd's affections in kind.

He's so incredibly handsome! Not only that, but he's also strong, and always calm and fearless and resolute... Granted, he can be a little blunt or awkward about things at times, but if you ask me, that just adds to his charm. Above all else, he's the kindest man you'll ever meet! He even hired me when I first arrived in the capital all lost and—

Another jab of pain, different yet just as sharp, pierced Ian's chest as he remembered Chloe's gushing words. Lloyd Stewart, the renowned knight of the First Order, was held in the highest esteem in Chloe's heart. He was a man Ian felt he could never hope to rival in strength, in bravery, in kindness—in all things that seemed to matter.

And yet, in the midst of this heart-wrenching realization, a glimmer of something else flickered within him.

“Even still, I...”

He clutched a hand to his chest, as if trying to contain the unfamiliar sensation stirring within him, refusing to let it escape him. With newfound resolve flickering in his eyes, Ian set out on his solitary journey back home.

Epilogue

“That took a while, didn’t it?”

When Lloyd and Chloe had been released after giving their statements, the day had long given way to night. They strolled side by side on their moonlit path home.

“I’m just glad we were able to clarify everything,” Lloyd commented.

“You’re very right about that,” Chloe agreed.

They both exhaled deeply, a sigh of shared relief.

The authorities had accepted their version of events, clearing them of all charges. They had been free to leave—the same, however, could not be said for Lily. Not only was she facing charges of battery and unlawful detention, but her attempt to murder Lloyd was also under scrutiny. The exact extent of her impending punishment remained unclear, but at the very least, a hefty fine and a stint behind bars seemed inevitable. This was putting aside the inevitable shame and disgrace her actions would inflict upon her family.

“Lloyd, I’m so sorry,” Chloe began. “For all of this, for dragging you into my mess.”

“Pay it no mind. It was bound to happen sooner or later.”

During their discussion with the authorities, Chloe’s history had been laid bare. Her familial ties, her status as a runaway, her employment as Lloyd’s housekeeper—all were now public knowledge. Being a matter too complicated to deal with on the spot, it had been sent along to higher authorities, leaving their current status in limbo.

“Regardless, I’m confident it won’t lead to any trouble,” Lloyd added. “Legally, you’re an adult. Plus, your reasons for leaving home were entirely justifiable. I’m sure they’ll respect your circumstances and not force you back into your family’s custody.”

“That is... That may be so, but if *you* were to get in trouble for it, I...”

As Chloe's voice faltered, Lloyd gently placed a steadying hand on her back. "No need to worry about me," he reassured her, his tone steadfast. "The decisions I made, the risks I accepted when I took you in without knowing your full background—those were my own. You needn't concern yourself with my actions."

A choked laugh forced its way out of Chloe. "Oh, Lloyd, you always..." She paused, her thoughts overwhelming. *You always treat me with such tenderness, such compassion, and yet, you seem so oblivious to it.* And that, she realized, was what she cherished about him the most. Her words faded into silence, a warmth spreading through her chest like a wildflower in bloom.

"I'm always...?" Lloyd gently pressed.

"I-It's nothing." Feeling a twinge of embarrassment at her unspoken confession, Chloe attempted to steer their conversation onto safer ground. "Lloyd... About that whole 'fiancé' thing..."

"That was a bluff, of course. We haven't done anything of the sort."

"R-Right?" Chloe shot back, her voice a notch higher than usual. "Right..." Relief—then regret—swirled within her, her voice ebbing away into disappointment.

"I'd never decide something of such importance without your consent."

"That... Yes, of course..." Chloe's lips curved into a small, self-deprecating smile.

"I'm just glad my efforts paid off," Lloyd added.

"Your...efforts?" Chloe replied, a confused frown knitting her brows.

"Yesterday, upon learning about your past, I thought it prudent to take a few preventative measures should your family show up," Lloyd explained. "To that end, I took to the castle library to do some research"

"You...you did that—*today*?"

"Yes? That was this morning. As knights, we're trained to prepare for the worst. And, there's nothing worse than not having acted when you had the chance."

“I see... So that’s why you left early this morning.”

“I have to admit it wasn’t my most thought-out plan. It would have been hard to convince your family of a marriage without a ring, so I decided on the next best thing—engagement. It wasn’t ideal, but what matters is that she fell for it.” Lloyd nodded, an air of satisfaction about him.

As Lloyd spoke, Chloe’s heart burgeoned with warmth and affection. This man, Lloyd Stewart, had done so much, planned so meticulously, just for her sake. And here she was—still running, still hiding. *That’s enough.* Chloe planted her feet.

Catching on, Lloyd stopped a few steps ahead of her and turned back. “What’s wrong?”

“Lloyd, I...I love you.” The words burst forth with startling clarity and force. “When I thought I was going to be dragged away, all I could think about was that I might never see you again, never get a chance to tell you how I feel. That thought alone almost made me wish I’d die right there, because then at least I wouldn’t hurt so much.”

Her words flowed as if a deep well of unprocessed sentiment had been uncorked. “I’m in love with you—I adore you. When you’re beside me, when I hear your voice, when you caress my head or hold me close, my cheeks burn and my heart races. It’s...it’s almost unbearable, the way you make me feel. I love you, so very much.”

Her face flushed with heat, her heart pounded in her ears, but even then her feelings for Lloyd surged. “Even all alone, you’re the only thing I think about. ‘Is he training well today? When will he come home? What might he want for dinner?’ You’re always, always on my mind. I want to spend every moment with you, to never be apart from you, I...”

“I’m in love with you, Lloyd.”

Her confession hung in the air, naked and raw. Chloe gazed up at Lloyd, her eyes filled equally with hope and fear. “I’d...like to know what you think...”

A yawning silence spread between them. Lloyd raised a hand to his mouth, his eyes taking on a thoughtful intensity as he pondered over her revelation.

“I’m in love with you too, Chloe.” His confession emerged, clear and confident. “I...struggle with the words. It is a challenge to be specific or precise about this affection and its depths, and so I restrain myself, rather than risk faltering. I suspect you’ve felt much the same. Yet I am certain of two things: I feel a great need to be beside you, and I can no longer imagine my life without you in it—I think that must be what love is.”

His own cheeks bloomed into an uncharacteristic blush, and for the first time, Chloe noticed his breathing turn shallow and uneven.

“That is...what I think,” he concluded.
Without warning, tears pooled in Chloe’s eyes. She remained still, silent for a moment, but then she broke out into loud, soulful sobbing.

“Ch-Chloe? What’s wrong?” Lloyd inquired, perplexed. “Are you hurt? Do your injuries ache?

“No—no!” Chloe choked out, her hands fluttering uselessly at the tears streaming down her face. “I’m just so...” Her words hitched with a sniffle. “I’m just so happy.”

As if driven by instinct, Lloyd pulled Chloe into his arms, cradling her as if she were the world’s most precious jewel. “I’m sorry. That should have come from me,” he admitted, his voice carrying a note of regret. “I’d recognized my feelings for some time, but I couldn’t voice them. I was too...afraid. I convinced myself long ago that I was unfit to love or be loved—that it was something that happened to other people and, at best, would simply pass through me without remark. That way of thinking left me with few words of my own to say on the matter, and even less of a notion of how to marshal them.”

Chloe looked up, her eyes filled with concern; Lloyd’s face was drawn into a mournful, agonized grimace. “Did you feel that way...because of your past?”

Lloyd gave a heavy nod. “Yes.”

“I... I see...”

Chloe responded by wrapping her arms tighter around Lloyd, her slender fingers clutching the fabric of his uniform. “That’s all right. You managed to say it now, didn’t you?” Her words were a balm to his tortured soul.

“Right... Yes, you’re right...”

“Someday, when you’re ready to talk about it, I’ll be here to lend an ear. I’ll wait for you, no matter how long it takes.”

“Of course. Someday...”

Their words dwindled into the hush around them, leaving only the physical warmth of their embrace between them. After a moment at once without end and over too soon, they began to gently detach from each other.

“That was...a little embarrassing, wasn’t it?” Chloe muttered.

“My face feels like it’s on fire...” Lloyd responded.

Chloe released a soft, delicate laugh. “Me too. And my heart—it’s beating so fast.”

Her laughter was infectious, and Lloyd couldn’t help but mirror her joy with a smile of his own.

With the distance between them no longer a chasm of unspoken feelings, but bridged with the courage of confession and acceptance, Chloe gazed up at Lloyd. “Let’s go *home*, shall we?”

“Yes, let’s.” Lloyd extended his hand towards Chloe, which she seized without a second thought.

She let out a small giggle, her eyes twinkling in the soft light. “This is our first time holding hands like this.”

“I suppose it is.”

“Our first ‘first’ of many, don’t you think?”

“Indeed. I’m looking forward to it.”

With that, they set off, their path marked out by the light of the moon at its fullest. The way weaved through the dark, opening onto the half-light of the dawn to come—a path to be walked hand in hand, into a single future made for two.

Chloe Ardennes, once a margrave’s daughter, now a free woman of the capital, thrived in the presence of the man she cherished most.



Afterword

I managed to avoid writing an afterword in the first volume, thanks to page number constraints, but it seems I'm not so lucky this time. Here we are, volume two, my first afterword, here we go.

That being said, while I do have you all as my captive audience, it's not as if I have some secret manifesto to shove down your throats, or some earth-shattering wisdom that'll guide you towards a healthier, more fulfilling life.

If you ever find yourself at Cafe Renoir, the Ikebukuro station location near the east exit, and spot an unassuming great ape nursing a cup of black coffee and a serving of strawberry shortcake, all while murmuring and churning their mind trying to come up with something worthwhile to write here—that's me! Come say hi—or well, maybe just do it in your mind.

Now, my first game plan was to stuff this afterword with nonsensical rambling, but that wasn't getting me anywhere. My manuscript still remains as pristine as the fluffy white sheet of clouds viewed from the window of an airplane cruising far above—and this afterword's deadline is nipping at my heels. Yikes, I'm freaking out!

Then it hit me—I could just fill up this space with keyboard smash gibberish like 'asfiawejfiawef,' you know, the way you do when you're playing an online social game and can't be bothered to name your characters? But then I thought about you all forking over 1,000 yen to read this, and I felt a bit guilty. I mean, I'm already eating up your precious money and time, so I figured I'd better not push my luck.

So here goes nothing. I'll write an afterword worthy of *Safe and Sound Vol. 2*, an opus that will move you to tears, shatter your heart into a million pieces, and send tremors of joy coursing through your body—hey, hey, I'm kidding! I'll take this seriously, promise. Please, put away your pitchforks. I'm sorry!

Ahem. Hi, I'm Fuyu Aoki, the author.

If we're just meeting for the first time, hey there! If you've been with me for a

while, hey again! I'm excited to have you here.

As I mentioned previously, this is the first afterword I'm doing for this series! And that's not the only first: this is the first volume two I've done—ever!

As a writer, there are several milestones that we all dream of: our first reprint, first manga adaptation, first anime adaptation, and so on. But landing that first 'second volume' is definitely the very first stepping stone towards all those other dreams.

When my editor gave me the thumbs-up for a second volume, I swear I heard bugles in my head at finally being able to take that first step. Riding that emotional high, I got to work, pounding out Lloyd and Chloe's story as fast as my brain could dish it out. So, how'd it go? Did you all enjoy volume two?

A lot happened—from Lloyd's confrontation with Luke, to Ian's puppy love for Chloe, to Lily's dramatic arrival in the capital. The volume was definitely a rollercoaster. If you enjoyed it, even just a bit, it'll have made all those late nights in Cafe Renoir, typing until I had tendonitis, worth it.

Personally, the scene where Chloe reveals her past to Lloyd and cries her heart out is my favorite. In almost every story I write, someone has to cry. There's just something so uniquely vulnerable and human about the moment tears start flowing that I just can't get enough of. It's beautiful. You can count on me to make even more characters cry in the future. What's that you say? That sounds misleading? I stand by what I said.

I can't wait to see that scene in manga form—yep, you heard that right, *Safe and Sound* is getting a manga adaptation! Please, please check it out when it starts streaming and when it hits the shelves. Manga Chloe will be the absolute cutest, I guarantee it!

Look at that, I even snuck in a little self-promotion. Okay, just a few more lines to go, perfect for some acknowledgments.

First of all, a huge thanks to my editor, F-san. Without their brutally candid feedback since volume one, this book wouldn't be as half as good.

Minori Aritani, the illustrator for the series, thank you for breathing life into my characters with your gorgeous and adorable art. Chloe's expression on the

vol. 2 cover? It’s everything.

I also want to thank K-san and all my friends for your great advice while I was writing. Thanks to my parents for their support from all the way in the countryside, and all the readers who have supported me unwaveringly since the web novel days. And last but not least, a massive thanks to everyone who helped bring this book to life.

Thank you!

I hope to see you all in volume three.

Fuyu Aoki