

Fuyu Aoki

Illust. Minori Aritani

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Safe & Sound
— in the Arms of an —
ELITE KNIGHT

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"And you know, Miss
Chloe—I, too, find myself
quite smitten with you."

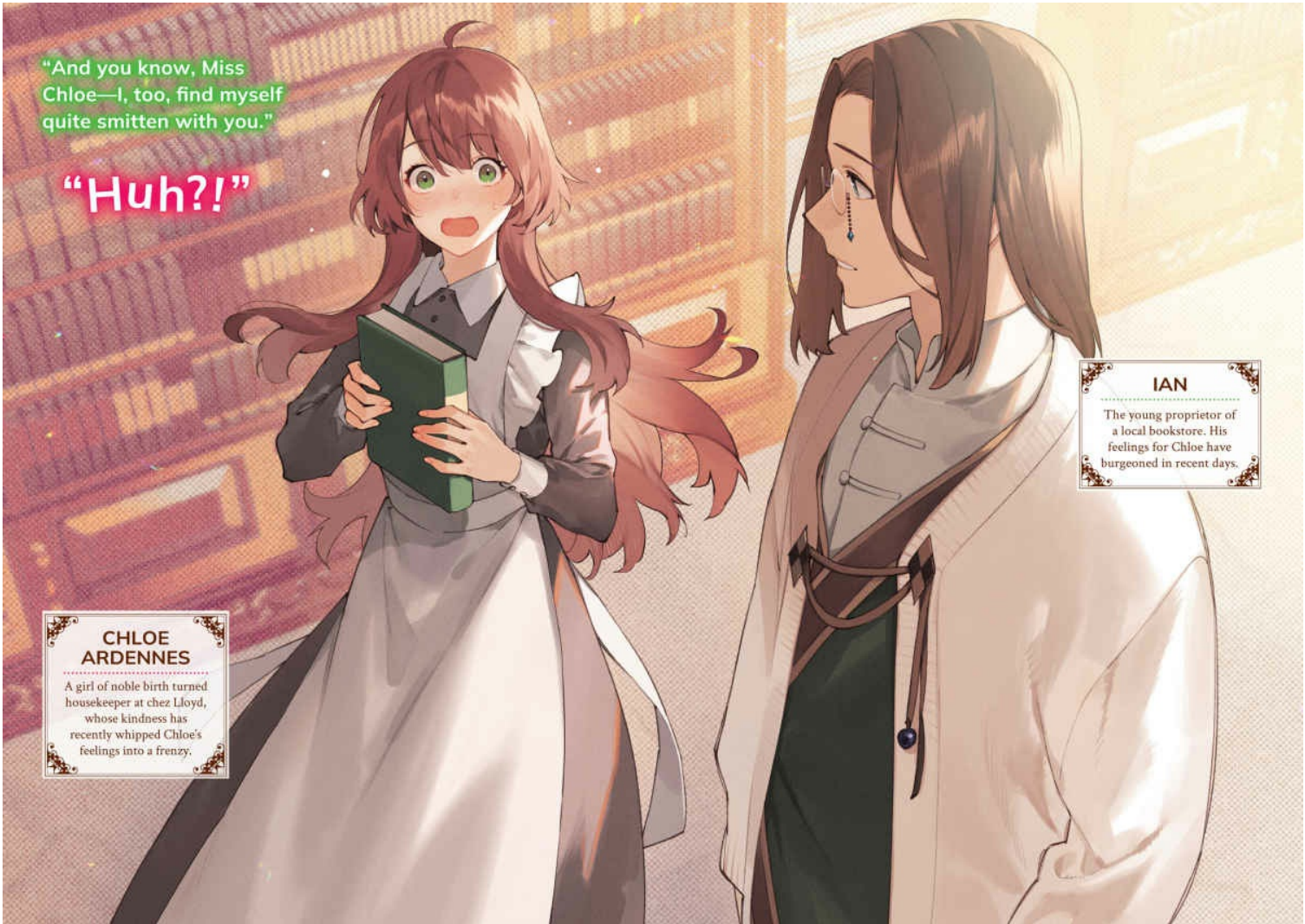
"Huh?!"

**CHLOE
ARDENNES**

A girl of noble birth turned
housekeeper at chez Lloyd,
whose kindness has
recently whipped Chloe's
feelings into a frenzy.

IAN

The young proprietor of
a local bookstore. His
feelings for Chloe have
burgeoned in recent days.







“Chloe.”

“Yes?”

“Will you marry me?”

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Safe & Sound in the
Arms of an Elite Knight

Prologue

“...and then, the princess and the prince got married, and the two lived happily ever after.”

In a cozy room lit only by the soft glow of candlelight, a young woman in a servant’s dress, a picture book in hand, read to a little girl sitting in bed.

“The end.”

She closed the picture book with a gentle snap and turned to the girl. The young child’s eyes sparkled, her eyes wide with the magic of the story. Then came a small tip of her head, a quirk of her brow. Had a question crept into her mind?

“Shirley, I have a question,” she said, her voice tinged with curiosity.

“What’s on your mind, young lady?” the young woman, Shirley, replied with a smile.

“What does ‘married’ mean?”

Shirley blinked, taken aback by the question of the young girl, Chloe. She thought for a moment, choosing her words with care. “Well, marriage, you see... It’s a bit complicated for your age, but let’s see. How should I explain this...”

She lapsed into thought for another moment; then, suddenly, she stuck an index finger out into the air—an idea had struck.

“A marriage is like a special promise. It’s when you find someone you love so much, someone you can’t imagine life without, and you promise to be with them always.”

“Wow!” Chloe gasped with childlike wonder. She gave a big nod of her head, as if it all made sense. “Then, when I grow up, I want to marry you, Shirley!” Her voice was earnest, her eyes shining with sincerity. “Because I don’t love anyone more than you!”

Shirley couldn't help but laugh, touched by the child's innocence. "That's very sweet of you, young lady."

Gently, she reached out to stroke Chloe's hair, causing the girl to giggle and squint her eyes in delight.

"But the love you feel for me is different from the love in marriage," Shirley said softly. "There are many kinds of love, you see."

Chloe frowned slightly, her brow furrowing in confusion. "I don't understand."

"One day you will, young lady. One day," Shirley said, her arms crossed, a wry smile playing on her lips. "When you meet someone who you can't imagine life without, someone you want to be with forever..." Her voice trailed off, full of a wistful longing that seemed to reach beyond the confines of the room. It was almost a prayer, a whisper of hope lingering in the air. Then, slipping into a smile as tender as a mother's embrace, with eyes glistening with unspoken dreams, she concluded, "Marry that person, Chloe. And may you live a long, happy life together."

Chloe gasped.

Her eyes flew open as she woke to the comfort of her blanket and the relentless morning sun sneaking a ray through her curtains. The morning chorus of birds and the familiar hum of early bustle drifted in from outside. She sat up slowly, her mind still clinging to the threads of her dream.

In the time since she had left her home for the capital, Chloe had transformed. Where she had once been frail and unkempt, regular meals and rest had sculpted her into a vision of young beauty. Her features were delicate, yet defined: sleepy, round eyes; a slender nose; and waist-length beige-blond hair with the slightest hint of pink, tousled from sleep but still lustrous and untangled. Her skin was as white as snow, pristine other than a small mark on her cheek. Though slim, her figure spoke of newfound health and vitality.

"A dream," she muttered, her voice still thick with sleep. Unlike most mornings, where dreams faded upon waking, this one lingered. It was an old memory from her home, Shadaf, a border region of the Kingdom of Rose—Shirley, her beloved handmaiden, had read her a picture book.

“When, one day, you meet someone who you can’t imagine life without...” she recited, clinging to the memory as though it were a precious jewel.

“Someone you want to be with forever...”

But as she reached the heart of the line, a warmth rose up from within her. Her hands flew to her face, as if to hold back the burgeoning emotions, as if something might happen to her if she were to say the last part out loud.

Before she could, however, there came a knock on the door.

“Chloe, are you awake?” called a familiar, muffled voice.

“Y-Yes, I am!” she responded, a bit too quickly.

The door swung open to reveal the voice’s owner: Lloyd. Her heart began to race at the sight of his formidable frame. He towered over her by two heads, his robust physique a testament to years of discipline. His features were striking—a strong, chiseled nose, lips set in a firm line, highlighted only by his usual impassive expression. His jet-black hair, cut in a no-nonsense style, somehow managed to look both imposing and inviting. Lloyd Stewart, the young knight of the First Order of the Knights Rose, was a man whose gallantry never failed to draw admiring glances wherever he went.

“Something on my face, Chloe?” Lloyd asked.

Chloe’s reaction was immediate; she jerked her head away, her cheeks burning.

“Chloe?”

Finally, she mustered the courage to speak. “I-It’s nothing—absolutely nothing!”

His response came quick, a touch of genuine concern in his voice. “That doesn’t sound like ‘absolutely nothing’ to me.”

Chloe’s heart thrummed, a drumbeat too loud, too early. She took a deep breath, bracing herself to face Lloyd once more. As she did, she noticed something distinctly out of place.

Lloyd was in his uniform.

Uniform? Not his pajamas? Chloe's groggy morning brain complained. Each morning, like clockwork, Lloyd would appear in his pajamas, ready for the day she would meticulously curate. She would rise before him, prepare a hearty breakfast, pack his lunch, and ensure the house was in order. But now, here he stood, in the attire he wore only when he was about to leave.

The implication behind this newfound reality struck Chloe with the force of a tidal wave. Her face paled.

Lloyd, noticing her distress, sheepishly scratched his cheek. "Sorry," he began, a hint of awkwardness in his voice. "I came to wake you, but you were sleeping so peacefully, I thought it best to let you rest a bit longer."

Chloe's piercing cry, distraught and desperate, reverberated through the house.

Chapter One: The Two Who Became Lovers

This single detached home nestled in the prestigious North District of Liberta, the royal capital of the Kingdom of Rose, was Knight Lloyd Stewart's home and the housekeeper Chloe Ardennes's place of work.

Chloe stood in front of the dining table, bowing deeply as if to embed herself into the wood. "I'm so terribly sorry!" she blurted out. "It's an inexcusable lapse for a housekeeper to oversleep. Please, forgive me. I'll make this right! I'll do whatever you—"

Lloyd, seated across from her, raised a hand to gently interrupt her rambling. "Chloe, stop," he said firmly. "It's all right. We all make mistakes. If I were to take issue with you over something as trivial as waking up late, it would never end. I'm not upset, so please."

Slowly, Chloe lifted her head, her expression akin to a startled animal. Her eyes seemed to ask, *Are you truly not upset with me?*

"It's all right," Lloyd repeated. "I managed breakfast on my own and was just about to leave for work." He paused, his voice gentle. "And Chloe, I would never reprimand you for something like this. You should know that by now."

"R-Right," Chloe stammered, a wave of relief washing over her. "Of course you wouldn't..." *Of course he wouldn't*, she repeated internally. *Lloyd isn't the type to get upset over a small mistake like this. I know this, and yet...*

Chloe clenched her fist tight in front of her, recognizing the source of her deep-seated fear. It wasn't Lloyd; it was the shadows of her past in Shadaf, where she was mistreated by her family, the house of Margrave Ardennes, because of the birthmark on her back.

Chloe's birth coincided with a series of famines and deaths in her family. Her mother, Isabella, deemed her a "cursed child" and subjected her to relentless abuse growing up. Verbal threats, physical violence, treatment akin to that of a dirty rag—she endured it all silently until a life-threatening encounter with her

knife-wielding mother spurred her to flee to Liberta. It was here she met Lloyd Stewart, the kind knight who had offered her the position of housekeeper. In the three months since, Chloe had begun to reclaim the life and confidence stripped from her, thanks to Lloyd's kindness and her new acquaintances in the capital. The path to full recovery, however, was long. Despite all her improvements (when she'd first arrived, her apologies left her prostrate; now, they were still frequent, but verbal), the guilt she'd been trained to feel over minor mistakes still reared its ugly head every so often. She had resolved to change, but it seemed the pace at which it would happen was out of her hands.

Lloyd remarked with a hint of concern, "It's unusual for you to oversleep."

Chloe felt a lump form in her throat. "Well, you see, the reason for that is..." she paused, gathering the courage to say the words. Then, in a rush of honesty, it all spilled out. "I got so caught up in the book I was reading I didn't realize how late it was!"

Reading was the one cherished hobby Chloe had found for herself since coming to the capital. Each evening, as if it were a treasured ritual, she would be found curled up on the sofa, eagerly delving into a new purchase from Ian's bookstore resting on her lap. Her reason for oversleeping was, indeed, very much in character.

However, Lloyd raised an eyebrow skeptically. "We read together last night, and I recall you retiring to your room at a decent hour."

"Where I continued to read..." Chloe said sheepishly. "The story was so captivating I couldn't put it down."

"I see," Lloyd responded, his tone softening into understanding. "I, too, find myself lost in books at times. I can relate to that feeling."

Observing Lloyd's uniquely charming pose—his arms crossed, nodding slightly—Chloe felt another rush of warmth to her cheeks.

"Chloe?" Lloyd's voice pulled her from her thoughts.

"Wh-What is it?" she stammered.

"Your face is quite red. You don't have a fever, do you?"

Lloyd leaned forward, concern etched on his features. He extended a hand towards her forehead, but Chloe quickly turned her head away.

“Chloe?” Lloyd asked again, more hesitantly this time.

“I’m fine, really. The picture of health. Especially after such a good night’s rest, thanks to you.”

“I struggle to see the correlation there, but you’re certain? There’s nothing bothering you?”

“Yes, I’m certain. Nothing at all. I’m the same old Chloe as always,” she insisted, trying to sound convincing.

“The same old...? No, something *is* wrong, isn’t there...” Lloyd stopped himself midsentence, his gazing searching hers. A silent, charged moment passed between them. Then, with a tenderness that startled her, he gently caressed the mark on her cheek. “It looks a lot better now.”

“Yes. It could’ve been much worse, if not for you,” Chloe murmured, her voice barely above a whisper.

As Lloyd’s fingers traced the mark on her cheek, a battle scar from recent days, Chloe winced slightly. Despite the healing, it still ached.

“That’s good to hear,” Lloyd said tenderly.

Suddenly, he stood up.

“Well, I should be going.”

Chloe quickly rose to her feet. “Right, of course. It’s almost that time, isn’t it?”

As they made their way to the door, Chloe spoke up again, her voice tinged with regret. “Again, I’m really sorry about this morning. Because of me, you haven’t got your lunch.”

Lloyd laced up a boot. “Nothing to worry about there. I’ll make do. And I’ll be back at the usual time this evening.”

“Yes! I’ll more than make up for it at dinner!” Chloe declared, her determination evident as she tapped her chest confidently.

“I’m looking forward to it,” Lloyd said, a faint smile gracing his face. He

opened his mouth again as if he wanted to add something more, but then seemed to change his mind, shaking his head slightly. “All right then,” he said instead.

“Have a good day at work, Lloyd! And be careful—don’t hurt yourself!” Chloe called out after him.

With that, Lloyd left for work. As the door swung to a close, Chloe slumped to the floor, her facade crumbling. She buried her face in her knees, her voice was a mix of frustration and self-reproach as she murmured, “‘Same old Chloe as always,’ my foot.”

She knew it—there had been nothing “usual” about her lately. Her words, her actions, everything felt off. She was convinced Lloyd noticed it too, as this wasn’t the first time she’d behaved out of character recently. Despite this, Lloyd chose not to probe too deeply, and as a result, the both of them chose to wallow in their respective confusion—it was preferable to the potentially embarrassing truths they’d both face airing things out.

“Oh, what do I do?” Chloe lamented softly. “I can’t even look him in the eye...”

Peeking through the gap between her knees was a face as flushed as a ripe apple.



It’d been three days since that fateful night, a turning point that profoundly altered both Chloe’s and Lloyd’s lives and their relationship. Reflecting on it, Chloe realized just how tumultuous that day had been.

On that day, Chloe’d had a harrowing encounter. Her sister, Lily, having traveled from Shadaf to attend a soiree in the capital, had found her. Lily kidnapped Chloe, dragging her to a hotel room, where she subjected her to a brutal assault. The mark on Chloe’s right cheek was a grim souvenir from that cruel episode. Chloe was moments away from being dragged back to Shadaf when Lloyd intervened, rescuing her in the nick of time.

Later that same evening, amid the emotional upheaval, Chloe and Lloyd had confessed their feelings to each other. “*I’m in love with you, Lloyd,*” Chloe had

admitted, her heart laid bare. To her relief and joy, Lloyd had reciprocated. *"I'm in love with you too, Chloe."* Their mutual confessions had unlocked something profound between them. Words long unspoken had been shared, and from them, a conjoined love blossomed.

Now, they were lovers.

"That was all well and good, but..." Chloe mumbled on the living room sofa, a cushion clutched tightly in her embrace. "Now that we're a couple, what are we supposed to..."

The thought was too much for her. With a soft *poomf*, Chloe's face once again disappeared into the cushion, her mind a whirl of emotions and uncertainties about this new chapter in their relationship.

Ever since she arrived, Chloe's relationship with Lloyd had been strictly professional. He was her employer, and she was his devoted servant. This clear distinction had allowed Chloe to control the feelings she harbored for Lloyd. But now, with the boundaries blurred, her mind was constantly caught in a whirlwind of thoughts about him. The mere sight of his face, the sound of his voice, and even the lightest touch all sent her heart racing and a warm flush to her cheeks. Alas, what was a girl to do? Chloe's past in Shadaf had offered her no opportunities to explore romance. Lloyd was her first love, and with that came a flurry of uncertainties and dilemmas. How should she behave around him now?

"No, Chloe, focus!" she admonished herself, vigorously shaking her head to clear the distracting thoughts. Despite their newfound relationship, she was still Lloyd's housekeeper. She couldn't allow her romantic daydreams to interfere with her duties—not any more than they already had.

Her late rise this morning hadn't solely been due to staying up late reading. After closing the pages, Chloe had found herself restless, unable to sleep. She'd tossed and turned, the image of Lloyd engrossed in his reading lingering in her mind, disrupting her peace. Just thinking about it now made her face burn up again.

Sitting up straight, Chloe gave her cheeks a light clap. "This won't do," she whispered to herself. Then she stood up and took a deep breath. After coaxing

her heart to slow, Chloe set her mind to the tasks at hand: sweeping, laundry, a trip to the market, and preparing dinner. Today, she would focus on her work, her way of showing love in the life they shared.



Chloe managed to finish all her chores before noon, and soon she was out the door, heading towards a familiar market square. Today, besides procuring ingredients for dinner, she had one other important mission to complete.

As she navigated through the bustling market, a familiar voice called out to her. “Chloe, dear, it’s so good to see you!”

Chloe turned, a smile touching her lips. “Hello, Miss Ciel!” she greeted, bowing her head respectfully. It was her first visit to Ciel’s stall since the harrowing incident, and the familiarity of it brought a sense of comfort.

Ciel’s face, however, clouded with concern as her eyes found the mark on Chloe’s cheek. “Oh, Chloe!” Hurriedly, she asked someone to take over the register as she rushed out from behind the counter to Chloe’s side. She peered closely at the wound, her expression conveying deep sympathy. “Look what happened to your pretty face. Does it hurt much?”

“I’m fine, really,” Chloe reassured her quickly. “It’s a bit tender, but it’s healing well. The doctor believes it won’t leave a scar.”

Chloe recalled the day after the ordeal when Lloyd had insisted on taking her to a doctor. Thankfully, the treatment she received had been effective, and her wounds were healing steadily.

Ciel let out a sigh of relief. “Oh, Chloe. You have no idea how glad I am to hear that.”

Chloe chose that moment to bow her head deeply. “Miss Ciel, I wanted to thank you sooner but hadn’t had the chance. Lloyd told me how you and the townspeople helped find me. I owe you so much.”

Three days earlier, in this very market square, Lloyd had frantically sought information on Chloe’s whereabouts. It was Ciel’s initiative that had rallied the community, leading to the swift gathering of clues about Chloe’s location. Their collective effort had pinpointed the hotel where Lily was staying, setting the

stage for Chloe's dramatic rescue.

"Ah, so the young man's name is Lloyd," Ciel murmured to herself, her lips curling into a knowing smile. "A fine name indeed."

Chloe, undeterred by Ciel's musings, pressed on earnestly, "If it hadn't been for you, Miss Ciel, who knows where I would be right now. Truly, I am in your debt."

Indeed, that other "important mission" for visiting the market this afternoon had been to convey her heartfelt gratitude to Ciel. However, Ciel, ever humble, dismissed Chloe's thanks with a gentle wave. "Nonsense, dear. You'd do the same for me. I'm just glad to see you safe."

Then, with a cautious glance around, Ciel leaned closer, ensuring their conversation remained private. "By the way, Chloe, a little birdie told me you've got noble blood in your veins."

Chloe's heart skipped a beat. "Wh-Where did you hear that?!"

"Don't be counting ol' Ciel out yet, my dear. I've got my sources," Ciel replied knowingly. "With everything that's happened, I'm not exactly an unrelated third party anymore. I thought it prudent to do a little bit of digging."

Kidnapping, wrongful confinement, battery, not to mention obstruction of a knight from the famed First Order in the line of duty—Lily's actions had attracted considerable attention. In the aftermath, even the details of Chloe's abuse at the hands of her family had come to light, kicking off an official investigation into the matter. Currently, a hearing with both Lily and their mother, Isabella, was scheduled to take place—though at an indeterminate date, as they yet awaited a response to the summons sent to Shadaf.

"And that lady, Lily. She's your sister?" Ciel inquired further.

It seemed Ciel had left no stone unturned. *Right, she's the director of a top trading firm*, Chloe reminded herself wryly. Realizing the extent of Ciel's knowledge, she gave a resigned nod.

"Aha!" Ciel said with a look of satisfaction. "I'd always thought you were more than just a common girl. Too pretty for that."

“M-Me?” Chloe stammered, her gaze dropping. “Not at all...” she said, her eyes falling to the ground. Though Lloyd had worked hard to boost her self-esteem, she was still unaccustomed to such compliments.

A moment of silence followed, during which Chloe’s expression softened into one of apology. “I didn’t mean to keep it a secret from you,” she said quietly, still not meeting Ciel’s eyes.

“Oh, nonsense, sweetie!” Ciel said, emphatically dismissing her apology. “With that piece of work as your sister, I can understand why you’d be cautious. People don’t just flee to the capital for a fresh start without good reason.”

Chloe hesitantly nodded again. She had valid reasons for her secrecy; she knew she did, but the weight of her past—the abuse, the life-threatening encounter with her own mother—it all felt too burdensome for casual conversation.

Picking up on her discomfort, Ciel smoothly steered the conversation down a new path. “Well, we all have our secrets. We wouldn’t truly be us without them, am I right?” she said with a big smile. The smile slowly slid off her face, and Ciel’s gaze fell to the floor as well. “Chloe, I’m truly sorry, I really am. If it weren’t for me and my big mouth, none of this would have happened to ya.”

At this, Chloe’s eyes shot up. “Oh, no, no, no, Miss Ciel, please don’t think that way!” she implored, fervently waving her arms dismissively in front of her. “You couldn’t have known about me or my sister, and even if you had, considering the circumstances, I don’t think you could’ve done anything differently, even if you wanted to! This is not your fault nor mine! It’s just something that happened!”

Ciel looked at Chloe with deep appreciation. “Oh, what did I do to deserve you? You’re too kind, Chloe. But my pride just won’t accept that. I’m a merchant, and us merchants believe in making things right! Today, whatever you need from my stall is on me. Take your time—pick out anything and everything you want!”

Chloe was mortified. “No, no! Absolutely not!” She was being a little harsh, but she knew that if she failed to show a little teeth and put her foot down here, Ciel would no doubt insist on giving away too much.

After a brief but spirited haggling, Chloe managed to argue it down to just a few complimentary items. “All right, now that’s settled, what do you have for me today, Miss Ciel?”

“Why, I’d never thought you’d ask! Today, we got in the most amazing...”



“Haaaaaah!”

Meanwhile, a sonorous war cry split the air over the arena at the First Order’s training complex. The source of the cry, a fearsome knight known as Daz, launched an aggressive attack, his wooden sword descending swiftly towards Lloyd.

But Lloyd, with his exceptional foresight, sidestepped the blow with pinpoint precision. Where he had stood moments before, Daz’s sword sliced only through air.

Daz, frustrated, clicked his tongue loudly and reset his stance, ready to strike again. A heavyweight fighter, Daz always possessed considerable strength behind his strikes. It was only recently, at Lloyd’s suggestion, that he’d started to focus on enhancing his agility and stamina, significantly boosting his overall combat effectiveness.

The air hummed with the *whoosh* of Daz’s sword, now striking and swaying at a pace that belied his bulky frame. His opponent, however, was still Lloyd, the renowned Ebon Reaper of the First Order, and Daz’s newfound speed alone was not about to help his sword find its mark.

Or at least, it wouldn’t have. Normally.

To an onlooker, Lloyd appeared completely at ease, dancing around Daz’s sword with grace, but beneath his composed exterior...

Strange, I can’t seem to focus...

Lloyd’s mind was in turmoil. Usually, he was a master of combat, perfectly attuned to his opponent’s every move. He would observe their gaze, analyze their swordsmanship, gauge their movements, and even listen to their breathing—all to outmaneuver them with precision. This heightened awareness

was his ultimate weapon, a mode of fighting that was only available to someone raised to be a soldier, almost instinctual.

That instinct today, however, was clouded by the memory of Chloe as she bade him farewell this morning.

Have a good day at work, Lloyd!

Her bright and cheerful voice reverberated with startling clarity in his head, slowing his reflexes, weighing down his body, dulling his mind. But as he clung to that memory, a more immediate, gruffer shout snapped him back to reality. “Eyes on the prize, Lloyd!”

He’d lost his focus, and Daz’s sword was already bearing down on him.

I can’t dodge it.

In an instant decision, Lloyd raised his sword to block Daz’s ferocious strike.

Crack!

Pain shot through his arms as the two swords collided, the impact resonating deep within him. His feet dug into the sandy arena floor as he struggled with all his might not to buckle under Daz’s powerful assault. As he pushed back, trying to regain his footing, Daz’s superior weight bore down on him relentlessly.

A triumphant grin spread across Daz’s face. His strike was calculated, and with both of Lloyd’s arms occupied, Daz unleashed a powerful kick to Lloyd’s flank.

Lloyd grunted in pain and was sent reeling backwards. He tumbled to the ground, his foothold lost. He hastily tried to straighten his form to readopt his guard—but it was too late. Daz had already closed the gap.

“I’ve got you now!” he bellowed. His sword carved a vicious trajectory towards Lloyd. At the last possible moment, the sword halted abruptly; then came down to a gentle tap on Lloyd’s shoulder.

A hush fell over the arena.

A stunned moment passed. Two moments. Then...

“Daz wins!” the referee’s voice boomed, igniting an uproar in the amphitheater.

“Now that’s what I’m talking about!” Daz roared. He paced triumphantly around the arena, fists pumping in the air, reveling in his rare victory over the Ebon Reaper.

In the wake of Daz’s victory, his fellow knights gathered around him, their cheers filling the training complex. “Let’s go, Daz!” one exclaimed. “That’s Lloyd you just beat!”

“Well, I’ll be darned,” another added, clearly impressed. “Seems you aren’t just all bulk after all.”

Daz responded with a loud laugh. “Who’s bulky, huh?” His tone was playful, basking in the rare moment of triumph.

Lloyd, still sitting on the arena floor and watching the scene, let out a soft sigh. His face was as impassive as always—marred by the slight pout that had formed on his lips.

Was someone upset they’d lost, perhaps?

Before he could dwell on the defeat, the crowd’s attention turned to him. “Good show, Lloyd!” one knight encouraged.

“Ah, don’t let it get to ya. Daz just had the upper hand that time,” another chimed in.

“Even the Ebon Reaper has his off days, am I right?”

It was a circle of warm encouragement and supportive comments for a duel well-fought—a scene that would’ve been unthinkable just a short while ago. His colleagues used to keep their distance, hesitant to engage with him. But a recent event had shifted that dynamic.

Daz then stepped towards Lloyd, extending a hand. “Can you stand?”

“Yeah,” Lloyd replied quietly, accepting the hand and pulling himself up. “Thanks. Those were some good moves back there.”

Daz’s laughter boomed at the compliment. “A fluke is all that was! I wasn’t sure that last move would work, but hey, it did!”

“Choosing to follow up with a kick in that position was indeed risky,” Lloyd remarked. “But you controlled yourself well.”

Daz slapped Lloyd on the back, grinning widely. “All thanks to you and your training regimen! Who knew mobility was so important, huh? Watch out, world—Big Man Daz isn’t just about strength anymore!”

Watching this, the other knights fell into their own hushed conversation. “Daz has been keeping up with Lloyd’s hellish training regimen?”

Another nodded. “He’s got my respect for that.”

“Anyone would improve after going through all that,” a third agreed.

Since bridging the gap with his fellow knights, Lloyd had taken a more active role in their development, offering tailored guidance to each. His intentions were noble, aiming to bolster the strength of the Order. It was just...his training regimens were notoriously rigorous, often daunting enough to intimidate even seasoned knights at first glance.

Daz, with his already formidable physique and endurance, was the sole knight who consistently kept pace with Lloyd’s demanding course.

Amid the postduel conversations, a new voice chimed in. “Master Lloyd! Here, a towel!”

Short, impeccably trimmed platinum blond hair. Striking amber eyes. The fresh academy graduate and First Order cadet Luke Gimul held out a cold towel. Slightly shorter than Lloyd, Luke stood straight in his immaculately maintained uniform.

“Thanks, Luke,” Lloyd said, taking the offered towel.

“And should you need anything else, just let me know. I’m here to serve!” Luke exclaimed, his eyes sparkling with adoration.

Lloyd nodded. “I appreciate it, but I’m fine.”

Luke had once been a rival of Lloyd’s, their conflict coming to a head when Luke challenged Lloyd to a duel for Chloe’s affection. After Lloyd’s decisive victory, Luke had shifted his stance, pledging his unwavering loyalty to Lloyd and becoming his most dedicated follower.

Luke Gimul, once a formidable adversary, now seemed more like a devoted servant. As these thoughts floated through Lloyd’s mind, so, too, did Chloe’s

words after his victory over Luke. *I...I knew you would win*, she had said with such sincerity, such clarity.

Not again, Lloyd thought, a tinge of frustration creeping in. *I'm on duty*, he reminded himself, trying to shake off the distracting thoughts, but to no avail. To his dismay, Chloe's image would persist, occupying his mind just a little while longer.



"Color me surprised, Lloyd. When was the last time you lost a match?"

Lunchtime. Lloyd was nibbling away at a dry meal bar when Freddy approached with a teasing remark.

"I apologize, Vice Commander," Lloyd replied in complete earnestness. "My concentration wavered during the duel. It was a lapse on my part, and it won't happen again."

"No, it's not all that serious," Freddy replied with an amused smile, quickly waving Lloyd off before he dropped to the floor and gave him fifty.

Vice Commander Freddy, despite his striking good looks that could mislead many into mistaking him for a playboy, was actually a dedicated family man—a fact Lloyd knew well.

"We all have our off days, Lloyd. Honestly, I'm just surprised it took you so long to get yours. Besides, Daz's win is proof he's improving. Thanks to your training, no less. You should be proud of that."

Despite Freddy's encouraging words, Lloyd's mood did not improve.

He'd lost. Against Daz, no less. Lloyd's combat record, though laden with far more victories than defeats, was by no means spotless. He'd entertained losses before, but those had been against Freddy, against the commander, against the people that stood at the top of this organization. This time, it had been against Daz. No matter how hard he'd been training, the raw difference in strength was such that Lloyd couldn't imagine Daz ever coming close to touching him. And yet, he had.

No. It's impossible, Lloyd concluded. He hadn't lost to Daz today. He'd lost to

himself.

“You know, Lloyd,” Freddy said, his tone shifting to a more serious note. “I hope it’s just my imagination, but you’ve seemed a tad slower these past few days, actually. Not just today. Really just a tad, though.”

Lloyd tensed. His fleeting hope that no one else had noticed his decline had been dashed, just like that. *It’s not just your imagination, Vice Commander.*

It was just as Freddy had said—Lloyd’s condition had been suboptimal for days. He’d struggled to accept it, but now, with Freddy’s remark, Lloyd could no longer afford not to. Acceptance, however, did little to help calm the storm in his mind. He knew what it was—a mental block, not a physical condition. But the more he tried to focus, the more he tried to not think about her, the more his thoughts inevitably drifted back to Chloe, back at their home, sweeping the floors, cooking them dinner, diligently managing their household.

“Lloyd, you there, buddy? Hellooo?” Freddy waved his hand in front of Lloyd’s face, finally pulling him out of his reverie.

“Sorry, Vice Commander, I was lost in thought.”

Freddy arched a dubious brow. “You feeling all right? You know you can take off early if you’re not feeling up to it.”

“No, I’m fine. In peak condition, as always.”

“All right, if you say so,” Freddy said, looking away, before his gaze snapped back to Lloyd and his simple lunch. “On a different note—no love-packed lunch box from Chloe today?”

“No; this morning, Chloe—”

“Aha!” Before Lloyd could divulge Chloe’s late rise, Freddy appeared to come to a conclusion himself, his voice jumping in excitement. “You had a fight. You two had a fight, didn’t you? You had a fight and as punishment, she said ‘no lunch for you’! That’s why you’re off your game, isn’t it? There, there, Lloyd, we’ve all been there. Leave it to me. As someone who’s always on good terms with his wife, I’ll teach you the simplest way to get back in her good graces and —”

“No, she just overslept.”

But instead of stopping Freddy in his tracks, Lloyd’s interjection only seemed to stoke his imagination further. “She...overslept?” he said, faking a gasp. “So, what were you doing with her till late last night, you dog? When did you two get so far—you have to tell me these things, Lloyd! But wait, if that’s the case, then why would you be feeling down...”

“No.”

Lloyd cut him off firmly, forestalling Freddy’s spiraling assumptions. Freddy’s response was a hearty cackle. “I’m just kidding, Lloyd. I know better than to expect things to move so fast between you late-bloomers. Heck, I’d be surprised if you two have even told each other how you feel yet.”

Silence from Lloyd.

“I... I said, I’d be surprised if you two have even told each other how you feel yet.”

More silence.

Freddy gasped. “Lloyd, don’t tell me you—”

“Master Lloyd, is that all you’re having for lunch?!” Just then, Luke sauntered into view, interrupting Freddy before he could broach the heart of the matter.

“This is my lunch, yes,” Lloyd replied dryly.

Luke’s reaction was immediate and dramatic. “That just won’t do, Master Lloyd! You need something more substantial. You can’t risk collapsing from hunger!”

“I won’t. I’ve survived three days and three nights in the jungle with minimal food and water.”

“But this isn’t the jungle! You should eat well and fuel your body when you have the chance!”

“I don’t need dietary advice from someone who, the day after his induction, brought his personal chef to prepare a full-course meal on the premises.”

Luke tugged at his collar. “I was...a bit naive then. But look at me now, Lloyd! I

bring my lunch just like everyone else!” He opened his lunch box to reveal a lavish array of meats, fish, and assorted side dishes, crammed unceremoniously into the container. It was quite the sight for Lloyd to see such a high-end feast stuffed so haphazardly in such an unassuming container.

Undeterred, Luke urged, “Please, help yourself to my lunch, Master Lloyd! I can’t stand the thought of you eating meagerly while I dine like a king. It goes against my honor!”

“No thanks. I’m getting heartburn just looking at it.”

Luke’s face fell in exaggerated dismay. “Impossible! Then...wait here! I’ll get you something else—some jerky or bread. Just give me five minutes. I’m quick!”

Before Luke could sprint off, Lloyd grabbed him by the collar. “Sit down, Luke. Why would I ever ask anything so lowly of you?”

Luke deflated like a scolded kitten under Lloyd’s firm hand. A sly smile crept onto Freddy’s face at the sight. “Got yourself a nice squire there, Lloyd?” he teased. The former valedictorian of the Knight’s Academy, up-and-coming ace of the First Order, had been rendered meek and compliant under Lloyd’s intense training regimen. Lloyd had only wanted to instill some discipline into the boy, but perhaps he had been a bit too effective.

Shoving the last bit of the meal bar into his mouth, Lloyd stood up. “I’m heading to the yard for some sword practice.”

“Already?” Freddy asked, surprised. “We’re still on lunch break, you know?”

“I need to clear my head,” Lloyd replied, grabbing his wooden practice sword. The defeat against Daz still gnawed at him. Only one thing would solve that, and that was more training.

“Mafster Lwoyd, wet meh be yourf sfhparing parfner!”

“Swallow your food before you talk.”

Luke quickly complied, “So sorry, okay, now—”

But Lloyd was already on his way out. Freddy called out after him, “I applaud your effort; just remember to take a break if you need it. Don’t push yourself to injury.”

“I’ll be fine,” Lloyd responded, not looking back. “I won’t injure myself doing something as simple as—”

Be careful, don’t hurt yourself! A faint remnant of Chloe’s voice tickled the back of his mind.

In a moment of irony, Lloyd’s foot snagged on a table leg.

CRASH!

The next thing he knew, he was sprawled on the floor, his expression a mix of shock and incredulity.

“Lloyd?!” Freddy called out, concern in his voice.

“Master?!” Luke echoed, equally alarmed.

Both hurried to Lloyd’s side, finding him flat on the floor, having tripped unexpectedly.

I...I tripped? Me?

“You, uh, sure you don’t want to take that early leave?”

Lying there, the famed Ebon Reaper of the First Order sighed deeply. “Thank you, Vice Commander,” he finally said, his voice muffled against the floor. “I think I will reconsider.”



Lloyd found the journey back home unusually brightly lit. Each step felt heavy, weighted not with physical fatigue, but with the burden of guilt, as if he had betrayed some deep-seated principle. He sighed for the umpteenth time, a rare show of unease for a knight who prided himself on his steadfast duty and resilience. Leaving early, despite being physically capable, felt like a blemish on his honor.

A blemish on his honor, and yet, Lloyd was not as downcast as he expected to be. No, in fact, when he thought about the prospect of seeing Chloe earlier than usual, a sense of elation bubbled up within him. This anticipation brightened his mood, lending a lighter quality to his steps.

In truth, Lloyd’s tread felt buoyed and weighed down in equal measure—a

condition emblematic of his larger dilemma and his inability to parse it. It was uncharacteristic of him to be so affected by personal matters; he questioned his current state of mind. His identity, always so clear and defined, now seemed to blur at the edges. He sighed for the umpteenth time plus one, as if that would clear the fog of confusion clouding his heart.

However, he would not have much time to dwell on any of that, because soon, he was home. Stepping through the door, he called out to announce his unexpected early return.

Lloyd had barely crossed the threshold when Chloe's voice greeted him, warm and welcoming. She appeared from around the corner, her face alight with curiosity and affection, reminiscent of a kitten reunited with its mother. "Why, you're home early today," she noted, a touch of surprise in her voice.

"Right," Lloyd agreed, a hint of weariness in his voice. "Just a bit."

He took off his boots and stepped inside. As Chloe led the way down the corridor to the living room, he couldn't take his eyes off her.

Upon reaching the living room, Chloe spun around to face him. "I just got home from the market myself, so I'm afraid dinner will have to wait a little. Is that okay?" she asked.

"That's fine. No rush," Lloyd replied.

Chloe's brow creased with concern at his curt reply. "Did something happen?" she inquired gently.

Lloyd only grunted in response.

"It's just that you sound rather...disheartened," Chloe clarified.

Lloyd stopped in his tracks. Disheartened—that was precisely how he felt. The day's events—his unexpected loss in the mock duel, the embarrassing trip over the table leg, being sent home early—weighed heavily on him. These humiliations, though personal, loomed larger in his mind when he thought of Chloe. He couldn't tell her—not the girl he cherished so dearly.

Turning to meet Chloe's earnest gaze, he saw the depth of her concern. Her eyes, brimming with genuine worry for his well-being, spoke volumes. She

seemed to understand his turmoil, and he didn't have to say a single word. Her kindness enveloped him, and in that moment, Lloyd was reminded once again just how much she meant to him.

"Um, Lloyd? If there's anything, you can—" Chloe said, only to cut herself off with a small, surprised yelp. Unexpectedly, Lloyd's hand had found its way to her head. He stroked her head so gently, with such warmth; his touch was a sensation that Chloe could never tire of. "D-Did I do something to deserve this?" she asked softly.

"No. Just because I wanted to," Lloyd replied, his tone matter-of-fact yet soft.

"J-Just because you wanted to..." Chloe echoed, a hint of wonder in her voice.

That had been the most succinct way for Lloyd to put it. They hadn't been apart for more than a few hours, yet all he wanted was to touch her, to feel her presence. It was a strange feeling, especially for a man as sworn to reason as Lloyd. He couldn't dissect it or rationalize it even if he wanted to. It was inexplicable, yet undeniable. He just wanted to be with her.

"Well, if that's what you wanted, then it's what you wanted," Chloe said, smiling gently.

She took one step closer, leaning into the comforting pressure of Lloyd's hand. Awash with an emotion that was one part embarrassment, one part joy, her face relaxed into an expression of contentment.

That behavior, that reaction, that endearing nature—it meant everything to Lloyd. As he continued to stroke her hair, he felt an unfamiliar warmth spread across his face.



Lloyd is acting strange.

The troubling thought occurred to Chloe as they sat at the dinner table that evening. The typically composed knight was unusually withdrawn, his meal consumed in silence, his brow furrowed in a persistent frown.

He seems down, and even more quiet than usual. Even the unexpected head pat... Well, those are always unexpected, but still, something just doesn't feel

right.

Since they'd been living together, Chloe had become adept at detecting the minute changes in Lloyd's mood.

Did something happen at work? Did he make a mistake? Was he reprimanded by Freddy for it?

Almost always, Lloyd returned home at the exact same time. Yet today, he'd been early, directing Chloe to the conclusion that perhaps an incident at work had been the catalyst for the change in his demeanor.

Unless...

But there was another, far more terrifying explanation for Lloyd's behavior, and as it dawned on Chloe, she felt her lips tighten in nervousness. What if *she* was the reason behind Lloyd's sullen mood? The possibility sent a wave of anxiety through her.

No, no, no, bad Chloe!

She shook her head almost violently in an attempt to dispel the negative thoughts. It was an old habit of hers, this tendency to spiral into self-doubt, to blame herself. But since being with Lloyd, she had come to recognize these thoughts for what they were: unfounded assumptions, creations of her own worried mind.

No more of that, she silently reprimanded herself.

Composing herself, Chloe addressed Lloyd. "Do you like the roast beef, Lloyd? It's compliments of Miss Ciel. I thought it looked quite nice, but..."

"The roast beef? Looks perfect."

"And these carrots—aren't they sweet? Miss Ciel never lets me down."

"Sweet? You're right, she certainly doesn't."

The conversation dwindled, leaving only the sound of silverware against plates as they ate in silence. Despite her efforts, Chloe's mind couldn't help but circle back to the nagging thought: *It is me, isn't it?*

Perhaps this isn't just me being negative, Chloe thought. *Given his reaction,*

could there be a real issue between us?

“Lloyd?” Chloe ventured cautiously.

“Yes?” came his quick response.

A crucial question lingered on Chloe’s tongue: *Did I do something wrong?* She wanted to ask, to clear the air, but the words wouldn’t come, stopping just shy of her throat. “Never mind, it’s nothing,” she said instead.

The root of her hesitation wasn’t the question itself, but the potential implications of Lloyd’s answer. Their recent confession of love was too fresh on her mind. Chloe had confessed her feelings to Lloyd, and Lloyd had reciprocated unequivocally.

Unequivocally, but...

How sure can you be of his sincerity, really? that incessant devil on her shoulder whispered. *Lloyd is inherently kind. There’s a chance he reciprocated merely to spare your feelings.*

What if she had somehow exploited Lloyd’s kindness? In a moment of vulnerability, Lloyd might have offered a response he never truly meant. Now, if Chloe dared to express her uncertainties, she risked uncovering a painful truth. Perhaps Lloyd had been pretending all along. The mere possibility was enough to make Chloe’s heart cry out in pain.

But then, she remembered something else. It was a conversation she had with Lloyd soon after they met.

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

I dislike injustice, untruths, and the irrational.

Yes, untruths—Lloyd had been clear about his disdain for dishonesty. A man so steadfast in his principles would not lie, not even out of politeness. This wasn’t mere conjecture; Chloe had seen Lloyd live by this creed every day.

How can it be you, Chloe, the angel on her shoulder countered, when he stroked your hair with such care earlier?

And with that, Chloe found herself right back where she started, unable to decipher Lloyd’s off behavior. Yet, just as she was about to delve deeper into

her thoughts, a startling observation jolted her mind off course. “Lloyd, your hand...”

Lloyd grunted in discomfort and surprise. He set down his fork and extended his hand across the table, revealing a sizable scrape, raw and slightly inflamed. “I didn’t even notice...” he murmured. The mark was a result of his stumble earlier in the day.

Chloe didn’t hesitate. “Wait right there.” She quickly stood and hurried out of the room, then returned moments later with the first aid kit.

“Something like this will heal on its own,” Lloyd said, trying to dismiss her concern.

But Chloe was resolute. “I won’t hear it. Any wound needs proper care,” she said as she took out disinfectant and bandages.

“You’re worried about me?”

“Of course I am!” Chloe exclaimed, louder than intended. She gasped, taken aback by the forcefulness of her own voice, and looked to Lloyd to gauge his reaction. He didn’t look upset; either happy or embarrassed, but she couldn’t tell which. It only flustered her further. To distract herself, she gently took hold of Lloyd’s hand.

Lloyd’s hand... It was so different from hers—larger, rougher, darker, and as she took in the contrast, she also realized this was the first time she’d had the opportunity to study his hand in such detail. The skin where his fingers joined his palm was hard as stone, calloused from countless hours gripping a sword’s hilt.

Like a moth to a flame, Chloe found herself mesmerized by the unfamiliar hand before her. Her lingering gaze left Lloyd slightly puzzled. “Chloe?” he finally said.

Startled, Chloe quickly came back to reality. “Oh, sorry. I just couldn’t help myself.”

Couldn’t help myself from doing what? Chloe wondered to herself. Her actions were a mystery, even to her. Despite the whirlwind of uncertain feelings inside her, she carefully cleaned Lloyd’s wound with a gentle touch, then securely

wrapped it with a bandage. “That should do it,” she announced, tying off the last of the gauze. The wound wasn’t severe, so the task had been brief.



Lloyd murmured a word of thanks, and it seemed the intimate moment should have ended there. But Chloe found herself unwilling to relinquish her grip, her thoughts echoing with a single longing sentiment: *I don't want to let go.*

"Chloe? Are you done?"

"Ah! Sorry," she said, jerking her hands away. "Not again," she muttered quietly.

"No, I'm, uh, sorry," Lloyd echoed, equally unsure.

Apology was met with apology, and neither truly understood why. A palpable sense of awkwardness hung between them, leaving them both out of sorts and fumbling in the face of the ineffable feeling between them.



"What am I doing..."

It was the dead of night. Lloyd sat on his bed, engulfed in a maelstrom of irreconcilable emotions that refused to be contained. Those feelings would've been fine if they were *only* feelings, but they had begun to seep outwards—manifesting into actions, influencing his demeanor. The mental disarray, the unexplained warmth flooding his body, the impulsive decisions overriding his usual rationality—these all contribute to an unintended coldness towards Chloe. Even Chloe, with her puzzled and concerned glances, seemed to have noticed the change in him.

"You know what this is, Lloyd," he whispered to himself in the silence of the room. "You know exactly what this is."

The cause of his turmoil was as clear as day. Ever since their mutual confession of love, Lloyd had been at a loss. How close should they be now? What behavior was appropriate? The seasoned knight, who had faced countless battles and emerged unscathed in every single one, found himself woefully unprepared on the alien battlefield of love.

"So damn much," he murmured, almost inaudibly. The intensity of his feelings for Chloe was becoming increasingly difficult to conceal. The way his face would

flush, the manner in which his heart would race—it all pointed to one undeniable truth.

Lloyd loved Chloe so damn much.

This realization had grown stronger each day, accelerated by the incident with Lily. The brakes on his emotions had failed; his affection for her was now like a carriage careening down a steep slope, rushing towards an inevitable crash that would consume him completely.

Yet in the midst of his tumultuous thoughts, one persistent question nagged at the back of his mind: *How is it okay? My life has been steeped in conflict, marked by bloodshed. How is it okay for someone like me to fall in love?*

Suddenly, a calming and all too familiar female voice echoed in Lloyd's mind, as if in response to his own question. *Say, Lloyd. Have you ever fallen in love?*

He couldn't recall his response, but her words resonated so clearly. *So you haven't, I see... Well, in this place, that's probably for the best.*

The vague silhouette of the woman from his past floated into his thoughts. Her face remained indistinct, blurred in his memory. As he strained to recall her features, crimson washed over the image, drowning it out.

Startled, Lloyd raised his hand in front of face, as if to confirm his grip on reality. He stared at the palm Chloe had bandaged. The linen appeared pristine and white, but then slowly surrendered to a vivid, encroaching stain, blotted with that deep, unsettling crimson.

A visceral grunt escaped him. His heart constricted like it was caught in a vise. The scent of copper filled his nostrils; the sensation of something warm and wet splattering against his face overwhelmed him. Was he still in his room, or was he...

"Not again," Lloyd grunted, his teeth clenched in an effort to regain control. A cold sweat had broken out on his back. He focused on steadying his shallow breaths, drawing in deep, composed breaths. Gradually, a semblance of calm returned. Looking down at his hand once again, he saw it was clean and unblemished.

The haunting vision that had just passed was nothing but a figment of his

imagination, a ghost conjured up by Lloyd's traumatized psyche. He understood this with crystal clarity, yet a profound sense of disgust with himself wrapped itself tightly around his heart, unyielding in its hold.

"I...don't have the right."

The thought echoed in his mind, reverberating with the weight of his past. He was certain he didn't deserve to fall in love; his conviction seemed immovable. Yet, even as he clung to this belief, the image of Chloe shone brightly in his thoughts, a beacon that defied his self-imposed darkness.

Trapped in the throes of a conflict he could not resolve, Lloyd succumbed to an uneasy slumber.



In the borderland of Shadaf, within the once-lordly estate of the Margrave of Ardennes, the night air was pierced by the sound of shattering porcelain. The remnants of a once-elegant vase lay in pieces, its destruction echoing through the room.

"Why me, why me, why me, why me?!" The shrill, frantic voice of Chloe's mother, Isabella, filled the space. "What...did I ever do...to deserve this?!"

In her fury, she had thrown anything and everything within reach into disarray. Isabella grasped another nearby ornament, then hurled it through the nearest window. It shattered, sending shards of glass flying everywhere and allowing the chilly night air to invade the room. The room, once the dignified living space of a noblewoman, now bore no semblance of its former glory. Paintings torn from their walls; furniture in shambles—all casualties of Isabella's unbridled rage. The household servants, powerless to intervene, huddled outside the room, trembling with fear and uncertainty.

At the heart of Isabella's fury was a single piece of parchment, carelessly discarded on the floor. It was a summons from the High Court, demanding Isabella's presence in the capital. The document laid bare the offenses of her eldest daughter, Lily, detailing the kidnapping and assault of Chloe, along with the penalties imposed. Furthermore, it mentioned Chloe's testimony regarding the abuse she had suffered at the hands of her own family, an accusation now under official investigation. It was for this reason that Isabella's presence was

required—she was to plead her case.

Isabella, breath ragged from her outburst, finally succumbed to exhaustion. Her energy spent, she collapsed into the lone chair that had survived her rampage.

It had all started three weeks ago. Lily had been invited to a soiree hosted by House Gimul, an opportunity Isabella had eagerly approved. For their family, modest regional nobles with limited prospects, this event held great promise. If Lily had charmed someone from the capital's elite, it would have been a significant triumph for their house. The outcome, however, was disastrously far from anything she had hoped for.

"How... *How...*" Isabella moaned, her voice tinged with despair and disbelief. "My head," she said more quietly, clutching a hand to her throbbing temple.

She had yet to fully absorb every detail laid out in the letter (the account provided was *thorough*), not least the fact that Chloe was *alive*—and in the capital, no less! She'd escaped in the middle of winter. The journey to the capital must have taken weeks, an arduous trek through treacherous mountains and valleys under harsh winter conditions. The feat *seemed* impossible, but in the face of the evidence, Isabella could begin to speculate how it must have been done. No wonder Chloe couldn't be found nearby.

But this was no time for shock or disbelief. The critical issue at hand was that Lily had assaulted Chloe in front of credible witnesses, an act that had cast a shadow over the entire family, painting them all as potential abusers. Part of Isabella refused to believe it. Surely Lily, despite her lack of sophistication, must have known the severity of the consequences should she ever be caught. Though she'd likely avoid imprisonment, a hefty fine seemed inevitable.

Isabella's mind raced as she pieced together the implications of the summons. Harry, the head of the house, had not been named—only Isabella herself. This detail alone suggested the case held more weight than she had initially thought. Ignoring a summons from the kingdom's highest court was a gamble she couldn't afford to make. This was effectively a criminal investigation in all but name.

Rage surged anew within her, and she slammed her fist onto a nearby table,

her voice escalating into a frenzied scream. “Why, why, why, why?!”

To Isabella, Chloe had always been a cursed child. It was as plain to her as any fact. In her mind, Chloe was the root cause of all the misfortunes that befell their family and their domain—the plagues, the famine, the deaths. Chloe was evil, and she was simply putting evil in its place.

Her actions were justified, weren’t they? So why was *she* being called to account for them?

“Lily did nothing wrong,” Isabella hissed, her grasp on reality wavering. “She only used a bit of force to capture Chloe and send her back, that’s all...”

Isabella’s perception was beyond saving. Any objective observer would see Lily as the clear aggressor, but Isabella’s mind was clouded by a toxic mix of love for one daughter and hatred for the other. All the anger and resentment that should have been directed at Lily instead came to rest on Chloe. “How dare she...” Isabella murmured bitterly. “She thinks she can humiliate us and get away with it...”

Her eyes burned with malice. “We’ll just have to take care of that, won’t we?”

Chapter Two: The Feelings That Lie Beneath

The midday sun hung over the royal capital's Merchant Quarter. There, tucked away from the hustle and bustle of the market area, stood a charmingly antique storefront.

"Your patronage is always appreciated, Miss Chloe."

It was here, in this quaint and cozy bookstore, that Chloe had made her first independent purchase, and it was today that she returned to buy the sequel to the novel that had captured her attention that day: *Love & Knight*.

"No, no, thank you, Ian. Your recommendations are always a treat," Chloe responded, her head bowed in polite gratitude as she clutched her new purchase close to her chest.

Ian, however, raised a concerned brow. "I hope this is just my misunderstanding, Miss Chloe, but...you seem a bit troubled today."

Chloe gave a small, startled squeak. "Y-You can tell?"

"Yes," Ian said gently. "Well, you let out a deep sigh when you were picking out your book earlier."

A mix of emotions flickered across Chloe's face—agitation at being read so easily and embarrassment for causing concern. "D-Did I now? I'm sorry about that."

Ian's tone was reassuring. "There's no need to apologize. It seemed like you had something on your mind." He paused, mustering the most earnest face he could. "So, is there?"

"Well, it's just..." Chloe began, but she trailed off into hesitation.

"It might help to talk about it. It's just us here, Miss Chloe."

Chloe was torn between her own reservations and the sincere kindness in Ian's offer. *Perhaps he might offer some insight*, she thought. With a deep breath, she began, "The other day, I...I confessed."

“I see, you confessed...” Ian responded automatically, but then the full impact of her words struck him. “Y-You confessed?!” His voice, usually so calm and measured, rose in surprise, echoing in the quiet bookstore.

Chloe, taken aback by his reaction, quietly affirmed, “Y-Yes?”

Ian quickly tried to regain his composure. “Ah, sorry for my outburst. I was just surprised,” he explained, clearing his throat. “By a confession, you don’t happen to mean...*that* kind of confession?”

A blush crept onto Chloe’s cheeks. “Y-Yes, that kind of confession...”

“And it wasn’t Sir Lloyd you confessed to, was it?”

“Yes, it was,” Chloe replied, her voice soft.

Ian had become acquainted with Lloyd through the ordeal with Lily. Bit by bit, the truth he’d so desperately wanted to avoid came into full view. With a hint of resignation, he ventured, “And would I be correct in assuming that he...”

The blush now having spread across her entire body, Chloe nodded, confirming Ian’s unspoken question.

“And so he did.” Ian’s posture deflated, as if his spirit left him. “Of course he would. I knew that much,” he said, this time too quiet for Chloe to hear. “She’s a charming girl, and he is a brave knight. There was no place for me, the humble bookstore owner...”

Chloe, straining to hear his quiet musing, asked, “What was that?”

Ian quickly masked his disappointment with a strained smile that struggled to reach his eyes. “Nothing, nothing at all. Just coming to terms with things, that’s all.”

“C-Coming to terms with...? Ian, you don’t have something on *your* mind, do you?”

“Let’s not focus on me right now,” Ian deflected. “Normally, I would expect the happy couple at the end of a successful confession to share a period of genuine bliss, so why do you seem troubled?”

Chloe chose her words with care. “Well, you see, I told Lloyd I loved him. And Lloyd, in return, said he loved me.”

At her words, Ian clutched his stomach, expelling a pained cough.

“Ian?”

“D-Don’t mind me. Please, go on.”

“You seem unwell. Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I’m fine. Really, continue.”

“All right, then... As I was saying, our feelings were mutual, and I was happy beyond belief, but...it feels like the distance between us has somehow grown.” She attempted to articulate the odd dynamic between her and Lloyd. “It’s as if I don’t know how to act normally around him.”

“Can you elaborate further?” Ian prodded.

Chloe’s already red cheeks deepened a shade further. “He’s there, in my head, all the time. Every time I see him, my heart feels like it’s about to beat out of my chest, and when our hands touch, I feel a weird, warm buzz. And his hands—when his hands stroke my head, I feel lightheaded, like I’m about to float away. It’s reached a point where it’s affecting my routine. I overslept recently because I was lost in thoughts about him, and our conversations have become awkward. I get so flustered around him that I act as if I’m not myself anymore.”



“I see,” Ian muttered, before falling silent, his expression turning introspective. After a moment of quiet reflection, he spoke, his voice shot through with a hint of melancholy. “The problem, I believe, is that you love Lloyd very, very much indeed.”

Chloe felt her heart flutter at his words. She had always known the depth of her feelings, but hearing them voiced by someone else was a different kind of mortifying.

“You’ve bared your heart to someone, and they have reciprocated in kind,” Ian continued. “It’s as if the floodgates of your affection have been opened, and now, lost in this newfound joy, you find it hard to be your old self. You love him so very much—that’s why your heart races; that’s why it’s hard to meet his gaze; and that’s why his presence overwhelms you, leaving you feeling so vulnerable.”

Chloe was taken aback by his insight. “W-Wow... It’s like you peered straight into my soul.”

Ian looked at her with gentle understanding in his eyes. “I’ve done no such thing. I know because I, too, was in love once.”

“My, it sounds like you’ve experienced a wonderful love yourself, then.”

“Yes, I have—a love that I’m watching wilt before my very eyes.”

“I’m sorry; what was that?”

“Nothing. Nothing at all. Now, let me ask you this, Miss Chloe: what is it that you want to do?” Ian inquired gently, guiding Chloe to reflect on her own desires.

“What do I want?” Chloe repeated, mulling over his question. “I just want to be myself around Lloyd without causing any misunderstandings.”

Ian nodded thoughtfully. “In that case, perhaps the best thing to do is nothing at all.”

Chloe’s eyes fluttered in surprise. “Nothing at all?”

“Yes,” Ian confirmed with a serene smile. “Though not ‘nothing’ in the literal sense, but rather, embrace and enjoy the present for what it is.”

“Enjoy it...” Chloe repeated softly, considering his words.

“You see, when we find ourselves adrift on the vast sea of love, we are tempted to grasp tighter at the rudder and oars of reason and pragmatism, thinking they will offer the same control they do on calmer tides. But affection churns the waters more than mortal grit and canniness can conquer; what sailor dares to match the moon’s pull strength for strength? What cause have you to pit yourself against your heart’s own sea? Why not instead believe the current’s course is fair, and set aside your oars? Enjoy your moments with Lloyd. Cherish them for what they are. In my humble opinion, your current turmoil stems from fighting the current, from not fully accepting that your behaviors and feelings are those of a woman deeply in love.”

Chloe nodded along eagerly to Ian’s explanation. “That makes a lot of sense! You sure have a deep understanding of love, Ian.”

Ian responded with a touch of humility. “I am but a modest peddler, parroting the best parts of my own reading. Alas, I only wish I could have applied it more in my own life.”

“Applied it more?”

“Never mind that,” Ian said quickly, brushing aside his personal reflections. “I’m just glad you find my advice helpful.” His smile was enigmatic, carrying layers of unspoken thoughts.

Chloe, encouraged by their conversation, ventured another question. “Can I ask you one more thing?”

“Yes, anything.”

“If I’m...afraid of finding out how Lloyd truly feels, what should I do?”

Ian took a moment to ponder her question. “As in, you’re unsure if Lloyd’s declaration of love was genuine?”

“Yes, exactly! Wow, it’s like you can read minds,” Chloe exclaimed.

Ian chuckled softly. “It’s not mind reading, just book reading. It’s just what you come to realize when you’ve read as many stories as I have. It takes an exceptionally poor author to write a book whose characters do not reflect *some*

facet of our own lives.”

Ian’s words resonated with Chloe deeply. Though she’d barely scratched the surface of the world of literature, she had already begun to see the parallels between the stories she read and the lives of those around her. It must’ve been this very insight that had let Ian pinpoint her concerns so accurately. Once again she found that where her own thinking failed, better counsel was waiting in the written word.

Ian gently steered the conversation back on track. “I believe I have an inkling as to the true source of your worries. It runs in much the same vein as many a fictional ingenue’s inner troubles.”

“Really?” Chloe asked, her curiosity piqued. “What is it?”

Ian offered a knowing smile. “You lack confidence, Miss Chloe.”

Ack. Chloe slumped over, as if Ian’s words were arrows that had found their mark in her heart.

“Oh, dear. Are you all right, Miss Chloe?” Ian asked with concern.

“I’m fine...” she replied, though her voice was strained. She held a hand to her chest, still reeling from the accuracy of his observation. “Is it that obvious?” she asked softly.

“Yes, I’m afraid so. Every word and deed, no matter how arbitrary, is a choice, and every choice is a kind of confession. In all our time knowing each other, Miss Chloe, insecurity has shown through in everything you’ve done and every interaction you’ve had; at times unbearably so.”

“You are...quite right about that,” Chloe admitted, a hint of sadness in her tone.

Chloe’s past left deep scars on her soul that, while not outwardly visible, stood plain to those who knew where to look. The severe mistreatment she had suffered in Shadaf had led her to believe that she was unworthy of love.

“But,” Chloe said, her voice taking on a brighter tone, “I feel like I’ve grown stronger in many ways, even if the root of the hurt still lingers. Do you know some remedy for this? Or must I only be patient?”

Ian pondered Chloe's situation, stroking his chin thoughtfully. Then, as if struck by a sudden realization, he asked, "Earlier, you mentioned feeling a distance between you and Sir Lloyd?"

"Right," Chloe replied, her voice tinged with unease. "Ever since that night, he's been...different."

She hesitated; her first inclination was to say "cold"—it almost fit the way they'd lost their understanding of each other. Lloyd's recent distance was an unsettling contrast to the man who had confessed his love to her, leaving Chloe filled with doubts and fears.

"Then...why not just tell him?" Ian proposed.

"T-Tell him? Tell him what?" Chloe stammered back.

"Everything. Your feelings, your concerns, all of it."

"But...is that really okay? Won't he find it too much? I don't want to burden him..."

Ian spoke with conviction. "While his reaction is something I cannot speak on, what I *can* tell you is that you will not be burdening him with anything. Sharing is not a burden. Communication is not a burden. But should you bottle up your fears and assumptions and allow them to fester, not knowing the moment their vessels may fail—that will be a burden to you both. Share everything. Talk about everything. If you're happy, share that happiness. If something troubles you, find a way forward together, for isn't that what love is truly about? Walking together through all of life's moments, both good and bad?"

Chloe was momentarily speechless, awed by Ian's eloquence and insight. They resonated with her deeply, seeming to settle precisely where they were needed in her heart.

"My apologies, was that too didactic?" Ian asked, a touch of sheepishness in his voice as he scratched his cheek. "Please, take my words as just one perspective."

Chloe quickly shook her head, still processing the depth of his advice. "No, not at all. I think that was just what I needed to hear." She bowed deeply in gratitude. "Thank you so much, Ian."

She was so glad she'd opened up. The weight of her concerns, which had been consuming her for days, suddenly felt lighter. Talking to Ian had dispelled her worries, as if they had never existed in the first place.

Ian returned her gratitude with a gentle smile. "I understand your hesitation about being open with Sir Lloyd, but I believe he will welcome your honesty. He loves you dearly—that much was clear to me from just a glance." The memory of Lloyd, anxious and desperate, gripping Ian's shoulders as he inquired about Chloe, flickered in Ian's mind. He'd known in that moment that he didn't stand a chance. "He is not one to turn up his nose at your worries, much less abandon you because of them. You know this better than anyone else, do you not, Miss Chloe?"

Chloe clenched her fists, struck by the truth in Ian's words. Lloyd was not the kind to turn away. He had listened and accepted every part of her story: the birthmark, the abuse, the mortal danger she'd faced at the hands of her own mother. He had embraced her past without judgment. Lloyd was a man who hated injustice, untruths, and the irrational, and he would never ignore someone in need.

That is the man you fell in love with, Chloe.

To doubt Lloyd's sincerity now would be an injustice to his character and a grave breach of trust. It would be an unforgivable affront against Lloyd, against her, against them.

"And you know, Miss Chloe—I, too, find myself quite smitten with you."

Ian's declaration took Chloe completely by surprise. She shrieked, her shock echoing through the quiet bookstore.

"Oh, I'm sorry; was that inappropriate?" Ian teased lightly.

Chloe, still reeling from his words, replied, "I-It wasn't so much inappropriate as it was completely uncalled for..." She couldn't bring herself to meet Ian's eyes, her cheeks flushed.

"Kind, eager, diligent, and with a lovely smile to boot. What's not to adore?"

Chloe took a step back, a mix of flattery and discomfort evident in her response. "I'm... I'm very flattered, but... I'm sorry!" She bowed deeply, her

voice overflowing with apology. “You’re a wonderful person, Ian, but...but I can’t...”

Right on the heels of the first confession of her life, Chloe found herself having to author her first rejection. Caught between the thrill of receiving such admiration and the guilt of having to turn it down, Chloe didn’t know what to do.

However, Ian suddenly laughed, a hand covering his mouth. “You really are kindhearted, aren’t you?”

Chloe cautiously lifted her head to meet Ian’s gaze; what she saw was a relaxed smile of relief. “It was a joke. Just a joke and nothing more. I do admire you, but as a dear friend.”

“Oh...” Chloe let out a breath she didn’t realize she had been holding. The tension drained from her body. “I-I’m sorry. I don’t know where I get off, jumping to conclusions like that.”

“No, no, please. I set you up to fail, employing such a misleading expression,” Ian reassured her, his demeanor calm.

Chloe sighed in relief, but a part of her couldn’t shake a feeling—a trace of melancholy she thought she saw lingering behind his eyes.

“However, everything I said about your character I said with the utmost sincerity,” Ian added. “I see what Lloyd sees in you; you should hold your head high.”

Chloe uttered a quiet word of thanks, still marked by her habitual unease at receiving praise. It was an issue of confidence, as Ian had articulated so well, but she felt more worthy of these comments lately—a clear sign that something was changing. “Yes, thank you,” she said, this time a little more steady. “I feel a lot better now, about many things, actually.”

“That’s wonderful to hear,” Ian said, his smile genuine.

“I’ve taken up so much of your time yet again,” Chloe said. “And I always seem to be the one receiving help from you. I promise to return the favor the next time I see you.”

Ian waved away her concern. “Oh, there’s no need for that between us. I thoroughly enjoyed our conversation.”

“I insist! Next time, I’ll bring you something special.”

A distinctly delicious memory struck Ian. “How about more of those delightful cookies you brought last time? I haven’t stopped thinking about them.”

“Absolutely! I’ll bring you a whole rucksack full next time.”

“A whole rucksack might be too much. Maybe just two palms’ worth instead?”

Chloe chuckled at his joke, coaxing a warm smile from Ian’s own lips. After bidding farewell, she left the bookstore feeling lighter, her heart as clear and open as the sky after the rain.



“If knowing doesn’t dull the pain, then what will...”

After Chloe left, Ian sank deeply into his chair. He leaned back, let his gaze drift towards the ceiling, and released a deep, soulful sigh.

He was all too well aware that his feelings had a snowball’s chance in hell of reaching Chloe. How could they, when Chloe already had someone so special, so perfect in her life? This understanding had been with him from the very beginning. But strangely, Ian found comfort in knowing Chloe’s happiness was with Lloyd. If it had been anyone else, he might have harbored resentment. But Lloyd, he had quickly realized, was someone truly capable of making Chloe happy for the rest of her life. His brief encounter with Lloyd had painfully illuminated just how deeply he cared for her.

“I suppose I should just be glad the words even came out.”

Though the playful nature of his confession had fallen short of his intention, Ian felt a sense of relief, as if a great burden had been lifted from his shoulders. He knew what he’d done was a bit roundabout, a bit sly, even, but he had managed to coax an answer from Chloe, and that was enough for him. Perhaps the pain of their continuing friendship would linger, but that was nothing time wouldn’t fix.

Until meeting Chloe, Ian had cocooned himself in the protective embrace of his books, distancing himself from the people around him. Forget about love; that was something he'd only read about, never experienced for himself, he'd thought. But Chloe had inadvertently shown him the depth of his own feelings, revealing that he, too, was susceptible to those pesky complexities of the heart.

Chloe had shown him that truth, and in spite of the hurt, he was nothing but grateful for it.

"Perhaps the world outside isn't so bad after all."

The thought occurred to him—a newfound perspective—and no sooner than it had did he stand up and begin to close up shop early, ready to venture a step beyond the confines of his world.



Lloyd's steps home today felt just as heavy as they'd been the day before. His stoic face bore a deeper scowl, and he emanated the aura of one who wished to be left alone.

I managed not to trip over empty air today, but my focus still isn't there.

Along with this thought, a sigh rose to his lips. During training today, he'd pushed himself to concentrate harder. He'd won the day's mock duels, but only barely, dodging blows by the skin of his teeth on more than a few occasions. Hardly the one-sided dominance he was accustomed to.

This can't go on for much longer.

Frustration brewed within him. He was the First Order's ace. He was supposed to exemplify excellence, to be a paragon for others. His current state was unacceptable to him, and yet he felt powerless to change it.

Before he knew it, he'd arrived home. "I'm back," he called out.

"Lloyd, welcome back!"

There she was, as usual.

But wait, was she "as usual"? Something seemed different about her today, Lloyd noted. "Did something good happen?" he asked.

“Oh!” Chloe gasped. She covered her cheeks with her hands. “Was it that obvious?” she said more quietly. “I guess you could call it something good, yes...”

Before Lloyd could ask what that something was, Chloe’s gaze turned scrutinizing, silencing him. “But what about you? You seem...down.”

Lloyd tensed. Chloe was absolutely right, and he wanted nothing more than to divulge everything that had been bothering him, but...he couldn’t. *This is your problem, Lloyd*, he chided himself. *Do not make her worry. Do not burden her with your issues.* Arriving at that conclusion, he gingerly opened his mouth. “I’m fine, same as usual—”

“That’s not true, is it?” Chloe said, cutting him off.

Taken aback by her unusually forceful tone, Lloyd met her gaze in silence.

“I knew it,” she said softly to herself. Facing him with a renewed resolve in her eyes, she said, “Lloyd, shall we go on a walk?”



As twilight descended upon the city, Lloyd and Chloe walked side by side through the streets. The fading light of the sun cast a soft glow on their path, while the bustle of the city continued around them.

“This might be the first time we’ve ever gone on a walk at this hour,” Chloe noted, her voice bright.

“You’re probably right about that,” Lloyd responded, though his voice lacked his usual vigor. His mind was occupied with a single question: *Why did Chloe suggest this walk?* He could only guess that it was out of concern for him, a thought that roused his guilt.

They reached an intersection, and Chloe suddenly stopped. “Lloyd, look.”

Following her gaze to the busy main road, crowded with pedestrians and carriages, Lloyd was hit by a wave of memories. “The road where we first met...”

“Yes,” Chloe replied softly, a faint smile gracing her lips. “Almost half a year ago now.”

It'd been a rainy, frigid winter day. Chloe, fresh from her escape from Shadaf and her deranged mother, had been at the brink of despair. Freezing and starving, she'd been accosted by a trio of thugs. Right before they could drag her away to meet an unknown fate, Lloyd had appeared to her like a guardian angel. The way he'd so effortlessly dispatched the three thugs that threatened her remained crystal clear in her mind. She realized now that it was at that moment, all the way back then, that her heart had been stolen.

Love at first sight, was it? Chloe pondered, her smile growing warmer. "Shall we keep going?"

"Go where, exactly?" Lloyd asked.

"It's a walk, so nowhere, really?"

"That's...true."

Lloyd scratched his head, a sheepish expression on his face, which made Chloe giggle. "The evening is still young. Let's walk a bit farther," she suggested, taking his hand in hers.



"It always comes back to this park, doesn't it?" Chloe asked.

It was now firmly nighttime. Lloyd and Chloe found themselves seated on a familiar bench in a familiar park near their home. Despite their lengthy walk, the stalwart knight and capable housekeeper appeared unfazed by the distance they had covered.

"Chloe," Lloyd said, his tone serious.

"Yes?" she responded, turning to face him.

"Can you explain what this is all about? I think we've walked enough."

Chloe nodded firmly, as if she were expecting this moment. She sprang up from her seat, and positioned herself in front of Lloyd. "Lloyd, why don't we take this opportunity to air everything out and take a load off our chests?" she proposed, full of earnest excitement.

Lloyd grunted. His brow furrowed in confusion.

Chloe, in her enthusiasm, realized she had skipped over some crucial context. Quickly, she backtracked. “Ah! Sorry, I got ahead of myself...” She sheepishly sat back down next to Lloyd, took a deep breath, and started again. “I don’t know about you, Lloyd, but I feel like things have been weird between us. I can’t quite put my finger on it, but it feels like we’re drifting apart a little, don’t you think?”

Lloyd grimaced, realizing what she was getting at. “I’m sorry; that’s my fault. I didn’t mean to make you worry.”

“No, no,” Chloe hastened to clarify. “I didn’t call you out here to point fingers. I just...didn’t want us to continue like this. The thought of us growing apart now that we’re lovers... It just doesn’t sit right with me.”

As Chloe paused, gathering her thoughts, Lloyd only waited for her to speak.

“That’s why I wanted us to talk tonight. To share what’s on our minds and ease our burdens.”

“I...see,” Lloyd replied softly, absorbing her intent.

Then, much to Chloe’s astonishment, he laughed.

“Did I say something funny?” she asked, a bit puzzled.

“No, not at all. I’m sorry, I just...” Lloyd’s rare smile lingered on his face as he looked at her fondly. “Oh, Chloe. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

Chloe, unsure if she had misspoken, asked, “Did I do something wrong?”

Lloyd shook his head. “No. You were just being yourself, and I appreciate that, more than anything in the world.” He looked up at the sky, a sense of relief washing over him. Oh, how foolish he’d been the past couple of days.

Seeing Lloyd’s change in demeanor, Chloe allowed herself a smile of her own. Feeling it appropriate to take the lead, she began with a heartfelt declaration. “Lloyd, I love you with everything I’ve got.”

At her unexpected opening salvo, Lloyd looked as if the wind had been knocked out of him.

“I love you, Lloyd—so much so that I don’t know what to do with myself. You occupy my every thought, from dawn till dusk. I adore the way you’re slightly groggy in the mornings, how you savor every meal I make as if it’s the best

you've ever had. I love the way your face scrunches up when you're reading, and the intensity in your eyes when you practice your swordwork in the garden. Of course, I love how strong you are, and how you use that strength to protect others. When we were accosted by that band of thugs, when you fought Luke to defend my honor, when you confronted my sister—every time, I was so glad it was you. I love the you that always finds something to compliment me for, even when it's about the smallest, most specific little thing. I love the you that told me I could find myself at my own pace. I love the you that accepts me for all I am, including my past and my flaws. The way you stroke my hair so tenderly, the warmth of your hand—it sets my heart dancing. Your warmth, your touch, your scent, it's all I ever want. Would you keep hugging me, whenever I ask for it? You're earnest, sincere, and a hard worker, and you can't see someone in need without *doing* something. Your smile, when it appears, is the most precious thing in the world. Before I knew it, you became the center of my world. When I overslept yesterday, it was because my mind was so full of you that I couldn't rest. Whenever you leave for work, I always wonder if you might come back just a little bit earlier than usual. That was why yesterday, when you came home early, I couldn't contain myself. Sorry for rambling, but I needed you to know that I love you, Lloyd, with all my heart. You are all I think about, and it's like I'm not myself when I'm with you. Before I confessed, I'd managed to keep these feelings tucked away, but now, they're too intense to hide. They're the reason I've been acting differently, and for that, Lloyd, I... Lloyd?"

Chloe's words trailed off as she noticed Lloyd's reaction. He was hunched over, his face buried in his hands, his gaze fixated on the ground.

"A-Are you all right? If you're feeling unwell, we can—"

"No, no, you've got it all wrong, Chloe."

As he lifted his head, removing his hands from his face, Chloe gasped in surprise. A deep blush colored his cheeks, more pronounced than she had ever seen.

He remained silent for a few more moments, taking deep, measured breaths to compose himself. Once he felt more centered, Lloyd spoke again. "It feels so good, and so *odd*, that I thought I might die."

“What?!” Chloe blurted out in alarm. “You can’t die, Lloyd!”

“That was a joke.” His reply was characteristically dry. “Knights don’t perish so easily.”

Hearing this, Chloe let out a deep sigh of relief, her worry giving way to a faint smile.

Lloyd pondered her earlier confession. “So the reason you’ve been acting differently is because...you love me too much?”

Chloe nodded, her cheeks flushing a deeper shade as the full impact of her admission hit her; Lloyd’s and Chloe’s cheeks matched now.

“That...makes a lot of sense.” Lloyd’s expression relaxed, as if a puzzle that had long tormented him had finally been solved. He exhaled deeply and covered his face again, the wave of embarrassment returning.

“And what about you, Lloyd?” Chloe prodded gently.

Lloyd slowly turned to face Chloe.

“You also have something you want to tell me, don’t you? Otherwise you wouldn’t have been acting so distant.”

“You’ve noticed, have you?”

“Well, we do live together, you know? And you are the one I love,” Chloe replied, the slightest bit of irony creeping into her smile.

Lloyd fell into silence for a bit, his gaze wandering, as if he were struggling with himself. Then, “I’m the same as you, Chloe,” he said.

“Huh?” Chloe’s eyes fluttered in surprise.

“I also love you, with every fiber of my being.”

Chloe’s breath caught in her throat, escaping her in an odd squeak. Undeterred by her response, Lloyd let the churn he’d felt inside rise and spill out of him, scrambling to fit it into words as it came. “I love you, Chloe. So much that I don’t know what to do with myself. You occupy my thoughts from dawn till dusk. I love the way you wake up before me just to make sure I have breakfast, how you see me out the door every morning and welcome me back

every night. Every meal you make is the best I've ever had, automatically. I love the way you so engross yourself in reading that you jump when I call your name, the way you find anything and everything so interesting while we're out on a walk. I love the face you make when you're embroidering and giving it all your concentration. I love the you who accepts me for all I am, my dullness, my past, all of it. I love the way your eyes narrow when I stroke your hair; the way you entrust your entire body to me when we embrace. You're kind, considerate to a fault, incapable of overlooking the suffering of another, a hard worker; your smile ranks among the most adorable things I've ever seen. You've been the center of my world for far longer than I've had the means to admit. I came home early yesterday because I couldn't get you out of my mind. I lost a duel, stumbled over nothing, caused concern among my comrades—all because I couldn't stop thinking of you. All this time I've lived by the sword, and now I can't wait to put it down just to be next to you. A shameful admission for a knight to make, I know, but it's the truth. Sorry—my thoughts are as scattered as my words, but I need you to know that I love you, Chloe, so damn much. I'm at a loss; I've never felt this way before, and ever since I confessed, these feelings have become all but impossible to ignore. They're why I've been distant, and for that, Chloe, I... Chloe?"

Lloyd's words trailed off as he noticed Chloe's reaction—mirroring his own just moments prior. "Are you okay?" he asked.

Chloe, her body trembling with emotion, managed to squeak out, "I thought I might die."

"Don't die..." Lloyd responded. "Please?"

Chloe, pulling her hands from her face and regaining her composure, responded with determination, "I'm... I'm all right! There's so much more I want to experience with you; I can't die now!" She then asked, "So you've been acting this way because you...love me too much as well?"

Lloyd softly murmured his agreement.

"Which means we've both been acting distant for the exact same reason?"

"I believe so," Lloyd said, awkwardly scratching at his still-flushed cheeks.

A moment of silence passed. Then, the two burst into laughter. Chloe laughed

openly, her hands on her stomach, while Lloyd, more reserved, covered his mouth with his hand. The irony of their situation, preparing for the worst only to discover their fears were unfounded, was too much. They were both overcome with relief, and their pent-up tension dissolved into laughter at the sheer absurdity of it all.

As their laughter subsided, Chloe wiped a tear of joy from her eye. “We really are quite similar, you and I.”

“That’s probably why we fell in love,” Lloyd replied, still smiling. “Thank you, Chloe.”

“No, thank you. Well, I think if there’s anything we learned from this whole ordeal, it’s that if there’s anything on our minds, we share it.” Chloe looked at Lloyd, her smile warm and affectionate. “After all, we’re lovers, aren’t we, Lloyd?”

“Yes, you’re right about that.” Lloyd lowered his head in a nod—but didn’t rise from it. He let out a strained grunt, and brought a hand to his temple, his face contorting in pain.

“Lloyd?” Chloe’s voice was laced with concern. “What’s wrong? Are you okay?”

Lloyd, fighting through discomfort, gestured reassuringly with his hand. “I’m fine,” he managed to say through gritted teeth. After he took several deep breaths, his composure returned. Seeing Chloe’s worried expression, he softly added, “Sorry about that.”

“It’s fine, but...” Chloe hesitated, lost in thought. “There’s more on your mind, isn’t there? More than what you shared.”

Lloyd visibly tensed at her words.

Chloe reflected on a previous conversation. “That night, you mentioned something about your past. Something that held you back from saying everything you had to...”

She remembered Lloyd’s words, heavy with unspoken pain and 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...

Chloe's heart ached at the memory. "Since then, I wondered if there was more to you that I didn't know. More to your horrible upbringing that I wasn't privy to. Parts that torment you, even now. I hoped I was wrong, but..."

"No, you're not wrong. You're not wrong, but..." Lloyd averted his gaze from Chloe, his voice growing quieter. "I don't think I'm ready to talk about it yet." His eyes shimmered with pain; his voice was softer, more vulnerable than she had ever heard. "It's not something I've come to terms with myself. I'm sorry, Chloe, I truly am, but can you wait for me, just a little while longer?"

"Now just why are you apologizing? Could my answer really have been anything but 'of course'?"

At Chloe's unexpectedly kind, bright voice, Lloyd looked up, surprised. "It doesn't bother you?"

"It bothers me," Chloe replied immediately. "And while I would love for you to open up so we can work through it together, I accept that we all have secrets. Secrets that make us *us*. I of all people should know." Her gaze drifted, clouded by memories. "Remember the birthmark on my back? My past? You never pushed. You waited until I was ready to share. I don't know if you know how much that meant to me." She locked eyes with him, a warm, steadfast smile on her lips. "So, I'll wait for you. However long it takes, even if that day never comes. I just want you to know, Lloyd," she continued, her voice soft yet firm, "that I'm in your corner. Always. Whatever you've been through, there's nothing that could change how I feel about— Hya?!"

Before Chloe could finish, she found herself suddenly enveloped in Lloyd's embrace. "L-L-L-Lloyd?!" she stammered, her voice muffled against him. The warmth of his body, the soft tickle of his breath, his intoxicating scent—it all made her feel so comfortable, so secure.

Lloyd's voice, barely more than a whisper against Chloe's ear, carried a sense of helplessness, a plea for understanding and comfort. "Hold me, Chloe. Please."

She realized then that Lloyd, the usually unshakable knight, was trembling ever so slightly against her. His strong frame, which had always seemed so

invincible, was now quivering in her embrace. Instinctively, her arms wrapped around him, offering comfort as a mother would to a child lost and afraid.

“You’ve saved me—in more ways than you know,” he confessed. “Thank you, Chloe. Thank you.”

Chloe felt a wave of warmth at his words. The idea that such a formidable knight felt so vulnerable—that he *needed* her—filled her with an indescribable joy. “I haven’t done anything,” she whispered back, gently patting him. She could feel him relax slightly under her touch. “You’re the one who saved me.”

In response, Lloyd tightened his hold on her. It was an embrace so close, a moment so quiet, that they could only hear each other’s heartbeats. It was an embrace they remained in until their minds began to calm.

Chloe spoke first. “Sh-*Shall* we go home?” she asked.

“I think we should,” Lloyd responded, a hint of normalcy returning to his voice. “We haven’t had dinner yet, have we?”

“Now that you mention it, I am starving,” she admitted. “I had a salmon bake prepared for us today.”

“Salmon. Lovely.”

As they stood up from the bench, there was no hesitation, no second-guessing—their hands found each other naturally, their fingers intertwining. It struck them both that they hadn’t held hands like this since the ordeal with Lily. Lloyd’s hand enveloped Chloe’s, his presence strong and reassuring.

Chloe’s heart swelled as they walked. *I am truly in love*, she thought, the realization washing over her with renewed intensity. Side by side, they made their way home, their steps noticeably lighter than they had been on the way out.



The morning after their heart-to-heart, the sky was a brilliant shade of blue, cloudless and open—a mirror to Chloe’s newly unburdened spirit.

“Good morning, Lloyd!” she said as a groggy Lloyd shuffled into the living room.

“Morning,” he responded, his voice still thick with sleep.

Watching Chloe bustle around the kitchen, carrying dishes to the dining table, Lloyd couldn't help but tease her gently. “I see you managed to wake up on your own this morning.”

“O-Of course I did!” Chloe retorted, a slight pout finding its way onto her cheeks. “I may be many things, but a serial oversleeper I am not!” With the troubles plaguing her mind gone, Chloe had enjoyed the best sleep she'd had in days.

As Lloyd took his seat at the table, his eyes surveyed the sumptuous spread before him. A simple salad paired with a comforting bowl of soup, alongside crispy bacon, perfectly fried eggs, and toast generously smeared with margarine and topped with a dollop of sweet jam. It was a meal thoughtfully balanced to provide energy for the day ahead, a veritable feast for the working man.

Lloyd started with a large bite of toast. “This is new.”

“Do you like it?” Chloe replied, beaming. “It's cherry, from Miss Ciel's shop.”

“I don't think I've ever had cherry jam. It's a nice change from strawberry and orange. I like it.”

“I do too! It's a bit sweeter than strawberry, isn't it?”

“Here, try it with a fried egg on top.”

“Oh, do they... Do they go well together?”

“Everything goes well with egg yolks.”

“Right. I almost forgot about your love of eggs.”

Their conversation flowed effortlessly, a stark contrast to the tension of the previous day. Both of them keenly felt the difference. It was like a return to the easy rapport they shared before confessing their feelings, when things were simpler.

After finishing their meal, Lloyd made for the door. “I'll be back at the usual time.”

“All right,” Chloe said playfully. “Try not to trip over anything at work today.”

“That won’t happen again,” Lloyd assured her with a touch of somewhat misplaced confidence, his chest puffing out in pride. He knew the previous day’s distractions were a thing of the past, now that he understood the depth of Chloe’s love for him.

As he prepared to leave, Lloyd instinctively reached out to stroke Chloe’s hair.

“Is this also...just because?” Chloe asked with a curious tilt of her head and a smile.

“You said you liked it when I stroked your hair.”

Chloe’s smile widened. “I didn’t say I liked it—I love it.”

Lloyd’s expression softened as he continued to gently caress her hair.

“Aren’t you going to be late?” Chloe teased after a beat. “If you are, how are you going to explain it to your cohort?”

“Ah, right,” Lloyd said, a bit startled, eliciting a giggle from Chloe. “Okay, I’m off now.”

“Have a good day, Lloyd!” Chloe called after him, her smile stretching from ear to ear.

Chapter Three: Closing the Distance

“Haaaaaah!”

Daz’s war cry split the air over the First Order’s training complex, his sword carving a merciless path towards Lloyd—only for Lloyd to sidestep clear of it in one short motion. Daz clicked his tongue. He followed up with a second and a third strike, all missing the mark.

The onlooking knights watched in awe from the stands. The duel was only a training exercise, the swords made of wood, but the skill and intensity on display had them all on the edge of their seats.

Last time, Daz had managed a victory against Lloyd. However, a single triumph, set against a backdrop of countless defeats, appeared to everyone, including Daz himself, as nothing more than a stroke of luck. Eager to prove it was more than just chance, Daz had entered this bout full of determination, but as the fight progressed, that determination quickly began to wane.

“I can’t freakin’ hit him!” he growled in frustration. He’d tried every angle and tactic he knew, but none of his attacks came close to landing. Exhaustion and irritation began to take their toll on Daz as he sustained his futile project to land a blow. Lloyd, conversely, was in a state of sharp focus, vastly different from his fugue just two days prior. His senses were heightened, his mind crystal clear. Every aspect of Daz’s swordplay—his gaze, his movements, his breathing patterns—was apparent to Lloyd. It was as if he could predict Daz’s every move, allowing him to dodge with an almost precognitive accuracy.

Lloyd’s eyes narrowed with intent, and he uttered a single word under his breath: “Now.”

Daz, overcommitting to a powerful swing, left his torso exposed. Seizing the opportunity, Lloyd moved with lightning speed, darting beneath Daz’s raised arms.

“What?!” Daz could barely register Lloyd’s rapid advance before he found

himself unbalanced. His legs were swiftly swept from under him, sending him crashing to the ground. He scrambled to defend himself, but it was too late—the tip of Lloyd’s sword already loomed over his neck.

“And that’s game,” Lloyd said calmly, addressing a stunned Daz who was still trying to comprehend his swift defeat.

“Lloyd wins!” the referee bellowed, igniting a wave of cheers among the spectators—the compelling comeback story seemed to have sparked their fervor.

Defeated, Daz lay sprawled on the ground. “No way...” he muttered in disbelief as onlookers filed into the arena from the stands.

“I hate to say it, Daz, but Lloyd had you outclassed!” one knight commented.

“His speed is unreal,” added another, clearly impressed. “One moment he’s there, the next he’s right up in Daz’s face!”

Luke, ever the enthusiastic squire, sauntered into view. “Well fought, Master Lloyd! Here, your towel!”

Lloyd, however, was focused on extending a hand to help Daz up. “You let your frustration get the better of you, Daz. Your swings became sloppy, giving me ample room to exploit them.”

Daz, accepting the hand, conceded, “Anyone would lose their cool seeing their attacks dodged like that. Good duel.”

“Good duel, but...” As Lloyd pulled Daz to his feet, an enigmatic spark glinted in his eye—a glint that scared Daz very, very much. “You still lack stamina. I’m adding another hundred laps around the royal castle to your regimen.”

“W-Wait, Lloyd, we can talk about this!” Daz’s desperate plea echoed across the training grounds.



As lunchtime arrived, Lloyd opened the lunch box Chloe had prepared, taking a satisfying bite. A contented “Mmm” escaped his lips, not just from the meal’s flavor but also from the satisfaction of his return to form. Reflecting on his decisive victory over Daz, Lloyd felt a sense of equilibrium restored, attributing

this newfound clarity to his heart-to-heart with Chloe the previous night.

However, his moment of reflection was interrupted by a sudden weight on his shoulders. “He’s back. He’s finally back,” a jaunty, familiar voice teased.

“You’re heavy, Vice Commander,” Lloyd replied without turning.

“Ope, my bad.” Freddy quickly straightened up. “Just glad to have our ace back in MVP form is all. We’ve missed ya, buddy.”

“Thanks to you.”

“Not to *me*, no.” Freddy shrugged his shoulders theatrically. “It’s thanks to Chloe, isn’t it? Thank goodness you two sorted things out, or I would’ve had to do something about it.”

“Like I said, we weren’t fighting.”

“But you won’t deny it was because of Chloe?” Freddy prodded, an impish chuckle escaping him.

Lloyd hesitated, then admitted partially, “Chloe wasn’t at fault. It was me and my own immaturity.”

While it was true from a certain point of view, that hadn’t been the whole story, and Lloyd knew it. He just couldn’t bring himself to tell his commanding officer the whole ordeal had been much ado about nothing.

“You think I don’t know?” Freddy smirked knowingly. “You were simply so smitten with Chloe that you couldn’t focus on anything else, weren’t you?”

Lloyd almost choked on his teriyaki chicken. Hastily wiping his mouth, he shot Freddy an annoyed look, only to see him burst into laughter. “Bull’s-eye!” Freddy exclaimed, thoroughly amused. “Oh, don’t be so hard on yourself, Lloyd. Happens to the best of us. When I first started dating Sara, I was so lovestruck I barely made it to work. Thank goodness she had the strength to literally drag me out of the house, or I would’ve...”

As Freddy went on another of his gushing rants, Lloyd returned his attention to his lunch, wanting to spare himself the conversation. At the same time, though, he felt a hint of relief and camaraderie in knowing Freddy had gone through the same thing. But then, an unexpected line from Freddy forcibly

snapped Lloyd back to attention. “So, when’s the wedding?”

How the conversation went from his recollections to this, Lloyd would never know. “Wedding?” he said, looking up in confusion.

“I know this can’t be the first time you’ve heard the word, so stop making that face,” Freddy shot back. “Yes, the wedding. Marriage! It’s the natural next step when you’re dating, isn’t it?”

Lloyd fell silent, contemplating a future he had never really allowed himself to pay any regard. “We’ve only just started dating. I didn’t know marriage was something to plan so early.”

“You’re getting married, Master Lloyd?!” Luke once again appeared out of nowhere, his voice loud enough to draw the attention of the surrounding knights.

“Didja hear that? Lloyd’s getting married!” one knight whispered to another.

“You’re putting me on! And here I thought he’d be the last of us to settle down.”

“It’s gotta be with that cute little Chloe, eh?”

“Her, huh?”

Amid the growing buzz, Lloyd let out a deep sigh.

“It’s a bit of a shame, though, isn’t it?” Luke chimed in. “A man as attractive as Master Lloyd could’ve fooled around a little before settling down.”

“I am not you. I do not ‘fool around,’” Lloyd admonished.

“Just look at him, Luke,” Freddy said. “Does he seem like the type to play the field?”

Luke, catching on, nodded sagely. “You make a good point, sir! The only thing Master Lloyd fools around with is his sword!”

Lloyd was not amused. “Luke, all I’m hearing is that you want to join Daz in running an extra hundred laps around the castle.”

“Ah! No, no, Master, please, anything but that! I was just joking—I didn’t mean anything by it, truly!”

As Luke clung to Lloyd, half in tears, Freddy shrugged a resigned shoulder. “Well, where’s the rush? You two are just starting out, after all. It’s all about learning as you go. Though, considering you’ve been living together already, I guess not much has really changed.”

Lloyd gave Freddy’s astute observation a half-hearted nod. Indeed, their lives hadn’t dramatically changed since the night of his and Chloe’s confessions. The heart felt it keenly, but it hadn’t yet manifested in any overt changes.

“That being said,” Freddy said, interrupting Lloyd’s train of thought. “Give your future with Chloe a proper think, won’t you? She’s wonderful, you know. A girl like her who accepts you for who you are so readily won’t come around twice.”

Lloyd couldn’t help but sense an undertone of expectation in Freddy’s voice—an almost inevitable conclusion that he and Chloe were to be together. “I...know that, Vice Commander,” he replied, his mind wandering.

Lloyd was acutely aware of his peculiarities, how far removed he was from what was considered “normal.” Chloe’s love for him, therefore, necessitated a matching eccentricity on her part. But besides that, Freddy was exactly right—Chloe was a wonderful girl, perhaps too wonderful for someone like him. The idea of a future without her was unimaginable; she had become an irreplaceable part of his life, almost to the point that he took her for granted.

“As long as you’re aware.” Freddy said with a wry smile, patting Lloyd’s shoulder. “Good luck,” he whispered softly. “And don’t forget to invite me to the wedding, yeah?”

“I’ll let you know,” Lloyd replied.

“And me as well!” Luke eagerly added.

Lloyd looked away.

“M-Master Lloyd?! Why did you ignore me, and only me?! Master Lloyd?!”

Lloyd, tuning out Luke’s exclamations, pondered to himself. Marriage still seemed so distant, so abstract a concept, and yet it felt like an inevitable step if he wished to continue his life with Chloe. This realization came to him as the lunch hour drew to a close, a bridge he knew he would eventually have to cross.



After finishing up her chores, Chloe made her way to Ciel's stall to purchase groceries. As she perused her options, Ciel interrupted her, clearly in a jaunty mood. "Chloe! What's gotten you so perked up this fine day?"

"H-How did you know?" Chloe asked, eyes fluttering in surprise.

"How couldn't I? Not with you humming up a storm over there!"

"Humming?! I was humming? Oh, no..."

She'd been completely oblivious. Clutching her cheeks, Chloe tried to contain her embarrassment, much to Ciel's amusement. "Am I really that easy to read?" she murmured quietly.

"Took ya long enough to realize!" Ciel responded, her hands on her hips. "I appreciate it, though. Makes ya easy to deal with."

Chloe had just begun to realize how much of an open book she was; her every mood was clearly reflected in her expressions and body language. She realized, somewhat belatedly, that it was perhaps for this exact reason that she admired Lloyd's ability to keep his composure under any situation; he could do what she could not.

"Back to my question," Ciel continued. "So—what happened? Let ol' Ciel in on some of that young joy, eh?"

Chloe fidgeted uncomfortably. "I... I'll try..."

Her voice trailed off as her mind drifted off to what had happened last night. After their heart-to-heart, she sensed that she and Lloyd had attained a deeper mutual understanding—a change that brought her immense joy, yet she found herself at a loss for words to convey this newfound feeling.

Her hesitation, however, seemed to have been answer enough for Ciel; her eyes sparkled with mischief, her grin widening as she stroked her chin. "Ahhh, I see, I see..." she mused, her voice lilting with a teasing note. "You've finally gotten intimate with Lloyd, haven't you?"

The word struck her like a stray bolt of lightning. "I-Intimate?" she echoed, her voice shaky.

“As in...you’ve kissed him, haven’t you?”

A series of shrill, staccato syllables tumbled out of Chloe. “K-K-K-Kissed him?!” Her mind spun, images cascading like a runaway merry-go-round.

Kisses. Smooches. The old smackeroo—a touch of the lips whispering love, desire, a secret language for those romantically inclined. Chloe knew the concept all too well; she’d encountered such an amorous scene in *Love & Knight*, one that had set her heart racing with each passionate line. She remembered tossing in her bed, the scene replaying in vivid detail, igniting thoughts that kept her awake until dawn. But she couldn’t spiral down that path again. Not here. Not now.

“W-W-W-W-We did not!” a red-faced Chloe stammered back. “We did not kiss!”

“Oh my, you didn’t?” Ciel responded with a hint of genuine surprise. “It wouldn’t be out of the ordinary for a pair of young housemates to have shared a kiss or two by now, if you ask me, but I suppose it takes all kinds.”

“Really?” Chloe replied, unsure. “That’s...normal?”

Ciel paused, speechless, sneaking Chloe a slightly annoyed sidelong glance. “Chloe, I did always peg you for the innocent type, but this...”

Chloe blinked, a whirlpool of confusion swirling in her eyes. “Um, Miss Ciel?” she ventured, her voice laced with bewilderment.

“Ah, nothing, pay the musings of a woman lost deep in middle age no mind; it’s nothing worth agonizing over.”

Chloe nodded, though her expression still held a trace of puzzlement. “Oh, okay...”

“So, what really happened between you two?” Ciel pressed.

Chloe hesitated, retreating slightly as she mulled over her response. “It’s a bit complicated, but Lloyd and I... We’ve been a bit off since we became sweethearts. And yesterday, we had a deep talk, sorted things out, and now we’re good again. I think that explains it?”

“Sweethearts?” Ciel repeated, her voice pitching up in surprise. “Now hold on

just a darn second; you two are official?”

“Um, yes. Lloyd and I are together, yes...” Chloe replied sheepishly, unaccustomed to saying it out loud.

“Since... Since when?”

“Since the incident with my sister. I confessed my feelings on the way home.”

Ciel’s expression drifted into a daydream as she absorbed this. “Rescued from the clutches of an evil sister by a dashing knight...” Her eyes suddenly widened, a dramatic flare igniting in them. “Chloe, you’re living a real-life fairy tale!” She leaned in, getting all up in Chloe’s face. “And you mean—to tell me—you two—haven’t kissed yet?!”

Chloe’s response was a high-pitched, startled yelp. “Miss Ciel?!”

Noticing the curious gazes from nearby shoppers, Ciel hastily recomposed herself. “Sorry, sorry. I got a little carried away there.”

Chloe shook her head. “It’s okay, really. It’s just I suppose I’ve never really given *kissing* much thought. I’m more than content with how things are right now.”

Lloyd hugged her, patted her head—why yearn for more when the simplicity of their connection felt so right? It would be presumptuous to ask for anything more, a part of her believed. Yet, beneath this, a nagging voice whispered of her naivety, hinting at the depths of experience she was yet to understand.

Ciel exhaled a soft sigh. “Oh, bless your sweet, innocent heart, Chloe. Part of me wishes you could stay this pure forever.”

“I’m...pure, Miss Ciel?”

“Well, with Lloyd being the gentleman he is, and you being...*you*, I might just die of old age before anything happens between the two of ya!”

“Sorry...” Chloe replied sheepishly.

Ciel waved off the apology with a chuckle. “No need to apologize, I’m just teasing. Everyone finds their own rhythm in life; there’s no rush. You two take your time. What I’m trying to say is, congratulations, Chloe. I’m truly happy for you.”

Chloe, momentarily taken aback, quickly recovered and bowed her head gratefully. “Oh, thank you, Miss Ciel!”

Indeed, congratulations were fitting. Their journey together had been a winding path, but Chloe and Lloyd had found each other in their own time. The joy of others recognizing and celebrating their union was as heartwarming for Chloe as the relationship itself.

“On an entirely unrelated note, Chloe,” Ciel began with a spark of excitement in her eyes, “how do ya feel about embroidery exhibitions?”

Chloe echoed the phrase, a blend of curiosity and unfamiliarity in her tone. “Embroidery exhibitions?”

“That’s right!” Ciel exclaimed. “There’s one held right in that grand hall next to the royal castle. Artisans come in from all over the country, and even beyond, to showcase their masterpieces. The quality of stitchwork on display there is unparalleled—you won’t find anything like it this side of the great ocean!”

“Wow, that sounds incredible. The capital really is full of surprises!”

“I knew you’d be interested. You’ve always had a soft spot for embroidery, haven’t you?”

Chloe’s heart swelled at her words. Embroidery had been another hobby Chloe had discovered for herself since coming to the capital. Strictly speaking, she’d practiced it since her days in Shadaf, but back then, it had been a task dictated by the demands of her sister, Lily—devoid of any personal enjoyment. No matter how full her hands were with other household responsibilities, or how much the biting cold numbed her fingers, Lily would always foist unreasonable deadlines upon her, forcing her to stitch late into the night. However, after a brief hiatus in the capital, Chloe’s love for embroidery had been rekindled, sparked by an unexpected commission from Ciel. She had been so taken with Chloe’s handiwork that she’d even boldly claimed that Chloe could pursue it as a career, a notion that bolstered Chloe’s fledgling confidence.

“So, how about it? Do you wanna go? Though judging by that look on your face, I’d venture to say I already know the answer.”

“Yes!” Chloe blurted out. “I’d love to!”

“And there it is. Give me one second...” Ciel rummaged around in her pockets for a moment before producing two banknote-sized tickets. “Here; time and date is written on there, so make sure to double-check that before you go.”

“Thank you, Miss Ciel! How much do I owe you?”

“Oh, don’t you worry about that, dear. The tickets just happened to come my way earlier; you’d be doing me a favor taking them off my hands.”

“I couldn’t, not for free!”

“Who said anything about free? You already paid me back—with that delightful smile of yours. That’s more precious than any amount of coin.”

Feeling a mix of embarrassment and warmth, Chloe relented. “Thank you, then. I’ll gratefully accept...” Her voice trailed off as she noticed something. “Wait, there are two tickets here, Miss Ciel!”

“Of course. How else would you take Sir Lloyd with you?”

“I-I-I-I’m taking Sir Lloyd?!”

Ciel nodded. “Course you are—on a date.”

Nodding, Ciel pressed the tickets into Chloe’s hands with a swift, decisive motion, leaving no room for refusal. Chloe, slightly overwhelmed, held them carefully with trembling fingers. “Thank you, Miss Ciel. You’re always so thoughtful,” she said, tucking the tickets into her rucksack. A hint of concern crept into her voice. “But I’m not sure if Lloyd can make it. His schedule is always so hectic...”

“You’ll figure it out!” Ciel replied. “These things pop up from time to time. If not this exhibition, then the next.”

Chloe’s heart swelled with appreciation. “You’re always far too kind to me, Miss Ciel. Thank you again!”

Ciel returned Chloe’s gentle smile with a warm, almost motherly gaze. “It’s my pleasure, Chloe. You’re more than just a regular to me. If you need anything, remember: my door’s always open to you.”

A pang of emotion stirred in Chloe's heart. *Miss Ciel always does so much for me*, she reflected, her thoughts drifting into the past. Ever since her arrival in the capital, she had become a regular at Miss Ciel's stall, relying on it for her and Lloyd's daily meals. Whether it was for the support during the incident with Lily or the encouragement she received for her embroidery, Chloe felt an overwhelming sense of gratitude towards Ciel.

With a gentle shake of her head, Chloe pulled herself from her reverie. She quickly finished her shopping, exchanged warm goodbyes with Ciel, and started her journey home. As she ambled through the bustling streets, a familiar name surfaced in her mind. "I wonder how Shirley's doing..." she mused quietly, lost in thought as the city's hustle and bustle swirled around her.

Chloe had taken up the needle in the first place thanks to Shirley's influence. Her mind wandered back to her early days of learning embroidery under Shirley's guidance. She vividly recalled her skilled hands; the way her needle danced between her fingers seemed like magic to the young Chloe.

Reflecting further, she realized how much Shirley had taught her—not just embroidery, but also reading, writing, and the essentials of household management. Every challenge she'd faced, from those earliest days in Shadaf to this very moment, she'd gotten by at all because Shirley had left her with the foundational skills she needed. Chloe even owed her knowledge of the royal capital to Shirley, who had meticulously drawn a map that guided her to this new life.

Thinking back, it had been perhaps the most critical blessing in disguise of all that Shirley, the estate's most junior handmaiden, had been tasked with Chloe's care. A fresh transplant from the capital, she had been unaffected by the prejudices of the countryside, and had treated Chloe with the kindness and respect she'd deserved. She'd been the sole light in Chloe's otherwise grim existence, and it was truly impossible for Chloe to describe with mere words the significance of having someone like Shirley who believed in her.

"I wish I could see her again," Chloe whispered to herself. Yet, in the vast expanse of the capital, finding Shirley felt as daunting as searching for a needle in a haystack.

“Maybe we’ll cross paths randomly, right here in these city streets?” she pondered, a touch of whimsy in her tone.

But then, with a self-aware chuckle, she added, “Just kidding.” She knew life was not a fairy tale, where such serendipitous encounters were common. With a wry smile and a renewed sense of purpose, Chloe quickened her steps, eager to return to the comforts of her home.



As Chloe passed by a familiar city park, she was pleasantly accosted by a familiar voice. “Miss Monkey Lady!”

As she turned around, Chloe’s eyes lit up as she saw a young girl of no more than five years old, skipping towards her. “Millia, hello!” she answered.

“Hi Chloe!” Millia shouted back.

Millia, with her doll-like blue eyes, fluffy blonde hair that now cascaded down to her waist, and another one of her frilly dresses, was the picture of a daughter well-loved. “You too, Othello! Go on, say hi!” Millia urged.

A soft meow emanated by her feet. Chloe’s face instantly softened. “Othello, hi!” she cooed, greeting the black-and-white tuxedo kitten. “And just how have you been?”

Chloe bent down, and as if on cue, Othello flopped over onto his side, eliciting a bubbly giggle from Chloe. She took the invitation without a second thought and ran her fingers through Othello’s fluffy belly. The cat purred contentedly under her touch.

“Oh, you’re just too precious.”

Chloe beamed, her smile radiating warmth. Lost in the moment, Chloe’s usual composure melted away as she continued to pet Othello. Her face relaxed into an expression of pure joy, and she found herself making soft, catlike sounds. “So cute. So cute!”

Millia pointed and laughed. “Your face is melting again, Miss Monkey Lady!”

Chloe tried to defend herself, but it was too late; her higher functions had all but been sapped away. “He’s just too cute! I can’t resist!”

In her heart, Chloe knew the universal truth—*the floof, it makes fools of us all*.

Suddenly, a third voice broke into the conversation. “I hear you, Chloe. Can’t resist, can you?”

Chloe gasped. Either Millia had suddenly grown into an adult or... She looked up slowly, and there she was. “G-Good afternoon, Miss Sara. You’ve caught me in the act once again...” she stammered, slightly embarrassed.



“Indeed, I have,” Sara responded playfully. “By all means, continue—but only if you let me have a good look at you while you do so.”

“N-Nooo!”

Chloe shouted, Sara giggled, and Othello meowed at their feet, as if to ask why the petting had stopped.

“Sorry, sorry!” Chloe quickly resumed petting Othello, drawing a warm smile from Sara.

Drifting into memories once more, Chloe reflected on how this very kitten had been the catalyst for her bond with Sara and Millia. She remembered the day she found him, a scared stray, perched high in a tree, and how rescuing him had not only given him a loving home but a most fitting name. It had all happened only a few months ago, yet she reminisced fondly—even the bit where her impromptu tree climbing had earned her the unfortunate nickname “Miss Monkey Lady.”

As she continued to pet Othello, Chloe noticed something. “Is it just me, or has Othello grown again since the last time I saw him?” she mused aloud, her strokes long and gentle.

“It’s not just you,” Sara replied. “Othello’s appetite knows no bounds. He’s grown so much, I don’t think he even qualifies as a kitten anymore.”

Chloe’s face lit up. “I knew it! I’ll miss the tiny Othello, but I won’t complain about having more of him to pet!”

Her eyes softened as she imagined the contented and pampered life Othello now enjoyed with Sara and her family. She couldn’t help but feel happiness by proxy for that once fragile kitten, trembling and alone in that tree.

Sara’s voice suddenly fell into hushed tones. “Chloe, are you all right?”

Chloe looked up, a flicker of surprise in her eyes.

“I heard about what happened from Freddy.”

Chloe’s hand stilled mid stroke. The realization dawned on her. Sara was Freddy’s wife, and Freddy was Lloyd’s superior and commanding officer, not to mention present at the scene. It only made sense that Sara would’ve heard.

Abruptly, Othello stood and sauntered over to Millia, almost as if he sensed the oncoming undertones of adult conversation and chose his moment to exit.

“Othello, you’re playing with me now?” Millia squealed. “How fickle you are! Come, come!”

As Millia and Othello wandered off to engage in their playful antics nearby, Chloe rose to her feet, turning to Sara with a grateful yet somber expression. “Thank you so much for your concern, Sara. There was a bit of an incident, but I’m all right now.”

Sara breathed a sigh of relief. “That’s great to hear, Chloe. Truly.”

“Please pass on my thanks to Freddy as well. I owe him a great deal.”

“Oh, please, my husband was merely present. It was Lloyd who saved the day, wasn’t it?”

Chloe hesitated, her mind suddenly awash with vivid images of Lloyd. “Yes, he certainly did...” Her voice trailed off as she recalled Lloyd’s defiant figure, standing resolute against Lily’s eight guards. She battled with guilt for putting Lloyd in harm’s way once again, but at the same time, she couldn’t deny the compelling allure in witnessing his prowess in full display. The ace of the First Order moved in a league of his own; the elegance, the *precision* of his swordplay and his movements had been almost poetic—not to mention...

I’m her fiancé, Lloyd had uttered in a voice so low, so dangerous.

“Chloe? Are you feeling okay? You look like you’re burning up...”

Chloe gasped. She fervently shook her head, trying to clear the image of Lloyd from her mind. “I-I-I-I’m fine! It’s nothing!”

After a few deep breaths, her pulse steadied, returning to its normal rhythm. *That was just a bluff, Chloe*, she reminded herself. *Something Lloyd said to handle the situation*. But even as she rationalized, those words clung to her, echoing in her mind. Who could really fault her for holding on to them, especially when they had openly shared their feelings not long after? A small, hopeful flame flickered within her at the thought that perhaps, one day, Lloyd’s words might transcend their convenient artifice.

But no, no! This is not the time for such thoughts! she admonished herself, giving her head another shake to dispel the daydream.

Sara observed her with a mix of concern and curiosity. Eventually, she let out a gentle sigh and reached for Chloe's hands, taking hold of them reassuringly. "Never mind that. What matters most is that you're safe." Sara's grip was firm, grounding, as if to reassure herself of Chloe's presence. "When I heard the news, my heart sank. You've become such a dear friend to me, Chloe. The thought of anything bad happening to you was more than I could bear."

Chloe's eyes softened, touched by Sara's words. "I'm sorry for worrying you," she murmured.

Sara shook her head, her smile warm. "Don't apologize. I'm just glad we got to talk like this again."

A surge of warmth blossomed in Chloe's heart. In her lonelier days back in Shadaf, she could never have imagined such a day would come—a day where she would not only have a friend, but a friend who cared so deeply about her well-being.

Thank goodness, she thought, a wave of gratitude washing over her. *Thank goodness that I wasn't taken back to Shadaf...that I'm still here, in the capital, with friends like Sara.*

"Apropos of nothing," Sara began, her eyes twinkling with a glint of something else entirely, "I hear you and Lloyd are an item now."

Chloe should have seen that one coming, but alas, she hadn't. "I gather you heard that from Freddy as well..." she said sheepishly.

Sara leaned in closer, her voice brimming with excitement. "So? Tell me everything. How is it going? How *is* he?"

Chloe fidgeted, a bit overwhelmed. "Well, not much has changed, really. We've already been living together, so things are pretty much the same."

Sara's mouth dropped open in playful shock. "What? But you're a couple now! Isn't there a little more intimacy? Cuddling, hugging, spooning, nothing of that sort?" she said, sticking an index finger out in explanation.

“Um, hugging, yes. And he pats my head—does that count?” Chloe mumbled quietly, embarrassed. “It’s just that he did all that before as well, so like I said, nothing’s really changed.”

“That...is a little questionable in its own right. Why, it almost sounds like you two are an old married couple more than anything else,” Sara said, looking a little confused. “You’re young and in love! To tell the truth, I was mincing my words earlier, but I would have thought you’d be exploring...the more passionate side of things by now!” She glanced around to ensure Millia was out of earshot, before leaning in and whispering, “You know, like a night of hot, fiery passion?”

“A n-n-n-night of h-hot, f-f-f-fiery passion?!”

With a knowing grin, Sara nudged her gently. “Come on, Chloe. You’ve read *Love & Knight*. Surely, you’ve some idea of what I’m talking about?”

Chloe nodded hesitantly. It was worse than that. Chloe had more than just *some* idea of what Sara was talking about. That passion of which Sara spoke had been depicted with alarming clarity in *Love & Knight*, each line pulsating with intense desire. After reading through the scene at night, Chloe had tossed and turned in her bed, unable to rest until morning. The mere thought of being so *physical* with Lloyd sent a rush of blood so potent to her head that she thought she might faint then and there. “Oh, Miss Sara. You and Miss Ciel are too much for me...”

Sara’s gaze turned compassionate, as if she were looking at an endangered creature. “Oh, how innocent you are, Chloe.” She paused, her gaze drifting as she reminisced. “I’d like to say I was once like you, but perhaps I never had the chance. You know how my husband is. When he and I first became sweethearts, we’d already...” Her hand fluttered to her cheek as she continued to speak of the memory.

Chloe looked on in wonderment as Sara fidgeted restlessly in silence. Sara and Freddy, each attractive in their own right, had shared moments of intimacy far beyond Chloe’s wildest dreams. She felt like she was getting a crash course in love, learning of things that she may or may not one day experience for herself.

Sara’s question snapped her back to the present. “So, have you and Lloyd...?”

“No, not at all! We sleep separately, so the mood never even arises!” Chloe blurted out, her face heating up.

Sara’s mouth dropped open again. “You sleep separately?”

“We do,” Chloe admitted. “In separate rooms, to be exact.”

Lloyd had originally welcomed Chloe into his house as a drifter. Their sleeping arrangements had been established when she took on the role of housekeeper, and neither of them, with their lack of experience, had considered altering the setup since that night.

“Well, that’s about to change! Starting tonight, you’re sharing a bed!” Sara suddenly exclaimed.

“Sh-Sh-Share a bed?! With Lloyd?!” Chloe stammered back, her voice shooting up an octave.

In the same bed...with Lloyd... Her mind ran wild with visions of the prospect: sleeping peacefully at night, turning around, seeing Lloyd right there, the soft sound of his breathing, the closeness of his face...

“Chloe?” came Sara’s voice suddenly. “Chloe? You there, honey?”

Chloe gasped. “Sorry, I was just thinking!”

Sara paused, took stock of the situation, then nodded knowingly. “I bet you were. Thinking of the big night, huh?”

“N-No! I mean, yes! But no!”

Sara feigned wiping a tear from her eye. “Oh, they grow up so fast.”

“I-I was only imagining Lloyd and I sleeping together, and nothing more!”

It took all of Chloe’s mental faculties just to keep up with Sara’s antics. When they’d first met, Chloe thought Sara to be a prim and proper young lady, but that impression had been shattered when *Love & Knight* came into the picture. This was the real Sara, Chloe realized, far more spirited and playful than she had ever imagined. It made sense, Chloe mused; someone as unique as Freddy would naturally have an equally intriguing partner.

Catching Chloe’s thoughtful gaze, Sara teased, “You’re not thinking anything

impolite, right now, are you?”

“Wh-Whatever could you mean...?” Chloe stuttered unconvincingly. “But, um, I do have a question: is it *normal* for couples to share a bed?”

Sara nodded, her tone casual yet informative. “Isn’t it? I can only speak for myself, but Freddy and I have been sharing a bed since we moved in together.”

“H-How nice...”

“It *is* nice—sleeping beside someone you love. It’s comforting, feeling their presence, knowing you can just reach out and there they are.”

Chloe listened intently, her cheeks slightly pink.

Sara continued, her eyes sparkling. “They’re right there for you—to hug, to kiss, and then, when the mood strikes, to—”

“I-I get it, Miss Sara! Let’s move on from the night of fiery passion for now!” Sara’s enraptured expression was enough for Chloe to politely steer the conversation elsewhere.

Sara simply smiled. “But there are real benefits to sharing a bed. I always sleep better when Freddy’s with me. My mind’s clearer, and even my skin’s better. On nights he’s away, it’s just not the same.”

Chloe nodded along, fascinated. “Really? That’s fascinating...”

Out of nowhere, Millia’s voice chimed in, her hand raised as if in a classroom. “I sleep with mommy and daddy too!”

Sara bent down to stroke Millia’s head affectionately. “You sure do, sweetie. All three of us together.”

Chloe observed the tender moment, her mind awash with thoughts of Lloyd, and the prospect of a shared bed. It was a thought that both thrilled and mortified her, the kind that could send imaginary steam shooting from her ears in a cartoonish display. Yet, despite the overwhelming mix of emotions, she found herself unable to push the idea away.

In her mind’s eye, she pictured it all: the two of them slipping under the covers together, the quiet of the night enveloping them. She imagined their fingers timidly finding each other, the gap between them naturally narrowing.

The thought of Lloyd's strong arms encircling her, the security and warmth of falling asleep in his embrace. Before she knew it, her face had slackened into a disheveled grin.

Sara, observing Chloe's dreamy expression, teased, "Still going to deny it, Chloe?"

Caught off guard, Chloe could only muster a bashful response. "I'd like to deny it, but... I can't."

I want to deepen what I have with Lloyd.

I want to bridge the gap between us.

I want to explore new experiences with him...

Chloe was flustered to learn that thoughts like these would ever occupy such a large part of her mind.



Later that night, as Chloe tended to the cooking, Lloyd's voice suddenly broke her train of thought. "Chloe, the pot's boiling over."

Startled, Chloe let out a surprised yelp and hastily turned down the heat. "Oh! Sorry about that."

"Everything okay?" Lloyd asked. "Need a hand?"

"Oh, no, I'm fine," Chloe quickly reassured. "I was just...lost in thought for a moment."

"All right," Lloyd replied curtly. He didn't seem intent on pressing the issue, only returning to the sofa and his reading.

Get it together, me! Chloe chided herself. She gave her cheeks a light clap and redirected her attention to the meal.

Thankfully, the rest of the dinner preparation went smoothly, and soon they were sitting around an unusually laden dinner table.

"This is certainly...lavish," Lloyd remarked, eyeing the elaborate spread: roast beef taking center stage, surrounded by sautéed garlic chicken, potatoes au gratin, a vibrant salad, creamy vegetable soup, and the hearty seafood stew

from the earlier pot.

“I, um, might have made a little too much,” Chloe said.

Lloyd raised an eyebrow, a hint of amusement in his tone. “It was my understanding that when someone ‘makes too much,’ they usually make too much of one dish, not more dishes in general.”

Chloe’s response was a sheepish smile. “O-Oops, I suppose?”

“It’s fine; I can eat. Besides, it all looks very delicious.”

With that, the two dug into their meal. Lloyd chose to start with the roast beef. “Mmm,” he murmured. “Perfectly medium-rare, with a seared crust.”

Chloe replied with a distracted hum. “It’s good, isn’t it?”

Lloyd sampled the soup next. “Cream of mushroom? Rich, but at the same time nice and light.”

“Indeed. Rich,” Chloe echoed.

Lloyd’s commentary was per usual, but Chloe’s responses were uncharacteristically brief, just simple affirmatives. Even Lloyd, while not nearly as sensitive as Chloe, could sense that she was elsewhere mentally.

As Chloe picked at her food, she was unaware of Lloyd’s increasingly puzzled and concerned glances, his curiosity about her preoccupied state growing with each monosyllabic reply.



After dinner, Chloe sat on the couch, her eyes lost in infinity as Lloyd settled down beside her. “Chloe, what happened between last night and this afternoon?”

Startled, Chloe let out a small shriek. “Whatever could you possibly mean?”

“That,” Lloyd said dryly. “Whatever is behind that reaction.”

The wool, it seemed, would not be pulled over Lloyd’s eyes today.

“I don’t think I’m wrong,” Lloyd continued. “Since I got home, you’ve seemed...unwell. Unusually jumpy, I want to say.”

Chloe flinched again.

Lloyd studied Chloe's face. "Could you tell me? I might not be able to help, but I'm here to listen, at least."

Chloe looked at Lloyd, seeing his intense gaze, his usual impassivity. Should she say it? Should she not? She seesawed back and forth. It was such a *silly* reason to be acting this way, but...

Didn't we just agree yesterday to share whatever was on our minds, no matter how big or small?

No, she couldn't break that promise so soon. With newfound resolve, she clenched her fists and faced Lloyd. "Um, right. Th-The thing is, Lloyd..." She pursed her lips shut, building the pressure up until the words all came out at once. "Do you think we could sleep together, starting tonight?!"

Lloyd froze.

He remained still—statuesque—as if time had paused for him and only him. A beat later, he regained his composure; his mouth hinged open. "Sure. Why not?"

Chloe's eyes fluttered in disbelief. "You're okay with it?"

"I don't see the problem," Lloyd paused. He scratched his head, a bit awkwardly. "We're a couple, aren't we?"

Chloe turned into a puddle. She nearly slid off the couch in her flustered state, but caught herself at the last second, straightening up. "Th-Then, I'll see you later tonight."

"Right. I'll be seeing you."

The process was a bit awkward, but they managed to arrive at this magical next step. Tonight, they would share a bed.



Later that night, Chloe sat on Lloyd's bed, already in her sleepwear and clutching a pillow, her mind buzzing with nervous anticipation.

That went smoother than I thought...

It had all happened so fast; she hadn't imagined Lloyd agreeing so readily, nor had she imagined him proposing they sleep in his room for the larger bed. She barely had any time to think about it before here she was, freshly bathed and ready, waiting for him.

Lloyd didn't seem nervous at all, Chloe reflected. This is probably no big deal to him, unlike me...

Just as she let out a resigned sigh at her own immaturity, the door swung open. "Sorry that took so long," Lloyd said, stepping into the room.

Chloe scrambled into a more proper sitting position, legs folded under her, hands on her lap. "N-Not at all!" She dared to turn Lloyd's way; he was dressed in his usual pajamas, but there was nothing "usual" about his allure right now!

Lloyd, noticing her gaze, asked, "Is something wrong?"

"N-Nothing..." Chloe quickly averted her eyes, staring at her lap. "Th-Thank you so much for joining me today," she stuttered.

Lloyd's lips curled into a slight smile. "I don't think that's something people usually say in this situation."

Chloe inwardly cringed at her own formality. *It's not a ceremony, Chloe!* she admonished herself, waiting for Lloyd to approach. Timidly, she moved over to one side of the bed and lay down. Everything about the experience was new—the give of the mattress, the texture of the sheets, and most notably, the faint scent of Lloyd that enveloped her senses, sending her heart racing.

"I'm turning off the light," Lloyd announced.

"G-Go ahead."

With a click, the room was plunged into darkness. Chloe heard the soft sound of Lloyd getting into bed, the mattress dipping under his weight. She felt the gentle weight of a blanket over her. "Thank you," she murmured.

In the quiet of the room, Lloyd's soft grunt was the last sound before silence enveloped them. The room was still, save for the gentle rhythm of Lloyd's breathing, the faint rustle of his pajamas, and the warmth that radiated from his body, so tantalizingly close. *Ahhh! I can't sleep!*

The initial hurdle was crossed—they were in bed together, a milestone in itself, but now another challenge loomed: *sleep*. Amid the tension gripping her body and the rapid drumming of her heart against her chest, Chloe wondered just how any couple overcame these sensations to find rest.

“Chloe,” Lloyd’s voice came suddenly, breaking the silence.

“Yes?” Chloe whispered back.

“Are you comfortable? Is there enough room for you?”

“More than enough! I’m quite small, after all. It’s you I’m worried about, Lloyd.”

“I’ve slept in far less comfortable places. Any amount of bed is a luxury to me. But if you can’t sleep, just say the word, and I’ll make do on the floor.”

“Or I could just return to my own bed at that point?”

“Hm, true.”

A giggle escaped Chloe’s lips, the tension in her body easing slightly thanks to Lloyd’s quirky remark. “I don’t know how you manage it, Lloyd.”

“Manage what?”

“Remaining so composed. Here I am, a bundle of nerves, and you’re just as calm as ever.”

“Is that how it looks to you?”

Chloe murmured a confused “Huh?” only to hear the soft rustle of fabric as Lloyd turned to face her. She could sense his gaze in the darkness.

“I’m nervous too.”

Chloe’s heart fluttered at his admission. She turned to meet him. From the soft moonlight filtering through the curtains, she could just make out the contours of his face, a shadowed figure in the dim light.

“It’s a strange feeling,” Lloyd continued, his voice low and thoughtful. “Hard to explain...but it feels right, somehow, being here with you.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” Chloe replied softly. “I’m sorry if I’ve pushed you into this.”

Lloyd's response was gentle and reassuring. "Don't be sorry." He smoothly moved his hand over the blanket, resting it lightly on Chloe's side. "I'm actually happy *you* were the one who brought it up."

Chloe didn't have to think hard to understand the depths of Lloyd's words. In Shadaf, her life had been one of obedience, where personal choice had been denied her. She'd grown up with little personality, no idea of what she wanted to do or liked to do. The concept of "free" time had terrified her—free to do what, exactly?

But now, here she was, making decisions, expressing her needs. "Me pushing you? Who would've thought," she said with a faint smile, reflecting on her journey.

"A welcome change," Lloyd affirmed, his voice full of warmth.

After a moment of comfortable silence, Lloyd spoke again. "Could I ask something of you too?"

Chloe's heart raced. "Yes, of course, anything," she replied, her voice barely above a whisper.

No sooner had she spoken than she felt the gentle pull of Lloyd's arms. Gently, she was drawn closer to him, their bodies now not even a breath apart. She could feel the texture of Lloyd's pajamas against her cheek, the warmth emanating from his body enveloping her. His scent was heady, a mixture of comfort and something thrillingly unfamiliar. In this close embrace, the boundaries between them seemed to dissolve, leaving Chloe awash in a sea of new and intoxicating sensations.



“L-Lloyd?” Chloe’s voice trembled slightly, her words barely audible.

“You don’t like this?” he asked back.

“No, I... I do,” Chloe admitted, her heart fluttering.

“Let me know if you want me to stop,” he offered, his voice soft yet earnest.

Chloe could sense a subtle change in Lloyd. His voice seemed more strained than usual, his breathing shallower.

Gently, he moved his hand, letting it find its way to her hair. His touch was a bit more uncoordinated than usual as he stroked her hair softly.

“No,” Chloe whispered, her voice steady but low, as Lloyd drew her closer against his chest. “Please, don’t stop.”

That was the last word exchanged between them that night. Their breathing gradually fell into a harmonious rhythm, the sound of their synchronized inhalations and exhalations filling the space between them.

Ba-dump, ba-dump—Chloe could hear Lloyd’s heartbeat, a comforting, steady pulse distinct from her own. In that silent sanctuary, the rest of the world seemed to fade away, leaving only the two of them in a cocoon of warmth and intimacy. What she had imagined to be an overwhelming, heart-racing experience was surprisingly calming.

Wrapped in Lloyd’s embrace, with her head gently caressed by the man she loved, Chloe found a profound sense of bliss. There, secure in the circle of his arms, she surrendered to the tranquility of the moment and drifted into a deep, restful sleep.



“Asleep already?” Lloyd murmured softly, feeling Chloe’s breathing settle into a gentle rhythm against him. A smile touched his lips as he gently adjusted his hold, allowing himself a better view of her peaceful face.

Bathed in the soft glow of moonlight, Chloe’s features seemed almost ethereal, fragile in their serene stillness. The vulnerability she displayed in her sleep, a side she revealed only to him, stirred something deep within Lloyd.

Ba-dump—his heart throbbed, louder in the quiet room. Gazing at her, so defenseless and trusting, ignited a raw, instinctual desire. But no sooner had these feelings surfaced than Lloyd screwed his eyes shut and shook his head, as if to scatter the urge from his brain. “No, no,” he murmured, focusing intently on the disciplined form of his swordplay, repeating the motions in his mind, until the surge of ardor subsided.

With his heart’s tumultuous waves calmed, Lloyd exhaled softly. “Never has my will been so tested,” he whispered to himself.

Yes, it was true. While it may have seemed the case from the way Lloyd carried himself, he was not immune to the natural desires of man. Worse still, he was well aware of the intimate nature of the activities men and women got up to in bed (thanks to Freddy’s influence). Yet, in Chloe’s proximity, he chose restraint—not to prove his self-control, but out of respect for Chloe’s wishes.

What Chloe had proposed was that they sleep together—nothing more—or she would’ve said. At least, that was the sort of rigid interpretation that a man of Lloyd’s nature had come to. Thus, he resolved not to overstep the boundaries she had set.

For sure, the fleeting thought that Chloe’s proposition had been, well, *a proposition* had crossed Lloyd’s mind, but seeing her slip into slumber so innocently dispelled that notion quickly.

To be in such close contact with the girl he loved was a test for Lloyd. But Lloyd, of all people, understood the value of being tested. He chose to take it as another form of training, an exercise in fortifying his will and strengthening his resolve.



“It’s...morning already?”

The next day, the soft song of morning larks gently coaxed Chloe from her restful slumber. As her eyes fluttered open, the realization of the large, comforting presence beside her slowly dawned on her. Her still-drowsy mind turned slowly and slowly, until memories of the previous night’s agreement to share the same bed resurfaced.

She shifted her head and looked upwards; there was Lloyd, still asleep, his breathing deep and steady. In this state, he looked so tranquil, so calm, so starkly different from his usual sharp, focused demeanor. Throughout the night, he had scarcely moved, his arms still tenderly encircling her. *He must be a heavy sleeper*, Chloe thought with a faint smile.

He is still asleep, right? she wondered. After a cautious glance confirming his slumber, Chloe snuggled into Lloyd's chest. Like a contented kitten, she rubbed her face against him.

I feel so...at peace. She felt herself relax. The warmth of the sun on her face, the distant chirping of birds reaching her ears, the presence of the man she loved enveloping her—her heart melted like butter. Sleep beckoned her once more. Chloe teetered on the edge, and yet she resisted the urge, reminding herself of the day's responsibilities.

She soaked in the moment for just a little longer, then gently extricated herself from Lloyd's arms. She sat up, stretching gracefully and silently. Reflecting on the night, she realized it had felt like barely a moment had passed between falling asleep and waking. Dreams were the machinations of a mind still active, or so she'd once heard, so if the gap in her memories in that regard were any indication, she'd had a very deep sleep indeed. She felt rejuvenated, her mind clear and her spirits high. *So this is what Sara meant?* she mused.

I always sleep better when Freddy's with me. My mind's clearer, and even my skin's better.

Just then, she sensed movement beside her. Lloyd grunted softly, his eyes fluttering open.

"Good morning, Lloyd," Chloe said softly.

Lloyd's sleepy eyes focused on Chloe, his voice a deep, groggy murmur. "Morning." His gaze drifted, the pull of sleep still strong. "Is it time to get up already?" he mumbled.

"Not quite yet," Chloe reassured him.

"I see," Lloyd mumbled. Pajamas rustling against the sheets, he shifted his position, turning onto his belly. Clearly someone wasn't ready to wake up quite

just yet.

In this new position, his bangs fell haphazardly over his eyes. Almost instinctively, Chloe's hand reached out, gently tucking the strands behind his ear.

"What are you doing?" Lloyd's voice was tinged with curiosity, his eyes fluttering open once more.

"I'm...not entirely sure," Chloe said with a giggle.

"But you just wanted to?" Lloyd asked, amused.

"Something like that," she replied, her smile audible in her voice.

Lloyd closed his eyes again, a relaxed murmur escaping his lips. "It tickles."

"Oh, sorry." Chloe quickly withdrew her hand.

"No, I meant in my chest," Lloyd quickly appended, a hint of embarrassment in his voice. "My heart feels...funny."

Chloe looked down at him with a warm, loving gaze. "I think I understand exactly what you mean." She recalled the fluttering sensation in her own chest whenever Lloyd played with her hair.

Lloyd peeked at her with a half-open eye. "You can continue, if you'd like."

"Really?" Chloe asked eagerly.

"You look like you want to. Go ahead."

Chloe whimpered. "I *really* need to work on not being so transparent."

Lloyd's voice was gentle and genuine. "I hope you don't. You're easier to understand this way."

With Lloyd's permission, Chloe reached out again. This time, she ran her hand through his hair with abandon, delighting in its softness between her fingers. At last, here was payback for all the times Lloyd had hogged the privilege.

Suddenly, Lloyd yawned deeply.

"Still tired?" Chloe asked.

"It seems so," Lloyd admitted, his voice heavy with sleep. "Maybe it's your

soothing touch.”

Chloe chuckled. “Now you know how relaxing it feels. Get some more rest. I’ll start preparing breakfast.”

“That sounds...wonderful...” Lloyd murmured, already drifting back into sleep.

As Chloe watched him return to slumber, she couldn’t help but smile affectionately. He was like a contented kitten in her care. Even if their night together had been just this—sharing these quiet, unguarded moments—it was more than enough. The opportunity to see this softer, more vulnerable side of Lloyd was a precious gift in itself. Chloe’s heart swelled as she quietly slipped out of bed, leaving Lloyd to his peaceful rest.



As they settled into breakfast, Chloe found the perfect moment to bring up her plan. “Lloyd, are you free next Saturday or Sunday?”

Lloyd looked up from his meal. “Sunday. Why do you ask?”

“There’s an embroidery exhibition I’d like to go to. I wondered if you would join me?”

“An embroidery exhibition?” Lloyd repeated, blinking in surprise.

“Yes. I have tickets courtesy of Miss Ciel. Apparently, it’s the greatest gathering of artisans this side of the great ocean!”

Chloe had wanted to ask Lloyd’s availability yesterday, but had forgotten all about it, thanks to Sara.

Lloyd appeared thoughtful. “Embroidery... The sewing thing you do?”

“Yes! The thing I did on your handkerchief; the sword.”

“Oh, interesting.”

Lloyd lapsed into silence, his brow furrowed as he considered the invitation.

Chloe’s confidence wavered, and she quickly added, “S-Sorry, I don’t mean to force you. If you aren’t interested, I’ll go by myself...”

Lloyd looked up. “What are you talking about? I’d like to go.”

Chloe's eyes widened in surprise. "Really?"

"I'm just worried if my presence will be welcome. I know nothing about embroidery, after all."

"Of course you will! It's open to everyone." The look in her eyes became furtive. "But you want to come? Are you sure you won't find it boring?"

"I feel it's only natural to want to better understand the things you enjoy," Lloyd added nonchalantly.

Relief and joy washed over Chloe's face. "Thanks, Lloyd. I love you!"

"I love you too, Chloe. Thanks for thinking of me."

Now Chloe was all smiles from ear to ear. "I can't wait."

A date with Lloyd, an embroidery exhibition! It took Chloe all she had to keep her heart from jumping out of her chest in excitement.



In the heart of Liberta stood a somber structure, casting a long shadow over the royal castle; it was dedicated to a grim purpose. This was the Liberta Stockade, a place marked by austere walls and vigilant guards, both inside and out—a place no one ever hoped to find themselves.

Within these walls, prisoners awaited their trials. In a stark room labeled "Visitation" sat Lily, looking haggard and forlorn on a wooden stool, caged behind cold steel bars. She waited impatiently for the arrival of a particular visitor and her lawyer.

Detained on charges of battery and unlawful confinement of her sister, Chloe, as well as for siccing her guards on royal knights—an act teetering dangerously close to treason—Lily had been confined here for nearly three weeks.

"Isn't my mother here yet?" she snapped at the guard nearby.

His reply was terse and indifferent. "Do I look like I would know?"

Lily clicked her tongue in frustration. *Three weeks in this dim, dank dungeon...* Her imprisonment was nothing short of a profound insult to her dignity. While her noble status had afforded her some small comforts, it was a far cry from the

opulent lifestyle and lavish attire she was accustomed to. Now, dressed in a simple smock and subjected to the fare of the common folk, she longed for the luxury of her home, the indulgence of a three-course meal, and the elegance of her exquisite dinner dresses.

I'm innocent, she seethed. So why am I being treated like this?!

In Lily's mind, her detention was a gross miscarriage of justice. Like her mother, she had always believed Chloe to be cursed, justifying her cruel treatment. The incident at the hotel, in Lily's eyes, was nothing more than rightful punishment for Chloe's audacity in leaving the family home. And Lloyd, who had thwarted her attempts, was merely an obstacle to be overcome. Make no mistake, the importance of the rule of law was not lost on the Kingdom of Rose as a whole—just this particular eldest daughter of a provincial noble.

The guard spoke up again. "Lily Ardennes, you have a visitor." The door creaked open on the opposite side of the bars, and a man and woman stepped into the dimly lit room.

"Mother!" Lily exclaimed.

"Lily!" Isabella echoed with equal fervor. She rushed to the steel bars, their hands clasping tightly in a long-awaited reunion. "Oh, my sweet Lily. To be put up in a place like this, you poor, poor thing." The look of pained love in Isabella's eyes was something Chloe had never experienced—a mother's affection, reserved solely for Lily.



Tears streamed down Lily's face as she pleaded, "I'm so sorry, mother. Can you ever forgive me?"

"Of course, my darling," said Isabella, her voice brimming with sorrow. "I'll do everything in my power to free you from this dreadful place." She then turned to the man accompanying her—Ted, her lawyer—her gaze sharp and accusing. "Ensure my daughter's release immediately! Money is no object; just remove her from this...this squalor!"

The guard's expression twitched at the word "squalor." Ted wiped the sweat from his brow before speaking. "M-My lady, I'm afraid her release isn't something I can arrange. Per the dictates of the kingdom's code of law, Lady Lily is presently indicted on several counts. It is a fundamental principle of law that an individual, once formally accused, must be detained to obviate any potential tampering with witnesses or evidence. The situation is, I'm afraid, beyond my control."

"How dare you suggest my darling Lily would ever do such things!" Isabella exclaimed, her voice firm with conviction.

"My lady, please. I understand your wish to stand by family, but the law must be upheld," Ted implored.

Frustrated, Isabella struck the bars with her hand. "Then what am I paying you for if you can't even manage that?!"

"Mother, I'm innocent! It's all, all Chloe's fault!" Lily yelled, her victim complex reaching its breaking point. "I only wanted to bring her home. If I hurt her, it's only because she wouldn't listen!"

Isabella tenderly consoled her. "I know, Lily, I know. My sweet, dear baby could never commit a crime. It must be some mistake, a clerical error. Have faith, Lily. Your mother will get you out of this mess."

"Mother..." Isabella whimpered, tears streaming down her face.

What am I seeing... Ted watched the scene unfold in disbelief, the twisted display of maternal affection before him stirring a deep sense of unease. Composing himself, he interjected, "There's a hearing scheduled for next week. Both the accused and the victim will be present, and a judge will deliver a

verdict shortly after.”

Victim? The word caught Isabella’s attention. *In other words, Chloe...* She turned to Ted. “To confirm beyond question, you’re certain there’s no chance I could face charges in this matter?”

Ted’s face was anything but reassuring. “I’m certain—is what I wish I could say, my lady. I must remind you there is a separate ongoing investigation into Chloe’s mistreatment in Shadaf, which could have...separate implications.”

“Mistreatment? I am hardly in the mood for jokes!” Isabella replied, aghast. “That girl is a curse, a blight upon our family! All I ever did was remind her of her place!” Her hands slammed on the table, her voice rising in agitation.

Ted did not look amused. “Is Your Ladyship able to produce causal evidence linking Lady Chloe to these ‘disasters’?”

“Causal? Spare me your jargon!” Isabella shot back. “The deaths in my family, my own illness, all followed Chloe’s birth. What more proof do you need?”

“Tragic as the passing of the late Lord Ardennes and your son is, they cannot serve as legal evidence against Chloe. The extenuating circumstances Your Ladyship is likely hoping for can only be considered in the face of concrete evidence. Otherwise, the allegations against Lady Chloe will likely be seen as abuse and battery.”

In the Kingdom of Rose, acts of violence committed against others were unequivocally classified as criminal offenses, but in practice, family violence frequently eluded scrutiny. The provisions were there to permit full prosecution; they just weren’t exercised unless a case attracted significant attention, which, in this case, it had. The royal investigation had already uncovered evidence of Chloe’s maltreatment and forced labor since her early years.

Isabella’s frustration boiled over. “Whose side are you on? You think Chloe is the victim here? What about *my* suffering?”

Ted was resolute. “I side with the law, my lady. Personal feelings or comparisons of suffering hold no sway in court. The judge’s decision will be based on the facts presented.”

Ted's words left Isabella in a state of stunned silence. Deep down, some part of her had known—had perhaps always known—that Chloe was not the cause of her family's misfortunes. Yet Isabella, set in her ways and temperamental from birth, had chosen to ignore this. People often established their beliefs first and only later sought facts to justify them—a pattern Isabella exemplified. She had wanted a convenient scapegoat for her anger and frustration, found it in Chloe, and over time, this belief that Chloe was “cursed” hardened in Isabella's mind, impervious to rational scrutiny.

Ted continued, “At the current juncture, Lady Lily may owe substantial restitution, along with the possibility of several years' imprisonment and hard labor. Should the abuse charges hold, the sentence will be accordingly more severe. As your attorney, I will strive to mitigate the sentencing, but I advise you to brace for the worst.”

Isabella wasn't listening to Ted's explanation. Her mind was already whirling with machinations, plotting her next move. She knew the key evidence against them would be testimonies from Chloe and the household staff. If allowed to give their statements, the odds would be stacked overwhelmingly against them.

The household staff I can silence, but Chloe...

Chloe was the problem. After what happened with Lily, Chloe's word carried more weight. Discrediting her would be no easy task. If undermining her testimony was unfeasible, then ensuring she couldn't testify became the only viable strategy.

“Mother...” Lily's voice was a whisper, tinged with desperation.

“What is it, Lily dear?” Isabella replied.

Lily beckoned Isabella closer and whispered something in her ear; Isabella's eyes shot open. She then looked at Lily, a soft, unsettlingly determined look replacing her earlier frustration. “Yes, Lily dear. Rest your pretty little head. Your mama will take care of it. All of it.”

Ted, observing this exchange, felt a chill run down his spine, compelling him to intervene. “Your Ladyship, while I fear I may be stating the obvious, I feel I must say it all the same. While you are not yet officially under suspicion and are free to move about, I must caution against any further complications before the

hearing. Our position is precarious enough as it is.”

Isabella’s response was distant, her smile chilling. “Of course; I understand the situation perfectly,” she said, her tone unnervingly calm.

Chapter Four: To the Exhibition

Chloe and Lloyd had comfortably settled into their new daily rhythm. Their mornings began together with breakfast, followed by Lloyd heading to work while Chloe tended to the home. Evenings were a time spent together over dinner, after which they indulged in their individual interests—Chloe lost in her books and Lloyd dedicated to his training. The day would always end with them reunited in the comfort of the same bed. Before they realized it, the day of the embroidery exhibition had arrived.

As they stepped into the grand hall, a gasp of awe escaped Chloe. Her eyes shone with delight, taking in the wonders that Ciel's gift had brought. The hall, illuminated by the soft glow of chandeliers, was a symphony of color and design, with embroidery displays stretching from one end to the other. The setup was vibrant and lively, reminiscent more of a bustling local market than a curated museum event, with artisans proudly presenting their creations in individually decorated booths and glass cases.

The variety of themes was breathtaking—coats of arms, pastoral scenes, vibrant depictions of flora and fauna, and even intricate religious tableaux, all rendered in multicolored threads and complex stitch patterns. In one corner, a crowd gathered around master embroiderers demonstrating their craft live, their skilled hands weaving magic into fabric.

Heaven. Chloe had stepped into heaven.

"Look at all this..." Even her plus-one couldn't hide his admiration.

Compared to other artistic pursuits like painting or pottery, embroidery no doubt occupied a more modest place in the public's imagination. But even then, there were enough enthusiasts and admirers gathered to fill up the kingdom's largest hall. Even Lloyd, as ill-equipped to handle needlework as he was, couldn't help but find himself immersed in the sheer artistry on display. Each piece told a story—countless hours of dedication, pinned down in color and texture. It stirred in him the same sense of awe he might feel at the foot of a

grand cathedral: here stood a monument to centuries of labor and devotion.

And if this was Lloyd's impression, just imagine how Chloe was feeling.

"Look at that!" she exclaimed, jumping to a nearby booth. "The threads seem almost alive, as if they might move at my touch! The way this flower is stitched, its colors so vividly captured... It's like nothing I've ever seen..."

Her attention was immediately captured by another display. "Goodness me, what bold, geometric patterns! The vibrant colors, the striking contrast—it's breathtaking! And the lion in the center, it's the very embodiment of majesty. I'm at a loss for words..."

Chloe's enthusiasm was infectious as she moved energetically from one booth to the next, her eyes wide with admiration. Each booth's creator, present to showcase their work, nodded in appreciation of her genuine praise. Their craft receiving such recognition was a true honor.

At another booth, Chloe's curiosity got the better of her. She approached the artisan and inquired, "Excuse me, how did you create this section?" while pointing to a specific piece.

The man behind the booth leaned forward, a smile on his face. "Ah, this part? It's a type of knotted stitch. French knots, they're called. They have a way of standing out, don't they?"

"So they're individual knots! That's why they look so full and vibrant!" she exclaimed. "Their texture is so appealing, and they really highlight the color gradation!"

The man looked delighted beyond words. "You have a keen eye, young lady. That's exactly my intention—using French knots and gradation to add depth to the piece. It's always a pleasure to meet someone who appreciates the finer details."

Just like that, Chloe eagerly seized the opportunity to engage with her fellow artisans. Round and round she went, her curiosity unbridled. Each time she encountered a technique or design she didn't understand, she eagerly sought clarification. Midway through her gleeful journey, she suddenly remembered her companion.

“Lloyd, I completely forgot about you; I’m so sorry!” she exclaimed, her eyes swimming with remorse. “You must be finding this terribly dull.”

Lloyd, however, looked at her with a gentle, understanding gaze. “Don’t worry about me. I’m quite enjoying watching you enjoy yourself,” he reassured her. “You *are* enjoying yourself, aren’t you?”

Chloe nodded, a sheepish smile on her face. “Yes, I am. I’m having the time of my life.”

“That’s what matters,” Lloyd affirmed. Noticing Chloe’s lingering concern, he added, “While I may not be well-versed in embroidery, I can still appreciate the skill and effort in these works. True talent is universal, recognizable even to those unfamiliar with the craft.”

Chloe’s spirits lifted at his words. “That’s exactly how I feel when I see you in action with your sword!”

Lloyd tilted his head, puzzled. “But my swordsmanship is hardly extraordinary.”

“If the First Order’s ace’s swordplay isn’t extraordinary, then what is?” Chloe countered, her voice full of admiration.

“Well, while I may be better than many, there are still those who surpass me. I can’t consider myself at the top.”

“Well, you are in my eyes.”

Her words, so brimming with confidence and admiration, made Lloyd shrink back in embarrassment.

Chloe had witnessed Lloyd’s fighting form on many occasions. Whether it was defending her from thugs in the park, his duel with Luke at the castle, or the confrontation with Lily, Chloe could pick any single moment and rattle on endlessly about the beauty in Lloyd’s form, the understated grace in which he handled his sword. In Chloe’s eyes, and likely in the eyes of many others, Lloyd’s skill was nothing short of spectacular, a true spectacle of martial artistry.

“I could never move like you do,” Chloe admitted softly. “The way you maneuvered around my sister’s bodyguards was incredible.”

“It wasn’t anything extraordinary.”

Chloe looked at him curiously. “Why do you say that?”

“It’s more about courage than technique.”

“Courage...” she echoed.

“Fear not your opponent’s blade,” Lloyd explained. “Fear impairs the mind, hobbles the body. Once fear is removed, you can analyze and counter your opponent’s actions effectively.”

Chloe nodded along as she absorbed his words. “Wow...”

“Practice is all well and good, but there is no substitute for the real thing. Real combat situations are unpredictable. Random obstacles, places to hide, things of that sort. You must be constantly aware of your environment, ready to adapt and use whatever is at hand.”

“The world of combat is indeed profound,” Chloe mused, her respect for Lloyd’s expertise growing.

“Have you any interest in it? In my opinion, you have what it takes. With a little training, we can make a swordsman out of you yet.”

Chloe shyly demurred. “I’m not sure I can handle pain very well. I think I’ll stick with the needle instead...”

“Oh,” Lloyd uttered, slightly disappointed. “Sorry, we’re here to focus on your interests; forget about mine.”

“Not at all! I enjoy hearing you talk about combat. You’re so passionate about it.”

Lloyd smiled. “Then you understand how I feel being here with you.”

Chloe gasped, surprised by Lloyd’s smooth reply, much to his enjoyment.

“Really, I’m having a good time.”

And with that, any remaining shadow of doubt that Lloyd was forcing himself vanished from Chloe’s mind.

“Come on, let’s keep going. We’re barely through with this place,” Lloyd suggested.

“Right...” Chloe said, still in shock.

Lloyd stretched out a hand. “Stick close to me. It’s crowded here.”

“Thank you...” she muttered, intertwining her fingers with his. Their comforting size, their faint warmth—every aspect of the experience sent her heart racing, a sensation she wondered if she’d ever grow accustomed to.

Hand in hand, they delved deeper into the exhibition, united in their exploration and mutual appreciation of each other’s worlds.



“This flower...”

A while later, Chloe’s attention was arrested by an embroidery at a particular booth. As she pulled gently on Lloyd’s hand, her steps slowed to a stop. The piece featured a flower found in Shadaf, its name just on the tip of her tongue. *Hardenbergia*, was it? She struggled to recall. It’d been ages since she last saw one; they didn’t grow in the capital.

The embroidery reproduced the flower’s characteristic purple corolla with stunning accuracy and vibrancy, shimmering like gemstones under the light of the hall. A delicate butterfly, rendered in lighter hues, seemed to flutter around it, amid glistening dewdrops. Set against a brighter backdrop, the dark bloom radiated a sense of serene, grounding calm. Chloe felt a wave of nostalgia wash over her.

“Something catch your eye?” Lloyd inquired, noticing Chloe’s rapt attention.

Chloe remained speechless, lost in a sea of memories. Something about the stitching technique, the placement of the delicate knots, evoked recollections of her childhood, of days spent learning to embroider...

It’s too similar to be a coincidence, she pondered. Almost automatically, she found herself asking the stall attendant, “Excuse me, sir, but is this your work?”

The man was broad-shouldered, with the demeanor of a gentle giant; stubble dotted his well-balanced face. Short wavy hair bobbing slightly, he shook his head. “No, I’m just helping out here,” he replied, his smile warm and inviting. “All these pieces are my wife’s creations.”

“Your wife?” Chloe echoed, her curiosity piqued.

“That’s right.” His gaze suddenly shifted past Chloe and Lloyd. “Ah, and here she comes now.”

As Chloe turned around, her eyes widened in recognition. “Shirley?!” she exclaimed.

“Lady Chloe...?” The response came from a familiar face.

The woman who had been more than a handmaiden at the Ardennes estate, who had cared for Chloe for over half her life, stood there in disbelief. Shirley could hardly hide her surprise.



“Here you go, milady,” Shirley offered, placing cups of water on the low table in the hall’s rest area.

“Thank you, Shirley,” Chloe responded warmly.

Seated together, just the two of them, Chloe and Shirley reconnected after years apart. Lloyd had graciously given them privacy, understanding the significance of their reunion after Chloe had given him a quick summary. “*Take your time to catch up; I’ll be here,*” he had said. Grateful for his consideration, Chloe savored the moment of reuniting with Shirley.

“It’s almost surreal to see you here, milady,” Shirley confessed, her voice tinged with emotion.

“The same goes for me,” Chloe agreed, her eyes reflecting her surprise. “I never expected to meet you again, let alone at a place like this.”

“I’m honored you recognized my work,” Shirley admitted.

“How could I not?” Chloe smiled. “Your embroidery was the beginning of everything for me. It’s unforgettable.”

Shirley’s hand fluttered to her heart, visibly moved. “Oh, milady...”

Chloe observed the subtle changes in Shirley. It had been six years since their paths last crossed. Shirley’s hair, once short, now cascaded past her shoulders. Gone was the familiar maid’s uniform, replaced by a charming dress. Yet the

warmth in her eyes and her gentle demeanor remained unchanged, as did her seemingly ageless appearance.

“To think that flower would bring us back together,” Shirley mused. “It’s like fate.”

Chloe nodded. “It really is. Hardenbergia means... Oh, what was it again?”

“Miraculous reunion,” Shirley supplied, her voice soft.

“Yes, that was it!” Chloe’s face brightened.

Shirley’s eyes held a tender expression. “This reunion does feel fated, milady.”

At that last word, Chloe hesitated. “Shirley,” she said tentatively.

“Yes, milady?”

“Would you mind not calling me that anymore? ‘Milady,’ I mean. You’re not my servant anymore.”

Shirley’s response was swift, yet respectful. “That may be the case, but in my heart, you’ll always be Lady Chloe. Asking me to change now would be like asking the sun to rise in the west.”

Oh, she hasn’t changed. Not one bit, Chloe thought, a wave of nostalgia washing over her. Shirley’s unwavering earnestness, compassion, and decorum were just as she remembered. At the estate, those traits had made Shirley a beloved figure, despite her recent arrival, and Chloe often thought that Shirley’s popularity had been pivotal in having successfully argued for Chloe’s life. “I’m so glad to see you haven’t changed, Shirley,” Chloe said, her voice tinged with fondness.

Shirley’s giggle was light and joyful. “I wish I could say the same about you, but...” She let her gaze travel over Chloe, from head to toe. “My, how you’ve grown, milady. And you’ve become so beautiful.”

Shirley had been absent during Chloe’s most transformative years, having left when Chloe was just ten. Though she’d tried her best to shield Chloe from the servants, there had been little she could do against her family. She remembered Chloe as a worn-down child. Gaunt, her skin covered with bruises and welts, she’d looked nothing like the radiant and thriving girl before her now.

“Yes, Lloyd has treated me very well,” Chloe admitted, her cheeks coloring slightly.

“I can certainly tell,” Shirley noted. “But why is Your Ladyship in the capital? Is Mister Lloyd your suitor? A lord from here?” She jutted her body out, her curiosity palpable. As only names had been exchanged earlier, Lloyd and Chloe’s relationship still remained a mystery.

Chloe hesitated, not wanting to dampen Shirley’s enthusiasm. “It’s not quite like that... My journey here has been...complicated.”

“Complicated, milady?”

“Do you have time? This might be a long story.”

“All the time in the world. My husband can handle the booth.” Shirley sat up attentively. “Please, tell me everything that’s happened since I left.”

Shirley was acutely aware of the hardships Chloe had endured back in Shadaf. Chloe’s current demeanor suggested her story since then was far from light. But Shirley was prepared to listen, to understand every detail of Chloe’s life in the years they were apart.

“All right, then...” Chloe whispered, sorting through her memories, deciding where to begin her tale.



Meanwhile, at the other end of the exhibition hall...

“...so the type of thread, the weave of the fabric, the type of needle you use, it all has an effect on the finished product. This piece, for example, is stitched with silk thread. Silk thread is lustrous and silky smooth, creating this beautifully delicate, dainty feel.”

“I see, I see...”

...Lloyd and Kevin, Shirley’s husband, were deep in conversation. Kevin held up one of the displayed embroideries, using it to illustrate his point.

“It’s fascinating. You’re able to describe your craft so clearly,” Lloyd remarked appreciatively.

“Naw, not me. That’s all my wife. Everything I learned, I picked up from being around her,” Kevin said, gently returning the embroidery to its place.

Lloyd fell silent for a bit.

“Do you enjoy being married?” he asked.

“Do I enjoy being *married*?” Kevin echoed, only a little taken aback by the bizarre shift in topic.

“Sorry, that was a strange thing to ask.” Lloyd quickly tried to backtrack, just as bewildered as Kevin to have asked someone he just met such a personal question. Well, he had an idea—the question had sprung from the conversation with Freddy; it’d been lingering in his mind ever since.

However, Kevin seemed to understand there was a deeper meaning behind Lloyd’s question. “Well, I suppose I do,” he replied thoughtfully, stroking his chin. “If you want one man’s opinion, marriage, to me, is about companionship, support, and enjoyment. As far as that goes, I am truly glad I married my wife.” His voice carried a note of pride and sincerity. “If you feel at ease, have fun together, and can count on your partner to be there to see you through both good times and bad, then I believe marriage is something wonderful.”

Lloyd pondered Kevin’s words, reflecting on his own relationship with Chloe. Did they have fun together? Did he feel at ease? Would she stand by him in difficult times? The answers came to him effortlessly. His gaze dropped to a row of embroideries furnished with price tags. While the day’s event was primarily an exhibition, nothing stopped Shirley and Kevin, along with most other booths, from offering items for purchase. “Are these pieces for sale?” he asked.

“Absolutely,” Kevin affirmed.

“Then I’ll take that one off your hands,” Lloyd said, pointing decisively to a specific embroidery.

Kevin’s eyes widened. Lloyd’s unusual question earlier, his choice of purchase—all of it culminated to one astonishing conclusion. “Lloyd, you don’t mean to...?”

Fire flickered in Lloyd’s eyes. “Yes, I do.”

Kevin's smile broke through, a mix of admiration and brotherly solidarity.
"Good luck, my friend."



Chloe talked and talked, pouring out the events of the past years. She spoke of the difficult days in Shadaf following Shirley's departure, the episode with her knife-wielding mother, and her escape to the capital. She recounted her rescue by Lloyd and how she began working as his housekeeper.

Then, she talked about her days in the capital—the fun times, the happy times, the near miss with Lily that Lloyd had thwarted. Condensing years into minutes, Chloe laid it all out, while Shirley listened without interruption, absorbing every word.

"...and that's what brought Lloyd and me to the exhibition today." Chloe concluded her tale, reaching for her glass of water to soothe her parched throat. She was surprised to find it had grown lukewarm.

"Oh, milady... You've... You've endured so much!" Shirley managed, before tears overwhelmed her. She broke down into a sobbing mess.

"Shirley?!" Chloe exclaimed.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry..." Shirley struggled through her tears, futilely trying to stem the flow with her hands.

Chloe offered her a handkerchief. "Here, use this."

"Th-Thank you..." Shirley accepted it, dabbing at her eyes. After a few deep breaths, she composed herself.

"Are you all right, Shirley? I didn't mean to upset you," Chloe said, gentle in her concern.

Shirley apologized, her voice shaky. "Hearing about all you went through after I left, it just...hit me hard. But then, you told me about your happy times in the capital, all the wonderful people you met, and I felt relief and joy, and it was all just so much that it simply overflowed..." Shirley took a breath—then slammed her face down onto the table. "Milady, can you ever forgive me? Can you ever forgive me for leaving you back then? The guilt I feel is...indescribable."

As Shirley's outburst subsided, a hush fell over their corner of the hall, drawing the curious glances of onlookers. Shirley remained bowed in her silent apology, until Chloe gently urged her to lift her head.

"Shirley, look at me," Chloe spoke softly.

Beckoned by her former master's command, Shirley slowly raised her head. She was met with Chloe's steady, compassionate gaze.

"You had a good reason for leaving, didn't you?"

"I did," Shirley admitted, her voice hesitant. Deaths in the family had left her family's business struggling. She'd returned home to support them—a fact Chloe remembered well.

"Then how could I possibly hold that against you? Besides, I'm in a good place now, surrounded by people who love and care for me. You must apologize for absolutely nothing."

Chloe's words were carefully crafted for Shirley's benefit, to assuage her of her guilt, although she would never confess this. After Shirley left, Chloe's treatment in Shadaf had been, in a word, appalling. To claim that her younger self completely understood Shirley's departure and never once saw it as a reflection of her own life filled with cruelty would be a lie. But there was no need to say so now. It belonged to the past. What purpose would it serve to unearth it?

"In fact, I owe you my gratitude. You have no idea how much you saved me, Shirley."

Words of appreciation, however, should never be omitted, no matter how belated. Chloe owed her life to Shirley. She taught her so much—how to read, write, manage a home, the art of embroidery. Even her bright and positive personality would not have been the same without Shirley's presence.

Shirley's expression softened into a smile. "I take it all back, milady. You haven't changed—not one bit."

Chloe's eyes sparkled with mild surprise. "All of it? Even the part where I've grown?"

Shirley's eyes crinkled with amusement as she shook her head. "Well, perhaps not that part. But you're still the same kindhearted, compassionate girl I've always known."

Something warm and ticklish fluttered in Chloe's chest, right behind her breastbone, prompting her to shyly avert her gaze.

Then Shirley's eyes twinkled with a glint of something else entirely. "So, how is married life treating you, milady?"

"Married...life?" Chloe uttered slowly, as if every syllable utterly bewildered her.

"With Mister Lloyd? He is Your Ladyship's husband, is he not?"

"H-H-H-Husband?!"

"Oh, have I misunderstood something? Oh, dear, I am terribly sorry, milady."

Chloe quickly shook her head, realizing she hadn't clarified the nature of her relationship with Lloyd in her story. "No, Lloyd is...my sweetheart. We've only been official for about a week."

"Just a week?!" Shirley couldn't hide her surprise. "The way you two interacted, I thought you were an old married couple..."

Chloe laughed nervously. "That...isn't exactly false either."

Shirley was right on the money. Chloe had spent months living with Lloyd. Though many people had already commented on the strength of their bond, she had only just begun to realize how they must've looked to others. "Do we really come across that way?" she added, a touch self-conscious.

Shirley hastily apologized. "It's just that you both seemed so comfortable around each other, milady. Too comfortable for a pair of new lovebirds..."

Chloe gently shook her head. "Don't apologize for that," she said. *Not when it makes me so happy*, she added in her mind. The fact that she and Lloyd looked so natural together brought a swell of joy to her heart—as well as a feverish heat to her body. To cool down, Chloe brought her cup to her mouth for another sip.

Shirley cupped her hand to her cheek. "But just because Your Ladyship and

Mister Lloyd aren't married—that doesn't preclude you two from having shared a night of hot, fiery passion, does it?"

Water went everywhere.

Shirley leaped from her seat in alarm. "Oh, milady, are you okay?" She hurried to Chloe's side, patting her back as Chloe coughed and sputtered.

"I'm fine, I'm fine," she muttered weakly between coughs. "I just...perhaps never expected such words from you, Shirley." Chloe's mind briefly flashed with an image of Sara's smug grin.

"Given your reaction, would I be correct in assuming you haven't even kissed him yet?" Shirley ventured gently.

A beat passed. Then, Chloe nodded silently.

WHUMPF. Once again, Shirley's head forcefully met the wooden table. "Forgive this dirty, dirty adult!"

"Forgive this...*what?!*" Chloe squeaked, taken aback by Shirley's sudden act of repentance.

Shirley muttered quietly under her breath, "Of course... Her Ladyship is pure... Untainted... Her love is perfectly innocent... Unlike... Unlike yours..."

A tinge of embarrassment crept up on Chloe. "I...I don't know about 'perfectly innocent'..."

Perhaps at one time, Chloe might have been able to claim innocence, but her relationship with Lloyd was progressing. It was a slow advance, but an advance nonetheless.

Shirley's gaze suddenly snapped back to Chloe. "Milady," she said, her expression serious, "are you perhaps not interested at all in...experiencing a more intimate side with him?"

"A more intimate side..."

Chloe didn't have to think twice to understand the implication of Shirley's question, her cheeks already flushing a vibrant apple pink—not when two certain others had already so graciously planted the seeds in her mind. *I am interested, but...*

Things were rarely so straightforward, or so Chloe thought. Both she and Lloyd—especially Lloyd—were rather passive on the matter. That was one thing. The other was that Chloe already found immense satisfaction in the current state of their bond. After years of enduring hardship, her vessel for joy was easily filled. Simply being with Lloyd, leading a peaceful life away from past abuse, was more than enough to fill her heart to the brim. *Any more happiness, and I feel I might get struck by lightning*, she mused.

But then, something flickered in her.

Struck by lightning?

It was a sense of disquiet that tickled and tugged away at the little bone in the back of her throat. *But why do I feel that way? Why do I feel so apprehensive about wanting more?* She sensed an answer forming, but then came an unbidden, overwhelming wave of blue-tinted thoughts, washing it all away.

Chloe was in Lloyd's room, lying on his bed. Lloyd loomed above her, his presence as naked and raw as the day he was born. His gaze, always so intense, now fixed on her. In a swift, gentle motion, he took her cheek in his hand, large enough to make her completely still. *Just relax, Chloe. I'll take care of everything.*

"Milady? *Milady?*"

Chloe inhaled sharply.

"You look like you're about to burst..."

"I'm fine! I think!"

Chloe had it bad. Whatever she'd been imagining had left her hot and bothered. Her errant fantasies had kindled a fire within her, the embarrassment of acknowledging them burning fiercely. Recalling Shirley's initial inquiry, she whispered, "I'm... I'm not quite sure about *that* yet, but...perhaps a kiss or two wouldn't be so bad at this stage," her voice growing quieter and quieter with every word.

As she clutched her cheeks, attempting to hide her inner turmoil, Shirley looked at her with a tender, knowing smile. "You are very fond of him, aren't you, milady?"

Chloe gave a timid nod in response.

“Has he ever mentioned marriage to you?” Shirley inquired gently.

“I’m not sure...” Chloe’s face furrowed in thought.

Of course, there was that one thing he’d said to Lily in the hotel room, but that had been a bluff. A bluff that made her heart nearly jump out of her chest, but a bluff nonetheless.

“Milady, do you remember the story *The Prince of My Dreams*?”

Chloe repeated the title softly, trying to place it. At first, the memory seemed distant, almost forgotten.

“I suppose you wouldn’t. You were awfully young...”

As she noticed the slightest hint of disappointment crossing Shirley’s smile, Chloe’s memory suddenly clicked. Shirley’s narration replayed vividly in her head, like she’d delivered it just yesterday. *And then, the princess and the prince got married, and the two lived happily ever after. The end.*

“I remember!” she exclaimed. “The picture book with the prince with silver hair?”

“That’s the one!” Shirley confirmed with an enthusiastic nod.

The Prince of My Dreams was a picture book Shirley had read to a young Chloe many years ago. It told of a girl who met a silver-haired prince in her dreams, where every night, they embarked on adventures. Lost in this fantastical world, she overcame trial after trial with the prince’s aid, until one final adventure blurred the line between dreams and reality, which culminated in their meeting in the real world.

Chloe recited Shirley’s words from that day, her voice tinged with nostalgia. “A marriage is like a special promise. It’s when you find someone you love so much, someone you can’t imagine life without, and you promise to be with them always.”

Shirley held Chloe’s gaze with a steady, reassuring look. “If your feelings for him are as deep as I sense, milady, perhaps marriage is something you might consider.”

Her words were softly spoken, yet they resonated deeply within Chloe, finding a receptive place in her heart. “Right...” she murmured.

I love Lloyd. I love him from the bottom of my heart. She had never and would never be presented with a truth more self-evident—of that she was certain. If it wasn’t Lloyd by her side, it would be nobody. It was he who was in every variation of the future she could think of. Marriage was the natural endpoint of such a connection, wasn’t it? “You must be speaking from experience, Shirley?”

“I’m only a little ahead of you in this journey, milady. Not by much, really.”

“But I’m sure Kevin is wonderful to you?”

“He is, truly,” Shirley affirmed with a soft glow of happiness. “I’m so grateful to have him in my life.”

Hearing Shirley confirm her love for Kevin so confidently, Chloe felt a twinge of envy. Just from first impressions, Kevin seemed kind—like someone who would never raise their voice in anger. She imagined Shirley’s life to be filled with contentment and joy.

They both took a sip of their water. “Goodness, is that the time?” Shirley remarked, checking the clock. “We’ve been talking for quite a while.”

“Perhaps we should head back. Lloyd must be bored out of his mind.”

“Of course. After you, milady.”

As they rose to leave, Chloe expressed her gratitude. “I’m so glad we got to talk today, Shirley.”

“The pleasure is all mine, milady. It warms my heart to see you so well.”

With that, Shirley extended her hand towards Chloe, guiding her as she had in Chloe’s childhood. Chloe glanced at their hands, a smile playing on her lips. *Was her hand always this small?* Despite the passage of time and all they had experienced, their reunion felt like a cherished reminder of a bond that endured. Reunited by fate, they would indulge in this return to days past for as long as they would be allowed.



“Hey, there they are,” Kevin announced, spotting Chloe and Shirley returning.

Chloe quickly approached Lloyd, apologizing for the extended conversation. Lloyd waved off her concerns and, somewhat unexpectedly, diverted his gaze. But before Chloe could inquire as to the source of this awkwardness, Lloyd spoke first. “Kevin’s been teaching me about embroidery. It’s quite an intricate and fascinating world. I’m surprisingly intrigued.”

Shirley chuckled. “It seems you two have hit it off quite well.”

“Indeed. Your husband is quite knowledgeable on the matter.”

Shirley raised a playful eyebrow. “Is he now?”

Kevin seemed eager to change the subject. “By the way, have you two visited the other hall yet?”

“Other hall?” Chloe repeated.

“Yes, the one showcasing Lord Melloi’s work. It’s truly exceptional; you really ought to check it out for yourselves.”

“My, I had no idea!” Chloe gasped. “What do you say, Lloyd? Would you like to go see it?”

“Of course,” Lloyd replied without hesitation. “In fact, let’s head there now.” He smoothly placed a hand on Chloe’s shoulder, and shared a meaningful glance with Kevin, a silent exchange Chloe didn’t quite catch.

As they began to walk away, Shirley called out to Chloe. “Milady.”

Chloe turned, locking eyes with Shirley. The same kindness and warmth she remembered from years past shone in Shirley’s eyes.

“Be happy, please.”

Chloe felt a surge of emotion well up inside her. Her response came from deep within her heart, sincere and heartfelt. “And you as well, Shirley.”



The separate hall Kevin mentioned was adjacent to the main exhibition space. Stepping inside, Chloe and Lloyd were greeted by an austere, rectangular room with cream-colored walls that seemed to stretch endlessly. The only break in the monotony was a stand-alone wall in the center, flanked by rows of chairs

for viewers. Dominating the wall was an enormous embroidery, so vast it covered the entire surface. The hall, with its glass ceiling, bathed the stitched piece in natural light.

“Wow...” Chloe’s reaction was a hushed, awestruck whisper.

They gravitated towards two empty seats, eager to fully take in the embroidery, titled *Sacred Vow*. It depicted a woman in a flowing white dress and a man in a tuxedo, their eyes locked in a passionate gaze. The woman’s hand was outstretched, reaching towards a golden ring held by the man. Around them, a whirlwind of flower petals danced like a blizzard, and above, a star-filled night sky sparkled, lending a celestial blessing to their union.

“Look at that...” Lloyd murmured, equally captivated.

Chloe couldn’t tear her eyes away. The sheer beauty, skill, and emotion woven into it were overwhelming. She pondered the years of dedication it must have taken to create such a masterpiece, and the answer she arrived at left her awash in reverence. *What poignant timing...* she mused, her cheeks growing warm.

Her conversation with Shirley had been just minutes ago. The couple in the tapestry, amid their swirl of petals, almost seemed to be a reflection of her and Lloyd. The piece spoke of an unbreakable bond, a sacred oath sworn between the two, and it ignited a deep-seated yearning within her. Time seemed to pause as she absorbed *Sacred Vow*, lost in its beauty and her own reaction.

“Chloe,” she barely heard Lloyd mutter.

“Yes?” she responded, not tearing her eyes away from the embroidery. She hadn’t noticed the tremor in Lloyd’s voice.

“Will you marry me?”

“What?”

Those four words hung awkwardly in the air for what seemed like an eternity, Chloe’s mind scrambling to comprehend their meaning. A proposal wasn’t exactly unexpected, but there was at least supposed to be some preamble, some lead-in; Lloyd couldn’t just plunge straight to the heart of the matter!

She faced him, finding him not looking at her, but still fixated on the embroidery, a solitary bead of sweat tracing its way down his face. Finally, he exhaled, turning towards her with an anxious look. “Sorry, that was too sudden of me, wasn’t it?” he asked, reaching into his coat pocket. “Here.”

Chloe’s eyes flew open as Lloyd produced a beautifully embroidered handkerchief. The centerpiece was a ring, meticulously stitched with dense, golden thread. A gorgeous stone was set into it, reproduced in a vibrant blue, the lustrous material catching the light. Framing it all was an intricate floral pattern and a delicate pink trim.

“I bought this from Kevin earlier,” Lloyd explained. “I wanted to give it to you along with a ring—I know that’s *traditional*—but I felt like it couldn’t wait.”

The implication of his gesture was not lost on Chloe, her emotions swelling. A lump formed in her throat as she absorbed the weight of his words.

Lloyd’s expression was solemn, his eyes earnest. “Marry me, Chloe.”

His voice echoed in the quiet hall, drawing perhaps more attention than it would in a less contemplative space. All eyes nearby swiveled towards the impromptu proposal, their gazes curious but discreet.

The rubberneckers, however, were the last thing on Chloe’s mind. Marriage was an eternal vow, a promise to share a future together. And now, it seemed, Lloyd was asking her to embark on this journey with him.

The feeling didn’t sink in. Even as her heart pounded fiercely, its rhythm echoing in her ears, sweat trickling down her back, it wouldn’t register.

She pinched her cheeks and tugged, the skin stretching out like dough. “It hurts.”

“Afraid you’re dreaming again?” Lloyd asked.

“I was. I still am.”

But if it hurts, I can’t be dreaming, can I?

Gradually, the shock began to dissipate, replaced by an overwhelming surge of happiness. Lloyd’s proposal to marry her, his declaration of love, filled her with an ecstasy that felt like it could burst through the hall’s ceiling. Tears of

happiness welled up in her eyes, making them sparkle.

In her heart, she knew her answer: yes, of course! But as she tried to speak, the words refused to come. They seemed to catch in her throat, hindered by a haze of overwhelming emotions.

Lloyd misinterpreted her sentence; his expression fell. He looked away, the hall's lighting casting his face in shadow. "Sorry; I've been overhasty, haven't I? Forget I said anything."

As she saw Lloyd's proffered handkerchief slowly retreat from her, Chloe's paralysis broke. Desperately, she tried to find her voice. "Wait, Lloyd! That's—No! I'm just a little surprised, that's all. I'm happy—I truly am, I just..."

Her gaze fell to the floor, her bangs casting her face in shadow. The same flickering she had felt during her conversation with Shirley resurfaced, but this time, she recognized its source. Gathering her courage, she gave voice to it—the reason she'd always stopped herself from wanting more, the reason she couldn't reply instantly to Lloyd's proposal. "Lloyd, I...lack confidence," she confessed, her words laden with pain. "All my life, I was made to feel unworthy, ashamed to ask for what I deserved. For so long I believed I had no value, that I didn't deserve love."

This was dangerous ground she was treading now; her words loomed over her, full of every fear she'd harbored, but never dared to acknowledge. Yet she continued. He had promised her his whole heart, and she was determined to honor his promise with nothing less than the whole truth.

"I've always second-guessed myself, questioning if it was even right for me to love you, as if I might invoke some divine punishment by doing so. When you said you loved me, it filled me with a joy I struggle to put into words. But deep down, I've always wondered—do I truly deserve it?"

In some ways, Chloe *was* a cursed child—cursed by her family, conditioned to feel guilt for simply existing. All this time, unbeknownst to her, she'd been cursed to dread her own contentment.

"I'm so happy that you proposed, Lloyd. That the first person you thought of when you bought that handkerchief was me. That is the truth of my heart, but the truth also is that I'm scared. I'm terrified—terrified beyond belief of taking

this next step, that I might not be the wife you're hoping for—"

Her words were cut short. She felt a gentle tug on her chin, a firm yet tender hand tilting her face upward, the scent of something sweet in the air—then, a soft touch on her lips.

Chloe's eyes fluttered open in surprise and wonder.

The moment she realized Lloyd had kissed her was the moment she became acutely aware of the closeness of his face. The kiss, her very first, ended as suddenly as it began. As Lloyd slowly pulled away, his gaze—deep, affectionate, unwavering—locked onto hers.

"I can't see a future without you, Chloe." Lloyd's voice was a warm caress, his eyes shimmering with unspoken promises. "I love you more than words can express. I want to marry you, to spend every day of our lives together. If fear shadows your heart, if your past keeps you from stepping into the future, I will chase it away with my love, again and again, until only hope remains."

Chloe's mind raced, her mouth working open and shut like that of a fish out of water, struggling to comprehend the depth of what had just transpired. Finally, her lips curved into a trembling smile, a single tear of joy rolling down her cheek as she nodded.

Lloyd's eyes searched hers, a mixture of hope and anxiety. "Lady Chloe Ardennes, will you marry me?"

In the hushed room, every breath seemed to still, the world holding its breath for her answer.

With a grace born of love, Chloe reached out, taking the handkerchief from Lloyd's hand and pressing it to her heart. Her smile blossomed, radiant and true. "Yes, I will marry you, Sir Lloyd Stewart."

The room erupted into jubilant celebration.

"Congratulations, sir!" a bystander called out.

"He's a catch, miss!" another voice added.

"Oh, to be young and in love," an elderly woman sighed wistfully.

Between the smattering of applause, the people patting and putting their

arms around Lloyd, it seemed this little episode of joy was exactly what the people needed. As the reality of what they had done finally sank in, Lloyd and Chloe shrank back, a flush of shyness coloring their cheeks. This moment of modesty, however, was fleeting. After all, how long could one truly remain embarrassed on the happiest day of their lives?

“I love you, Lloyd,” Chloe muttered, a bashful smile playing on her lips.

“I love you, Chloe.” Lloyd gazed back at her, his eyes tender and full of warmth.

There, in the quiet gallery, under the watchful gaze of *Sacred Vow*, Chloe and Lloyd stood, a perfect reflection of the scene in thread.

Chapter Five: Engaged

“I kissed him...”

The evening after the exhibition found Chloe on the couch, clutching a pillow tightly, her mind racing with a single repeating thought.

I kissed him, I kissed him, I kissed him, I kissed him!

She slumped onto the cushion, her legs kicking aimlessly up and down, as a storm of emotion churned within her; she didn’t even know where to start dissecting it all.

The kiss—she hadn’t thought much of it at the time, the spontaneity of it being all she could register, but now, after she’d had the chance to cool off, the thought of all those people watching left her absolutely mortified. Was that actually steam pouring out of her ears, or was it just her imagination?

“My first kiss...”

Lloyd had practically stolen it right out from under her. She touched her lips reflexively, as if to confirm the lingering sensation. The memory of the kiss, sweet and unexpectedly delightful, set her heart aflutter. But it wasn’t just the kiss that warmed her heart; Lloyd’s promise of a future together held an even deeper meaning. She looked at the handkerchief he had given her, her eyes softening.

“I’m so happy,” she murmured, savoring Lloyd’s words: *I can’t see a future without you, Chloe*. That line still contained enough joy to last her a lifetime.

“Chloe?”

Chloe shrieked, bouncing into the air off the couch.

Fresh from his bath, Lloyd approached her calmly and sat down, seemingly unfazed by her reaction.

Chloe’s eyes were drawn to him, noticing a newfound allure in his flushed cheeks and the lingering traces of steam around him. There was something

different about him postkiss, something irresistibly delicious that she hadn't noticed before.

"Something wrong?" Lloyd asked.

Chloe, feeling a sudden surge of emotion, stammered a reply. "N-Nothing." She averted her eyes, overcome with the fear that direct eye contact might awaken something deep inside her. She took a deep breath, as subtly as she could, trying to calm her racing heart.

"Thanks for today," Lloyd said, initiating the conversation. "It was the best day off I've had in a while."

"D-Don't mention it," Chloe said. "Did you enjoy the exhibition?"

"I did—very much. I've kept my distance from embroidery due to my distaste for needles, but it's a very interesting art form."

Chloe giggled, light and carefree. "I'm glad to hear it."

The conversation died down. Lloyd, slightly bashful at her laughter, scratched his cheek. "And... Thanks for accepting my sudden proposal."

"O-Oh! Not at all. There was nothing sudden about it."

"I suppose that means we're fiancés now?"

"Y-Yes. Fiancés. Until we file the marriage license, I believe..." Chloe said softly. Just saying the word was enough to send a smile creeping across her face.

Lloyd, however, heaved an exhausted sigh, as if staring down a mountain of paperwork waiting to be done. "There's a lot to plan, between the wedding and all the documentation."

"The wedding..." Chloe murmured, her mind drifting.

"What do you want to do for the ceremony? We could skip it if you prefer something more discreet. I'm fine with either."

Chloe squirmed. Deep down, she'd always dreamed of a grand wedding with a lavish reception. *But the grander the ceremony, the greater the cost...* she thought. *That burden isn't for me to impose onto Lloyd.*

“Chloe,” Lloyd said, his gaze firm yet gentle. “Tell me what you truly want—your real desire for our wedding.”

She hesitated for a moment longer, but couldn’t say no to those eyes. “I...would like a ceremony,” she muttered hesitantly.

“Then it’s settled.”

Chloe’s eyes fluttered in surprise.

“It’s a once-in-a-lifetime event, and...” Lloyd’s voice trailed off, his gaze growing evasive. “Well, I...want to have one too.”

Chloe’s heart warmed at his admission, her smile shy yet filled with happiness. “I’m...glad to hear that.”

Lloyd smiled, a touch of self-awareness in his tone. “Though it must be said I’m quite clueless about organizing such events.” Wedding receptions and what goes into them had hardly been a concern before for the fearsome Ebon Reaper. “I’ll ask the vice commander tomorrow.”

Chloe’s spirits lifted. “Would you? That’s great. I think I know someone who might be able to help us too.”

“Great.”

With that, their decision was made. Their wedding would be a significant affair, a celebration befitting the special occasion it represented.



“...so now Chloe and I are engaged.”

“Is that a joke? Should I be laughing?”

Lunchtime, the royal castle, the First Order training grounds—Lloyd had just finished recounting the story to Freddy, who couldn’t hide his incredulity.

“I suggested you think about your future, not leap into a proposal...” Freddy pressed a palm to his forehead, shaking his head. “These things require time, Lloyd. You can’t just dive into marriage without truly knowing each other. Besides...” he stopped himself, his expression softening slightly. “But I suppose it’s true—you two are different, the exception that proves the rule,” he

conceded with a hint of exasperation in his voice.

“When I thought about my future, I couldn’t see one without Chloe, so I thought, *Why wait?*” Lloyd added nonchalantly.

Freddy shot him a sidelong glance. “You really are head over heels for her, aren’t you?”

“Not sure what that means, but she’s the only woman for me.”

Freddy slipped into a wry smile. “The Ebon Reaper’s settling down. I wish someone had told me that six months ago, so I could’ve laughed them out of the room.”

“Master Lloyd! Congratulations on the engagement! Have you considered the ring yet?”

“And where have you been eavesdropping this whole time?” Freddy said with an exasperated shake of his head.

Luke continued undeterred. “Master Lloyd, my family knows a jeweler, a venerable establishment that crafts rings for only the wealthiest nobility. Would you like me to introduce you?”



“No.”

“Why not?!”

“You said it yourself. They cater to the wealthiest nobles. I can’t afford, nor do I want, an ostentatious ring with a giant gemstone.”

“Who said anything about giant gemstones?! That would be utterly impractical!”

“Apologies. I just assumed that would be the case from the way you bedazzled yourself at your induction ceremony.”

Luke swallowed. “We don’t...we don’t talk about that anymore...”

Freddy finally decided to chime in. “Lloyd, you asked for my help, and I’ll give it. Just so you know, marriage isn’t just about love; it’s a legal contract with its own fair share of complexities.”

“Thank you, Vice Commander. I appreciate your support.”

“But I’ll be counting on that invitation, yeah?”

“Of course.”

“Oh, oh! Me too, Master, me too!”

“...”

“Again! You’re ignoring me again!”

“Beat me in a duel and I might consider it.”

“No way, really?! Heck yeah, I’m off to train right now!” And with that, he dashed off, full of determination.

Freddy and Lloyd watched him go, a hint of amusement in their expressions. “You’ve got your work cut out for you, don’t you?” Freddy remarked.

“He’s fine; he’s got spirit, if nothing else.”

Freddy clapped a hand onto Lloyd’s shoulder. “This probably doesn’t need to be said, but Lloyd, don’t break her heart, yeah?”

Lloyd nodded solemnly. “Never.”



“...and then he proposed.”

Later that evening, in the familiar city park, Chloe finished recounting her engagement story to Sara.

“So I suppose you could say Lloyd and I are engaged now. But Miss Sara—” Chloe paused, noticing Sara’s reaction. Her friend’s face was flushed a deep red, her lips quivering slightly in excitement. “Miss Sara, are you all right?”

Sara managed a breathless reply, her hand covering her mouth as she trembled with emotion. “I’m...just fine, Chloe... Just reeling a bit, is all. Such a pure, romantic proposal... In front of that beautiful embroidery, with everyone watching? It’s like something out of *Love & Knight!*” Her words trailed off into a whisper, more to herself than to Chloe. She clapped her hands together in prayer, her expression oddly serious. “It gives me life. Thank you, Chloe,” she said, dipping her head low.

“Wh-What?!” Chloe squeaked.

Sara’s expression softened into a knowing smile. “Congratulations, Chloe. You and Lloyd are truly meant for each other.”

Chloe scratched at her cheek, a touch of shyness in her voice. “A-Are we? Thanks, Sara.”

“But Lloyd, what a man,” Sara said, excitement bubbling up again. “Didn’t you two *just* become sweethearts?”

Chloe nodded. “Yes, it was a surprise for me too...”

Sara’s expression turned thoughtful. “How do you feel about it, though? Normally, it’s six months to a year before marriage is even on the table, but it seems you two are a rather special case.”

Chloe’s eyes widened. “Th-That long?” But then a smile slowly overtook her face. “But I’m actually happy he proposed so soon. If I already have it in my mind he’s the man I’m going to marry, why wait?”

Sara shielded her eyes, as if she were a vampire caught in the full intensity of the afternoon sun. “So...bright... I’m...dying...” she croaked.

“Miss Sara?!”

Sara dropped her hands, her smile returning. “Sorry, I couldn’t help myself. It’s not every day I witness such blinding purity.”

“B-Blinding? Take care of your eyes, now...” Chloe replied, a bit flustered.

Their lighthearted banter waned as Millia approached, Othello cradled in her arms. “Mommy, what’s marriage?”

Sara crouched down to Millia’s level, her voice gentle. “Marriage is...a promise. A promise to be with someone you love very much, for your whole life.”

“Someone you love very much!” Millia echoed enthusiastically. “Then I want to marry you, mommy!”

A wave of affection washed over Sara’s face. “Your mother is so happy to hear that, my dear,” she replied, tenderly stroking Millia’s hair.

Witnessing their loving exchange, Chloe felt a warmth in her heart, but it was tinged with a pang of something else, prompting her to look away.

Sara noticed the change in her demeanor. “What’s on your mind, Chloe?”

“Huh?” Chloe murmured, returning Sara’s gaze.

“It’s just that you look awfully gloomy all of a sudden.”

“Oh,” Chloe said, shaking off the momentary surprise. “I just saw how happy you two looked and felt a bit... Never mind, I don’t know what I’m getting at. Sorry for bringing down the mood.” She laughed, but it was tinged with awkwardness.

“Afraid of whether or not you and Lloyd can start your own happy family?”

Chloe’s heart skipped, as if a bucket of ice cold water had been dumped all over her.

“Bull’s-eye?” Sara asked knowingly.

“B-Bull’s-eye...” Chloe quietly confirmed.

Chloe had always harbored the dream of being part of a joyful family. But for someone raised in her circumstances, a shadow had always hung over the

fantasy—a doubt that Sara had so expertly picked up on. “How did you know?” Chloe asked.

Sara fixed Chloe in an understanding gaze. “I suppose I just do. Marriage transforms a relationship. It’s not just about love anymore; it involves starting a family, meeting expectations. It’s a significant shift, and it’s natural to be worried.” Sara’s eyes softened. “I perhaps recognized your feelings because I’ve experienced them myself.”

“You have?” Chloe was surprised. The Freddy she knew appeared a little glib and frivolous, but she’d seen his devotion to his family firsthand.

Sara nodded. “My husband had quite the reputation as a playboy before we met. When he proposed, I worried if someone like him could truly embrace a stable family life. Thankfully, he proved my fears wrong, but that initial worry was very real.”

Chloe smiled, feeling a connection. “I think it was you who changed him, Miss Sara. He must have realized he couldn’t risk losing you and transformed himself for the better.”

“My, you and Millia must be competing over who can make me blush harder today,” Sara said, stifling a giggle. “But following that logic, you have nothing to fear. Lloyd will do the same for you, I’m certain of it.”

Chloe squirmed, weakness creeping into her voice. “Y-You really think so?” Despite all of Lloyd’s efforts—the affirmations of her worth, his declaration of everything he loved about her—Chloe still struggled to fully accept these compliments, which ricocheted off the protective walls around her heart. She knew she’d likely struggle with this sort of thing for the rest of her life, and yet her outlook was bright. The fact that she could now frame her issues objectively at all was enough to help her keep her head high, maintaining her resolve against the tide of self-doubt.

She *was* changing. These things just took time.

Sara clasped Chloe’s hand reassuringly. “You’ll be just fine, dear,” she said. “Call it a hunch, but I think you and Lloyd will start a happy family. Don’t ask me why I feel that way; I just do.”

Chloe smiled, touched. “Thank you. I’ll do my best.”

Millia chimed in, her innocent curiosity breaking through the moment. “Miss Monkey Lady, are you marrying Mister Lloyd?”

“Yes, I am,” Chloe replied lovingly.

“I knew it! I knew it would be him!” Millia exclaimed. She remembered Lloyd as the kind adult who had played house with her once, back when Lloyd and Chloe’s relationship had been strictly professional. “He looked at you like daddy looks at mommy!”

Chloe’s heart fluttered. It was that blunt honesty unique to children that made Millia’s observation hit all the harder. Othello meowed from Millia’s arms, as if in agreement.

Sara chuckled. “Seems like Othello approves too.”

Chloe uttered a word of thanks, a bashful smile working its way onto her face, when suddenly a shiver ran down her spine. She stiffened, her expression sharpening with her alertness. That unsettling feeling—a presence she hadn’t felt since...

“What’s wrong, Chloe?” Sara asked.

“I, um...” Chloe couldn’t find her words, her attention consumed by her sudden apprehension. The park looked the same as always, but she couldn’t shake the sensation that she was being watched. Was it just her imagination playing tricks? Unable to pinpoint the source of her discomfort, she felt a nervous pit settle in the middle of her stomach.



“I’m turning off the light.”

“Go ahead.”

A rustle of clothes, a dip of the mattress, and Lloyd sidled up to Chloe, their nightly ritual in their shared bed. Chloe couldn’t help but giggle, a lightness in her heart.

“What’s so funny?” Lloyd asked, curious.

“It’s just strange to think about,” Chloe said, her voice laced with nostalgia. “I was just a runaway, and you were just offering me shelter out of the kindness of your heart. We were *strangers*; now look at us.” She snuggled up to Lloyd. “I came to the capital with no money, nowhere to go—barely a will to live. If you hadn’t found me when you did, I would’ve surely perished on those streets. One wrong turn and life could have gone so differently.”

“You’ve grown so much since then,” Lloyd observed.

“Have I?”

“You were so jumpy and timid back then—hardly able to meet my gaze,” Lloyd reminisced.

“W-Was I now...?”

“I remember how you welcomed me home, bowing so low your forehead kissed the floor. I don’t think I’ll forget that image for as long as I live.”

Chloe buried herself in the covers in shame. “I... I really wish you would. I thought it was normal back then; I didn’t know any better.”

“But now you speak what’s on your mind and carry yourself with your head held high. You’ve become so much more cheerful and lively.”

“And just whose fault do you think that is?” Chloe emerged from her cocoon, snuggling closer to Lloyd, her tone playful. “If you hadn’t constantly encouraged me, always pushed me to express myself, I’d still be that same shy girl.”

“Really?” Lloyd sounded genuinely surprised. “Then I’m glad.”

“You’re glad?” Chloe teased with mock annoyance. “That’s all you have to say?” Her tone softened. “You know, you’ve changed a lot too, Lloyd.”

“Really? In what ways?”

“When we first met, you were so inscrutable, unchanging—unfeeling, almost,” Chloe began, her voice soft in the darkness. “You were quite intimidating, honestly. But now...” She took a moment to find Lloyd in the darkness, not speaking until she was sure his eyes were on hers. “You make faces, you react to things—you seem so much more alive.”

Lloyd blinked, absorbing her words. Then, almost as if to exemplify her point,

his eyes softened in affection.

“And just whose fault do you think that is?” he asked gently, his hand lightly caressing her through the blanket. “Before you came into my life, my days were monotonous, devoid of any real emotions. Why would I make a face when nothing really made me feel that way? I never knew joy or anticipation—I didn’t even realize how my demeanor alienated my fellow knights. Only the vice commander ever really tried to connect with me.” Lloyd swallowed, taking a breath before continuing. “But since meeting you, everything has changed—slowly at first, but irrevocably. You’ve opened up a world to me that’s rich with happiness, excitement, and affection. It’s no wonder my expressions have started to change.”

“Wow,” Chloe breathed out, her voice tinged with emotion. “You have no idea how much that means to me.” She lapsed into thought for a moment. “But I don’t think that’s quite correct. I might’ve been the key, but the warmth, kindness, and brightness were always there inside you, just waiting to be unlocked. Something was always just...in the way.”

Chloe instantly regretted her words as she saw a flicker of pain cross Lloyd’s face. Her heart sank. How could she have been so insensitive? There *was* something in the way, something in Lloyd’s past that he had yet to overcome. Rushing to apologize, she said, “I-I’m so sorry; I didn’t mean anything by it.”

“It’s fine; I know,” Lloyd said.

A moment of silence passed. “Chloe, you once mentioned us being similar.”

“I... I did, but what about it?”

“The other day, you questioned if it was right for me to love you, questioned whether you deserve this happiness.”

“I did, and it’s something I’m quite embarrassed to be reminded of...”

“I...” Chloe felt Lloyd’s body tense beside her. “I also struggle with feeling undeserving of love—of being loved.”

The confession seemed to drain the warmth from the room. Lloyd turned to face her directly. “I think I’m ready to tell you about my past.”

A jolt shot down her spine. She remembered their conversation in the park, the unspoken truths and pain that Lloyd had hinted at but had not yet shared. Their conversation from that night replayed in her head.

Since then, I wondered if there was more to you that I didn't know. More to your horrible upbringing that I wasn't privy to. Parts that torment you, even now. I hoped I was wrong, but...

No, you're not wrong. You're not wrong, but... It's not something I've come to terms with myself. I'm sorry, Chloe, I truly am, but can you wait for me, just a little while longer?

Lloyd had a feeling. If he was to tell Chloe about the most harrowing chapter of his past, a secret that had been weighing on his heart like a leaden shroud, it had to be now. Amid their conversation about change and the profound impact that Chloe had brought, Lloyd realized the dissonance of keeping his darkest secret from her.

He didn't need to share. He knew that if he were to stay silent, Chloe wouldn't say a word. But he couldn't let her continue to fumble around in the dark, especially when she had shared her own painful history with him. It was time to reciprocate that trust.

"You know that as a child, I was raised to be a soldier—an insurgent," Lloyd began, his tone somber.

Chloe acknowledged this softly, already familiar with parts of his backstory. Lloyd's parents had tragically died when he was young, and before he could find refuge in a state-run orphanage, he'd been abducted and taken to a facility that had been known only as the "Institute for the Development of Party Operatives." Despite its vague-sounding name, it had been a facility run by radical ultranationalists who aimed to overthrow the monarchy. Here, Lloyd had been subjected to indoctrination with other orphans, forced to survive lethal trials in the jungle, battle ferocious creatures, and engage in deadly duels.

Taking a deep breath, Lloyd braced himself to reveal the part of his story unknown to Chloe. "In that place, there was someone who showed me kindness. She could not have been more than five years older than me, but she was a mentor to me, of sorts. Somehow she'd found compassion where all the

others had been left broken and desensitized by the brutality of it all.”

Lloyd’s voice trembled slightly, tinged with a mixture of fondness and sorrow. “Looking back, I realize I idolized her in my own childlike way. I was one of the youngest there, and she always looked out for me. She was a beacon of hope in that dark place. Without her, I’m not sure I could have endured those horrific days.”

Lloyd’s words hung heavy in the air, the fondness in his voice now replaced by a sobering chill. “At the facility, there was only one way to be recognized as a true warrior for the cause: a death match. You and one of your peers go to the pit; only one gets to leave.”

Chloe swallowed, at a loss for words at the cruelty he was describing.

“The fact that I’m here next to you now is proof that I won my death match, and that I have killed. My opponent that day...was her.” Lloyd’s fists clenched tightly, his face twisted in anguish. “I was the most talented swordsman of my cohort. None of the children my age proved an equal match, so I ended up fighting her.” Lloyd closed his eyes, his breath shuddering as he mustered the courage to continue. “She was far superior in skill and experience. In training, she’d always had the upper hand. I fully expected to die in the pit. But somehow, I didn’t.” Lloyd’s voice was strained, a quiet whisper in the darkness. “I killed her, Chloe.”

Chloe didn’t dare to speak. A moment later, Lloyd’s voice resurfaced, a tenuous thread of sound. “That day, something inside me broke. I became indestructible—unfeeling, as you put it. All my emotions deserted me, and all that was left was the ruthless warrior they desired. It’s ironic,” he added bitterly. “These hands are tainted with blood. I’m a murderer. How can I possibly deserve happiness, love, or be loved? Tell me, how does that—!”

His words were cut short. Chloe’s arms enveloped him, pulling him into her warm embrace.

“Chloe?” Lloyd’s voice was laced with surprise and confusion.

As Chloe held Lloyd, his head resting in her arms, she struggled to find her voice, choked with overwhelming emotion. “Th-Thank you...for trusting me with this,” she managed to say. Words seemed inadequate to express the depth

of her grief, her heart aching for Lloyd's harrowing past.

Lloyd, perplexed and concerned by her reaction, asked gently, "Chloe, what's wrong?"

She shook her head, unable to articulate the turmoil inside her. Lloyd's revelation had torn through her heart, unleashing a torrent of emotions that battered the hull of her being. All she could do was hold him close, trying to offer some solace in the face of his profound grief.

She recalled a past moment in the park, after Freddy's dinner party, when Lloyd had first opened up about his past. But the intensity of her emotions now paled in comparison to what she felt then. "I wish I could do more to help," Chloe whispered through pursed lips. "But I feel so helpless."

Lloyd looked into her side, his own softening as he realized the depth of her compassion. "No, Chloe, you're doing everything I need," he reassured her, leaning into her embrace.

A while later, when the squall in Chloe's heart began to calm, Lloyd spoke again, still firmly in Chloe's arms. "I don't understand, even to this day—why she let me win," he confessed. "From the first time our swords met in that duel, I could tell she was holding back. She could've easily cut me down and lived, but she didn't. You know what her last words were? They were 'I'm so glad.' So glad for *what*, I—"

Chloe felt a sudden clarity, her intuition speaking louder than her logic, and she interrupted Lloyd. "She lost to you on purpose."

Lloyd breathed quietly, letting Chloe's words settle. "How could you possibly know?"

"I...don't," Chloe admitted. "I wasn't there. I can't claim to understand the life you've led or the kind of person she was. But, somehow, I believe she was glad *because* you won. She wanted you to survive, to have a life beyond that place."

"But why...?"

"Because she loved you."

Lloyd felt his chest constrict.

“At least, that’s what I think.”

A heavy silence fell between them, punctuated only by a soft, pained sob from Lloyd. “Did she...” His words were a mixture of realization and sorrow. He grasped Chloe’s nightwear tightly, his tears soaking into the fabric. “Of course... Of course she did...”

The floodgates finally opened, and he wept, his body shaking with each sob. Chloe felt his pain, his regret, his loss—all pouring out in a torrent of tears. She held him close. For Chloe, it was a heartrending, intimate moment, witnessing Lloyd allowing himself to fully feel and express the depth of his emotions for the first time.



A long, long while later, Lloyd finally managed to rein in his tears. The intensity of the moment had brought them out from under the covers of their bed, leaving them in a vulnerable but honest space.

“Lloyd, here,” Chloe said, reentering the room with a glass of water.

Lloyd accepted it with a soft “Thanks” and took a sip, feeling the cool, refreshing liquid seep into every corner of his body. “Sorry for losing control like that,” he said, his voice tinged with embarrassment.

“It’s all right,” Chloe said, dismissing his apology with a wave of her hand. But her words were cold comfort to Lloyd; here he was, a battle-hardened warrior, still raw and red-eyed in front of the girl he loved.

“I wanted to tell you sooner; I just couldn’t find the right time,” Lloyd admitted, his voice suffused with regret.

“I said it’s all right,” Chloe firmly repeated. “It was hard enough for me to listen to. I can’t even begin to imagine the burden of carrying that story.” Odds were it was a part of Lloyd that he had bottled up and kept unspoken all this time. Chloe was just grateful that she had been the first person he chose to share it with.

“Lloyd, I...think you have every right to be happy,” Chloe said earnestly, reaching out to place her hand gently over his. “I know it often feels like our pasts cast long shadows we might never get out from under, but that just isn’t

true. Take it from me. I worry about my own past catching up to me, my mother just appearing one day and dragging me back. The thought alone makes me feel like a cornered animal.” Her voice quivered slightly, revealing her own vulnerabilities, her own traumatic fear. “But I can’t let it own me. We can’t change the past, but we *can* try to survive it,” Chloe continued, her voice growing stronger. “Since coming to the capital, since meeting you, I’ve learned that.”

Chloe reflected on her journey. Her past had once held a tight grip on her, filling her with pessimism and self-doubt. But in Lloyd’s presence, she found herself changing, gradually breaking free from the chains of her past. Things that used to be beyond her reach, things like shouting out her love for Lloyd, were part of her daily routine.

“We can create new, positive moments, and embrace even the sad and challenging ones—anything to create distance from the old. Of course, we’re never quite free, and we never will be, but we can loosen the past’s grip on us. We can turn it from a debilitating anxiety into a...nagging afterthought—nothing so dire as to bar us from ever finding happiness.”

“I...” Lloyd whispered in awe. There was a hint of optimism in his voice that hadn’t been there before. “You always have a way of saving me, don’t you, Chloe?”

Chloe giggled. “It seems we’re each other’s saviors,” she remarked, leaning closer to him.

Lloyd responded by wrapping his arm around her, drawing her into a warm embrace. “Fate really did have a hand in bringing us together,” he murmured softly.

“You’re now beginning to believe too, aren’t you?” Chloe asked playfully, teasing him gently.

Chloe and Lloyd were bound by their miserable upbringings. Both had a piece torn out of them—the part that could find joy in all there was to their brief, mortal existence. These two damaged individuals somehow, some way, found their way to each other in their colorless lives. They met, cohabitated, fell in love, and found themselves joined soul to soul. What was that, if not fate?

As they looked into each other's eyes, a profound understanding passed between them. "Meeting you, Chloe, has been the greatest blessing," Lloyd confessed earnestly.

"I feel the same way, Lloyd," Chloe replied, her voice filled with emotion.

No more words were needed. They naturally drew closer, their lips meeting in a kiss—one that was far more than the simple peck they shared in front of *Sacred Vow*. It was a kiss filled with yearning and passion, their lips moving together in perfect harmony. Chloe let out a soft moan, lost in the intensity of the moment.

She was the first to pull away, slightly breathless.

"Was that too much?" Lloyd asked.

Shaking her head, Chloe smiled softly. "No, it was perfect," she whispered, her voice breathy, a timbre that unraveled Lloyd's self-control. Before either of them knew it, he was on top of her.

Lloyd's breathing was shallow, his voice thrumming with barely contained longing. "Chloe, I...I need you."

Chloe didn't need him to elaborate. They were alone in their own world, their emotions speaking louder than words ever could. The moonlight cast a soft glow around them as their silhouettes mingled and were one.

That night, Chloe surrendered herself to Lloyd's gentle touch as they plumbed the new depths of their bond.



Chloe woke to the pleasant melodies of the dawn chorus. Her eyes fluttered open languidly, as if waking from a pleasant midday nap. She sat up, but her body felt strangely heavy—not a feeling of lethargy or exhaustion, but a satisfying soreness reminiscent of the glowing ache of a hard day's work.

The covers slipped away, revealing her bare skin, and a startled exclamation escaped her lips. Her mind raced back to the events of the night before, igniting a blaze of realization across her face. In a flurry of modesty and overwhelming emotion, she hastily retreated under the covers, curling up in the protective

cocoon of the sheets.

As she cradled herself, her knees hugged against her chest, her face radiated an intense heat. She and Lloyd had crossed a significant threshold. There had been no time to prepare, no preamble, only a spontaneous outpouring of raw emotion and passion that guided their bodies in the night. The memory, now crystal clear in her mind, brought a mix of bashful reflection—along with an undeniable sense of satisfaction.

A warmth unfurled in her chest, filling her with a profound contentment. She was surprised to realize how little shame there was to the feeling. Chloe tentatively popped her head out, and allowed herself to relive the memories of the previous night. Lloyd, whom she had assumed to be indifferent to pleasures of the flesh, had proven quite the contrary. He had taken from her all that he wanted—as she had been more than happy to give.

Another surge of embarrassment rolled in, and back down under the blanket she went. The previous night's encounter with Lloyd had been a surrender to raw, primal instincts, far removed from her usual levelheaded self. She was taken aback by how naturally and intensely her desires had manifested.

Suddenly, she felt something warm gliding over her side, settling onto her stomach. Startled, she kicked out her legs. Turning around, she saw Lloyd—as naked as the day he was born. His upper body, a sculpture of perfect contour, emerged from beneath the covers. His emerald eyes were unusually bright for this early in the day. “Good morning, Chloe.”

Chloe couldn't help but be captivated anew by his handsome features—his well-defined nose, his sharp, angular face. The realization that this man had been her partner in the previous night's intimacy sent a nervous thrill through her. “G-Good morning, Lloyd. How, um... How long have you been awake?” she managed to ask with a fluttering heart.

“Not much longer than you have,” he replied.

“Excuse me as I run away from home right this instant,” Chloe said, her voice stonily calm.

“Wearing nothing?” Lloyd inquired with a hint of amusement.

“Wearing— Right... My clothes, my clothes... Huh? Where are they?” Chloe looked around the room in a fluster.

Lloyd then sat up and gently rested his hands on Chloe’s shoulders. “How do you feel? You don’t...hurt anywhere, do you?”

Chloe’s voice barely rose above a whisper as she assured Lloyd, “I’m... I’m fine...” Despite his formidable presence the previous night, Lloyd had been incredibly gentle, constantly checking in with her to ensure her comfort. Chloe knew that the memory of falling asleep in his arms, enveloped in the warmth and contentment of their closeness, would stay with her forever.

“That’s a relief,” Lloyd paused, weighing his words. “It was my first time, so I was a little worried.”

“You were more than considerate,” Chloe replied gracefully, even as her voice dropped to a near-whisper again. “W-Was I okay? It was my first time as well...”

“You were great,” Lloyd reassured her, affectionately patting her head. “Adorable.”

Chloe whimpered. Being complimented was one thing. Being complimented for *that* was quite another. The mix of emotions—shame, embarrassment, joy—ignited a fierce blush on her cheeks. She looked down, only to be met with Lloyd’s gaze as he leaned in for a soft, passionate good-morning kiss. They relished the moment, their eyes closing naturally. When they parted, smiles naturally formed on their faces.

“Let’s get out of bed, shall we?” Lloyd suggested, holding up Chloe’s pajamas, seemingly pulled out of thin air.

“Oh! Thank you... And yes, let’s.”

Lloyd had work today. Shifting from the intimate reverie of the morning, she prepared to embrace the day ahead.



Chloe’s morning unfolded seamlessly. She packed Lloyd a lunch, they ate breakfast, and Lloyd was off to work. After noon, Chloe made her way to Ciel’s stand for her daily shopping.

“Congratulations, Chloe!”

Ciel grabbed Chloe’s hands and swung them up and down—she had just learned the good news. The sheer size of the smile on her face let Chloe know that her joy for them was genuine.

“Thank you so much!” Chloe replied. “You did so much to set it up.” Thinking back, she realized if Ciel hadn’t offered her tickets, would Lloyd have found the right moment to propose?

“What are ya talking about, Chloe? Handing off two spare tickets is hardly a masterstroke of matchmaking.” Ciel placed her hands on her hips and laughed heartily. “You two would’ve found your way to each other with or without my invitation. I just sped things up a little, is all.”

“Y-You think so?” Chloe said, sounding unsure.

“I know so! My intuition hasn’t failed me once!” Ciel declared confidently. “All right! In honor of your engagement, Chloe, everything you take home today is free of charge!”

“Miss Ciel, no!” Chloe shouted. “I can’t keep taking advantage of your generosity...”

“Now why *can’t* you?” Ciel said, her voice growing serious. “Don’t make that sorry-looking face, sweetie. I’m happy from the bottom of my heart for you two. Words aren’t enough to express my joy, so I insist I give you a little something as well. Go on now, take whatever you want.”

If there was one thing Chloe had learned about Ciel over the course of the last few months, it was that she never took no for an answer. “I’ll take you up on that, thank you...”

“I knew ya would!” Ciel replied with a radiant smile contagious enough to uplift Chloe’s own face as well. She realized in that moment that to have someone who shared in her happiness, who felt joy when she felt joy, was truly a blessing in itself.

Chapter Six: The Final Battle

“I’ve never had roast turkey before...” Chloe muttered to herself on the way back home from Ciel’s. Her steps were unusually buoyant, not at all hindered by the significant weight of groceries that Ciel had generously piled into her rucksack. Among the items was a whole turkey, its bony legs comically protruding from the bag. Back in Shadaf, Chloe had prepared many turkeys for her family, but she’d never had the chance to try one herself. “I can’t wait,” she whispered, a smile gracing her lips at the prospect of the evening meal. The mere thought of Lloyd’s face as he murmured a quiet “Delicious” in response to her cooking was enough to send her heart singing.

Upon arriving home, Chloe instinctively called out, “I’m home,” as she removed her shoes. It was a habit, a comforting ritual, even though she didn’t expect Lloyd to be there. As she mulled over the turkey recipe Ciel had shared with her, Chloe made her way to the living room.

“Welcome back, Chloe,” a voice called out from the supposedly empty room. Chloe’s heart skipped a beat, her body freezing as a shiver of fear cascaded down her spine. Her heartbeat quickened, not with the flutter of excitement she felt with Lloyd, but with the terror one might feel stumbling over a viper.

Chloe slowly turned, seeking the voice’s source. There, on the sofa where she often sat with Lloyd, was a decrepit figure—a woman shrouded in faded elegance. “Mother...” Chloe whispered, barely audible.

“I’ve missed you, darling daughter.”



Chloe felt as if she had been plunged back into a nightmare she thought she’d long since woken from. Isabella, the mother who had shunned her over a birthmark, the woman who had subjected her to daily abuse and once attempted to cut her to ribbons, sat plain before her. Chloe’s mind reeled, unable to grasp the situation. Her legs, trembling, refused to obey her desperate urge to flee.

“I know what you’re thinking, dear,” Isabella said with a mocking croon. “You’re wondering, ‘How did she find me?’” A smug smile crept across her face. “It’s simple. Lily mentioned a shop you frequent. Following you from there was easy.”

Chloe recalled the unsettling sensation of being watched in the park days earlier—it must have been *her*.

Isabella rose and began to approach. As her mother drew closer, Chloe noted the stark changes in her appearance. She seemed older, frailer, her eyes now hollow, the life they once held extinguished.

Stopping just within reach, Isabella loomed over Chloe.

Chloe finally found her voice. “Why...are you here?” she managed to say.

Isabella’s face twitched. “Why, you’ve grown uppity, haven’t you? Why am I here? Isn’t it obvious?” Her hand reached into her dress, withdrawing a concealed knife.

Chloe’s face paled at the sight. That knife—it was the very one she used for cooking.

“I’m here to end your life, you wretched girl!” Isabella’s scream was piercing, loud enough to shatter glass. She raised the knife high above her head.

Memories of that harrowing day surged in Chloe’s mind—the image of that same knife poised to strike. In a rush of adrenaline, her paralysis shattered. Shifting her weight, Chloe fell to the side, narrowly evading the knife’s deadly arc. The added weight of her pack accelerated her fall, enabling her to escape unscathed.

Isabella, having committed her full weight to the swing, continued her momentum and crashed into the kitchen. She collided with the dish cabinet, dislodging porcelain plates that crashed down around her in a chaotic cascade.

Chloe shrugged off her rucksack, dropping it to the ground. “Mother, stop! It doesn’t have to be this way!”

“Silence, you wretch!” Isabella bellowed over her shoulder, her glare piercing Chloe, a trickle of blood staining her face. “Do you even know the trouble

you've caused? Lily's imprisoned in a vile dungeon; I was summoned to the capital for your hearing—do you understand the consequences for me if you testify? I'll be labeled a criminal, incarcerated for the rest of my life. I won't let that happen!"

The vitriol in Isabella's voice left Chloe speechless. Isabella's gaze grew distant, her ramblings increasingly deranged. "If you're dead, you can't testify, and if you can't testify, I won't face punishment. Yes, if I just kill you, all will be resolved!"

Finally, Chloe understood the motive behind Isabella's actions. The hearing, initially concerning Lily's crimes, now implicated Isabella too. Chloe's testimony could expose the abuse she suffered in Shadaf, leaving her mother in a grim position. Isabella's twisted solution was clear—silence Chloe permanently.

Insane... She's insane... Chloe thought. "Mother, please, will you listen to me!" Chloe cried out, a desperate attempt to inject reason into Isabella's frenzied state. "Killing me won't solve your problems. It will only make things worse!"

"Shut up, shut up, shut up!" Isabella's rage boiled over as she stomped her feet. "This is your fault! If you hadn't fled, none of this would've happened! You're a curse; you've brought calamity upon us all! If only you'd never been born... If only I'd never conceived you at all!"

Chloe's pleas couldn't have fallen on deafer ears. Isabella had lost her grip entirely. The city guards weren't incompetent—if Chloe was found dead today, Isabella would be apprehended tomorrow. Yet, even with this imminent threat, Isabella's madness drove her to violence. There was no reasoning with her.

"Die!!!" Isabella lunged, her eyes ablaze with hatred, brandishing the knife again.

"No!" Chloe screamed. In her frantic attempt to retreat, she stumbled, not quick enough to fully evade the attack. The blade slashed her arm, drawing a sharp cry from her as she collapsed. Looking up, she saw Isabella poised to strike again, the knife swooping down. Chloe rolled to the right just in time; the knife thudded into the floorboards. Seizing the moment, Chloe thought, *Now! Escape while the knife is stuck!* But as Chloe struggled to rise, Isabella delivered

a brutal kick to her side. Air burst from Chloe's lungs as she crumpled to the floor, curling in agony.

"You really think I'd fall for that again?" Isabella taunted, sneering.

Pain immobilized Chloe as Isabella wrenched the knife free. She loomed over Chloe, her face twisted in hatred. Chloe's body refused to cooperate. The situation was dire. "Help... Lloyd..." she whispered faintly.

Isabella erupted in mocking laughter. "Hah! He won't be coming! I made sure to find out—he doesn't return until the evening!" Her gloating words deepened Chloe's hopelessness.

Chloe knew the truth. Lloyd was at the castle; he never came home at this hour. Reality was harsh, devoid of fairy-tale rescues. Lloyd had always saved her by the skin of his teeth before, but it seemed her luck had finally run short.

"Your knight in shining armor isn't here to save you now! You're helpless; accept your fate and die!" Isabella stood triumphant, reveling in her perceived victory, lost in her delusional monologue.

As the word "die" echoed in her mind, a spark ignited within Chloe.

I'm going to die—now? After all my struggles to reach the capital? After finding a haven of peace? After Lloyd and I discovered love in each other's embrace? After his proposal? The thoughts raced through her mind, a flurry of disbelief and defiance. Her life, just beginning to bloom with happiness, was on the brink of being snatched away. The old Chloe—the cursed child—might have surrendered, accepting this grim fate as the curse of her existence.

But not anymore.

"I will not—*cannot* let it end here..."

A newfound strength surged through her limbs. The same spirit that had flickered to life when Lily kidnapped her, the first time she had defied her oppressive life, now burned brighter. Slowly, Chloe rose from the ground, locking her gaze with Isabella's.

"What's with that look?" Isabella sneered. The resilience still shining in Chloe's eyes inflamed her down to her soul.

Up until now, I relied on Lloyd to save me.

In the park against those thugs, against Luke's uncomfortable advances, when Lily had kidnapped her—on each and every occasion, she had never been able to resolve the situation on her own.

When will I stand up for myself?

As that flame of determination blazed within her, she noticed the paralyzing stiffness no longer claimed her body. A revelation dawned upon her: she had been conditioned to fear Isabella. Her mother had always been a looming, oppressive presence—punishing disobedience with physical abuse and mistakes with harsh words. It had etched an overriding fear of recrimination into the core of her being; the mere sight of her mother spurred her to obedience in the hope that she might avoid more pain. But now Chloe saw Isabella with brilliant, piercing clarity: a frail, elderly woman, inept with the knife in her hand. Chloe, younger and physically stronger, her mind fortified by recent trials, realized the odds were in her favor.

“Stop looking at me like that... Stop looking at me like that!” Isabella screeched in desperation.

Chloe, undeterred, took a deep, steadying breath. She recalled Lloyd's words:

It's more about courage than technique.

Fear not your opponent's blade. Fear impairs the mind, hobbles the body. Once fear is removed, you can analyze and counter your opponent's actions effectively.

Her body a calm and empty vessel now, Chloe focused intently on Isabella's knife.

Isabella made her move. “Die!” she cried, lunging forward, brandishing the knife.

This time Chloe was ready. Her eyes keenly tracked the trajectory of the blade. With a swift, calculated sidestep, she evaded Isabella's swing.

“What?!” Isabella's exclamation was one of sheer disbelief.

Chloe had created an opening. She sifted through her memories, searching for

what Lloyd would do after evading an attack. Then it clicked—*counterattack!*

Isabella was no skilled fighter; her failed strike had left her vulnerable. Seizing the opportunity, Chloe wheeled in a brutal pirouette and sent Isabella's frail body hurtling to the ground with a keenly aimed kick.

As Isabella cried out from the impact, Chloe quickly backed away, opening up space between them. Her foot snagged on something—her rucksack full of groceries. Stopping there, she slowly turned to gauge Isabella's reaction. Shock was etched across her face: disbelief that Chloe, the daughter who had never dared to defy her, had actually fought back.

But shock swiftly turned to fury. "You dare, you dare, you dare, you dare to fight back against me!" Isabella shouted, scrambling to her feet and pointing the knife at Chloe again. "Why won't you just die?!" With that hoarse battle cry, she lunged at Chloe. Her knife, swift and unerring, plunged deep—not into human flesh, but the cold, rubbery innards of a whole raw turkey.

Isabella's eyes widened in astonishment. "Wha—?!"

Chloe stood defiant. Lloyd's advice reverberated in her mind: *Real combat situations are unpredictable. Random obstacles, places to hide, things of that sort. You must be constantly aware of your environment, ready to adapt and use whatever is at hand.*

Her hands still grasping the knife's handle, Isabella stared in disbelief at the scene before her. The blade was firmly lodged in the turkey's prodigious girth, rendering it harmless. "L-Let go, let go!" Isabella demanded, struggling to free the knife; Chloe pressed against her, denying her leverage. With a determined yank, Chloe twisted the turkey, wrenching the knife from Isabella's grasp. Isabella yelped in pain, clutching her wrist. "You dare mock me! Give back the knife—give it back now!"

"No!" Chloe's refusal was resolute.

"Y-You cursed child!"

"I am not cursed!"

With a scream that echoed the depth of her spirit, Chloe shattered the epithet that had haunted her for sixteen long years.

“My name is Chloe! I am *not* your cursed child!”



Isabella, struck by the intensity of Chloe's defiance, seemed to wither before her. Retreating, she cowered, realizing there was no more room for threats or escape. In the next moment, Chloe hoisted the turkey, knife and all, high above her head. Isabella could only watch as Chloe brought it down with all her might.

THUNK. Isabella made a sound reminiscent of a dying frog as her body careened into the far wall. Her eyes rolled into the back of her head. She coughed once, twice, a dribble of white spittle escaping her lips, before finally she fell limp.

Panting heavily, Chloe carefully set the turkey onto the table. She crouched on the ground, overwhelmed by the exertion.



What happened next was a blur to Chloe. She quickly rustled up some rope to bind Isabella before dashing outside to seek help from her neighbors. The city guard arrived promptly. Chloe, still reeling from the ordeal, gave a disjointed account of the events. However, the evidence was clear: her injured arm, the shattered balcony window—all corroborated her story. Isabella was arrested and taken away shortly after, never having regained consciousness. Chloe was allowed to stay in her home to recover, where she anxiously awaited Lloyd's return.

It wasn't long before Lloyd burst through the front door, his voice filled with concern. "Chloe!" he called out, seeing her seated on the sofa amid the disarray of the living room. Sweat streamed down his face, his breath ragged—no doubt he had sprinted all the way from the royal castle.

"Lloyd..." Chloe's voice was a mere whisper.

Lloyd rushed to her, kneeling before her. "Are you all right? Are you hurt?" he asked urgently, his hands gently scanning her body for any unseen injuries.

The sound of Lloyd's voice and the reassurance of his touch slowly calmed Chloe, grounding her back in reality. "I'm...I'm fine, somehow..." she replied, managing a small, comforting smile.

Lloyd let out a deep sigh of relief.

“I’m so glad...” He rested his head in Chloe’s lap, as if seeking physical confirmation of her presence. “When the city guard informed me of an incident with you and your mother, I feared the worst. I rushed here as quickly as possible. I’m so sorry, Chloe, for not being there for you when you needed me most.”

“It’s all right,” Chloe reassured him, shaking her head gently. “Mother deliberately chose a time when you weren’t here to intrude, so you have nothing to apologize for.”

Deep down, Lloyd knew that even if he had somehow been psychically alerted to Isabella’s presence at the same moment as Chloe, it would have been physically impossible for him to arrive in time. Yet the weight of not being there for Chloe in her moment of need weighed heavily on his heart. “It was scary, wasn’t it?” he asked, his face etched with pain and sympathy as he tenderly cradled Chloe’s hand.

It was only then that Chloe noticed her hands were trembling. Throughout the confrontation with Isabella, adrenaline had driven her, focusing her body solely on survival. But now, in the relative safety of Lloyd’s presence, the full gravity of the situation dawned on her. The realization that a single misstep could have been fatal sent her heart racing, her breaths becoming shallow.

“You’re safe now, Chloe,” Lloyd whispered, drawing her close into a protective embrace. “It’s over. It’s all over...” His gentle strokes on her back soothed her.

“Yes...” Chloe’s voice was a whisper. She clung tightly to Lloyd’s clothing, drawing comfort from his warmth, his scent, the steady rhythm of his heart. Gradually, her own heartbeat slowed. “I... I did it, Lloyd,” she said, her voice quivering with a hint of pride. She pulled back slightly to look at him. “I protected myself, with my own strength, by my own will...”

Lloyd had been briefed by the city guard before he arrived home. They had told him how Chloe had valiantly fought off her mother and restrained her before their arrival. A proud smile spread across Lloyd’s face as he nodded deeply. “Now do you believe me that we can make a swordsman out of you yet?”

Chloe's eyes widened in half surprise at Lloyd's words, a giggle bubbling up from deep within her. "Why stop there? Maybe I'll become a knight myself," she quipped, before sinking back into the comforting cradle of Lloyd's arms.

"You did well," Lloyd murmured, his fingers gently caressing her hair in a soothing rhythm.

"I did..." Chloe's voice was a soft whisper, a mix of acknowledgment and awe. Lloyd's affirming words triggered a warm surge that welled up in her eyes.

"You were so, so brave."

"I... I was..."

That simple acknowledgment was the catalyst. In the secure embrace of Lloyd's arms, Chloe's emotions overflowed. Her brush with death had left her physically drained, and Lloyd's presence, his warmth and support, eased apart the walls around her heart. More than anything, it was the liberating realization that she had cast off the curse that had hung over her for so long. The flood of feelings seemed like it would never cease. In Lloyd's arms, Chloe cried and cried and cried, until she had no tears left to shed.



A few days after the harrowing encounter with Isabella, Chloe and Lloyd received a visit from a lawyer who introduced himself as Ted.

"I initially represented both Lady Lily and Lady Isabella, but recent events have...altered the circumstances," Ted began, setting the stage for the fine details that followed. He outlined Isabella's arrest and detention, explaining her vehement denials and attempts to shift the blame onto Chloe. "With the emergence of this new evidence, her claims aren't gaining much traction. Her state has deteriorated to such an extent that her statements are largely dismissed as the incoherent ramblings of someone mentally unstable," Ted commented, his smile tinged with irony.

"Good," Lloyd replied, a hard edge creeping into his voice.

The initial hearing involving Lily, Chloe, and Isabella had been deferred. The latest incident had effectively sealed the case regarding the abuse allegations, hastening the investigation's conclusion. With Isabella caught red-handed

attempting to manipulate the trial through an act of attempted murder, her fate seemed inescapably grim. In Rose, the crime of filicide was gravely serious. Ted elaborated that, even though the murder attempt had failed, the judiciary was expected to impose a sentence that would confine Isabella to prison for the (scant) remainder of her life.

“There’s more,” Ted added. “Lady Isabella’s actions have sent shock waves through high society, and if there’s one thing the aristocracy detests, it’s scandal. Significant compensation is expected, of course. But be aware, her title and the standing of House Ardennes are likely to be revoked, leading to its dissolution.”

Realization washed over Chloe’s face. “I had no idea...”

On a deeper level, Chloe found herself relatively unfazed by the news. She had already made a conscious decision to leave her past life behind and embrace her new identity as a citizen of the capital. The fact that she might no longer be recognized as the daughter of a margrave held little significance to her now. Still, she couldn’t help but feel a pang of sympathy for the innocents who would inevitably be caught in the fallout.

“The case seems straightforward. You were a victim in this, Lady Chloe, so I don’t foresee any of this impacting you negatively,” Ted reassured her, his smile warm and genuine. “Off the record, I believe the immediate danger to you has passed. And just between us, I, too, feel a significant weight has been lifted from my shoulders.”

When Ted departed that day, his expression was noticeably lighter, as if a burdensome shadow that had long loomed over him had finally dissipated. Chloe couldn’t help but speculate that he must have been thoroughly exhausted by Lily and Isabella’s selfishness and folly.



After Ted left, Chloe and Lloyd decided to take a leisurely stroll to the nearby park for a breather.

“What beautiful weather,” Chloe remarked, her eyes roaming over the clear blue sky as she soaked up the warmth of the midday breeze on her skin. The sounds of children playing in the vicinity graced her ears. Such a peaceful scene

felt almost surreal to her; it seemed impossible to reconcile with all the mortal terror her mother had brought into her life only days prior.

“So that’s it, then? You’re finally free,” Lloyd inquired, breaking the silence.

“I suppose so...” Chloe replied, her voice a little melancholy.

“You don’t seem very happy about it,” he observed.

Chloe diverted her gaze, focusing on the path beneath her feet. “I wanted to apologize, Lloyd, for involving you in all this. This was my affair, and you shouldn’t have been dragged into it.”

Lloyd had indeed been an outsider in the familial strife that engulfed Chloe. His involvement, particularly in the incident with Lily, could have ended disastrously had he not been a skilled knight. Chloe’s guilt for entangling Lloyd in her family’s troubles pressed heavily on her.

Lloyd’s reaction, however, was one of gentle understanding. His lips curved into a reassuring smile as he tenderly stroked her hair. “Is that what’s troubling you?” he asked softly. “Chloe, I’ve fully embraced your family situation and the burdens that come with it. Your problems are my problems. In fact, I expect to share in your troubles. You should know that by now.”

The warmth that spread through Chloe’s chest was almost tangible as she softly uttered his name. In that moment, the depth of her feelings for him became strikingly clear. Yet alongside this realization was a nagging unease, a disbelief that someone as wonderful as Lloyd could have fallen for someone like her. The dubious foundations of her self-assurance were still there, for all the joy and resilience that had been built atop them.

“You must think I’m quite a handful, don’t you, Lloyd?” she asked, her lips curling into a half-smile.

“You’re just figuring this out now?” Lloyd responded playfully.

“I’m too naive, always reading too much into things...”

“I’m aware of that.”

“And I often ask these silly questions because I still can’t quite trust my own intuition, and I recede when I should press...”

“That’s true.”

“Even so.” Chloe looked directly into Lloyd’s emerald eyes. “Knowing all this, do you still choose to be with me?”

“Of course,” Lloyd replied without a moment’s hesitation. “There’s nowhere else I’d rather be. I’ll stay by your side as long as you’ll have me.” With a tender gesture, he gently cupped Chloe’s cheek in his hand, leaning in to capture her lips in another kiss. Chloe’s eyelids fluttered closed instinctively. Whether it was their first kiss or the thousandth, each one sent her heart racing and her cheeks flushing.

As they parted, Lloyd looked into Chloe’s eyes, his gaze filled with unwavering determination. “I love you, Chloe.”

Her face lit up with a radiant smile, stretching wider than she thought possible. “I love you too, Lloyd.”



It was a crisp and wintry day, the sun casting sparse yet radiant rays that pierced through the season’s chill.

Today marked exactly one year since Chloe’s arrival in the capital. A momentous occasion, to be sure, but the day was even more momentous for quite another reason.

“Ready?” Lloyd’s voice reached a stiff, nervous Chloe as they stood before an imposing set of double doors. He was the picture of formality in his full dress uniform, reserved for only the most grandiose events.

“I...think so,” Chloe replied, trying her best to sound even the tiniest bit confident. She was adorned in a delicate, lacy silk gown—pure white, of course.

“Watch your feet,” Lloyd said gently.

“I-I’ll try my best,” Chloe stammered back.

Chloe Ardennes, true to her nature, was still a bit of a handful. This was the first time she had ever worn a dress so opulent and heavy, and all her focus was dedicated to not tripping over its folds.

“If you fall, I’ll catch you,” Lloyd assured her, his tone full of support and

affection.

Chloe let out a light giggle, her nerves easing slightly as she looked up at him. "Then I'm counting on you, my knight."

The usher stationed at the doors hesitated momentarily, seemingly reluctant to break up the happy scene, but duty called. "It's time," he announced. At his cue, the grand doors began to creak open. Arm in arm, Chloe and Lloyd stepped forward together.

Chloe's breath left her in a wispy "Wow..." The church they had chosen as their wedding venue boasted majestic, vaulted ceilings and exquisite stained glass windows. The sunlight streaming through the colorful panes bathed the interior in a kaleidoscope of light, creating an almost divine atmosphere, as though God Himself had descended upon the earth to give them His blessing.

But it wasn't just the visual splendor that captivated Chloe; the church was alive with the sounds of joyous celebration. The applause of friends and loved ones filled the air, a resounding symphony of happiness and well-wishes for Chloe and Lloyd's union. As they made their way down the aisle, the lengthy train of Chloe's dress gracefully trailed behind her. The path was adorned with a beautiful arrangement of red and white flowers, leading them towards the altar where they would soon exchange their sacred vows.

Don't trip... Don't trip... The mantra echoed in Chloe's mind with each step. But as she progressed, arm in arm with Lloyd, her fears began to fade. Passing by the rows of benches, they were enveloped in a chorus of celebratory cries.

"Congratulations, Chloe!"

Miss Ciel...

"Congratulations, Lloyd, Chloe!"

"Master Lloyd, congratulations! I'm over here, Master Lloyd, over here!"

"Congratulate Chloe too, ya punk!"

"Ouch, my head!"

Freddy, Luke...

"Chloe, Lloyd, congratulations!"

“Congratulations, Miss Monkey Lady!”

Miss Sara, Millia...

“Congratulations, Lloyd, Chloe!”

Ian...

“Congratulations, Lady Chloe!”

“Congratulations, my friend!”

Shirley, Kevin...

Chloe’s heart swelled with gratitude and joy at the abundance of heartfelt wishes. They reached the altar, where the officiant stood ready, greeting them with a warm, welcoming smile. He opened his codex, and his voice, rich and resonant, filled the nave of the church. “We are gathered here today to witness the sacred vow between two souls,” he began. “Chloe Ardennes, do you take Lloyd to be your wedded husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, for as long as you both shall live?”

“I do.” Her voice was a soft yet firm affirmation.

“Lloyd Stewart, do you take Chloe to be your wedded wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, so long as you both shall live?”

“I do.” Lloyd’s response was immediate and unwavering.

Acknowledging his reply, the officiant said, “And now the rings.” Lloyd produced a small box, revealing within it a beautifully crafted gold ring, intricately carved—a tangible symbol of their shared future.

Chloe watched, her heart fluttering with anticipation, as Lloyd carefully took the ring and tenderly slid it onto her finger. The moment the ring made contact, a surge of emotion coursed through her. The cool metal settled into its place, wrapping her in warmth and belonging. Such a simple object, yet it embodied an immeasurable depth of love and promise.

Next was Chloe’s turn. She carefully retrieved her ring and reached for Lloyd’s outstretched hand. Lloyd, ever composed, showed only the faintest hint of

nervousness. With a delicate touch, Chloe slid the ring into its rightful place on his finger.

“By the power vested in me, I pronounce you husband and wife. You may now kiss the bride,” the officiant declared.

Chloe and Lloyd shared a glance, filled with love and understanding, before their heads naturally came together in a tender, heartfelt kiss.

CLANG, CLANG, CLANG—the church bells rang out, accompanied by the thunderous applause of their friends, a resonant celebration of the couple’s union. The joyous peals had the weight of a divine acknowledgment of their unbreakable bond.



If only she'd known such a joyous day would ever come, Chloe thought. If only she could travel back in time to meet her past self, she would show her this scene. She would tell her: *Things may seem tough now, but this is the happiness that awaits you at the end of the line*. Indeed, the path to this day hadn't been without its trials and tribulations, but as she stood there by Lloyd at the altar, the joy she felt eclipsed all past struggles.

This is it, Chloe thought. *The most blissful occasion of my life*.

As they stood together, the sunlight streamed through the stained glass windows, casting them in a glorious display of light and color. The rays seemed to dance around them, as if the universe itself was celebrating their journey and the love they had found in each other.

Epilogue

Life as a married couple was much the same for Chloe and Lloyd. With a drawn-out stretch and a contented sigh, Chloe woke up at the exact same time she always did. As she reached up to rub the sleep from her eyes, the golden ring on her finger caught the morning light. This symbol of their eternal commitment had never parted from her since their wedding day, and a mere glimpse of it, even now, was enough to bring a warm smile to her face.

For her daily dose of joy, Chloe simply turned to her left. There beside her lay her husband, still cocooned in the sheets, his breathing steady and peaceful. Another ring adorned his finger, a twin to her own. Unable to resist the urge, Chloe snuggled back under the covers, nestling close to him. A soft giggle escaped her as she allowed herself a few more moments of blissful rest, enveloped in the familiar scent and warmth of Lloyd.

After savoring these precious moments, Chloe finally rose from the bed. She walked over to the window, flinging it open to welcome the fresh, crisp morning air and the gentle warmth of the rising sun. After changing into her day clothes and washing her face, she took care to comb her hair meticulously before heading to the kitchen to prepare breakfast.

Despite now being Lloyd's wife and not his housekeeper, Chloe found that little had changed in their daily life. It was a comfortable, familiar routine that she cherished.

As breakfast neared completion, Lloyd made his way downstairs, still shaking off the remnants of sleep. "Morning," he murmured, still a bit groggy.

"Good morning!" Chloe replied.

The two leaned in for a quick peck on the lips—their routine morning kiss.

"Looks great," Lloyd commented, his gaze sweeping over the dishes arrayed on the table. Together, they began to enjoy their hearty breakfast.

Midway through the meal, Chloe let out a spontaneous giggle.

“What’s up?” Lloyd asked.

“Nothing, I just... The feeling still hasn’t quite sunk in.” The simple pleasure of sharing a meal with the person she loved left her uncertain what more she could ever ask for. These quiet moments of everyday life, seemingly uneventful yet filled with warmth and love, were what Chloe cherished the most.

“I know what you mean,” Lloyd replied. “It feels so surreal, getting to spend every day with you like this.”

A smile broke out across Chloe’s face. Their story—a tale of two strangers crossing paths, falling in love, choosing to spend their lives together—might have been one shared by countless others all over the world, but to Chloe this simple shared bliss was nothing short of a miracle.

As Lloyd readied himself to depart for the day, Chloe handed him a lunch box with a smile. “There’s some roast beef in there for you today,” she said.

“Excellent. That should make this morning’s training a breeze,” Lloyd replied.

“It’s your favorite, isn’t it?” Chloe teased with a playful giggle.

“I’ll be back at the usual time.”

“I’ll be waiting.”

These words served as their unspoken signal. Chloe stood a little straighter, anticipation lighting up her eyes. Lloyd leaned in, and they shared another kiss—their routine morning kiss, part two.

“All right then, I’m off.”

“Have a good day at work, Lloyd.”

Lloyd opened the door, stepped through it, and until the door swung to a completely close, Chloe stood there waving.

As Lloyd stepped through the door, Chloe remained, waving until the door closed completely. Once alone, her face still beamed with a brightness that rivaled the sun. “All right,” she mused aloud, bubbling with energy. “What should I tackle first today?”

So began another day in the life of Chloe—once an Ardennes, now a Stewart

—one not too different from the day before or the day before that. It promised seasons still to come in much the same shape, here in the city of her dreams: keeping house for a noble knight, keeping good company, warm and welcome, safe and sound.

Afterword

It's over...

...might be the reaction you hear from me in a moment of loss, like after I realized I lost my wallet, but I assure you in this case, it's pure elation.

Yep, it's over. The journey of Chloe, the cursed child, and her adventures with the elite knight Lloyd in the royal capital has reached its conclusion in three volumes.

Woo-hoo! I brought a series to completion!

You have no idea how long I've waited to say those words.

It's not the first time I've brought any work of mine to completion, but it is my first published work, and for that, I am immensely grateful. While I'd love to express my thanks to each and every one of you reading this with a personally delivered gift and celebratory dance—that's probably too much! And a bit suspicious! Don't call the cops on me! Let's settle for a heartfelt "Thank you so much!" instead!

Though I'm tempted to continue Chloe and Lloyd's story, I believe in ending a tale at its peak. So, as much as there are more stories to tell, their wedding marks the perfect finale. I hope you agree that it's a fitting conclusion.

Let's take a stroll down memory lane, shall we? This story, set in another world, was my second submission to Shosetsuka ni Naro. Among the plethora of tropes in the genre—like villainesses and tales of revenge—I was drawn to the timeless theme of "a classic Cinderella story." The concept of an unfortunate character finding happiness resonated deeply with me.

The spark for this story ignited quite whimsically. I was idly spinning in my chair, pondering all the ways I could indulge my urge to transform someone's sorrow into joy, when suddenly, the idea struck me, as if gifted from above: a cursed child! That's where Chloe's journey began.

Chloe, mistreated thanks to her remote village's backwards prejudices,

needed a hero. Enter Lloyd, a strong, dependable knight, who could shatter her cursed fate with a single stroke. Both bearing scars of their past, they find solace and understanding in each other's company.

Their personalities couldn't be more different—Chloe, bright and effervescent, against Lloyd, reserved and impassive. Yet it's in their differences that they find harmony, making up for what the other lacked. This unlikely pair, seemingly worlds apart, discover a deep connection. I aimed to write a tale of love that blossoms slowly yet profoundly, from their first encounter to falling deeply in love.

My greatest hope is that this story, crafted with passion and love, has brought some comfort to its readers. If it has touched your hearts, even just a bit, then as an author, I couldn't ask for more.

Oh, right! The novel might have ended here, but the comic adaptation is still ongoing! Which means this isn't really goodbye; it's hello! The latest chapters of the comic adaptation of *Safe & Sound* are available to read for free on DRE Comics for a limited time only—catch it before it's gone! Just as I predicted in the afterword in volume 2, Chloe is just the cutest! Lloyd is a heartthrob as well! It really is a stunning adaptation so make sure you check it out. The first volume will be out November 2023! We're deep in the weeds of cross-promotion now—that's how you know this afterword won't continue for much longer.

Finally, I'd like to extend my heartfelt acknowledgments. To my editor, F-san, your invaluable mix of much-needed encouragement and candid criticism was like doing hot and cold water therapy—challenging but incredibly effective. Your guidance ensured the smooth progression of my manuscript.

Minori Aritani, thank you, thank you, thank you for all the wonderful illustrations. The happy Chloe on the volume 3 cover is everything. I'm going to frame it and pass it down through my bloodline as a family heirloom.

Gratitude is also due to my friends for their insightful advice during the writing process, and to my parents for their unwavering support from the countryside. To all my loyal readers since the web novel days, your constant support has been the backbone of this journey. And, of course, immense thanks to everyone who played a part in bringing this book to fruition.

From the bottom of my heart, thank you all. I look forward to our paths crossing again in future stories.

Fuyu Aoki



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Safe & Sound in the Arms of an Elite Knight: Volume 3

by Fuyu Aoki

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Ebook edition 1.0: April 2024

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