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The Cursed Princess and the Lucky Knight

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The Cursed Princess and the Lucky Knight

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The Cursed Princess and the Lucky Knight

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contact@crossinfworld.com

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Published in the United States of America

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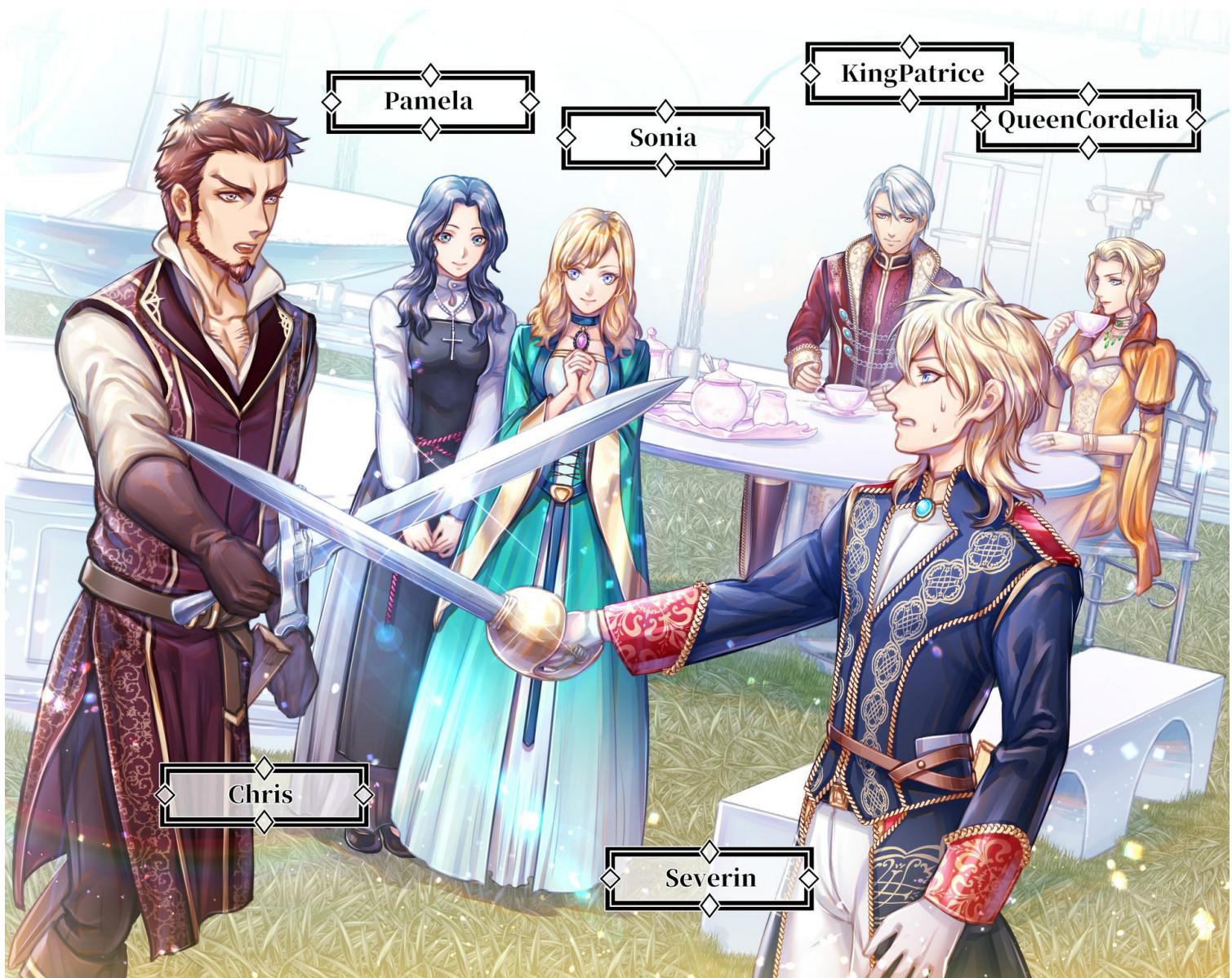
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First Digital Edition: December 2018

ISBN-10: 1-945341-18-1

ISBN-13: 978-1-945341-18-2



Chapter 1: My Fiancé is a Bearded Old Fart?

RISING before the sun, Sonia de Clare got dressed and offered her prayers to the statue of the Holy Mother. From there, she set about her weekly assigned chores. She was supposed to set the table for breakfast this week.

The Royal Abbey where Sonia resided was quite large, featuring both an adjoining orphanage and a boarding school for girls. The boarding school served as a finishing school where affluent young women learned social decorum. Here in the kingdom of Pharrell, girls were believed to gain an edge in life if they left home to study the word of God; hence, a fair number of noble ladies boarded for the short duration of six months to a full year.

Of course, they were also free to stay longer to follow the path of a nun. Out of all these noble ladies, Sonia had been here for a particularly long time. Not only had her parents died a decade ago, but she had also lost her older brothers in the very order of their claim to the family title and estates. The only daughter, Sonia, was now the sole direct descendent of the Dukedom of Clare, which possessed a massive fortune and vast lands.

Sonia's guardian, the King of Pharrell, had sent her to this abbey. It almost seemed as if he were trying to protect her from something...

CUTTING across the abbey's impressive herb garden, Sonia walked down the simple and austere, chocolate brown hallway floors that had been polished to a sheen. She knocked on the heavy door at the end of the hall.

“Come in,” a gentle voice responded. Sonia opened the door.

The headmistress—the Abbess—sat behind her desk with brilliant sunlight shining through the window at her back.

“Thank you,” Sonia chimed.

Sonia spread the hem of her simple, unadorned gray skirt with both hands as she sunk into a curtsy. Ostentatious gowns and hair accessories were prohibited upon entering the boarding school. The girls lived in novitiate uniforms.

A benevolent smile crossed the Abbess' face as she said, "Come in, my dear," and showed her in.

Sonia made her way toward the formal leather sofa set in the back of the room with ladylike grace. When she saw who was there, her pale blue eyes sparkled with joy.

"King Patrice!" Sonia exclaimed.

"I see you're doing well, Sonia," Patrice responded. He welcomed Sonia over with open arms, giving her his best smile. Responding to the gesture, Sonia didn't hesitate to bury herself in his chest. Any of the nuns instructing her would have frowned at such outlandish behavior if they were present, but, fully aware of Sonia's extenuating circumstances, the Abbess' smile only grew deeper as she watched in silence.

"I never dreamed you would come in person, Your Majesty," Sonia said.

Realizing how childish her behavior was after hugging Patrice far longer than decorum allowed, Sonia flushed with embarrassment as she stepped back to put on her best behavior.

"I wanted to tell you personally, so I came to see you incognito," Patrice explained.

"Goodness! Whatever for?"

The golden-blond hair Sonia kept tied behind her gently swayed to and fro. The adorable sight reminded Patrice of his own first love, and the nostalgia brought a smile across his lips.

"Why don't we go for a short stroll while I tell you? Would you mind leading the way?"

"It would be my pleasure!" Sonia said in response, and the two went out to the cloister surrounding the herb garden.

SOFT light shone through the stained-glass vaulted ceiling of the white stone walkway Sonia and Patrice strode down. With the coming of spring, butterflies and bees busily flew about the abbey's herb garden, enticed by its fragrances.

“I’ve decided who you shall marry.”

“Huh?”

The sudden announcement stopped Sonia dead in her tracks. She looked up at Patrice with her mouth hanging wide open.

Not expecting to elicit such surprise, Patrice smiled wryly as he continued, “Is it truly all that surprising? You’re already eighteen years old. That is certainly old enough for you to have a fiancé.”

“...I’m sorry. This is just all so sudden...”

“By any chance, are you already fond of someone?” he asked.

“Goodness, no! This is a world of women. You *know* there aren’t any men aside from you allowed to enter the boarding school on a whim, Your Majesty,” Sonia quipped.

The sight of Sonia puffing up her cheeks in annoyance made Patrice bark a laugh. “Oh, I’d forgotten about that!”

“So tell me...do I happen to know this gentleman?” Sonia asked in a calm tone, but she could feel her heart racing in her chest.

“Yes, you know him.” Patrice met the expectant gaze Sonia directed at him as she tightly clutched her hands against her bosom.

“My son, Severin—”

“Prince Severin?” she promptly interrupted.

“Right, Severin—”

With that, Sonia’s eyes grew misty. She cupped her cheeks with both hands as her whole face began to glow.

“Prince Severin! I couldn’t be happier! I shall strive to be a good wife, King Patrice!”

“HMM...”

“Is something the matter, Your Majesty?” asked the puzzled attendant who

was accompanying Patrice. Ever since he got into the plain carriage used for incognito travel, Patrice had been grunting and groaning. “By any chance, did Duchess Sonia have qualms with her future groom?”

“No, she was ecstatic... It’s just...”

“Just what?”

“She might have misunderstood who she’s marrying.”

“...Didn’t you make it clear?” the attendant asked.

“By the time I got out ‘He’s someone you know well,’ and ‘Severin,’ she was already on cloud nine... I told her again to make sure she understood, but...I doubt she was listening... Now do you see the problem?”

“Certainly. I have no doubt she thinks, ‘I’m going to marry Prince Severin,’” the attendant answered with a pathetic groan. He hung his head alongside Patrice, then pointed out, “Doesn’t that mean Duchess Sonia has feelings for Prince Severin for her to be so happy about it?”

“Yes, I’m sure it does. The simple fact of the matter is that she entered the abbey when she was eight, so Severin and the adults around him are the only men she has ever known. She and Severin were so close in age that they often played together.”

“So her feelings of friendship blossomed into romance... She’s so pure...unlike Prince Severin,” the attendant said, not realizing he had spoken out of line. Patrice shot him a dark glare, but couldn’t chide his attendant considering his son’s bad habits.

Just then, the attendant broke into a smile that screamed, “I’ve got it!” and he began to explain his idea to Patrice. “Why don’t you take the plunge and have Duchess Sonia marry Prince Severin instead? Maybe he’ll be smitten with her purity and become a devoted husband.”

“Or Sonia will be miserable. I can’t make her a victim to my son’s womanizing ways.”

“Good point,” the attendant agreed.

Patrice shot him another dark glare for not defending his son as he continued,

“Besides, Severin isn’t capable of dispelling the *curse* placed on Sonia.”

“I hope the Pope’s divine revelation comes to pass. If it doesn’t and *he* loses to the curse, our country will suffer a great loss,” the attendant commented. He must have been worried for the safety of Sonia’s fiancé, for a look of concern crossed his face.

Patrice opened the carriage’s small window and gazed out at the townscape. For roughly fifteen years, that knight’s hard work had kept this land untouched by the flames of war. The townsfolk bustling about with bright smiles amid this beautiful, orderly townscape was an ode to his devotion to his country and unparalleled chivalric prowess.

“I hate to place a heavy burden on him yet again... But not only is there the Pope’s revelation, I also believe he is the only one capable of breaking Sonia’s curse,” Patrice said, drawing the conversation to a close.

“WHOA! You’re getting married? Congratulations, Sonia! And to the second in line, Prince Severin! That’s wonderful!”

“Thank you, Pamela,” Sonia squeaked with embarrassment to the zealous excitement of her fellow eighteen-year-old roommate. Pamela was as excited as if she were the one getting married. The porcelain white skin on her face flushed red.

“Wasn’t he your first love to boot? How romantic! You get to spend your life with the man of your dreams...! Prince Severin must have felt the same for you all these years!”

“I hope so... Going by the letters I get from him every now and then, I was under the impression he only thought of me as a little sister... I’m afraid he’s forcing himself to marry me,” Sonia confessed.

She dropped her eyes as she recalled the contents of the letters she had received from Severin so far. Part of her was anxious his father, King Patrice, was pushing him into the marriage. If that was the case, she felt bad for Severin.

Being her second cousin who was only three years older than her, Severin had often played with Sonia in the royal palace until she lost her family to tragic

deaths and moved to this abbey.

Severin's blond hair fell elegantly to his shoulders, shining brightly as if it absorbed the light of the sun. With rosy cheeks complemented by deep blue eyes, his beauty surpassed genders, even eliciting a tinge of jealousy from Sonia.

But rather than growing vain in his beauty, he was kind to everyone. People sang him praises, claiming, "If an angel descended to earth, he would be just like Prince Severin."

"Sonia, I'm sure Prince Severin gave his consent, so it's all good. You should be more confident in yourself!" Pamela said to comfort Sonia.

"You're right. I need to start putting my heart into my studies and etiquette classes from now on so I can become a good wife," Sonia replied, offering Pamela a smile in return.

"But isn't this all rather sudden? It's hard to believe you're leaving in two weeks... As a friend, I'm happy that you're getting married, but you've been a part of my life for so long, I'm going to miss you..." Pamela admitted. Though she felt the optimistic radiance of Sonia's smile, she truthfully confessed the loneliness she felt in her heart.

Ever since Pamela came to the Royal Abbey, the two girls had slept in the same room. Unlike the other ladies who were here for finishing school, she had also lost her family. With nowhere else to go after a relative inherited the family estate, she had come to this abbey.

"I hope that the uncle I've mentioned inherited our Benoit family title and estate will find a marriageable suitor for me... Then I could leave and visit you..."

"Pamela..."

Sonia's eyes grew misty with tears as she drew her friend into a hug. Pamela's uncle had probably forgotten about the niece he had dumped in this abbey. As it was, he never once responded to any of the letters she sent him. Supposedly he sent annual donations to the abbey, but rumor had it they were getting smaller by the year.

Sonia stroked Pamela's tightly braided hair, which was ebony black. Countless ladies came to the abbey because they had nowhere else to go. However, she had clicked with Pamela best. Of course, being roommates helped, but they had laughed and cried together, suffered from the same type of loneliness, and comforted one another.

"I'll be sure to write. And I have every intention to see your uncle and ask him, 'Now that Pamela is of a marriageable age, aren't you going to find her a good husband?'"

"If Prince Severin's fiancée asked him that, I'm sure my uncle would fly into a frenzied panic trying to find someone," Pamela said. She must have imagined the sadness in her eyes, for she broke into a smile. Seeing Pamela's expression, Sonia relaxed and grabbed her hands.

Facing each other, the two put their palms together and interlocked their fingers. Then they pressed forehead against forehead. They made this gesture whenever they comforted one another.

"I'd like to congratulate you again, Sonia. I will always be praying for your happiness."

"Thank you, Pamela... I will always be praying for your happiness, too..."

The two ladies stayed like that for a long time. Both kept their eyes closed as if trying to hide the stream of tears...

TWO weeks later.

Aside from attending the prayer services, Sonia was excused from all of the morning chores. She had received packages clear up until the night before her departure containing the latest design in dresses, made from the highest quality materials. Matching hair accessories, necklaces to adorn her neck, earrings, and bracelets came with each dress. Even though they would be hidden under the hem of her dresses, no corners were cut with the shoes either, which fit as if they were custom made for Sonia.

Not only was she sent several such complete outfits, handmaids had also been dispatched to help prepare for the morning of her departure.

"Um... I heard we're going to visit my old home, Clare Castle, first. Did I hear wrong...?" Sonia asked the newcomer handmaid. Left under the impression they were going to return to her castle, alter the dresses and gems stored there for presentation, and then head to the royal palace, Sonia was dumbstruck as dresses and finery arrived one after the next.

One of the handmaids respectfully lowered her head to Sonia before answering, "You are not mistaken, milady. That is what I have heard as well. All of the gifts sent here are but a token of your fiancé's feelings. In his own words, he said, 'Please wear whatever is to your liking.'"

"...All of these...?"

Upon taking a closer look, Sonia noticed the styles varied across the different dresses, shoes, and hair accessories. Taking the dresses for example, there was a red-based dress that evoked the image of a sleek adult, but right next to it was a pale pink dress designed with an abundance of lace and meticulous gathers, prioritizing a sweet and cute appeal. Each dress had a unique style.

"He didn't know what you would like, so he covered all of his bases."

"....."

Even if he didn't know her taste, wasn't this a bit excessive? Sonia lightly rubbed her temples in frustration. He had buried the floor in Sonia and Pamela's room with mounds of gifts.

Nonetheless, when she heard, "He also wanted me to pass on the message, 'If you please, I'd appreciate it if you greeted me dressed in your finest with your most dazzling smile,'" Sonia's chest ached with happiness.

Oh, Prince Severin...

"Very well. But with so many, it's hard to know which to choose. Would you mind helping me decide?" Sonia asked.

"With pleasure. This will be fun for us as well."

All of the other handmaids agreed to lend a hand with a smile.

"...SONIA, you look gorgeous! That looks great on you!" Pamela exclaimed,

reeling with excitement when she returned from volunteer work in the afternoon to find that Sonia had cast off her usual plain novitiate uniform in favor of one of the dresses she had received.

The dress Sonia ultimately chose was a refreshing shade of mint green that set off her golden-blond hair beautifully. The fine lace on the round collar draped around her delicate neck down to her collarbone. It produced a sense of elegance, while giving an image of innocence. Not only was the collar trimmed with pearls, they were also sewn into the bust.

Supposedly, low-waist dresses with ample gathers were all the rage. Lace flowed from the waistline clear down to the hem. By laying the lace over material with a sheen, even a potentially scandalous dress became perfectly wholesome.

A belt with elaborate, yet delicate goldwork was fitted around her waist. The sole emerald set into the buckle shined brilliantly. After lightly applying makeup, Sonia put on a circlet that matched her belt and covered her flowing hair with a lace veil.

“You’re so beautiful...! Honest...! Prince Severin is sure to fall in love with you all over again!” Pamela cheered.

At her words, the handmaid who was waiting in attendance beside Pamela asked, “Prince Severin?” with a raised eyebrow. However, neither of the girls heard her over their excited squeals. Likewise, the maid was informed by another handmaid that the escort picking Sonia up had arrived at that moment, and frantically began straightening up the room. She hardly had time to ask what Pamela meant.

“Duchess Sonia de Clare, your fiancé has come for you personally,” one of the handmaids reported.

Sonia and Pamela tightly held hands. Naturally, they did it the same way as always, with their palms pressed together and fingers interlaced.

“Take care...Sonia.”

“Yes, and you too, Pamela... I’ll be sure to write...”

The two had always taken comfort in one another. They had shared their

dreams throughout the years in the same room. No matter how minor the problem, they always asked the other for advice. Occasionally, they would also get into fights that seemed amazingly “trivial” later.

“...Pamela.” The days they spent together ran through Sonia’s head one after the next.

“Now, now, don’t cry. You don’t want your makeup to run,” Pamela said enthusiastically, encouraging Sonia. The dam holding back her tears was on the verge of breaking.

“We’ll meet again! I’m sure of it! We’re bound together before God,” she said, in mimicry of what the sisters always told those who were sad to see one of the ladies leave.

“Right, we will! I’m sure we will...!”

The Abbess entered the room as the two dragged out their goodbyes.

“Sonia, God is in all of us, keeping us bound at all times,” said the Abbess. Upon hearing the same thing that Pamela had just told her, Sonia wiped the corners of her eyes and nodded.

The Abbess proceeded to hand Sonia a present, saying, “Take this.” The young lady’s eyes popped open at the gift. It was a beautifully crafted silver rosary.

“Reverend Mother...! I can’t take such an amazing gift...!” Sonia protested.

Though it was worn from use, she could tell it had been lovingly polished the second it was in her hands.

“I used to wear it when I was younger. It’s somewhat flamboyant for the abbey, so I put it in storage...but I think it should be perfect for you,” the Abbess said, and gently touched Sonia’s hands with both of hers. “I’m certain your future husband will guide you in the right direction. Have the faith to follow his guidance.”

“...I will! Reverend Mother, thank you for everything.”

“Sonia, I will pray that you have a long, happy future ahead of you,” the Abbess responded. Sonia failed to notice that unlike usual, something about the Abbess’ smile held a faint shadow of grief.

SONIA was dancing on air with excitement. Up until this point, anyway.

Through the cloister around the herb garden, the heavy double doors made of stone at the other end of the spacious narthex with its pure white walls, were left wide open. The other side revealed a beautifully designed carriage.

The last time I rode in a carriage like this, Mother and Father were still alive.

Sonia may have belonged to a dukedom boasting of such tremendous wealth that even the King served as her guardian, but she had grown accustomed to the life of simplicity and frugality at the abbey. Between nostalgia and joy, she felt as if she were walking on air. If she didn't know better, she'd swear her body was lightly drifting along. But the carriage wasn't the first thing on her mind.

I wonder what Prince Severin looks like now?

They had only communicated through letters since her family's funerals.

Will he care for the way I look? I can understand if he doesn't think I'm pretty, but will he at least call me cute? No, what if I'm not what he expected when he sees me, and he's disappointed?

Sonia's heart beat loudly as it raced with all its might, driven by the nervousness and apprehension at reuniting with her first love at long last.

Calm down. Calm yourself, Sonia! Her heart was pounding way too hard. If she had to describe it, this felt closer to fear than love; it had reached the point of giving that impression.

What the heck? I'm breaking into a cold sweat? Sonia was surprised to feel sweat running down her nape when she wasn't hot. *I don't want to see him.* She quickly dismissed the words of rejection that suddenly popped into her head.

When she was but a step from passing through the narthex doors, a man who had been waiting by the side of the door stepped in front of Sonia. A smile spread across his face as he respectfully took Sonia's hand and kneeled before her.

"Umm?"

She had seen him somewhere before, but he wasn't Severin. The man solemnly holding her hand was clearly middle-aged. A middle-aged man. Over the hill. Geezer. Old fart. And to make matters worse...

"I've come for you, my blushing bride."

Why, there was a beard on the face of the old fart gazing up at Sonia.

"ICK!"



Sonia fainted.

IN the end, they decided to have Sonia stay at the abbey an extra night after she fainted. The couple officially departed the next day.

Awkward... This is so awkward. Sonia was alone in the carriage with the old fart—or the middle-aged gentleman—who claimed to be her fiancé. His name was Crisford Cortot.

Crisford was the thirty-four-year-old knight who taught Prince Henry, the heir to the throne, and Prince Severin swordsmanship and tactics, serving as their tutor-in-arms. Or so the people hovering over Sonia had explained once she regained consciousness.

Wasn't he granted the most prestigious rank as a knight, the Diamant?

Titles were given based on the stones representing the twelve months according to the Order of the Birthstones. A total of twelve knights bore these titles, all of whom had mastered protective magic. Under the protection of God, Crisford Cortot served his king, guarded his kingdom, and saved the people. He held the highest rank out of the twelve knights renowned as heroes among heroes.

“Embarrassed” didn’t even begin to describe how Sonia felt. Not only had she gotten the wrong idea from halfheartedly listening to King Patrice, she had also screamed upon laying eyes on Crisford’s face and passed out. That was no way to treat the highest order of knight, much less the man revered as her nation’s guardian angel. So much blood had drained from her face, she had gone beyond a sickly white and turned blue. Even with the coming of the next morning, she still looked pallid.

“Inform me when you feel better. I will come back then,” Crisford had said without taking the slightest offense. The sight had filled Sonia’s heart with guilt over her behavior.

That was precisely what had driven her to insist, “No, I’ll be fine. I’m terribly sorry to have worried you.” And with that, they had set out to leave once more and boarded the carriage.

Alas, sitting diagonally from each other only made things all the more awkward. For some odd reason, her body was rejecting him. Actually, she knew the reason why: it was because of the dense beard burying his jaw. She found his beard physically repulsive.

To make matters worse, it wasn't just his beard. When she snuck a glance at his hands poking out of his sleeves, the forest of hair growing on the backs of his fingers and hands made her want to cry, "It's even *there!*"

This is one hairy man. But, Sonia thought, just because I lived in an abbey where men were prohibited doesn't mean I have an excuse to hate beards or hairy men to the point of fainting at the sight of one.

She had been capable of interacting just fine with such men clear up until she was eight years old. Why, the same even held true for this gentleman.

"Excuse me...Sir Cortot," Sonia took the plunge and spoke to him.

"You may call me Chris, Princess. Isn't that what you used to call me a long time ago?"

When he asked, "Don't you remember?" Sonia's mind spiraled down through the memories of her youth. She was in the courtyard of the palace where the King and the royal family resided. There, each of the four seasons never failed to welcome Sonia with flowers and fruit.

She recalled how she'd always sit with her dress spread across the grass as she picked small flowers to make a bouquet. Nearby was a round arbor made of marble, where her mother would sip tea with Severin's mother, the Queen. And there he was, standing a few steps back.

Once she remembered, Sonia couldn't help but stare at Crisford.

"Is something the matter, Princess?" he asked. Chris blinked in surprise by how suddenly Sonia forgot that she couldn't stand the sight of him and had begun to stare at him intently.

"Your beard."

"My beard? Ah," Chris said as he traced his fingers along his beard.

Regardless of how nicely maintained the short beard running from his

sideburns down along the contours of his face was, there was no getting around the fact that it made a man with his physique look like a well-groomed bear from the forest. To top it off, his short, light-brown hair was trimmed to the same length as his evenly cut beard. It was rather unusual in this country to see men who looked like Chris.

In Sonia's native land, Pharrell, it was common for men to grow their hair down to their shoulders. Even those who kept it on the short side rarely went so far as to show the nape of their neck.

"When I was little, you didn't have a beard, did you...? And correct me if I'm wrong, but didn't you have shoulder-length hair that you kept tied back?"

"Yes, that's right. I'm impressed you remember," Chris said. The clarity of her memory both surprised and impressed him.

"...Um, why did you grow that beard? And cut your hair...? Your whole head looks stubbly like a wheat field after harvest..."

"A wheat field after harvest! What a funny comparison!"

Sonia must have tickled his funny bone, for Chris burst out laughing with his mouth wide open. It was such a hearty laugh that it did the impossible and echoed off the walls of the carriage.

Noticing Sonia's eyes were rolling in pain, Chris coughed as if to clear his throat. "You see, there is a reason for the way I look," he explained.

"And what might that be?"

"To be honest, it has to do with my grandfather's last words."

"...His last words?"

"Right. My grandfather spent his whole life with a beard and short hair. He was also a knight, yet even so, he wasn't afraid of exposing his neck to the enemy."

Sonia tilted her head to the side, puzzled. "You aren't supposed to let the enemy see your neck?" she asked.

"It's considered commonsense among knights to grow your hair out as a means to protect your own neck. Naturally, this is adopted by everyone who

sets out to battle, not just knights.”

“Really! You don’t say!” Sonia exclaimed. She had no idea. To think there was such a significant meaning behind their hair.

“In that case, why did your grandfather cut it?”

“Yes, well, he said it served as motivation. It must have worked, for he was knighted a Diamant.”

“You’re from a family of knights, yes?” Sonia recalled.

Knighthood was also hereditary in Pharrell. But much like royalty, only the oldest son could inherit the title.

“Were you the oldest son...? I could have sworn you were the third or fourth...”

“Wow!” Chris cried, impressed. “I’m the third son. It’s impressive you remembered that.”

“Well...I was standing nearby when you mentioned it to Prince Severin and happened to overhear you...” she struggled to admit.

It was another instance where she had simply listened as Severin’s curiosity drove him to throw questions at a random person. She merely wanted to share the experience with the boy she loved by listening to whomever he had taken an interest in at the moment. And now she’d gone and humiliated Severin by thinking that she was going to marry him.

“Is that right? Nonetheless, your memory is quite impressive. Prince Severin himself has completely forgotten where I fall in the Cortot line,” Chris said.

“Goodness...!”

With his troubled smile, Sonia began to see Chris more and more like a good-natured gentleman. As she did, it felt like the weight pressing down on her eased up some. The fact that she had physically loosened up a little proved as much. Nevertheless, she still had questions. Not to mention, she was still afraid of his beard.

“You said this is out of respect for your grandfather’s last words, but shouldn’t that responsibility fall on the oldest?” she asked.

"We have a long tradition of choosing to serve as warriors in my family. Perhaps it's a sign of the times, but some of my siblings decided to pursue other fields rather than follow the path of the warrior. As it is now, my eldest brother and I are the only warriors. This didn't sit well with Grandfather, so he ordered me to follow the family motto as well, just before he died. That way, if anything happened to my brother or I, it would live on."

"...Uh-huh..."

After hearing such a passionate explanation, Sonia's shoulders slumped with disappointment. Each family motto was unique, and she *had* heard there were occasionally some bizarre mottos that made absolutely no sense. So as far as Sonia was concerned, the Cortot motto could definitely be called weird.

But even so...!

If he was the man she was to marry, she was going to have to spend the rest of her life with him. In that case, she desperately—desperately—desperately wanted him to shave off that beard! Sonia mustered her courage and asked, "Um...in that case, does that mean you wouldn't be willing to shave your beard?"

"No, it's my family motto," he refused, swiftly cutting her down.

"...You wouldn't budge on that?"

"No," he said, bluntly shooting the idea down again.

He looked her in the eye with a stern expression as he rejected her both times, leaving Sonia no choice but to meekly whisper in defeat, "I see..." and lower her gaze.

As she listened to the sound of the horse's hooves beating the ground in the swaying carriage, Sonia desperately fought the urge to break into tears.

Why? Why do I hate his beard so much it makes me want to cry?

Crisford simply sat with folded arms, wondering how to contend with the young woman who had shrunken in on herself.

This, too, is part of my duty. I am terribly sorry, Princess, he apologized in his heart.

Chapter 2: Supernatural Phenomena at Clare Castle

FOR their lodgings that day, arrangements had been made in advance for Chris and Sonia to stay at Duke Dumas' country house. Duke Dumas was a longtime associate of the Clares. Naturally, Sonia also knew him and his family personally.

After the carriage passed through an iron-railed gate that arched high over its roof, it followed a brick road that spanned through a yard of shortly cut grass that stretched for as far as the eye could see. Before long, the carriage pulled up to the white porte-cochere. Although the area grew dim in the evening light, Sonia felt like the flowers in the garden that displayed the livery of spring seemed to be welcoming them as they strived to open their fragrant petals.

Chris descended from the carriage first and offered his hand to Sonia. Mustering her courage, she placed her hand in his. The moment their fingers touched, *it* happened. Zap! An electric shock ran up her fingernails.

“Eep!” Sonia yelped at the sensation of getting struck by a small bolt of lightning and pulled back her hand. Also surprised by the electric shock, Chris found himself looking back and forth at his hand and Sonia’s.

Noticing Sonia’s uncertain gaze as he pumped his hand, Chris smiled to reassure her. “I didn’t expect static electricity to be a problem this time of year. You’ll have to forgive me. I’ll wash my hands—Avan!”

Chris called for his squire, who was waiting behind the carriage. Sonia heard the crisp response, “Yes, sir,” before the neatly dressed young man came forward.

“Tend to Her Grace. My hand seems to be charged with static electricity at the moment,” Chris ordered.

“Right away, sir,” the boy responded obediently. Although he was younger than Sonia, Avan showed the utmost respect as he guided her down from the carriage.

“Sonia!”

Sonia turned to face the country house at the sound of a familiar voice. It belonged to a man in his upper-middle years with dusty brown hair slicked clean back with gel into a single, low ponytail. Although he had deeply chiseled wrinkles now, he still looked as amiable as his younger self. The wrinkles only seemed to bring out his inner kindness for all to see.

“Duke Dumas! It’s great to see you again!” Sonia exclaimed. When Dumas held open his arms, she flung herself into his welcoming chest. Realizing she’d done it again, Sonia’s face turned bright red as she stepped back.

“Forgive me. It’s been so long, my emotions got the better of me,” Sonia apologized. Gathering her skirts in her fingers, Sonia bent at the knees in a graceful curtsy.

“It’s fine. You’ve truly grown beautiful during the short time I haven’t seen you! You’ve become quite the lady!” Duke Dumas effused.

“Thank you.”

Noticing how Chris seemed to stand watch behind Sonia as she expressed her gratitude, Dumas went to him for a handshake. “Thank you for coming, Sir Diamant Knight Crisford Cortot.”

“Although I’ve seen you at royal balls and soirées, I believe this is the first we’ve met personally,” Chris returned.

Sonia’s eyes bulged in surprise at the sight of the two exchanging a firm handshake. Nothing had happened. It was as if the yellow flash of sparks that shocked her mere moments ago weren’t real.

“I had no idea you were going to marry Sonia...! Honestly, His Majesty couldn’t have picked a better man! I can set my mind at ease entrusting her with you!” Dumas then turned from Chris to Sonia. “Isn’t that right?” he asked, seeking Sonia’s agreement.

“Oho! Ho! Ho!” she laughed to dodge the question. After all, Sonia wasn’t sure whether she liked or hated the man yet.

“But I hate his beard...” she mumbled quietly under her breath so no one

could hear her.

DUKE Dumas' wife, Brigitte, joined them for supper. Much like in the past, she donned a dress that was dignified, if not splendid, as she welcomed Sonia and Chris with a gentle smile.

Am I just imagining things, or does she seem somewhat nervous? Though her quiet smile overflowed with benevolence, the way it seemed forced when she looked at Sonia was disconcerting. Then again, it had been ten years since they last met.

The Duchess wasn't terribly outgoing, so she might be nervous seeing me after all this time. Sonia came to that conclusion on her own following her intrinsically bright nature and optimism.

"By the way, how is Sharon doing?" she inquired about her old friend and Brigitte's daughter, eager to break the ice. Sharon was two years older than Sonia. She might already be married off by now.

Brigitte's shoulders shook like a leaf in a windstorm for a moment before she answered, "F-Fine. She married Count Bourget's oldest son last year." She smiled.

However, Sonia suspected that was yet another one of her forced smiles. Brigitte had only managed to lift one corner of her mouth, making unnatural wrinkles crease her skin.

"She did? I must apologize. I didn't realize... I'm sorry I haven't sent a congratulatory letter, marriage gifts, or anything," Sonia apologized.

Sonia had a chamberlain placed in charge of managing her family's castle, who made certain to visit the abbey once a month to provide a management report and present any letters. He was a trustworthy man who had served their family since her father inherited the family name. Yet, he hadn't so much as mentioned a word of their marriage or reported that he'd sent wedding gifts to the Duke's daughter, whom she went way back with.

"D-Don't worry about it. I mean, well, you know how shy she is. So we didn't make a big deal out of it. Isn't that right, Darling?"

"Y-Yes, that's right. We had our personal reasons for keeping it quiet, so please don't be insulted," the Duke quickly agreed when his wife turned to him.

"I didn't realize... If that's the case, I'll send the wedding gifts when I can in a few days." Although the way the couple was behaving didn't sit well with Sonia, she tried to end the topic on that note. However— "Th-That isn't necessary! We don't need anything from you! What if we get caught in the curse—" Brigitte burst out screaming and flung herself out of the chair in a panic.

"That's enough!" the Duke remonstrated his wife in a no-nonsense voice.

Brigitte swayed as she weakly sat back down and whispered, "I'm sorry."

"Your Grace, are you perhaps feeling unwell? Might I suggest you retire early tonight..." Chris gently urged the ghostly pale Duchess with downcast eyes, as the shock had left Sonia paralyzed.

"...I'm terribly sorry. I think you're right... Darling, I'm sorry, but I'm heading up to our room."

Brigitte looked as if she were about to burst into tears as she curtsied to her husband and Sonia before withdrawing from the dining room. The Duke grimly watched his wife leave before bowing his head to Sonia.

"I am sorry...Sonia. As of late, my wife has been emotionally unstable. Sometimes she'll start yelling nonsense like that," he apologized on behalf of his wife.

"...No, I'm the one who should apologize for staying the night when your wife isn't feeling well..." Sonia apologized in turn.

Though Sonia was curious about this "curse" his wife mentioned, she couldn't bring herself to ask once it became apparent he was casually trying to change the topic.

Sonia may have nodded while listening to the Duke's humorous stories throughout the rest of supper, but everything he said went in one ear and out the other.

SONIA stepped onto the veranda of the private room assigned to her on the

second floor and gazed upon the night sky alone. The moon shining clearly in the night sky gently enshrouded Sonia with soft golden light that was neither waxing nor waning. But not even this tender view of the moon could dispel the anxiety brewing in Sonia's heart.

I should have noticed. The way the servants behaved should have caught her eye. Between going beyond the abbey grounds for the first time in ages and the nostalgia of seeing the Duke who had been close to her father, Sonia had been too overwhelmed to notice how others viewed her. She hadn't realized anything was amiss.

Yet, there was only a bare minimum of staff here. Moreover, the maid assigned to her room would look at her and tremble, desperately trying to read Sonia's expression to avoid displeasing her. As if she wanted to leave right away if Sonia didn't need her. Like she was terrified of a fearsome being that she was forced to serve...

After seeing Brigitte's breakdown, Sonia's rose-colored view of the outside world gradually focused on an unsettling reality. She could tell something was amiss.

But why... The Duke hadn't been afraid to hug her in an embrace when she lunged toward him.

Was he putting up a brave front despite his fear? At that thought, tears began to overflow from Sonia's eyes. *Why?*

She was frightened by the changes slowly gnawing away at her since yesterday.

What is it about me that people find so terrible? she asked herself. As she reasserted the question with no answer, the sound of knocking at the door drew her attention. Thinking back, Sonia recalled she had already dismissed the maid since she seemed so eager to leave. As such, she had to answer the door personally.

"Who is it?"

"It's me, Princess—Crisford. I wanted to wish you a good night."

A black whirlpool stirred in Sonia's chest. What was this sickening sense of

unease? It didn't make sense for her to grow ill simply from the sound of Chris' voice.

And here in my mind, I was so happy he was courteous enough to come bid me good night.

"...Is all well? Were you about to turn in for the night?" Chris asked.

Sonia felt sorry for Chris as he called out to her across the door again. Pushing aside how crummy she felt, Sonia answered, "I'm coming," and opened the door.

The moment her eyes landed on that mug covered in light brown facial hair and locked on his eyes, the world around Sonia began to spin. But she stood firm as her dress hid her wobbling legs. Somehow managing to avoid collapsing, she forced a smile.

"Sir Chris, thank you for coming just to bid me good night."

"The honor is mine. We will be leaving early tomorrow morning. This was your first outing in so long, you must be exhausted after getting jostled about during the carriage ride. I hope you sleep—"

"Give it a rest. I'd get my shut-eye a whole lot quicker if you didn't come waltzing into my room, damn pedo."

Both were left speechless. That had been the low, grating voice of a man. After freezing for a moment, Sonia's mind began racing wildly, convinced that voice had come from her own mouth. She flung her hands up to her mouth.

"Eh? Huh? What? What just happened? Was that me? Did I say that?" she asked, one question on top of the next.

Watching Sonia rapidly turn bright red, Chris burst out laughing heartily and said, "Ha ha ha! How inconsiderate of me to call upon a lady before bed. You have my apologies."

"No! Nothing of the sort! Y-You made me happy! I was actually feeling somewhat down when you came!"

"Why is that? If you like, you're welcome to talk to me about it. After all, I am your fiancé."

Fiancé. For some odd reason, Sonia felt annoyed at Chris for emphasizing that. *Why are you so annoyed, Sonia? Isn't it only natural for your fiancé to worry?* she thought to herself.

"You're just after my land and money. Nothing's left to the boys after the firstborn son, so you must be pretty damn desperate to nab a rich chick—Eek!"

Not again! This time Sonia turned pale as she snapped her mouth shut.

"I-I...! That's not what I think! Wh-Why?!" Sonia cried out. Unable to understand what was happening to herself, Sonia shook her head as she covered her mouth with her hands.

Tears welled up in her eyes as she repeatedly took it back, insisting, "I didn't mean it." Chris firmly grabbed her slender shoulders with both hands and he gave her a toothy smile that covered his whole face.

"You must be exhausted, Princess. Be sure to get a good night's rest. Oh, by the way, do you have a rosary with you?"

"Ah... Yes, I do. It's the one I always used back at the abbey..." Sonia answered.

"I imagine you must be worked up between suddenly getting engaged and then leaving the abbey so quickly. If you hold the rosary like you did at the abbey, it's bound to help you relax," he suggested.

"G-Good idea! I'm sure it will!"

Sonia rushed over to her luggage, pulled the rosary out of a small case, and put it around her neck. The moment she did, she definitely felt calmer. Sonia heaved a sigh of relief, feeling as though a refreshing wind had embraced her body. Chris also seemed relieved.

"Princess, with this, I bid you good night. May you have pleasant dreams," Chris said.

Having paid his courtesy call, Chris began to walk away until Sonia ran up to him.

"Sir Chris!" she cried. She tried to touch his hand but found herself hesitating at the sight of the bushy hair there. Not to mention, she was afraid the static

electricity would give her another nasty zap like earlier that evening.

Chris laughed at Sonia's hesitancy while shaking his head from side to side. "I don't mind," he said consolingly, aware of how she felt.

By no means did Sonia dislike his all-embracing kindness. Yet if that was the case, why did she find him scary?

"Thank you...and good night," Sonia said as she gave Chris a smile filled with gratitude, hiding the guilt she felt over her fear toward him.

"**YOU** mustn't become so agitated, Your Grace. You must retain your composure around her, or else your behavior will stimulate the curse compressed in her," Chris admonished.

"I'm sorry..." Brigitte apologized. Under Chris' fierce glare, Duchess Brigitte buried her pallid face in her handkerchief.

"Her Grace doesn't know the truth. We are only falling into *his* hands if she doesn't know why everyone around her is going into hysterics and ostracizing her. More than anything, *he* thrives on people's fear and inner turmoil," Chris stressed.

"I know... I will act like my normal self tomorrow when I see Sonia off," Brigitte said.

"Please do."

Having remained on the sidelines throughout his wife's exchange with Chris, Duke Dumas suddenly gave a heavy sigh. It was an indication he'd heard enough.

"Do you honestly believe Sonia has been cursed? I'd like to believe it's not true myself," he said.

"But people have been talking about this curse for ages... Not that anyone was insensitive enough to mention it in front of that poor family," the Duchess said.

She added on, "But...first we lost Duke Clare and his wife in that terrible accident... Then, starting with the first in line when he died falling from his

horse, the Clares lost children to illness, accidents, and duels in order of succession over the course of a few years... You can hardly write this off as mere gossip anymore..."

"Your Grace," Chris interrupted the Duchess as the blood drained from her face once more. "Take the utmost care Her Grace does not learn of this. I'd appreciate it if you could do that until I find a way to break this curse. This is a royal order, issued personally by His Majesty."

"King Patrice personally...? Of course I can." The Duchess wrung her handkerchief as she nodded her head in consent.

Orders issued by the King were absolute. The situation was sensitive enough to require the direct intervention of Crisford Cortot, the King's right-hand knight and the highest ranking military commander in the kingdom. Not only did it imply the possibility that this could grow into a grave problem for the kingdom, it also indicated the importance of the Clares.

"While I don't believe in that Clare Curse nonsense, I find you rather unbelievable as well," Duke Dumas said to Chris.

"How so?"

"Aren't you afraid? Doesn't the curse on that girl scare you?" Duke Dumas asked. It was a perfectly reasonable question.

"Since times of yore, it has been common practice for knights to protect princesses and save them from any manner of trouble," Chris said with a wink and a smile beaming with confidence.

RISING early the next morning, Sonia and Chris left the Duke's country house to make their way toward Clare Castle. Sonia was in a splendid mood, balancing a basket on her lap. Brigitte had personally given it to her, saying, "Here's a little something for the carriage ride."

I guess she wasn't feeling well last night, just like the Duke said.

Since putting the rosary around her neck, the black cloud inside her had completely vanished. She wasn't sure if that had something to do with it, but

the sight of Chris' fuzzy face and hairy hands didn't bother her to the point of fainting.... She'd merely shudder a little.

"What do you have there in the basket?" Chris asked, brimming with curiosity. To be fair, they had left in the dim hours before sunrise—without a chance to eat. It didn't help that the carriage was filled with an indescribably scrumptious aroma wafting from the basket.

"I'll take a look," Sonia answered. She was also curious. The toasted, sweet smell was tantalizing.

The moment she opened the basket, Sonia looked back up at Chris with eyes that sparkled like aquamarines and passed over the whole basket with a "Here you go!" to show him the contents.

It had fried chicken and baguette sandwiches with ham, cheese, and plenty of vegetables. For dessert, there was a cake loaded with dried fruit. It was also crammed packed with a generous amount of fresh fruit.

"This is amazing!" Chris exclaimed. His eyes were also sparkling. He looked as if he were about to attack the basket at any moment.

"Are you hungry?" Sonia asked. Seeing Chris on the verge of drooling, she offered, "Would you like to eat?"

"Oh, I couldn't... My apologies. Here I am, a grown man, getting worked up over food. This is terribly embarrassing," Chris apologized.

Sonia couldn't help but giggle at the sight of Chris patting down the short hair on the back of his head in a poor attempt to hide his embarrassment.

"Why don't you dig in?" she suggested, but Chris declined with the shake of his head. "...But will you be all right?" she pressed with concern.

Anyone who saw Chris could see he was physically large, boasting a strong, robust build fit for a soldier. Meanwhile, Sonia figured she could get by without eating much since she was accustomed to simple meals from life at the abbey and wasn't terribly active. Chris would go hungry if his serving wasn't proportional to his large body size.

"You don't need to match my eating habits, okay? Feel free to help yourself,"

she added and handed the basket back to Chris. Despite taking it, Chris quickly flipped the lid down and placed the basket by his side.

“Sir Chris?”

Noticing how Sonia was batting her eyes in surprise, Chris explained with a chuckle, “I know of a superb resting spot not far from here. The sun should be rising by the time we arrive, so let’s dine there.”

NOT much time had passed since the morning sun’s face first emerged from the horizon, gently illuminating the land. Under Chris’ orders, the carriage ambling down the lazy country road came to a stop.

“We’re almost there, Princess. It’s a short walk from here, but you’ll find it well worth the effort,” Chris explained while offering Sonia his hand once more.

After a moment’s hesitation, Sonia threw all caution to the wind and laid her hand upon his. Nothing happened. Relieved to the bone, she allowed Chris to assist her down from the carriage.

Chris led her by the hand up the gently sloping hill. That alone was enough to set Sonia’s heart racing. It felt as if she were treading upon a whole new world.

“Aren’t you afraid of setting foot on unfamiliar soil, Princess?” Chris asked, noticing the spring in Sonia’s step as she hummed.

“No! Not at all! It’s so much fun when I imagine what might be lying ahead,” she replied, only to furrow her brow in a troubled frown.

“What’s the matter?”

“You’d never know I’m of marriageable age... I’m a far cry from the image of a proper young lady... It’s mortifying.”

“Don’t let it get to you. Everyone is different. If you’re too shy and passive, running the castle while your husband is away could prove challenging. I’m certain that your inclination to make things fun or joyous as you press onward is a trait that will prove very important to you,” Chris said. His hand suddenly pulled away from Sonia’s. “Look! That’s the spot over there.”

Sonia gasped in awe when her gaze fell upon the direction Chris was pointing.

Toward the peak of the gently sloping hill was a thick field of white flowers.

"I believe they are white clovers... It makes for such an impressive sight, I simply had to share it with you."

"It's beautiful! Absolutely breathtaking! Sir Chris, thank you for bringing me here," Sonia gushed.

He led her to the field of white clover flowers, smiling at how she seemed so excited that she was practically bouncing with enthusiasm. Upon reaching their destination, Chris removed his cloak and spread it over the ground.

"There you are. Please take a seat," he offered.

He did it all so smoothly, Sonia found herself briefly mesmerized; her cheeks promptly flushed.

"Th-Thank you."

"It was nothing," Chris replied with a smile that seemed particularly brilliant to her.

Now if only he didn't have that beard ruining his smile. No, even with all that hair it's still nice... Sonia thought to herself.

Chris sat leaving a respectable distance between him and Sonia before opening the basket.

"Now then! I think we've both been looking forward to breakfast!! I made sure to bring some wine as well," Chris declared. He amazed Sonia by pulling out a bottle of wine and two cups that he must have slipped into the basket at some point without her noticing.

FROM that point on, the journey to Clare Castle proved most enjoyable. Perhaps it was evidence of his years on Sonia, but Chris was a treasure trove of stories. Also versed in poetry and music, he sang happy songs, sad songs, and recited romantic poems. Among the various tales he spun were accounts of the palace and stories of knights. Not only did he display extensive knowledge over a wide range of topics, he was a captivating speaker.

Whenever Sonia pestered him to continue, he would change the topic, ask an

increasing number of questions about her, and occasionally start a debate. In this manner, the two of them talked without end. And before they knew it, they had reached Clare Castle.

The carriage haphazardly jolted to a stop. Wondering if something was amiss, Sonia peered out the window only to see her old home.

“What’s happened to it...?”

No sooner had she stepped out of the carriage than Sonia stared up at the castle aghast.

“Is this really Clare Castle...?” she asked. The whitewashed porcelain castle had lost its former glory. The whitewash was peeling off, revealing the unsightly stacks of faded Ashlar stones beneath. As if to say it was no longer needed in times of peace, the curtain wall encircling the castle meant to defend against enemy attacks suffered from neglect, with some areas left in shambles. Even the path stretching from the gateway to the forebuilding, and the decorative row of trees along the path, were abandoned to wither.

“Princess,” Chris called to Sonia, still looking around in dismay. Hearing his voice, she looked up at his face.

The next moment, her eyes darted toward Clare Castle towering behind him. The eerie vibe it emitted made her freeze in place. There was darkness—she felt like she could see some sort of black haze encompass the castle as if it were trying to hide it from the refreshing weather and clear blue skies.



“What happened here...?” Sonia struggled to ask before taking in a deep breath. Drawing her lips into a tight line, she glared firmly up at the castle.

“Let’s go, Sir Chris,” she said and offered her right hand as if asking him to escort her.

Chris couldn’t help but slightly curl his lips in a grin at the sight of her behaving like the mistress of the castle. “As you wish,” he replied and took her hand.

CREAK... The double doors made a rusty sound as they opened. The black doors had originally been selected to complement the porcelain white castle’s design, but they only made it look all the more creepy now that the whitewash was peeling off.

Although Clare Castle was an old castle with a long history, it had undergone remodeling and renovations countless times in the past to keep it up to date with the times. The landing spread before Sonia’s eyes when she opened the entrance doors. She knew if she climbed up the landing, which had been enlarged during renovations, the grand staircase dominating the center of the room would take her straight to the second floor. Doors leading to the other rooms were placed directly in front of the stairs, as well as on either side.

The first floor had a great hall for balls and meetings, a dining room, along with a sunroom that opened to the courtyard.

Welcoming their mistress home, the staff, maids, and butler stood in procession with heads bowed on either side of the rectangular, crimson rug that seemed to continue on forever. Serving as the representative of the castle staff, the chamberlain, Matthew, greeted Sonia and Chris.

“Welcome home, Duchess Sonia! And it is an honor to welcome our mistress’ fiancé! Thank you for coming, Sir Crisford Cortot!” Matthew exclaimed.

Seeing what had become of Matthew, Sonia’s eyes widened and the blind anger dissipated. In its place, her pale blue eyes quivered with pity.

Despite his old age, in the past every inch of Matthew’s body had beamed

with pride at holding such an important position. It was as if the youthful soul of the Matthew she knew had suddenly aged, for his face was covered in wrinkles, and his hair had turned white and dull. He used to stand straight and tall regardless of his years, but now his back was hunched over as if he could no longer hide the weight of his burden.

Yet, the way he still welcomed her back with a cheerful voice clearly unable to conceal his happiness touched Sonia's heart. When he presented the Clare administration report at the abbey a month ago, he had still been his ordinary, lively self. Whatever troubles had brought about such a dramatic change in him must have occurred within this past month. Sonia's intuition told her that whatever it was, it was related to Clare Castle.

"Matthew! I can't believe my eyes...! How have you managed? What happened?" she asked.

"Duchess Sonia..."

Matthew was briefly dumbstruck that Sonia would draw him into an embrace, but after a moment, he began to shake his head happily from side to side as tears filled his eyes. After gently pulling Sonia away, he wiped the tears from her eyes while explaining, "Several problems hit all at once... However, we should be fine. All shall be well now that you've come back with Sir Crisford," Matthew said and looked over at Chris. They seemed to communicate something through their eyes before exchanging nods.

She had no idea what went on between the two men, but decided it was time to pull herself together and straightened her back.

"I want an explanation. Why is the castle in such a horrible state? What has been going on here?" she inquired. This was her first job as the lady of the castle.

THE chamberlain, Matthew, the house steward, and the housekeeper gathered before Sonia and Chris.

"To be honest, both the severity and frequency of the paranormal phenomena here have increased recently," Matthew began.

Continuing his explanation, he said, “We might normally be able to overlook floating dishes and furniture, but not if they attack us and the staff. And even if we tend to the garden, somehow we find it overgrown with weeds the very next day, while any plants and flowers we try to bring in simply wilt away. We suffered a string of casualties while trying to fix the castle walls, and we finally managed to complete the repairs despite them, only for the whitewash to begin rotting off a day later... The workers fled out of fright, and no one who has heard the rumors of our castle is willing to pick up where they left off.”

The house steward chimed in, “Our castle staff are so scared of the sudden increase in strange occurrences that they are resigning one after the next... We are barely scraping by currently using staff that have been dispatched from the palace on order of the King or recruited from distant lands at the promise of abnormally high wages.”

The housekeeper nodded along as the steward disclosed his frustration.

Sonia had listened to their explanations quietly but found herself asking, “Earlier Matthew mentioned these phenomena have ‘increased’... Does that mean the track record of the things you described goes further back than just recently?”

Realizing his tongue had slipped, the blood drained from Matthew’s face.

“How far back does this history go?” she repeated.

Matthew caved under Sonia’s persistence and confessed the answer with a lowered gaze. “I am terribly sorry. We were acting under strict orders from your father, the late Duke Clare, to keep this a secret from you...”

“You were so young, he didn’t want you to be afraid. His Grace only did it out of love!” the housekeeper admitted, jumping in to defend Matthew.

It was common for strange or otherworldly phenomena to occur in old castles with long histories. Most had already accepted it as simply a part of life—assuming it remained in the realm of inconsequential *mischief*.

“Did it get this bad just recently? Do you remember roughly when it began to escalate?” Sonia asked.

“I believe it was about two weeks ago...”

Around when my engagement was decided? Sonia couldn't help but look up at Chris.

Rubbing his maturing beard, Chris suggested, "I'd say this transcends petty 'mischief.' Wouldn't it be in your best interest to call for an exorcist?"

Matthew, the house steward, and the housekeeper all turned to look at Sonia.

"...You're right. Let's call one over," Sonia agreed.

They decided to summon the parish priest right away. Matthew grabbed the door handle to head out to make the necessary preparations.

"Whoa...!" he cried out. The moment he pulled to open the door, the handle popped right out!

Then the door flung straight at Matthew, who was still gaping at the gold filigree handle in his hands, and viciously smacked him square in the face. Sonia and the others rushed over to where he had fallen backwards on his rump in shock. Blood drizzled down the chamberlain's nose as he writhed in pain.

"Are you all right, Chamberlain Matthew?" Chris asked. When he planted himself in front of the old man to protect him from the door, it began swinging open and shut once more.

"Sir Chris, watch out!"

Having gained more momentum this time, the door swiftly swung toward Chris' back as if it were a weapon with a mind of its own. But— The door broke with a snap! Chris head-butted the heavy, thick wooden door, smashing it to pieces.

"Did you think you could kill a war hero with a measly wooden board?!" He laughed boisterously as his words, brimming with confidence, reverberated throughout the room. However, neither a disembodied voice nor an apparition appeared to offer a comeback.

"...Anyway, you can bill me for the door later. I'll cover it," Chris said, unshaken.

"No... You don't need—" Sonia was in the middle of rejecting his offer after

she had pulled herself back together when a thought suddenly occurred to her. She pressed her hand against her lips.

Sir Chris is my fiancé, which means he will become the lord of this castle... That's right—Sir Chris is going to be my husband.

The impending reality suddenly exacerbated her fears. *Can I really marry Sir Chris? How can I when I'm physically turned off by his beard and all that icky hair everywhere? Not to mention, there's still Prince Severin...*

All of the years she had spent pining after Prince Severin, her tender first love, made it hard for Sonia to immediately shift her heart from one man to the other.

“Are you all right, Princess?” Chris asked. He had dropped down to her eye level, clearly concerned for her wellbeing since she had suddenly fallen silent while squatting on the floor. Something about that rubbed her the wrong way.

“Don’t get that nasty fuzzball face of yours near me,” she hissed, the insults flowing naturally from Sonia’s mouth yet again.

“Ngh!” Sonia swallowed her breath as she frantically snapped her mouth shut. The look of surprise that Chris, Matthew, the house steward, and the housekeeper all directed at her was painfully embarrassing.

“I-I’m sorry! I must be tired...! I’m going back to my room now! Please call an exorcist for me!”

Her mouth had started rambling things all on its own again. It was terrifying! Sonia’s hand touched the rosary tucked in her bosom as she left the room.

I’m scared! Is this more mischief by whatever is haunting my castle?

She needed the priest to come right away! The continuous string of trouble was beginning to sour Sonia’s mood.

BEFORE doing anything else, Chris had the head steward give him a tour. Although the current crisis made the entire castle seem dark and stagnant, it had a long history. Furthermore, it was practically the same size as the palace where the King resided.

In line with owning such a vast castle, the Clares possessed numerous demesnes. At one point, their assets had even surpassed the national budget. Their wealth was so great that they had lent the King capital for war in the past, and it had expanded even further during Sonia's grandfather's time. And then trouble had hit the Clare family.

Chris trailed behind the house steward, casting fascinated glances at any of the furnishings that seemed to hold historical value.

"It's a shame the paranormal phenomena are laying waste to your beautiful furniture and decorations," Chris commented, sounding distracted. It didn't sound much like he mourned their loss.

Though he appeared to find value in armor and swords, he didn't seem to have much of an eye for art. But perhaps that should have been expected of someone paid to wield a sword. The head steward bore this in mind as he spoke to the man bequeathed the title of Royal Knight. "To be honest, we've had a priest come perform exorcisms more than once..."

"And they were all ineffective," Chris concluded.

"...Well, this curse goes back to Duchess Sonia's grandfather. I realize it won't be easy to remove, but if we don't do something, Duchess Sonia's life will be in danger..."

"That's why I'm here. I intend to do my best to help her."

"Aren't you afraid? He will come for your life simply because you're her spouse."

"On the battlefield, I always have the highest bounty on my head. I'm accustomed to people coming after me regularly," Chris announced with a radiant grin that stunned the head steward. The way he carried himself without fear of death brought a smile to the man's lips.

"I see His Majesty has chosen wisely."

"Actually, I'm personally puzzled by his decision," Chris remarked.

"Oh? And why is that?"

As if trying to hide his embarrassment, Chris ran his hand through his short

hair.

“I declared that I’d ‘never get married,’ and I’ve rejected every marriage proposal up until now. His Majesty is well aware of this, but nevertheless pushed me into this engagement. Although I must admit, I could see where it was going when I learned my fiancée is Duchess Sonia de Clare.”

“I see word of the Clare Curse has spread far and wide...”

“It’s a testament to the Royal Abbey’s impeccable supervision that Her Grace never learned of the curse. The Abbess there is a brilliant woman,” Chris replied.

“Nevertheless, I’m afraid Duchess Sonia will catch word of it before long,” the head steward said with sorrow in his voice.

“I hope that she will learn about it in the least shocking way possible. When she learned I was her fiancé, she took one look at my face and fainted. I’d hate to make the young lady suffer more than she already must,” Chris said with a grim smile, stunning the head steward yet again.

“She doesn’t seem to hold you in disfavor...”

“Oh, how should I put it...? I don’t think *she’s* the one who hates me,” Chris replied.

“*She* isn’t...?”

Ignoring the house steward’s look that begged for an explanation, Chris pressed on. “There is quite a bit I, myself, don’t understand. At any rate, the Pope saw in a dream that I am the chosen one. Besides, there is a time-honored practice for knights to save princesses in distress. I guess you could say my chivalric code demands I take action.”

Only growing more confused, the head steward realized that Chris had no intention of offering a detailed explanation at present, so he simply nodded in reply and climbed the stairs.

Then, sensing the knight’s robust presence—physically and metaphorically—waken, the house steward turned back.

“Oh? Sir Chris?”

He found Chris gazing fixedly at the wall to the small landing just before the stairs. A large, religious painting hung there.

"That was commissioned by Duchess Sonia's grandfather, the Duke two generations ago. He claimed this scene unfolded before him countless times in his dreams," the head steward supplied.

"So that's what it means," Chris whispered with his shoulders quivering. His stifled laughter grew into a hushed chuckle. "So that's what it means!" he roared, bursting into a mighty laugh. It should go without saying that his laughter echoed throughout the entire castle.

THE room Sonia had used before going to the Royal Abbey was cleaned periodically. She went into the adjoining bedchamber, kicked off her shoes, and plopped down on her bed.

"...Ah!" Upon hesitantly testing her voice, Sonia was filled with relief to find it was back to normal.

Breathing a sigh of relief, she suddenly noticed something on her chest felt amiss where the rosary dangling on its silver chain nestled against her bosom.

"Huh...?"

She only touched it through her clothing, but it didn't feel the same as usual. Unfastening the clasp, she pulled the rosary out from under her dress. What she saw made her tremble.

"What...happened?! I don't believe my eyes!"

The ornately crafted silver rosary was tarnished pitch black.

"What's going on?! *No!* This is too scary! *Someone help me!*" Sonia shouted and flung herself across the bed in a fit of tears. "Mom! Dad! Alexis! Help me! *I can't take it anymore!*"

This was the first time Sonia had called out to her parents and older brother while crying, since her family had died when she was little. The sudden isolation had forced her to face loneliness, uncertainty, sadness, and indescribable loss. But even so, she had been able to get back on her feet because she was still

young and had people who offered kind, gentle hands of support.

But things were different now. Not only did she have a fiancé, she'd be getting married soon. In other words, she was an adult. Once she inherited this massive fortune, it would be up to her to run the estate as the lady of the land. Now it was her turn to step into the advisor role.

"But I have *no idea* how to deal with this!" She punched her frustration out in her pillows.

KNOCK! KNOCK! The knocking at her door finally caught Sonia's attention. From the sound of the frantic pounding, the visitor had tried knocking dozens of times. Occasionally she could hear him use that same title as always, calling, "Princess?" from the other side of the door.

"...Sir Chris!" Sonia breathed. She raced barefoot across the room to open the door.

"I came to bid you good night, but heard you crying. I was just about to fetch help. What happened, Princess?"

"S-Sir Chris!"

Breaking into tears, Sonia threw herself upon Chris. Despite his surprise, the knight gently stroked her shoulders.

"Princess, calm down. Could you explain what happened?"

"My rosary...!"

"Your rosary?"

The blood drained from his face when he realized the tarnished lump clutched in Sonia's hands was her rosary. But as might be expected of a knight of his caliber, not only was he quick to regain his composure, he even mustered a smile.

"This is proof it was protecting you."

"My rosary was...?"

"That's right. You earned its protection for being such a good person in your daily life," he explained.

Sonia couldn't help but smile wryly. Instead of claiming it was due to the strength of her faith, he said it was because she was a good person.

I feel like he's coaxing a child.

In all reality, there was a sixteen-year age difference between them. He could very well see her as a child. Case in point, Chris was patting her on the head as if to say, "There, there. You're a big girl."

It was somewhat annoying he didn't see her as a fellow adult, but more than anything, she found herself filled with a happy feeling that was warm and fuzzy.

"Do you have any other rosaries?" he asked.

"Yes, I have the one I received from the Reverend Mother..." Sonia said as she searched through her things. She found the small box it was stowed in and hesitantly began to open it in front of Chris. Fear that it would be tarnished as well made her hands tremble.

"Allow me," Chris offered. Noticing Sonia's trepidation, he took the tiny box and opened it slowly with great care. The two peeked inside...and were filled with relief. Wrapped in white silk, the platinum rosary emitted a divine light.

"It's okay," Sonia confirmed.

"Indeed."

Chris took the rosary out of the box and put it on Sonia, who now wept tears of joy.

"Has this put your mind at ease?"

Sonia's nod earned her more pats on the head. As Chris consoled her, his face appeared extremely kind, overflowing with compassion. He was protecting her—Sonia got that feeling from him.

It was extremely comforting, and she thought of him as more reliable than any rosary, so why was she filled with such disgust over a measly beard? Because he was going to become her husband in the near future? Or was it because her first love came too close to her image of the ideal man?

But still...

She hadn't expected Prince Charming to come whisk her away from the abbey, to stay true to her, and be there for her all the time... A man possessing all of the traits she desired in a husband would never appear outside of a fairy tale.

At least she harbored a more realistic outlook in that respect than most other girls her age. As a result, she uttered no complaint upon learning that Chris was her fiancé. She was even beginning to make a conscious effort to somehow grow fond of his beard before the wedding ceremony.

Going by her own self-analysis, it was the experience of losing her parents in the past that gave her such a practical orientation. Here before her, a middle-aged knight was offering her a smile. And while he might be middle aged, he had earned the highest rank among knights, Diamant. He was most assuredly skilled. Unmatched by any youth, he boasted the strength and physique worthy of such a title. Such was the man renowned as the guardian angel of the kingdom.

However, his head was not the least bit swollen with pride. He was a fascinating conversationalist and sang improvised songs—his voice was a true delight to the ears, at that!

I've heard palace knights must become proficient at the seven liberal arts and master etiquette on top of combat, so it makes sense Sir Chris can do all of that.

Furthermore, anyone could plainly see he treated her with all the respect due a proper lady. While there might be a large age gap, Chris was a better catch than she could have hoped for out of a husband.

Nevertheless, Sonia found herself glaring with teary eyes at the forest of hair growing along his jawbone.

Why does my body reject his beard—just his beard?! Simply drawing her attention to the beard made goosebumps pop up across Sonia's skin.

Chris must have thought it strange when Sonia suddenly glared up at him, for he brought his face down closer to hers. "Princess?"

"I-I'm sorry! I'm fine! Good night!" Unable to bear his face so close, Sonia fled to her room. Chris simply chuckled without any hard feelings.

"Good night then, Princess," he said and shut the door she had left wide open. He truly was quite the chivalric knight.

THE next morning, the messenger sent to fetch the parish priest the previous night returned alone.

"I see... So his hands are full..." Sonia said, disappointed.

"I'm so swamped with commissions that I'm afraid I won't be able to go anytime in the foreseeable future," the priest had claimed.

Upon hearing the messenger relay the priest's reply, Sonia sadly dropped her gaze. "Does that mean this territory is suffering from the supernatural phenomena plaguing the castle?" she asked.

"I haven't heard of any incidents...but I shall look into it," Matthew answered, standing in attendance at Sonia's side.

Come to think of it...

"Where is Sir Crisford?" she asked.

After having that knight with his boorish beard and overpowering presence stick to her side like glue for the past two or three days, it was puzzling to realize he was gone.

"Sir Crisford rode off before sunrise this morning. He said that he'd return before the sun reached its peak," the housekeeper replied, causing Sonia to quickly put the cup of tea she had been sipping back down.

"I should have waited for him before eating. Jeez, I wish you mentioned this sooner!" Sonia whined at the housekeeper.

The house steward stepped in and said with a faint smile, "It wasn't necessary. Sir Crisford instructed us before he left to serve you breakfast when you woke rather than wait for him."

"When he left, he told me 'It's been so long since Her Grace has traveled such a long distance, it seems to have exhausted her in mind and body. I shall go search the land where she was born and raised for good news to lift her spirits,'" Matthew added.

Sonia found herself slip, “Oh my!” at that. Her porcelain cheeks flushed ever so slightly.

“He didn’t need to go to such lengths for me...” Sonia whispered.

The housekeeper offered Sonia a fresh cup of tea as she said, “I’m sure that is simply the type of man he is.”

“He is a kind gentleman, Duchess Sonia.”

“To be sure. Not only is he kind, he’s a strong and renowned knight. I’m certain he will offer you the support you need, Duchess Sonia.”

The housekeeper, head steward, and even Matthew smiled at her as if they trusted Chris with all their hearts, throwing Sonia into inner turmoil.

What should I do? Sonia wasn’t personally excited about this marriage. But she was sure no one would accept her resistance to the whole thing solely because of his “furry face.” Even if she asked Chris to shave, it was unlikely he’d go against his grandfather’s last request. And not even she could explain why she had such a strong aversion to his beard.

Is it because of how dry and itchy it looks? Because it’s growing out a bit...? Simply imagining it sent chills down her spine.

Not to mention... She was concerned about Chris’ attitude toward her. He was most courteous, and came across as mild-mannered and unassuming. With his extremely kind, gentlemanly treatment of women, he exemplified the superb image of a royal knight. *But...I don’t think that’s the right way to treat your fiancée.*

What if he didn’t see her in a romantic light and was merely obeying the King’s orders? She felt he was *too* polite. *How should I describe it...? I know! He’s like a knight protecting a princess...! Huh?*

When she thought back to how Chris had interacted with her this whole time, it fit the “knight and princess” performance perfectly. He always referred to her as “Princess” and never explored any physical contact beyond touching her hands.

For some reason, realizing that made Sonia’s heart throb with a stabbing pain.

THE gentle spring sun came to shine upon Clare lands as assuredly as any other. Away from the castle, the leaves were a fresh, soft green. They were full of life as they bathed in the sunlight, absorbing the morning dew.

The serfs who had begun working the land bright and early did not glare suspiciously at Chris for being an outsider, but instead, bowed with hats in hand.

I should have expected no less, since the Clare crest is embroidered on my horse's caparison, Chris chuckled to himself atop his steed. The sight made the peasants exchange confused looks with one another.

"Hmn!" His head jerked up when he sensed malice from the direction of the gleaming sun. He squinted his eyes, focusing on the object hurtling toward him.

"Nice try!" Chris bellowed, as he unsheathed the blade at his waist and, without ever leaving the saddle, put all his muscle into his swing. In accordance to the Conservation of Momentum, one body acted upon another, and Chris sent the fist-sized stone back from whence it came. The object flew off into the sky at an even higher velocity than when it had come crashing down.

"Gweeeh!"

Using his hand as a visor against the sun, Chris saw the rock strike a bird, which shrieked a human-like cry as it tumbled to the ground. Kicking his horse into a gallop, he raced in the direction the bird had fallen. As he combed the shrubbery it had likely crashed into, he came across a marvelous pigeon.

"Well, I'll be... This should fix up nicely for supper tonight," he said, grabbing the lifeless pigeon by its legs. As he was lifting it up, Chris furrowed his brows. "...You're an awfully sinister-looking fellow—er, bird."

Chris convinced himself that perhaps pigeons suffer hardships in their own right before looking down at the shrubbery caught in its feathers.

"And I seem to be quite the lucky knight. I guarantee you, I've never had to go hungry," Chris said. He laughed happily at the heavy growth of wild raspberries.

“WELCOME back, Sir Crisford,” greeted Matthew. As if on cue, he had appeared as Chris was taking his horse to the stable.

“You can just call me Chris,” the knight offered.

“I would never have the audacity to treat Duchess Sonia’s husband-to-be on such familiar terms.” Matthew waved away the offer with a wry smile. Seeing Chris offer a slight shrug in resignation, the butler dropped his voice to ask, “So how did it go? Were you able to make the priest speak the truth?”

Truth be told, Matthew had asked the priest to perform an exorcism more than once, but each request was rejected for one reason or another. Even though the new head of the Clare family, Sonia, had sent the request this time, it was questionable whether he’d accept it.

That was why Chris had volunteered to secretly follow the messenger and observe the exchange. There was no denying the possibility that an ulterior motive lay behind rejecting their requests. Chris had watched the crestfallen messenger leave upon getting turned away before confronting the priest himself.

“I revealed my purpose, in the name of King Patrice, and it still took some work to loosen the man’s lips! That’s what took me so long... Does Her Grace suspect anything?”

“No, I told her that you said you were searching the land where she was born and raised for good news to lift her spirits,” Matthew answered.

“I see you’re better with women than I,” Chris teased.

“Surely you jest,” Matthew retorted then knit his brows speckled with white hairs into a sour frown over the priest.

“But if what the priest said is true, our foe could be too great for anyone but the Pope himself—no, it could prove a challenge even for His Holiness,” Chris said.

“...Then it truly is...”

“So you know about this?” Chris asked gravely, when the expression painted across Matthew’s face grew grimmer.

"Yes, I do," he replied, sadly lowering his gaze.

"I need to inform His Majesty and devise a plan... If we're up against a fallen priest, it will complicate things in more ways than one," Chris said, untying a basket bound to the horse. The basket was filled with wild spring flowers, ripe raspberries, and the pigeon he had knocked from the sky.

"The people here are nice and friendly. They looked tranquil rather than world weary. It's the sign of good land under fair administration."

"It's an honor to hear you say that."

"At least this way, the 'message' you gave Her Grace won't be a lie anymore, Matthew," Chris said with a toothy grin and a mischievous chuckle, before heading to the castle to give Sonia the basket in its entirety.

WAITING by the forebuilding to greet Chris, Sonia's eyes nearly popped out of her head when he handed her a basket. It was filled with the fresh, natural fragrance of wildflowers and bittersweet aroma of raspberries.

"It smells like they were freshly picked," she said.

"Would you like to try one?" Chris asked, picking one of the raspberries out of the basket to show Sonia. The lustrous red raspberry was large and ripe, tantalizing her taste buds.

"It looks delicious!"

Forgetting her manners, Sonia chomped down on the raspberry pinched between Chris' fingers. Realizing she had gone too far, she quickly hid her mouth behind her hands as she chewed the berry. Meanwhile, Chris stood dumbstruck, gaping at Sonia.

The housekeeper chastised, "Duchess Sonia, that was most unbecoming of a proper lady!"

"I-I'm sorry..." Sonia apologized, growing as red as the ripe raspberry.

To hide his own embarrassment, Chris dismissed it with, "No worries... But, um, thank goodness I didn't shock you this time," in a whisper.

"Seeing how fresh they are, we could eat them plain. Or should I have them made into tarts?" the housekeeper inquired.

Recognizing the housekeeper had offered her a way out of this awkward situation, Sonia answered, "I'd like that," and handed her the basket.

This isn't like me, is it? Sonia shot quick glances at Chris as she led him to the dining room, as he hadn't eaten yet.

She didn't find him the least bit repulsive or scary today. In fact, her heart was racing much like it did when she thought of Prince Severin.

Is it because of my scandalous behavior just a second ago, when I chomped on his finger? It truly was high time she started acting like a proper lady. After all, she was getting married.

I'm getting married. At that thought, she suddenly felt depressed. Could she view this man as her spouse for the rest of her life? She could come to respect him, but in order to leave heirs, eventually she would need to produce a child.

Could I bear having a child with him? She tried imagining it. Stripped of his clothes, Chris' robust, firm chest was like an overgrown field of ragged chest hair... When it touched her skin, the steely bristles would prickle—no, scratch...

"Ouch... Ow, that hurts!" Sonia cried. Simply imagining it made her skin hurt.

"Huh? Was there a thorn?" Chris asked.

"What?"

"You kept crying out in pain..." Chris pointed out.

"Er, it was nothing." Realizing the thoughts from her daydream had come spilling out of her mouth when Chris vocalized his concern, Sonia offered him a fake smile.

To make matters worse, this mouth of mine spouts out things I'm not even thinking, too. What is happening to my body...? She stewed over her troubles, wondering if it would be wise to consult a doctor.

"Princess," Chris broke in, standing next to Sonia, "I would like to discuss our marriage plans."

Here it comes! Sonia gazed into Chris' face, her heart pounding so hard in her

chest it hurt.

"Would you mind if we postponed the wedding?"

"...Huh?" The unexpected request left Sonia stunned.

Chris further elaborated, "I realize we're hardly strangers meeting for the first time, but a great deal of time has passed since we last met. Not to mention, you were still a child then. I imagine this must not come easy for you right after leaving the abbey, especially when your fiancé is an older man such as myself."

"No, I wouldn't say that... And you're hardly an old man..." Sonia protested.

Although Sonia had been so shocked by the sight of him when they met that she fainted, it was only because she was expecting Prince Severin to come for her. Plus, she had also been startled by his beard. On her journey home, she had been surprised to discover that she didn't particularly mind that he was older.

...Not if he's like Sir Chris, anyway, she thought, yet she also felt, But I just can't stand that beard. All that excessive body hair is too much for me, too!

"I thought it might be best to wait until we know each other a bit better, so we feel more comfortable with one another," he continued.

If she had more time, would his beard and body hair stop bothering her? If they were to get married as things stood, it was doubtful they'd enjoy fulfilling lives as newlyweds. It could open a deep rift between husband and wife.

But...

"But, Sir Chris, this marriage was arranged by His Majesty, King Patrice. I'm pretty sure that when the King arranges a marriage, he attends the ceremony. The date should be set to match his schedule. It isn't our place to change the date at our own discretion, is it?"

"We won't have a problem on that account," Chris answered.

"Pardon? How can that be?"

"A month from now, King Patrice is going to hold a ball at the Royal Palace in celebration of his birthday. He plans on announcing our wedding then. Didn't you receive the notification?"

"Yes, but it's too great an honor for us."

"You are the daughter of the King's dear cousin. Not only are you related, you are his legal ward. On top of that, you are the largest asset-holder in the kingdom. And above all else, His Majesty loves you as if you were his own daughter. It makes him happy that he can celebrate with you."

"That's even more reason not to postpone! If he found out we did that, wouldn't it tear him apart...?"

"I'm sure he'd prefer that over seeing you come as a bride in a veil of worry."

Sonia couldn't help but touch her cheeks. "Do I really look that bad?"

"Of course, I understand that our marriage isn't the only thing weighing down on you. So please don't look so troubled," Chris reassured when Sonia looked down with melancholic eyes.

He is such a wonderfully kind man. Not only was he trying to keep this from being awkward for her, he had tried to lift her spirits as well. It took an adult with a wealth of confidence to be able to suggest "Let's postpone the wedding."

Sonia knew how much she was worth. She could see just how enticing the men found her; an orphan loaded with tremendous assets and a massive estate. Most would be champing at the bit to take a girl like her to the altar before she could change her mind. But Chris prioritized her feelings, saw how the problems concerning Sonia and the castle were troubling her, weighing her down. His kindness made her heart waver, and yet...

That darn beard stuck on his face sends chills down my spine...

"Sir Chris, thank you for being so understanding. Um, just so you know, I don't dislike you by any means. I want you to realize that."

"Princess—"

Sonia's confession must have come as quite the surprise, for Chris drew her into a smothering embrace.

"S-Sir Chris!"

They slid to the ground, his body on top of hers.

“No! Let go of me!” Sonia burst out screaming, her mind thrown into confusion by his sudden assault.

It was that very moment when the piercing sound of glass shattering shot through Sonia’s ears, making her shrink in Chris’ arms. At the sound of the crash, the castle staff frantically raced into the room.

“Duchess Sonia! Sir Chris! Are you all right?!”

The scene that greeted Sonia once Chris pushed himself off her was a sea of glass shards from shattered candlestick holders. The decorative chandelier had fallen from the ceiling—the chandelier, with its dozens of glassblower-crafted, thin glass candlestick holders arranged in a circle, had fallen exactly where Chris and Sonia were talking only moments ago.



If it weren't for Sir Chris, I would have been crushed by that chandelier. Seeing the horrible fate that nearly befell her, Sonia began to tremble.

"Sir Chris," she said. Turning to face him, Sonia's eyes shot wide open in surprise. Several small shards of glass had torn through his clothes and stabbed his upper right arm.

"There's glass in your arm! Oh, dear! Someone, hurry and fetch a doctor!" Sonia desperately ordered the crowd, but Chris shook his head with a grin.

How can he be so calm? Doesn't it hurt? The answer came soon enough.

"Ngh!" Chris flexed hard enough to pop his biceps. When he did, the glass shards piercing his arm popped out like corks in champagne bottles. His arm showed no signs of ever being stabbed.

"Ha ha ha! This was nothing! I don't undergo just any old training regimen!" he boasted.

"...Amazing! If I train as much as you, could I expel something stabbing me too?" Overcoming her surprise, the earnest question flew from Sonia's awe-stuck mouth.

In response, Chris seemed serious when he gave his answer. "If you train hard enough, you can, to an extent."

The surrounding maids and staff waved their hands frantically in protest. "No, that's impossible!"

"Truth be told, my ability to use protective magic probably helps," Chris admitted.

Sonia nodded and said, "I guess that makes sense." Everyone else also agreed and began cleaning up the chandelier straightaway.

"Duchess Sonia, are you all right?" the housekeeper asked as she worked with Chris to help Sonia get back on her feet.

"Yes, I'm fine. But I'm surprised the chandelier suddenly fell..."

"We recently brought it down to replace some of the candlestick holders that were broken. Perhaps the base wasn't bolted down firmly enough. I'll make

sure it is bolted firmly in place this time,” the head steward said.

Yet from this incident on, calamity seemed to be magnetized to Chris.

“DUCHESS Sonia, this is all of them.”

“Thank you.” Sonia smiled sadly as she glanced across her room that was so stuffed with wooden trunks that there was hardly any room to walk. Her late mother’s clothing and jewels were stored in those trunks.

“Mother had quite the wardrobe, didn’t she?”

“Not only did she inherit clothes from her own family, she also received them as gifts from your paternal grandmother,” the housekeeper explained. A sad, reminiscent look crossed Sonia’s face as she nodded in response.

Sonia had to prepare several outfits for the King’s birthday celebration next month. Perhaps due to their old lineage, the Clares had an extravagant collection of historical jewelry and accessories. Many of the dresses were made with them in mind. Clares for generations had worn these accessories with the dresses, remade to fit the current trends. Now, as the current lady of the house, the dresses needed to be updated for Sonia.

“Put any of the dresses that have been damaged or eaten by moths in one pile. Bring the ones that look wearable over here,” the housekeeper instructed.

“Should we organize them by color?” Sonia asked.

“Good idea. Let’s go ahead and do that as well,” the housekeeper agreed.

The tailor joined them as the women opened the chests, each radiating excitement. After all, women of any age or social status would enjoy gazing upon a wealth of beautiful, vibrantly colored dresses.

But after a moment of silence, gasps of concern spread among them like a ripple. Sonia stared vacantly at one of the open trunks. The insides of all the trunks were pitch black, as if they had been burned.

“What happened to them...?” she asked.

She checked each trunk. If the clothes were reduced to soot, the fire should

have damaged the trunks as well. Yet, upon checking all of the trunks that stored clothes, none of them showed fire damage.

“Did someone take the clothes out, burn them, and then put the ashes back in...?” the housekeeper wondered, but Sonia shook her head.

“That couldn’t be it... They were burned in the trunks. If they were burned outside, the ashes and soot wouldn’t form such clear outlines of the clothing. It would have crumbled when put back inside...”

As Sonia stared at the soot and ashes that had once been fine clothing, the blood drained from her face, turning it a ghastly white. Without so much as budging, she fixed her eyes on the lost clothes.

“Duchess Sonia!”

With the assistance of the maids at her side, the housekeeper pried Sonia away from the trunk, as she didn’t seem herself. The moment Sonia’s hand lost grip on the trunk, she fell flat on her rump and stopped moving.

“Get Sir Crisford,” the housekeeper instructed one of the maids, as she shook Sonia’s shoulders to see if she was conscious.

It wasn’t long before Chris came. He dodged around the trunks to reach Sonia, who was sitting in the center of the room.

On his way to her, he peeked inside one of the open trunks. Understanding what had shocked her into a daze, he said in a soft, kind voice, “Princess, we still have plenty of time before the birthday celebration. I know a seamstress we could summon, so please don’t look so disappoint—”

“That isn’t the problem...”

“It isn’t?”

Chris’ words made Sonia snap back; she slowly raised her head to look at him. Her large, pale blue eyes quivered like ripples struck by the wind.

“The clothes kept in these trunks weren’t just made for my mother and grandmother—they go back for generations... With each passing generation, they undergo repairs and slight alterations. The Clare women have treasured them for so long... But now that they’ve been passed on to me... This is a

disgrace to my ancestors! Why did this have to happen...? Is it a sign I'm not fit to inherit the Clare legacy?"

"Princess...it doesn't—"

"If you look at it like that, it'd explain why all of these bizarre things have been happening. God doesn't approve of my leaving Him to return to the secular world. This is divine punishment meant to make His will known. But in my blind foolishness, I waltzed right on back to the castle... So He destroyed part of my precious family heritage that goes back for generations... How could I have been so foolish?!" Sonia cried.

It made sense. Come to think of it, ever since she had left the Royal Abbey, strange things were happening left and right. It was a message that she should serve God for the rest of her life.

"It's nothing of the sort, Princess," Chris said.

"But..."

Seeing Sonia look at him with eyes so filled with tears that looked as though they were about to start streaming down her cheeks at any moment, Chris offered her a smile and reminded, "Our God does not administer punishment. Each and every person bestowed life on this Earth is given a purpose.

"You are doing everything within your power to ensure the survival of your family name... This may feel daunting on your own, but you're nevertheless striving to fulfill your duty. I can't imagine God would punish you for leaving Him when He can see such diligence."

"I-I..."

"This is coming from the man blessed with God's protective magic, remember? If anyone was going to receive divine punishment, wouldn't I lose my magic first and foremost, as your future husband?" Chris said teasingly with a wink.

Putting on a bold front, the housekeeper piped in, "He's absolutely right! You have Sir Chris, blessed by God, our Holy Father, on your side! There's no way this is divine punishment!"

The other maids also jumped in. "Right! Let's find the rascal who played this cruel prank and teach him a lesson he won't soon forget!"

"Couldn't it be a natural phenomenon of some sort? Let's investigate!" another suggested, greatly lifting Sonia's spirits.

The atmosphere had completely changed, making the room feel bright and cheerful. Sonia wiped away her well of tears and threw everyone a smile. Getting back on her feet, she arched her back in a deep stretch.

"You're right! But for now, we need to clean out the trunks and order completely new gowns for the birthday celebration! Everything will have to be made from scratch, so we're going to have our hands full!"

"Right!" All of the staff present responded enthusiastically before briskly setting about their tasks.

Sonia approached Chris, who had been solemnly watching the scene unfold. With no small hesitation, she reached out to hold his hand tightly. The action not only surprised Chris but Sonia herself.

"Phew! You didn't shock me!" Sonia seemed overjoyed as she held his hand. The reaction Chris gave was rather unexpected.

"S-So I see...! That's great! Just wonderful!"

He's clearly nervous. Sweat is pouring down his face, and he's turning bright red. After the way he had handled Sonia with the calm composure of an adult, it made his reaction all the more puzzling.

"I-I know! Allow me to pitch in. Even I can manage emptying the trunks and cleaning them without getting underfoot," Chris said and grabbed the closest trunk, which was particularly large.

"The maids can attend to—AAH!" A shocking sight caused Sonia to scream, cutting off her attempt to stop him.

CLACK! The trunk had swiftly snapped its lid with a loud crack, trapping Chris inside.

SCREECH! SCRATCH! SCREECH! SCRATCH! It made a terrifying noise as it slid across the floor with a mind of its own. The trunk threw the room into turmoil,

mowing down any trunks or maids in its path.

Everyone began screaming and crying before the impossibly strange phenomenon. Amidst the chaos, Sonia desperately chased after the trunk as she shouted Chris' name.

“SIR CHRIS!”

“HIYAAAAHH!” Accompanied by that battle cry, a long, large sword pierced out of the trunk. The trunk containing Chris came to a halt before Sonia, who was too astounded to move.



“HAAAAA!” The stifled sound of Chris’ spirited cry came from the trunk.

CREAK! CRACK! SNAP! The sound of thick wood breaking filled the air as Chris burst out of the trunk with sword in hand.

“Take that! You’ll need to do better than that to wipe me off the face of the planet!” Chris declared with a mighty laugh, drawing the dumbstruck stares of everyone present.

Stealing a quick glance at the trunk he destroyed, Chris said, “Whoops!” and turned to offer Sonia words of apology while rubbing the back of his head.

“Ah...Princess, I’m terribly sorry. I didn’t mean to destroy one of your trunks,” he apologized.

“It-It’s fine... I don’t mind that...” she replied.

I don’t think that’s the problem at hand... Sonia thought to herself while fielding Chris’ endless apologies.

Shortly after the incident, several more maids resigned and left the castle. Chris sent the King a letter requesting that he recommend Clare Castle to anyone in search of employment. He made sure to stress a preference for thick-skinned folk who would think nothing of the extraordinary...

“**SIR** Chris, are you sure you’re all right? Do you hurt anywhere?” Sonia asked.

“They’re just a few scratches. At most, I’ve got some bruises, so you don’t need to worry about me,” Chris assured her.

Seeing the wounds covering Chris grow with each passing day made Sonia’s face darken with concern. On the other hand, the knight seemed extremely cheerful, as if he were striving to show her there was no need to fret. In fact, he seemed positively radiant for some odd reason.

“It’s almost like the castle’s misfortune is being directed at you. I’m practically beside myself with worry...” It was hardly surprising for Sonia to voice such fears. The paranormal phenomena may have stopped plaguing the castle, but only because they now occurred around Chris instead.

Wherever Chris went—wherever his feet carried him—something was bound to happen. If he mounted a horse, it would suddenly spook and try to throw him off. If he took a walk in the yard, part of the wall deemed safe would come crashing down toward his head. If he lit a fire outside, a gust of wind would blow live embers toward him and catch his clothes on fire. If he walked along the garden path paved with chiseled stones, they would suddenly cave in. The incidents ranged from ones like the aforementioned that could prove fatal if not careful, to other silly little things.

For instance, if he plucked fruit from a tree in the orchard, a shower of fruit juice would rain down on him. If he walked on the grass, the grass in front of him would tie in a knot to catch on his shoe and trip him. When he ate, the ends of his knife and spoon would be bent. He was plagued by a variety of such nonfatal trickery.

If asked which was more frequent, the nonfatal pranks happened far more often.

“The majority feel like pranks played by a mischievous kid. They’re nothing serious. I’m simply integrating them into my daily training. Honestly, it’s exciting, the way *he* keeps thinking up new pranks to keep me on my toes,” Chris said with sparkling eyes. A sense of fulfillment emanated from his body.

So that’s what’s going on. He’s having the time of his life. His optimism was astounding. Sonia had always considered herself optimistic, but she acknowledged he had her beat with a wry smile.

“Hmm,” Chris said, “I do think it happens more often when I’m with you. Perhaps he’s jealous.”

“Jealous?” Sonia asked back, eyes wide with surprise at Chris’ opinion.

CREAK! CREAK! They heard heavy sounds as the area overhead was slowly overtaken by a shadow. When the two looked to the source of the oncoming shadow, they realized a tree was falling their way.

“What?!”

“Princess!”

Chris lifted Sonia and darted to the side. He openly laughed with glee as the

deciduous tree fell to the earth with a loud boom that made the ground tremble.

"I'd say he's embarrassed I hit the hammer on the nail!" Chris cheered. Sonia gave him a sidelong glance as he then admitted that even this was going a bit too far while rubbing his beard.

"I get the feeling the falling tree was furiously asserting, 'Don't get the wrong idea'..." she remarked, the tip of her lips quirking into a smile.

Is he being too optimistic...? For the first time, Sonia questioned Chris' judgment.

"Ah!" Chris must have suddenly remembered something, for he stopped rubbing his beard and turned to face Sonia. "That's right! There was something I've been meaning to ask you."

"What is it?"

"It's about the chapel in the castle..."

"**MATTHEW** told me this chapel hasn't been used since it was blocked off years ago," Chris explained. His hand rested on the unkempt door, its old paint chipped and peeling.

The chapel was built in the southernmost part of the castle. Located on the first floor, it stood in the most desirable of places. But, sealed shut with a large bolt, it barred entry from one and all.

"As I recall...my mother told me we 'closed this one because we built a new chapel in the ward.' I never thought much of it since this has been closed off for as long as I can remember," Sonia said.

There was indeed an adorable chapel with white walls built off in a corner of the inner bailey. Back when Sonia had lived here as a child, that was where she always went to pray.

"According to Matthew, your grandfather was the one who blocked this chapel off. Apparently he did it right after the priest who held services here passed away."

"Why would he do that?" Sonia asked, tilting her head in surprise. Normally the death of a priest didn't warrant building a completely new chapel.

"Would you mind if I opened the door? I'd like to look inside."

Sonia nodded to indicate she didn't mind. In reality, she herself had never been inside of this chapel. Back when she was still little, she and her brothers had once gotten caught before they could go in for one of their make-believe adventures. The scolding she had received from her parents was so harsh it crushed any further interest in venturing inside; her mother had wept bitterly and her father had flown into a fury as he chastised them.

As young as she was, even Sonia had picked up from the way their admonishment continued until late into the night that entering that chapel was dangerous. Thinking back on that incident, she couldn't help but hesitate over what they were doing, despite how far they had come.

"...Do you really think this is wise? What if the ceiling is rotten and collapses on us...?"

"I'm just going to take a peek. If it looks dangerous, we won't go in, so please don't worry," Chris answered as he removed the thick bolt.

CREAK... The door opened with a rusty cry. Only stepping partway in, Chris scanned the interior with sharp eyes. He proceeded to push open one of the double doors. With the bar he had just removed, he propped the door open to keep it from closing behind him.

"About the only thing I can say for sure at the moment is that it's musty."

"May I come in...?" Sonia asked.

"Give me a second," Chris said. He proceeded to enter alone to look around. A look of concern came over Sonia's face as she watched him from a distance. "It should be safe, but watch your step."

Chris came back to offer Sonia a hand, leading her inside. As expected of a facility connected to part of the castle, it was spacious with high, vaulted ceilings. The stained glass decorating the wall directly across from the entrance was transparent against the sun, making the room quite bright overall.

The chapel had been used a great deal as a ceremony hall for a variety of events. It was easy to see that great expense had gone into making the interior beautiful, since it was also a piece of the castle belonging to the highly influential Clare family.

So why did my family abandon it to build another chapel on our castle grounds? Sonia asked herself, adding to the endless list of questions. *Not to mention...*

It was so cold, she had wrapped her arms around herself without realizing it. Despite all of the light shining through the stained glass, it still felt oddly dim.

“Sir Chris...I don’t feel comfortable here,” she said while tightly squeezing the rosary dangling down her chest.

“Understood...” Chris must have sensed something, for the reply he gave was unusually concise.

After the two hurried out of the chapel, Chris put the bar back in place.

“Let’s keep this place barred off until an exorcist comes. This bar is pretty old, so it might be wise to have a new one made in the meantime,” he said.

“Absolutely,” she agreed. After a pause, Sonia continued, “I hope he comes soon.” Concerned, she heaved a heavy sigh.

“We’ll be at the capital in ten days or so. Why don’t you seek advice from the Pope while we’re there? I’m sure he will dispatch someone else for you,” Chris suggested.

“It’s worth a try... Why don’t we leave for the capital a little early? I imagine he’s only going to get busier the closer it gets to the birthday celebration.”

It was normal to leave well in advance whenever an engagement in the capital featured someone from the countryside. There was always the chance of running into bad weather or the possibility of getting caught in unfortunate accidents, such as encountering bandits.

Sonia made preparations to arrive at the capital five days before the birthday celebration, but an accident was waiting right around the corner.

Chapter 3: Reunion with My First Love: the Prince “IT’S raining cats and dogs...” Sonia commented as she peeked out through the small carriage window. Without a cloud in the sky, rays of warm sunlight had blessed patches of land when they first departed, but the rain now beating upon the ground only earned Sonia’s baleful glare.

She knew glaring wouldn’t stop the rain, but it was grating how it only poured down even heavier than before. It fell so furiously, Sonia had to quickly shut the window for fear of the heavy drops pelting the inside of the carriage.

“I’m afraid we’d best...seek shelter at an inn for the night,” Chris suggested from where he sat across from Sonia. She felt the same.

Due to the upcoming birthday celebration, a transient town had been built along the road leading to the capital. It was only a short ways off.

They had originally planned to go past the town and pitch a tent in the open fields a good distance beyond. They had stayed at Duke Dumas’ country house on the way from the Royal Abbey to Clare Castle, but considering the bizarre things happening both to and around her, Sonia couldn’t impose on them again.

Witnessing the paranormal phenomena happening to Chris as they steadily made progress in their preparations to depart for the royal capital only served to deepen Sonia’s fears.

“Should I forgo attending the event?” she had asked upon confessing her concerns to Chris.

“His Majesty is looking forward to seeing you. Besides, isn’t this an excellent opportunity to see what he thinks about these strange incidents?” he’d responded.

As Chris had pointed out, she wasn’t going simply to attend the King’s birthday celebration. So she now told herself anew that despite how reckless it

was, she would go to the capital not only for the celebration, but also to set things right.

I need to resolve this soon for Sir Chris, too... That was still something she found puzzling. Why do the paranormal phenomena only attack Sir Chris?

“He’s jealous,” Chris had once said, but Sonia felt there was a different reason behind it. Besides...

I think Sir Chris is a great guy, but I simply can’t see myself falling in love or sharing a romantic relationship with him. If anything, he was more of her knight in shining armor...and if Sonia had to give a more personal description, she might say he reminded her of an older brother.

If I cared for him, I suppose Sir Chris’ explanation makes some sense...maybe?

But what about Sir Chris? Does he...? Does he have feelings for me? Her body burned with embarrassment. She felt so hot that she began to flap her hand to fan herself.

“Princess? Are you all right? Is it hot in here?” Chris asked, reaching for the window. But if he opened it now, rain would come gushing in. As he racked his mind for a better solution, Sonia dismissed the offer with a faint smile.

“Oh, no...! I’m fine! I’ll cool down in a moment.”

CLUNK! The carriage swayed violently once before coming to an abrupt stop.

“What do you suppose that was all about?” she asked him.

Chris popped open the little window and asked, “What happened?”

At the sound of Chris’ voice, a flustered expression crossed the coachman’s face as he drew in close to explain, “We’re stuck in the mud...”

Come to think of it, the carriage was slightly leaning to one side.

“I presume the ditch isn’t all that deep. I’ll come out and help,” Chris announced. The guards frantically tried to stop him when they saw him open the door to get out.

“Please don’t! We’ll handle this, so please remain inside the carriage, Sir Crisford!”

"You'll get wet, so please stay there with Duchess Sonia, Sir Crisford!"

"I'll patiently wait inside if you promise to call me 'Chris' from now on," Chris countered.

The guards fell silent, for there was no way they could casually refer to their lady's future husband by his nickname.

After silently watching them, the hilarity of the situation finally got the best of Sonia. She couldn't help but giggle as she told the guards, "Good sirs, let Sir Chris lend you a hand."

With the guards' reluctant permission, Chris took to step out of the carriage. But the moment his feet touched the soil, trouble struck! The horses that were hitched by long lines to the carriage abruptly flew into a panic! The carriage tossed forward and backward, this way and that— "WHOA! Easy, there!" The coachman desperately tried to soothe the horses, but there was no calming beasts that were in such a frenzy that they were foaming at the mouth.

"EEK!" Sonia cried. She was flung back onto the seat inside the rocking carriage. The swaying was so great she was unable to get back up.

"Princess!"

Instead of calming the horses first, Chris focused on getting Sonia out of the carriage. But the moment he set foot on the carriage, "NEEEEIGH!" the horses trumpeted in unison and bolted—with Sonia still trapped inside the carriage.

"PRINCESS!"

Acting on impulse, Chris latched onto the open door. The horses wildly raced down a roadless path as if they had gone mad.

"Someone! HELP ME!" Sonia cried, as she clung onto the curtain for dear life to save herself from being hurled out the open door. She continued wailing for help in her fear.

The carriage pitched and swerved down an ominous route. *Not good!* The land was diminishing by the second. If Sonia's memory was right, there was a cliff up ahead!

"SAVE ME! SIR CHRIS!"



At the sound of Sonia crying out his name from inside the carriage, begging him to come to her rescue, Chris summoned desperate strength into his arms. With it, he hauled his body from the verge of falling off into the carriage.

“SONIA!”

“Sir Chris...!”

Despite being drenched, he offered her a shrug; despite being out of breath, he offered her a smile. Knowing everything would be all right, Sonia’s face crumpled as she flung herself onto Chris.

“It’ll be okay! Now hold on tight!”

“I will.”

There wasn’t a moment to lose.

Immediately after Chris leapt out with Sonia in his arms, the two turned to see the carriage fall down the cliff, accompanied by the horses’ cries. Then, out of nowhere, came a shout.

“DAMN! I was *so close* to killing you off!” bellowed a deep voice that sounded as if it came from the bowels of the earth...

Perhaps it was due to having been out in the rain; perhaps it was because she had nearly fallen off that cliff along with her carriage and horses; or perhaps it was because of the creepy voice she’d heard—whatever the case, Sonia broke out with a high fever. By the time they managed to reach the fancy inn at the transient town, she was bedridden till the fever broke.

BUT...*isn’t he worrying a bit much...?* Sonia had only spent one day sleeping due to her high fever. After that, she’d been put on bed rest for “good measure.” Whenever she tried to go out and about, she was promptly sent back to bed.

“We’re worried. Everyone cares about you greatly,” Chris explained with a smile when he came to check on her and offered her a bouquet. It was a magnificent bouquet of white and pink roses in full bloom.

“It’s from King Patrice,” he added simply.

“Wow...! They’re beautiful! I’ll be sure to thank him the next time I see him at the birthday celebration!” Sonia exclaimed.

“The doctor said it would be fine for you to be back on your feet tomorrow. Why don’t we head straight over to the palace?”

Sonia shook her head “no” at Chris’ suggestion. “I’d like to visit the Central Church first,” she said and revealed the rosary nestled at her bosom.

“Ah!” Chris gasped, his face growing dark. The rosary that had once emitted a silvery light was now pitch-black. Sonia’s eyes wavered with apprehension as she looked upon the heavily tarnished rosary.

“...I must uncover the root of the unearthly disturbances at the castle and the strange things happening around me...as quickly as possible,” she said, before heaving a long, heavy sigh. “Why...is this happening...? Is it possible the deaths of my mother, father and brothers—”

—were somehow related? Sonia was unable to bring herself to voice the last of what she had tried to spit out. She wanted to deny the possibility.

We weren’t plagued with all of these otherworldly terrors back when Grandfather was still alive.

“None of this makes any sense...” Sonia whispered hollowly. Chris gently patted her head. “Sir Chris...”

“It’s okay! You’ve got me! And I happen to be extremely lucky,” he boasted.

“Extremely lucky?”

He puffed up his thick chest to declare she’d heard right. “I’ve been in countless life-or-death battles and the like, but look! As you can see, I’ve come out of all of them in one piece, free of any debilitating injuries. The same can be said of the comrades-in-arms who fought at my side. As a result, our enemies always tremble in fear whenever I enter the battlefield. You can hear them yell, ‘Crisford Cortot has stolen all our luck!’”

“...Haha! You make it sound like you absorb all of the good luck around you,” Sonia said with a giggle.

"It feels like I'm vacuuming it up and scattering it around me... Hmn? Is it just me, or does that make it sound like I'm some sort of monster?"

Sonia had to cover her mouth to keep from laughing at the sight of Chris looking up with folded arms while muttering to himself, "That doesn't sound right..."

"Jeez...! You're so silly, Sir Chris...!"

"It truly is best when you laugh and smile. It brightens the spirits of those around you," Chris said, relieved to see Sonia trying her hardest to hold back her laughter.

"You're the one trying to make me laugh!"

"Laugh to your heart's content. And repel that wicked spirit! I would do anything to ensure you can spend your days laughing."

Everything about this man is strong, Sonia thought to herself, gazing upon the radiant smile Chris directed at her. He was gifted with a strong body, mind, spirit, and luck. It wasn't simply because God had blessed him with protective magic. His very presence seemed like a beacon, shining light on those around him.

I'd like to become like him. Strong and resilient.

"Sir Chris, I won't give up either. I'll repel any bad luck that comes my way!"

"That's the spirit, Princess," Chris said encouragingly, seeing the clouds of worry had vanished from Sonia's face.

"Um..." Suddenly curious why Chris referred to her the way he did, Sonia asked, "Sir Chris, why do you always call me 'Princess'?"

"Huh? For a knight such as myself, you are—"

"But didn't you call me 'Sonia' when you saved me from the carriage?" she asked, cutting him short. Chris turned bright red from head to toe in a matter of seconds, making her blink in surprise.

"Oh, jeez...! Where were my manners?! I was lost in the heat of the moment...!"

"Seeing as we're going to be husband and wife before long, I don't mind if you call me by my name..." Sonia ventured.

"I couldn't! We aren't married yet...! Please allow me to call you 'Princess' until we tie the knot," Chris pleaded.

Not wholly satisfied with his answer, Sonia fixed suspicion-filled eyes upon Chris. She figured that as far as he was concerned, she was still just a child. Considering the many years she had spent in the Royal Abbey, she was well aware that she was somewhat ignorant in the ways of the world, after all.

For her trip to the Royal Palace, Sonia had reviewed dance and etiquette, lest she be a nervous wreck. And, as she was ignorant of the latest gossip and trends in dresses, she'd had to ask Chris as she worked on gathering as much information as she could.

Nonetheless, I'm of marriageable age! Doesn't that mean I'm a mature adult in both mind and body?

But for a man in his thirties, did she come across as a naive little kitten?

Don't tell me he...

Struck by another possibility, Sonia hesitantly asked, "By any chance, was there another woman you promised to share your future with, but were pulled apart from her against your wishes due to the King's orders...?"

Chris was a knight in service at the Royal Palace. He could have promised to wed a lady who worked there. If he was remaining faithful to her, Sonia had unwittingly been terribly cruel. But Sonia's fears must not have been warranted, for Chris shook his head so violently to and fro that she thought she could hear his neck creak.

"If I had such a woman in my life, regardless of the King's orders, I wouldn't have accepted this marriage arrangement," Chris said.

"...Honest? You aren't forcing yourself?"

Struck with another suspicious glare, Chris rubbed his head with its shortly cropped hair as if to say, "Oh, jeez!"

"I am a knight in service at the Royal Palace. It goes without saying the knights

there have attained mastery of the sword and combat, but we must also be experts at etiquette, manners, and conversation. These are incorporated into the very nature of chivalry. In other words, it is expected and required for a knight to treat a lady with kindness and tender consideration. While I've interacted with women in the ways dictated by the chivalric code, my feelings were always pure."

"So that means...you call me 'Princess' because of your chivalric code, not because you see me as a woman?" Sonia surmised, somewhat annoyed. She felt a slight pang in her chest as if something had jabbed her.

A long moment of silence passed between the two. A faint flush still dyed Chris' cheeks red.

"...Aren't you still put off by my beard? That's why I'd like to continue playing the role of a 'knight' protecting the 'princess' a while longer. If you wind up wishing you'd never gotten stuck with a man with a beard...it will only make our marriage all the harder on you," Chris explained.

"Sir Chris..." Sonia said, dropping her head. She hadn't realized at all that he was doing this out of such care and consideration for her.

In all honesty, she had told herself that whoever the King picked would work out. She had resigned herself to her fate and decided, "There's nothing I can do about it anyway."

If I don't get a say in the matter, I'd like to get along with my husband and enjoy married life, she had thought. But what if somewhere in my heart, I'm not willing to "resign myself to my fate," so I chose to think "beards are scary"? If that proved to be true, she had asked Chris a horribly rude question when he had been nothing but polite according to knightly conduct. She hadn't even stopped to think about how he must feel!

"I'm sorry... My behavior is to blame, and yet you—"

"It's fine. I'm doing it for myself as well, so think nothing of it," Chris said, cutting her short.

"But...!" Looking up at the face of the knight who treated her with infinite kindness, Sonia couldn't help but stare in wide-eyed surprise. Chris was so red,

he was like a freshly boiled lobster, steam and all.

“...Sir Chris?”

When Sonia said his name, Chris hid his mouth behind his fist and shyly averted his eyes.

“...I’m able to maintain my composure when I approach you as a knight. The thing is, I’d see you through the eyes of the plain old man, Crisford Cortot, if I shed my armor as a knight...”

“I...I see...” Sonia said, blushing in turn.

“For the record, I am not a pedophile. I do not have a thing for little girls.”

“I...understand...” Sonia felt like she was going to die of embarrassment. She imagined Chris must have felt the same.

“Well then, I’m going to contact the Central Church. Take care!” Chris said and rushed out of the room.

“Romance is complicated when you’re an adult...” Sonia whispered absentmindedly as she fanned her flushed cheeks.

THE young handmaid who accompanied Sonia rushed in a mad flurry to inform her of a guest. “D-Duchess Sonia! The most astounding visitor has come to wish you a speedy recovery!” the handmaid cried with her face burning bright red. For all her alarm, her gaze was drifting as if in a dream.

“So? Who is it?”

Sonia barely had time to get the words out of her mouth before the guest asked, “May I come in, my darling friend?”

Recognizing the face peeking through the small crack in the door, Sonia gasped, “Ah!” in surprise and broke into a broad smile. “Prince Severin?”

“I’m glad you still recognize me, Sonia,” he said. Upon hearing his name, the young man had pulled his head from the crack and boldly swung open the door.

If any single word could describe him, “handsome” was it. Sunlight almost seemed to shine through the slightly wavy blond hair that fell over his ears. His

blue eyes were reminiscent of the deep, blue sea. He spoke in sweet whispers that seemed tailor-made to roll off his lips, cocked into a refined smile. Had he painted his pearly white face with lamé glitter powder to make it sparkle?

He wore a neatly bound lace scarf with a jacket that matched the color of his eyes. His slim-fit tights tucked into thigh-high leather engraved boots. The attire was most becoming set upon his frame that lacked even an ounce of excess weight.

Thigh-highs are all the rage right now! Not to mention that light wave perm! He totally nailed the sparkle effect with the lamé glitter powder!

Sonia's eyes quickly began checking off the various fads she'd had heard about from Chris. As expected, there was no getting past a woman's critical eye. But either Severin was accustomed to women sizing him up or he was confident in his sense of fashion, for he casually approached Sonia. Once by her side, he presented her with a single red rose.

"Ever since Father told me the news, I've been looking forward to seeing you again. But then I heard that with one thing after the next, from that accident to falling ill, your arrival to the palace has been delayed. So I figured I'd come pay you a visit," he explained.

There was a ribbon with silver embroidery tied around the stem of the rose he gave Sonia.

"I imagine Father already gave you a large bouquet, so I wanted to give you one flower filled with love, you know what I mean?" Severin said with a quick wink, which felt completely natural and innocent. It suited him so well that Sonia was just as hopelessly mesmerized as the handmaid waiting to be called on at her side.

"Th-Thank you. And I'm sorry you had to see me like this for our big reunion," Sonia apologized. Suddenly recalling her surroundings, she hastily tried to climb out of bed.

"It's fine. Stay as you are. No matter your condition, it doesn't change the fact that a cute young lady is still cute." He personally readjusted her blankets.

"...?" Sonia tilted her head, perplexed. Something about Severin's kind and

gentle act struck Sonia as odd.

“Is something the matter?”

“No, it’s nothing... Did you come incognito today, Prince Severin? Where are your attendants?” she asked.

“Waiting outside. I’ll draw a commotion if I stay too long, so I should probably head back now. Let’s meet at the palace next time and relive the old days,” Severin told her, before offering a respectful bow, kissing the handmaid on the hand, and taking his leave.

“The prince truly is in a class all his own! Every gesture was so elegant and refined! It’d be laughable if your average Joe tried to pull that off, but he made it all so enchanting!” the handmaid he’d kissed on the hand gushed. She went on to continue in her excitement but eventually fell silent when she noticed something was amiss with Sonia. Bunching the blanket in her fists, Sonia stared fixedly at one spot.

“Duchess Sonia? Are you feeling ill again?” she asked in a hesitant tone, but Sonia didn’t seem to hear her.

Sonia muttered weakly, “...Prince Severin went out of his way not to touch me...”

Running back over the encounter in her mind, the handmaid gasped, blood draining from her face as the realization struck. Sonia was right. Normally, Severin should have kissed Sonia’s hand first, since she was not only of higher status but the handmaid’s mistress. Although he was most respectful, he hadn’t treated her like a lady.

“Do you think he forgot...?” the handmaid asked sheepishly, regretting how the prince’s kiss had made her so happy that she’d gotten carried away in front of her mistress.

Sonia didn’t pay her any mind, for she was preoccupied with doubts about Severin.

He used the utmost care not to touch me when he pulled the blanket up. That was what felt off. Now she understood what had struck her as odd in the moment he’d kissed the handmaid farewell. With the exception of an awkward

interlude, his movements had been poetry in motion. And the awkwardness arose because he'd been careful so his hands didn't accidentally touch Sonia as he held the blanket.

"Have rumors about my castle spread? Clear up to the palace...?"

WHEN Chris was informed of Prince Severin's visit upon his return from the church, a look of surprise flashed across his face as he exclaimed, "He did?" But he quickly regained his composure and moved on to discuss when they should visit the church the day after. Sonia was of the opinion the sooner the better, so Chris left to arrange an early breakfast. Sonia asked the maids to pack their belongings so they would be ready to leave first thing in the morning.

Upon telling Chris about the incident with Severin, Sonia hadn't failed to notice his reaction of surprise mixed with a tinge of dismay. He stood as a mentor figure to the heir apparent, Prince Henry, and his brother Prince Severin, teaching them swordsmanship and chivalry. In other words, they shared a master-pupil relationship. Sonia felt Chris should have acted a bit happier when he learned that his pupil snuck out to this transient town beyond the capital perimeter to see her. Likewise, Severin should have said, "I'll leave after I see Master Chris."

"Sir Chris, are you disappointed that you didn't get to see Prince Severin?" she asked, afraid he was acting tough for her.

"Not really. I can see him at the palace," he responded bluntly, but...

He's giving off such hostile airs! They're piercing! He exuded waves of undeniable anger, prickling her skin.

"By any chance, are you having a fight with Prince Severin?" Sonia ventured.

Chris grumbled at her question with his head tilted. "How could I? Everything I say falls on deaf ears, and lately he's outright avoiding me..."

"What are his current duties?"

"He doesn't particularly have any... If I absolutely had to come up with something—and this would be a stretch if ever there was one—I suppose you

could say he's 'in charge of entertaining the ladies.'"

"...I could see that. It'd explain why he had such impeccable fashion."

"I wish he would get over indulging in the pleasures of fashion and women... He was already graceful and handsome to begin with...the women at court flocked to him at an early age. Unlike the crown prince, he couldn't differentiate between the harpies and the ladies," Chris groaned.

Come to think of it, Severin never spoke his mind when we played together as children. Whenever I'd ask something, he'd simply smile and agree, "Okay, sure." Could it be that...he's turned out this way because he's always going with the flow and never developed an independent mind?

"His Majesty believes he'll change once he finds his calling or realizes what he'd like to do," Chris said. Sonia got the impression he felt exasperated but resigned himself to wait and watch over the prince for the time being since his hands were tied. But with all that said...

He's certainly changed a lot since I saw him a decade ago, Sonia thought, somewhat shocked.

Severin had been a cute little boy with a lofty, sweet smile. Nonetheless, he still maintained the graceful appearance of royalty. But the childhood friend who had come to see her after all these years had surpassed "lofty" and grown into a young man best described as "flighty."

But there is no hiding his royal upbringing. Not to mention...he was my first brush with love... That thought made her heart pitter-patter.

"I am terribly sorry, Princess. I shouldn't speak ill of the man you've cared for all these years..." Chris apologized with a bow, alarming Sonia.

"It's fine! I can understand from your words that he's been quite the handful," she replied with a fake giggle.

If you knew it'd bother me, don't diss him in the first place! she snapped in the back of her mind.

THEY departed early the next day, arriving at the Central Church during the

morning hours. The abbey's chapel was located away from the Central Church. When Sonia lived at the Royal Abbey, she had prayed daily at the nearby chapel. She only went to pray before the altar at the Central Church for a handful of major rites held each year.

The sound of the double doors heaving open was majestic. Illuminated in an array of colors by the stained glass, the statue of the Holy Mother before the cross lying ahead of Sonia seemed to be extending a welcoming hand filled with compassion. The refreshing sound of the pipe organ tickled her ears.

She proceeded to head toward the end of the red carpet, where the Pope was waiting. But Sonia was shocked to find that the closer she got, the heavier her feet grew.

"Princess?" Chris asked, noticing something was amiss when Sonia stopped short.

"M-My feet...! They're getting heavier with each step I take...!"

They felt heavy, as if they were being weighted down. Eventually, she reached the point where she couldn't take another step forward and crumbled onto the ground.

"My, you poor dear..." the Pope said. He had been informed of her plight beforehand and tried to rush to her aide. But he abruptly came to a stop.

"Your Holiness!"

"M-My feet are stuck to the floor...!" he cried. He grunted and groaned as he tried to lift his feet up, but they were bound fast, as if the floor was a vacuum sucking them down.

"What's happening...?" Sonia breathed.

"Hmm. I believe a lost sheep is trying to prevent you from approaching me," the Pope said. He looked as if he were trying to harvest turnips the way he yanked at his legs, to no avail.

Meanwhile, not only had Sonia's feet become lead, now the weight was bearing down on her whole body, pressing her against the floor.

"I hate to say it, but let's leave the church for now!" Chris decided. With a,

“Pardon me,” he scooped Sonia into his arms and raced out of the church.

The exact same thing happened each time they gave it another shot. In the end, they surrendered themselves to the fact that some mountains couldn’t be crossed and chose to rest their weary bodies at the Royal Abbey.

The sight of Sonia glaring while deep in contemplation as she held the teacup between her hands was pitiful. The Abbess furrowed her brow, recognizing a dark shadow in the young lady trying to hold back the tears that had been absent during her days at the abbey, when she had acted so bright and cheerful.

“Sonia,” the Abbess said sympathetically. She sat next to Sonia and rubbed her shoulders with the same, familiar warmth in her hands, bringing a smile to Sonia’s lips. Then the Abbess removed the rosary dangling from her own neck and put it around Sonia’s neck.

“Reverend Mother! Isn’t this...?”

“I’ve heard that rosaries filled with the devotion of daily prayer are more effective than new ones. I hope you don’t mind a hand-me-down from me, though,” the Abbess said.

“Thank you so much.” Sonia replied in such a weak voice that the Abbess drew her into an embrace. “...What is going on? I’m so lost.”

Hearing this, the Abbess burst out in surprise, “Haven’t you heard?”

“What do you mean by that?” Sonia demanded. The Abbess knew what was happening? Not only that, but judging by her surprise, so did everyone else.

Am I the only one in the dark? Sonia felt like she’d just been hit on the head with a mallet. The surge of strong emotions following the jolting shock were just that great.

“After my parents died, it was decided I’d live here in the Royal Abbey... Then sickness and accidents took my brothers one after the next...! I always thought it was strange—that something was going on—whenever I thought about home...! But no matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t figure out why misfortune kept striking!”

“Sonia...” the Abbess’ voice sounded pitiful. It was a heartbreak mix of compassion and regret for her slip of the tongue.

“If you know, please tell me! What is happening to me—to the Clares?!” Sonia begged, clutching the Abbess’ sleeve as if to keep her from escaping.

“...I’m sorry, but it’s not my place to say...”

“Reverend Mother!”

Please!

Undaunted by Sonia’s pleading eyes, the Abbess continued to gaze upon her with concern etched across her face. Nonetheless, she was continuously stroking Sonia’s hair and cheeks in an attempt to soothe the young lady. Although Sonia always found her affection comforting, she couldn’t help but feel the Abbess was doing so to gloss over the issue at hand.

“Why? Why won’t you tell me?” Sonia questioned.

“...King Patrice has strictly forbidden me to speak of it,” the Abbess answered.

“King Patrice forbade you?”

The Abbess gave a slight nod. “Sonia, your family, the Clares, have been deeply involved with the royal family for a long, long time. The family lines are far closer entwined than we can imagine. So much so, that once an incident that could have overturned the regime occurred.”

“That was a long time ago. I’m just another one of His Majesty’s subjects now,” Sonia protested.

“Nevertheless, the Clares are still wealthier than the monarchy. Simply existing as a member of the family line ‘close to the royals’ that ‘once plotted to steal the throne,’ will earn you the ire, envy, jealousy and other such negativity of those around you.”

“.....”

“If His Majesty has not personally explained to you how this all began, he may feel that you are not ready yet. Or perhaps, he means to tell you at his upcoming birthday celebration. Whatever the case, I cannot tell you.” The Abbess pulled Sonia into a hug.

In her ear, Sonia heard the Abbess' raspy apology. "*I'm sorry.*" She was left with no choice but to accept it with a silent nod.

"Excuse me!"

At the sound of knocking at the door, the two quietly pulled apart.

"Come in," prompted the Abbess in her usual, gentle voice, and the door swung open.

"Thank you. Sorry for the interruption," said Chris as he entered the room.

After he had dropped Sonia off at the abbey, he had returned to the church to rescue the Pope.

"His Holiness is just fine. He was able to lift his feet up afterward; he's acting as if nothing ever happened," he reported to Sonia, as if he could see what was weighing heavily on her mind.

"Thank goodness..." Sonia said. That had been such a scary experience for her; she was certain the Pope must have been terrified. It was a relief to know he was all right.

"Let's head over to the Central Church again after the birthday celebration," Chris suggested.

After Sonia agreed, "Good idea..." she noticed Chris was holding a bottle. The lidded bottle was beautifully crafted, carved out of a single, large crystal. Holding some sort of liquid, the crystal reflected against the light to create an array of prisms.

"Sir Chris, what is that?" Sonia asked.

"Oh, here!" Chris handed it to her. "Supposedly it's body oil that has been turned into a form of holy water." His gaze shifted to the Abbess. "I heard you had this specially made, insisting that simple holy water is too plain, so you made some body oil she can wear at all times by having it turned into holy water."

"So it's holy water à la body oil..." Sonia mused, and opened the lid. It felt wonderful, how the fragrance of a variety of flowers seemed to embrace her. "It's lovely... This fragrance is so soothing..." She sighed.

"Isn't this birthday celebration your social debut? I thought you might like something nice for the occasion," the Abbess said. When she added, "Or would you have preferred perfume?" with a faint smile, Sonia shook her head with a "no."

"I'm tickled pink! Thank you so much!" Sonia replied. She had completely forgotten this would be her entrance into the social scene, but the Abbess had been thoughtful enough to prepare a present for her. She was truly happy, and yet...

I can't honestly bring myself to enjoy the moment from the bottom of my heart... Sonia was afraid there was an ulterior motive. The Abbess wouldn't reveal everything because she still didn't view Sonia as a full-fledged adult, but she surely must've been bursting with unbridled joy while preparing the gift for Sonia's social debut, which would signify her entry into the world of adults. Yet, it even crossed Sonia's mind that the body oil could contain something dangerous.

"Actually, Pamela is the one who made the fragrance for the body oil," the Abbess confessed.

"Pamela did?"

"She made this blend by carefully selecting flowers from among your favorites. We mixed it with the body oil I made."

How could I forget about Pamela? Where is she now?

"Where is Pamela? I'd love to see her. Besides, I'd like to thank her," Sonia said.

The Abbess' face dropped at Sonia's request. "I'm afraid Pamela's family came for her."

"When did that happen?"

"About three days ago."

That was the day after Sonia had gotten in that accident. When she had spent the day in bed with a fever. *If that hadn't happened, I could have seen Pamela...*

Seeing Sonia's spirits visibly drop, Chris pointed out with a smile, "Isn't there a

chance you'll run into her at the birthday celebration? If Lady Pamela is becoming a debutante this year, she should have received an invitation as well."

It was the norm for girls to become debes between 15 to 18 years of age. Pamela was the same age as Sonia.

Considering that a member of Pamela's family had come to get her before the birthday celebration, it was plausible they intended to introduce her to adult society through the event while hunting for her future husband. Any noble would consider that the ultimate shortcut.

I hope I see her at the celebration! Simply imagining their reunion filled Sonia with such excitement she couldn't help but crack a smile.

Observing her reaction, Chris remarked, "I see you still prefer friendly girl-talk over dressing up and dancing with noblemen or other knights," and laughed vivaciously.

Sonia retorted, "That isn't true," and puffed out her cheeks.

I might be more simple-minded than I realized. Simply the thought "I could see Pamela at the birthday celebration," had put her in high spirits. Her wild suspicions blew right out the window, and she hummed while checking over the clothes and jewelry she was going to wear.

I'd be thrilled if we could see each other. No, we will see each other! I just know she's coming! In Sonia's mind's eye, Pamela was thinking something similar while also picking out what to wear.

Chapter 4: Birthday Celebrations and Debutantes, Fights and Reunions

IT was the first day of the birthday celebration. The sky was a brilliant blue without a cloud to be seen as if in commemoration of King Patrice's birthday. Ceremonious cannons sounded off before noon, signaling the festivities had begun.

Having arrived at the Royal Palace the day before, Sonia and Chris were in their respective private chambers, which had been assigned beforehand. The festivities for the next three days would keep the King even busier than usual. Despite how close she was to Patrice, not even Sonia could make an appointment for a private meeting.

I wanted to ask him about the Clare line, but nothing can be done. Perhaps I'll get a chance during the festivities, she told herself in an attempt at optimism, and decided to wash herself squeaky clean for the evening events.

“Ladies, help me get all dolled up, okay?”

The handmaids chimed, “Of course, milady!” and rolled up their sleeves.

“This is your long-awaited debut! By the time we’re done with you, no noblewoman could hope to wipe the floor with you!” one declared.

“That goes without saying! I’m itching to get started!” cheered another.

“You’re the best lady out there! It’s our job to ensure the other ladies and gentlemen realize that!” affirmed a third.

“...Uh...girls...?” Sonia squeaked. The approaching maids’ passionate vibes only served to unnerve her.

Why are they so gung-ho about this? Sonia unconsciously tried to inch back, but the maids latched onto her arms and held firm against her back. They stripped her gown right off with ferocious smiles plastered on their faces. Sonia was simply dumbstruck by how quickly they had her undressed.

“A woman’s battle has already begun the moment she starts to get dressed,

Duchess Sonia!" one handmaid declared.

"You'd best brace yourself!" warned another.

"Aim to become the foremost Queen Consort of our kingdom!"

"Huh? Er...I'm already engaged..." Sonia tried to argue, but the maids would have none of it.

Sonia discovered firsthand that handmaids also fought as troops in the terrifying battle all noble ladies staked their pride on.

The handmaids would exclaim, "This isn't right!" and "That isn't right!" as they toyed with Sonia's appearance. Her preparations didn't draw to a much-desired end until the evening sun was on the verge of setting.

"Phew! We should be done in time for the ball, Duchess Sonia," a maid said.

"That's wonderful, truly wonderful..." Sonia wheezed. The maids shared satisfied nods at the sound of Sonia's genuine relief. Sonia was probably the only one who knew the reason for her relief differed from theirs.

After spending what felt like forever trying on one dress after the next before finally settling, they then claimed, "The lace needs to be moved" or "It doesn't fit quite right," and set about making the alterations. From there, they moved on to decide on a hairstyle and hair ornaments to go with the dress.

An uproar took place before the handmaids eventually agreed on a hairstyle. Then they had taken a horrendously long time before coming to terms on which hair ornaments to go with. After that, they'd meticulously picked out her gloves, necklace, and earrings. The jewelry Sonia brought from her castle were some of the salvaged Clare finery that had been repaired. For the finishing touch, they just had to coordinate her shoes, and she was done!

It's over. At last... I'm beat! That was how Sonia honestly felt. It was so exhausting, she had fallen asleep at one point. *I can't believe I have to go through this whirlwind again tomorrow and the day after... As much as I like dressing up, there's a limit to it. This is too much!*

Indifferent to the handmaids, who were relieved to see they had altered the dress to satisfaction, Sonia let out a long sigh as she began to sit down.

"You'll wrinkle the dress, milady!" one snapped, forcing her to jump back up.

"Please motion to us when you'd like to sit, milady. We'll readjust your skirts to prevent wrinkles," another handmaid instructed.

"I-I'm sorry," Sonia apologized.

After deciding on a signal for sitting, Sonia was finally able to rest her weary feet. She looked over herself anew in the mirror.

She was wearing an evening dress meant for soirées. The silk satin dress was a dark pink hue of plum with a pale salmon pink lace overlay. The bodice was designed to tightly hug the contours of her torso. To keep the bosom from coming across as scandalous, lace lightly covered her chest up to her collarbone. Lace also decorated her sleeves, which had rhinestones scattered throughout.

Her long evening gloves were also made of silk satin. For the finishing touch, she wore a Clare family choker around her neck, and the gold ore gleamed when it swayed. Only the lace overlay daintily trailed across the floor, evoking an image of a garden of flower embroidery in blossom.

Sonia's hair was pulled up high and allowed to tumble down in cascades. Once she got married, she would have to wind her hair or wear a veil at formal events, but that was yet to come. The handmaids had intentionally picked this style since she wouldn't be able to wear her hair down at formal events forever.

"Duchess Sonia, would you like me to get you something light to eat?" one of the maids asked.

"That'd be lovely... If you would, please," Sonia answered. When she directed her attention to the handmaid who offered to fetch her food, she realized the others who had been deafening with their squeals were gone.

"Where are the others?" she asked.

"They left to check on Sir Crisford's preparations."

"I was under the impression he already had people helping him..."

"He does, but we need to coordinate your outfits since he is serving as your escort tonight. It would invite gossip in the court if there wasn't any coherence

between your attire..." the maid said.

"Huh?" Sonia blurted out.

My escort? Wouldn't it make more sense to call him her fiancé? The woman before Sonia was in service of the palace, unlike the handmaids she had brought with her. *Maybe it doesn't look like we're engaged because of the huge age gap between us.* But Sonia was too embarrassed to openly declare, "You mean he's my fiancé."

She'll find out soon enough anyway, so I guess I can let it slide, she thought, and decided not to correct the woman.

Sonia gobbled up the cheese and ham sandwich the handmaid brought back for her and whittled away the time waiting for Chris to arrive. Around the time the evening star revealed its shine, Chris came to escort her.

"I barely made it in time..." he said.

Chris wore a long, dark green evening coat with a thick golden trim. Gold buttons embellished the simple white shirt underneath a vest with intricate salmon pink embroidery. A gold ore broach fastened the plum scarf around his neck.

His lower half featured leggings with some give. The cuffed, long boots that reached his knees were embellished with engravings. They were a shade of sienna.

His outfit used the same colors Sonia was wearing at strategic points, creating a sense of consistency when they were together. It overall came across mellow, neither indecent nor over the top, while still most becoming.

I should have expected as much from a palace knight, Sonia thought, mesmerized by his dashing figure despite herself. Looking at his face, she mentally noted, *A shame he didn't shave off that beard...* and dropped her shoulders.

"It's just as the maids said! You truly have bloomed beautifully into a delicate flower," Chris said admiringly with a smile. Apparently he had also been appraising her.

Realizing he could read the self-conscious expression written on her face, Sonia couldn't help but flush as she cast her eyes downward in embarrassment.

"As your escort, I had planned on serving as your 'accessory' and prepared a relatively simple attire. But when the two maids serving me heard about what transpired from your handmaids who came to check on me, it ignited their competitive spirit. 'You need to strike more impact if you're going to escort such a young lady!' they claimed...before all five tackled me... It was impressive," Chris recounted, his voice growing weak at the end. He must have been recalling the ordeal, for a cold sweat was running down his face. When one of the handmaids drew near, his large body flinched away.

Five maids... I can only imagine how dreadful that must have been. As it is, I was overwhelmed by just four. Sonia couldn't help but giggle at the mental image of the five maids ganging up on Chris, forcing him to change into a completely different outfit.

"You've had quite the night, Sir Chris."

"Quite the night? But we're just getting started! Come along! Let's enjoy ourselves to the fullest!" Chris replied, and offered his white-gloved hand. Sonia merrily chirped, "Definitely!" and took it.

THROUGHOUT the birthday celebration, King Patrice would appear at the main balcony to wave to the public and present speeches while there was still light outside during the afternoon hours. The queen and two princes made appearances alongside him, meeting the cheers of the people.

Then King Patrice would spend his evenings in the great hall speaking with each and every nobleman and woman who had come from far and wide to wish him well. The King radiated dignity as he welcomed his guests from atop his extravagant throne at the center of the dais. Sitting at his side, an elegant smile rested upon Queen Cordelia's lips.

The crown prince, Prince Henry, sat in the chair on his other side, while Prince Severin sat on a chair placed at the edge of the dais, nibbling at the food laid out on the narrow table stretched before them.

“Presenting Her Grace, the Duchess of Clare, Sonia de Clare, accompanied by Sir Crisford Cortot!”

This was a formal salutation that once called, required them to strut pompously down a red carpet to King Patrice.

Formal salutations are so exhausting! And I'd curl up and die if anyone saw what I look like under my dress... Sonia had to dip into a partial squat and bow at the waist. It was a bow-legged curtsy.

The position put a fair amount of strain on her thighs. It didn't help that she had to hold the position until King Patrice said, “You may rise.”

It hurts, but it's considered proper decorum for a lady to wear a mask of composure as she curtsies. With that thought in mind, Sonia endured it with gritted teeth.

“You may rise,” King Patrice said.

Hiding her inward relief, Sonia put her best smile on as she rose.

“Sonia, it is good to see you again. What were your thoughts about returning home after all these years?” he asked. While he still maintained his kingly dignity, Sonia was relieved he spoke with his usual kindness. This was the first she had ever interacted with him in a formal setting.

“It is good to see you. The remaining castle staff are most diligent. I was relieved to see that the castle looks just as it did before I departed for the abbey,” Sonia answered, fudging the details on the state of her castle to keep up appearances.

“I'm glad to hear it. I was worried since you had to inherit the heavy responsibility of serving as the lady of the castle despite your young age.”

“I'm only doing this well because I have your kind support, Your Majesty.”

Patrice gave Sonia a broad smile before turning his attention to Chris. “How about it, Chris? What do you think of life beyond the palace?”

“Your Majesty, I find it most pleasant,” Chris answered with a bow.

“Ha ha!” Patrice gleefully laughed and teased, “I'll be! I dare say, it sounds like you're enjoying that over palace life! I see you prefer being at the side of a

beautiful, young lady, after all."

Sonia's face turned beet red, but Chris maintained his composure as he smoothly replied, "Not only is she extremely polite for her age, she also has a cheerful disposition. And as you say, she is most beautiful and enchanting. I feel like a young lad again."

Sonia's face turned an even deeper shade of red.

"Is that right? I'm glad the two of you are so compatible. May you enjoy this night to the fullest."

"Thank you, Your Majesty."

After another formal curtsy, Sonia placed her hand upon Chris' arm, and the two took their leave.

Did we do the right thing?

Sonia decided to direct the question on her mind at Chris. "Was it okay...that we didn't tell His Majesty about postponing the wedding?"

"Yes, it was," Chris replied. "I sent him a letter beforehand explaining the situation. If we discussed it in the presence of other nobility, some could grow suspicious and start poking their noses where they shouldn't. That's why His Majesty intentionally didn't broach the topic."

"But aren't there a fair number of people under the wrong impression about us? Some seem to think of you as my bodyguard," Sonia stated.

Chris stopped dead in his tracks. "Huh?" He stared at Sonia with his light brown eyes bulging in surprise.

"Um, uh... Did I say something strange?" she asked while fidgeting with the hem of her dress.

"...Does that mean you don't mind if people think we're betrothed?" Chris asked in turn, this time making Sonia's eyes widen in surprise.

Feeling awkward over the whole exchange, both dropped their gazes to the immaculate floor. Sonia's hand naturally pulled away from his arm. Without anything to hold, she nervously twiddled her fingers. Casting a quick glance up at Chris from under her long eyelashes, she saw he was holding his fist up to his

mouth, his face also flushed.

“Ahem!” he coughed to clear his throat. As if taking that for a sign, Sonia raised her head.

“Well, you see, I thought you were still uncomfortable around me. As such, I, uh, figured we should see how things play out a bit longer. Besides, you’ve only recently left the Royal Abbey. Now that you’ve entered the social scene, you might want to socialize for a time...”

Huh?

“What...do you mean by that?” Sonia asked.

“Er, exactly what it sounds like. Why...?”

The sweet atmosphere that had been hanging over them mere moments ago vanished without a trace. Boiling with anger, Sonia felt as if the blood pulsing through her veins had suddenly started to flow backward. Startled by the abrupt change that came over Sonia as she drew her brows into a deep scowl burning with fury, Chris unconsciously edged back.

“In other words, you mean to say I should fraternize with other men?” she pushed.

“That is one way of looking at it,” Chris answered.

“If I fell in love with someone, and he returned my feelings, you wouldn’t care if I betrayed your trust?” she demanded.

“I don’t think there is a man alive who wouldn’t fall for you,” he replied with a faint smile, a glimmer of sadness in his eyes. But Sonia was too overwhelmed to guess the reason behind it.

He continued, “You’ve only recently left the abbey. You were prohibited from the pleasure of life as a woman while you were cooped up in there all these years. You should continue experiencing the joys of dressing up, conversing with men and women, and falling in love. That is what King Patrice wishes for you.”

King Patrice?

“...And you’re okay with this? Don’t you realize you’re giving me permission

to cheat on you? That I could decide to call off our engagement?"

Chris was unable to answer either question. His smile merely deepened...

"...I see how it is. I'm going off on my own now!" Sonia snapped, hiking up her skirts and fleeing as fast as her legs could carry her.

"Princess!"

She ignored Chris' voice calling after her as she raced straight through the ballroom to make her way outside. Her tears wanted to come gushing out, but she fought to hold them back for fear they would cause her makeup to run.

What was that?! What is he thinking?! Sir Chris is such a jerk! So what if I'm just an ignorant child!

"Eep!" she screamed. In her mad dash through the dark garden, Sonia eventually caught her foot on something sticking up. Just as she was about to fall on her face— "Look out!" a man cried. She noticed his arms were supporting her from behind.

Heaving a sigh of relief, Sonia craned her neck to see who was supporting her weight.

"Are you all right, Sonia?" the young man asked in a kind, sweet voice that tickled her ears.

"Prince Severin!"

After making sure her feet were planted soundly on the ground, Severin pulled his arms away.

"What are you doing out here?" Sonia asked.

"I was worried when you suddenly raced out of the ballroom, so I came after you. It's dangerous for a noblewoman to run around blindly, and in the dark no less," he answered.

"Thank you... I'm okay now," Sonia said.

Severin gently brushed his finger against the corner of Sonia's eye. "You don't look okay to me. Did Chris say something?" he asked.

This struck Sonia as odd. Was Severin watching Chris from afar? If he saw her

run out of the room as if trying to escape from Chris, it would certainly explain why he chased after her out of concern, but it was hard to believe this was the same Severin who avoided touching her when he paid her a get-well visit.

Tonight Severin not only touched her like normal, he had saved her from falling. It was only natural for her to be touched by such kindness.

“Prince Severin...”

The tears she had managed to hold back began to spill down her cheeks. She buried her head in Severin’s chest and cried freely.

ONCE Sonia finally stopped crying, Severin led her by the hand to the familiar old arbor.

“It’s still here! Wow, this takes me back!” Sonia exclaimed.

Although entrance to the arbor was usually restricted to royalty, apparently an exception had been made for the ball. Lamps were scattered throughout the garden so people could walk about freely, their soft lights dimly illuminating the benches and surrounding areas.

Sonia and Severin entered the arbor and sat upon a marble bench built into the base of a pillar. When Sonia was little, this was usually where her mother brought her. Her mother would enjoy sitting with Severin’s mother, Queen Cordelia, over a cup of tea amidst the wafting sweet fragrance of the surrounding rose garden here in this very arbor.

“We always came here in the spring and autumn, didn’t we? We’d run out to the grass and start reading, drawing, or playing with the dogs and cats...” Severin reminisced. Each direction he pointed at was lost to the darkness of night, but Sonia recognized each spot as a play area she had enjoyed in the past.

“It was fun back then... My first thought of the day was ‘What games should I play today?’” Sonia said.

Thinking back, Sonia felt her mother and father had truly pampered her when she was a little girl. Although she was still too young back then to start learning

the ways of a proper lady, it didn't change the fact that she had never been harshly admonished or disciplined for behavior unfitting of a nobleman's daughter.

What if these unearthly terrors were plaguing the Clares then as well? Did my parents let me do whatever I wanted because they were afraid death could take me at any time...? Struck by the queasy sense that the darkness sweeping across the grass was creeping toward her, Sonia squeezed her eyes shut. She must have clenched the skirt of her dress tightly as well, for Severin wrapped his hands around Sonia's balled fists with a soft clasping sound.

Gasping in surprise, Sonia jerked her head up to look Severin in the eyes, only for him to offer her a gentle smile. Her heart raced madly at the sight that was as sweet as the fragrance of the roses.

"Did you get into a fight with Chris?" he asked.

Sonia dropped her gaze, the mention of his name reminding her of what Chris had said.

"...It wasn't a fight. It's just..." Sonia said, trailing off.

"Just what?" Severin asked. Sonia's gaze fell even lower upon realizing how close Severin's face was as he peered into her eyes, urging her to continue.

Her face felt hot. Never before had a man looked into her eyes like this, so Sonia was unsure how to respond. Her mind a muddled mess, she repeated everything that Chris had just told her.

Although it wound up an incoherent mess told out of order, Severin listened intently and occasionally nodded his head while muttering, "Uh-huh." It helped her gradually calm down as she told her story.

When she came to the end, Severin tilted his head to one side while groaning deeply with a, "Hmmm." After stewing over it a minute, he boldly looked Sonia straight in the eyes and said, "Chris is as straightforward as an arrow, so I think he told you how he honestly feels. Bluntly put, he's trying to help you, not hurt you."

"By recommending his fiancée cheat on him?" Sonia retorted.

"I don't think he was recommending that. It's just you interpreted some of what he said to mean that," Severin countered.

"...You're really standing up for him. Is it because he's your sword instructor?" Sonia snapped.

Severin shrugged upon seeing Sonia pout sullenly. "Like it or not, you get to know a person when you go as far back as we do. Not that I associate with him anymore."

"Because he's with me now?"

"That's not why," Severin answered with another shrug and shook his head. "I stopped interacting with him before that. I'd had enough."

"...Enough what?" Sonia couldn't help but ask what he had enough of.

"Don't look so serious. It's not like I got fed up with Chris or anything," Severin said. He rested one of his elbows on the edge of the backrest. His long fingers sprawled across his finely chiseled chin. There was a lustrous gleam about him despite his listless appearance, filling Sonia's chest with pangs of pain.

He had three years on her. How could such a small age difference make him seem so much older? Was this all an illusion created by the deep darkness of night?

"I grew tired of the sword, I guess. After careful consideration, I realized I didn't care to become a knight. I was learning swordplay and combat from Chris as part of my knight training, you see," Severin explained.

"But aren't those among the skills you need to hone as a member of the Royal Family?" Sonia asked.

"I'm already fairly decent at them, believe it or not."

"Then what are you doing nowadays?"

"I suppose you could say I'm in charge of entertaining our guests," Severin answered.

Sonia's eyes narrowed as she recalled what Chris had told her; Severin took care of *entertaining* the ladies.

“...Are you imagining something uncouth? Like I cater to the ladies, for instance?” Severin asked.

Her eyes must have given her away. Rather than try denying it, Sonia simply nodded. Her blunt honesty threw Severin into a fit of laughter.

“Aha...! You’re just as honest as ever, Sonia. I know there are rumors to that effect, but I don’t entertain just women,” he explained.

“Is that a fact?”

He gazed into Sonia’s pale blue eyes, which searched his suspiciously in turn. His expression and deep blue eyes held such intensity, she couldn’t peel her gaze away.

“I was overcome with joy when I heard you still haven’t married Chris,” he confessed.

For a brief second, Sonia couldn’t breathe. After a long moment of silence, she finally managed to force out, “Why?” but she was afraid her meek, raspy voice didn’t reach Severin.

However, he must have heard her. Admittedly, he may have only heard due to how close his head was. Lowering the hand that had been lazily propping up his chin, he brought his hands to cup Sonia’s.

“I was surprised to find you’ve grown into such an enchanting lady during our time apart. When I first saw you sick in bed, you looked somewhat waxen and fragile... It made me want to protect you.”

“Prince Severin...” she breathed.

His sudden confession made all of the gears in Sonia’s mind come to a stop, turning her mind completely blank.

“With your permission...and if it’s not too late, may I steal you from Chris...?” he asked. Though her mind was blank, she caught every word of his proposal and latched onto them, holding them tight.

As if cotton candy was entangled around her five senses, Sonia was unable to move a muscle. Yet, the pounding of her heart continued to race furiously. It showed no sign of stopping but only pounded faster still.

The cause of her internal plight was right before her eyes. His beautiful countenance gradually drew closer, so that Sonia could see the reflection of her face in his pretty blue eyes. Was his glittering skin but a trick of the mind?

Oh, yeah. It's probably the lamé glitter powder... Her eyes fixed upon Severin as she thought, He's so pretty, he doesn't need that powder.

"So this is where you went. I've been looking all over for you, Princess."

A beard suddenly appeared right at eye level, making Severin nearly jump out of his skin as he lurched back.

"Yikes!"

"Sir Chris...!" Sonia exclaimed. Illuminated by the light of the lamps, she was able to identify him. However, his eyes were not on Sonia, but focused on Severin.

His cutting, threatening glare was apparent even in the dim lighting, and Severin was clearly unnerved by it.



"His Majesty was calling for you, Prince Severin. Even if it's only in name, I've heard you were supposed to serve as a host tonight. Is this any time to *socialize* in the arbor?" Chris chastised.

"I was just checking on Sonia," Severin snapped.

"Please leave her to me. Go along, now. You must not keep all of those ladies waiting," Chris replied. Despite the thorns in his words, several people must have come to mind at the mention of "all those ladies," for Severin sprang to his feet and readjusted his clothes.

"They completely slipped my mind...! I must return to the ballroom at once," he declared. This time he didn't forget to kiss Sonia's hand before saying, "Sonia, let's enjoy a nice long talk over afternoon tea next time. Until then!" Without waiting for her consent, he darted into the dark garden.

Now that she was alone with Chris, Sonia felt horrendously awkward. Tightly clutching her skirts, she stared at the marble floor with taut shoulders. She couldn't bear to raise her head and look Chris in the face.

As dense in the ways of romance as she was from her life in the Royal Abbey, even she knew what Severin had been about to do to her. Mesmerized by his face, she had been unable to reject his advances.

"We should be heading back ourselves, Princess," Chris said.

Sonia looked at his proffered large hand in surprise. Then she slowly raised her head to look at his face. Chris was smiling down at her just as he always did.

Why? Why was he trying to treat her with the same kindness as before? Forced to face reality anew, it felt as if her heart was slowly sinking in an icy spring.

"...You aren't mad at me, are you?" she asked. Trying to contain herself, Sonia's voice came out in a deep growl, even to her.

Seeming not to notice, Chris raised his eyebrows in a troubled, wry smile. "It'd hardly seem fair after I just said I wanted you to meet and associate with as many people as possible... It's just..."

"Just what?"

“Prince Severin isn’t currently good enough for you. I don’t think you should take your relationship with him beyond this,” Chris advised.

Sonia’s body instantly began to burn with rage. “Why not? We’re old friends! Why can’t we get together to have fun reminiscing over old times? As you said, you’re the one who told me to ‘socialize’ with a ton of people!”

“...Such were His Majesty’s orders,” Chris answered.

“What...?”

Unable to find what to say next, Sonia simply stared up at Chris with her mouth agape. His uncharacteristic diverted gaze began to gnaw at her; a multitude of insults raced through her head.

“Is everything you do per the King’s orders? I’m fully aware that King Patrice arranged our marriage! I was perfectly willing to accept that! Sure, your beard and burly hair is a bit...repulsive? That became quite apparent after I just reconfirmed my personal preferences, but you’re such a great guy, I truly believe there will come a day I will accept you, beard and all! I’ve been trying to develop feelings for you in my own right! But you’re prioritizing ‘the King’s orders’ first and foremost, aren’t you?!”

“Princess...!”

“Do you adamantly call me ‘Princess’ because ‘the King ordered’ you to? If the King gave the ‘okay’ and ‘ordered’ you, would you have overlooked what Prince Severin was about to do to me? If the ‘King ordered’ it, would you hand me over to some other man?”

“That’s—”

She didn’t want to hear any more. Not another word. The tears she had kept in check came streaming down her cheeks.

“I’m my own person! I’ll do whatever I want! I don’t care about you! Spend the rest of your life with your beloved ‘King’s orders’ for all I care!”

Lashing out with, “I’m going back to my room!” Sonia slapped Chris’ hand away when he reached out for her hands. Eager to be away from him, she fled as quickly as her feet could carry her.

SIR Chris is such a jerk! I've had it! I'm going to do whatever I want! Sonia ran to the chambers assigned to her in the Royal Palace as she fervently wiped away the tears that flowed on end.

A young noblewoman crying as she ran through the palace halls must've made for a peculiar sight. But the burning stares and voices of bystanders couldn't reach her as she was now. Plus, it helped that she had run from the quiet garden to the section of the palace restricted to the King, his family, and close friends. Aside from a few startled maids who jumped to either side of the hall, Sonia made it to the wing where her room was located without running into anyone.

She could barely hear the dance music drifting in from afar. The guests were probably in the midst of the revelries. Fortunately, it was still too early for men and women to share their tender affections.

Crudely running as fast as she could had left Sonia horribly winded. She slowed to a crawl as she fought to catch her breath.

When was the last time I cried so hard that I got the hiccups? Sonia wondered, her mind thinking back. *I'm pretty sure it was when I was notified that the youngest of my older brothers had died.* His death had whittled their family down to just her, and she had been filled with sadness and uncertainty. What was she supposed to do henceforth? How was she supposed to live? What was she supposed to live for?

Back then, it'd felt as though she had been abandoned in a wasteland without a compass. She hadn't known whose hand to take. Who should she turn to for advice? Who could she go to convey this indescribable sorrow? Although she had sought the teachings of God while at the Royal Abbey, the fact was that God only smiled down at her and never extended His hand. It wasn't like He would hug her tightly. The idol before her had been merely a symbol.

An accident had taken Sonia's parents from her first. Her wounded young heart could hardly be mended from "prayer" alone after she was shuttled off to the Royal Abbey immediately following their loss.

She had wanted warmth. However, all of the people who provided her

reassurance with a simple hug had passed away. Young as she was, she had known that the slick, cold, white statue couldn't offer what she sought. Perhaps worshiping the statue instead of the God in the Bible was the problem, but she didn't know the difference.

Sonia had cried and cried and cried—and Pamela had cried along with her. "I don't have a mother or father either. I'm all alone," Pamela had confided in her. Facing the same situation, they held each other and wept.

Sonia wanted to see Pamela badly. She wanted to pour out her feelings.

"...Pamela," Sonia called her friend's name, choking back her tears.

"Sonia...?"

Surprised to hear the familiar voice come from behind, Sonia slowly turned around. "Pamela? Is that you?" she asked.

In a red and black dress with real flowers pinned in an updo, something about her attire looked different from the other noblewomen. It was shiny and sexy.

Sonia was so surprised by the stark contrast to the innocent and cheerful image she had of Pamela at the abbey that she forgot all about crying.

"What? Why do you look so surprised? Do I look funny?" Pamela asked.

Sonia shook her head, still dumbstruck. In reality, the dress looked beautiful on her. It just didn't look like something she would have expected to see her old friend wear. Not with that color combination or the mature design, let alone the accompanying vivid red lipstick. Pamela looked at Sonia with a slight smile on her lips, and it felt to Sonia like her best friend had matured much faster than her.

But this is definitely Pamela standing in front of me! My irreplaceable best friend! Sonia's vision slowly began to blur yet again.

"Pamela!" Sonia cried and flung herself onto her friend in a fit of tears. "What are you doing here? I went to the abbey the other day, but they said your family came and picked you up...!"

"My uncle threw my coming-out party. He means to marry me off as quickly as he can," Pamela answered. She twisted her mouth distastefully and clenched

the skirt of her dress. “I thought you might be here tonight, so I was searching for you.”

“Same here, Pamela!” Sonia breathed.

“I saw you with Sir Chris, but lost sight of you after you split up. So I waited for you to come back until it was time for the Debutante Presentation. But you never did show up! I asked around if anyone knew what happened to you.”

“Ah! The Presentation! I completely forgot!” Sonia exclaimed.

All of the young noblewomen who became debutantes that year were presented individually during the annual birthday celebration. Sonia was supposed to stand in line and wait her turn to come out in front of the court.

“I can’t believe it...! How could I forget?!” she cried out.

“It’s held all three nights of the festival, so don’t worry about missing it tonight.”

“Have you already done it?” Sonia asked.

“My uncle stuck to me like glue so I would. As you can see, he doesn’t care what I do now that it’s over and done with,” Pamela said with an exasperated shrug. Sonia was inwardly relieved to see she was still the same Pamela she knew. It was a testament to just how far the impression Pamela gave deviated from the past.

“Anyway, what’s going on? I found your room and was waiting out here for you. I didn’t expect to find you come sobbing down the hall... Why isn’t Sir Crisford with you like always?”

“...Pamela!”

Reminded of why she had been crying by Pamela’s question, Sonia fell onto her friend in another fit of tears.

SONIA welcomed Pamela into her assigned guestroom and told her what happened from beginning to end. Somewhere along the line, she realized a maid was on hand. In all likelihood, Chris had arranged for her to be here. She was often impressed by the sensitivity shown in his kind consideration, but he

hadn't chase after her this time.

Isn't this one of the most important times to go after the girl? It only drove the nail in further.

"Sir Chris has only resigned himself to marry me because of the 'King's orders'..." Sonia said. That fact made her vision waver and blur once more. "That's why he insists on calling me 'Princess' rather than my name."

The suspicion had drifted in her head hazily, never taking a clear form. Run ragged with the chaos of the supernatural disturbances, she tried not to add another element of unrest to the pile. Perhaps that was why her heart laid a thin curtain over her doubts. But now that those strange occurrences had calmed down, the curtain opened for her to face her "marriage" anew. And in doing so, she found...

"Sonia...have some tea," Pamela suggested, placing the cup and saucer in front of her. "I know she's your handmaid, but given the circumstances, I took it upon myself to ask her to brew it."

Pamela urged again, "Have some," before Sonia picked the cup up. There were also snacks such as biscuits and a layered cake arranged on the beautifully carved oval table. When Sonia looked with bloodshot eyes at the maid at her side, the woman smiled softly and bobbed her head.

"...Thank you," Sonia said and sipped the amber tea with steam rolling and swaying from the cup. Mild sweetness wet her dry mouth, easing her nerves. Only now did she realize how scratchy and dry her mouth felt from crying too much.

"Pamela, you're amazing."

"How so?"

Sonia softly smiled at the bewildered look on Pamela's face from suddenly being paid a compliment.

"You can see how I'm doing and show your concern without being overbearing. You're able to gently give me exactly what I want... I've always admired that about you, clear back to our days at the abbey. You do it so casually but with a warmth that melts the troubles bogging down my heart. The

acts of kindness you show have that power, Pamela... I'm sure you'll make some lucky man very happy."

After silently listening to Sonia's confession, Pamela growled back in a deep voice, "That's not true," surprising Sonia. She dropped her gaze as if to cut Sonia out of her line of sight as she continued.

"You only think that because I was too afraid to do otherwise. I was always second-guessing everyone, desperate to ensure they didn't grow to hate me. Unlike you, I was afraid of getting hurt if I wore my emotions on my sleeve or was true to myself."

"Pamela... I didn't realize you—"

"Anyway, let's return to the topic at hand, shall we? The way Sir Chris is treating you is a much bigger problem than me, isn't it?" Pamela asked, lifting her head up with a smile.

Overwhelmed by her uncompromising smile, Sonia nodded, saying, "Yeah."

"Still...Sir Chris' attitude doesn't sit well with me," Pamela said. "I thought that during your engagement and honeymoon, well...you'd be so lovey-dovey that you'd break into goo-goo eyed smiles whenever you looked into each other's eyes."

"...Maybe it's my fault for fainting when we met," Sonia suggested. With the scene in mind, she could hardly fault Chris for what he did or said.

After all, I bluntly rejected him through my actions, instead of just words.

"...Jeez. It truly was cruel of me to faint simply because he wasn't Prince Severin," Sonia reflected.

"But I think 'feel free to go cheat on me' is a bit much, too..."

"Cheat! Sir Chris didn't say I should cheat, but—"

"Isn't it the same difference?" Pamela interjected in a no-nonsense tone that silenced Sonia. This was the very reason why Sonia herself had gotten so enraged.

Pamela went on, "Supposedly once in a blue moon, you'll hear of couples among the nobility where each party freely pursues romantic exploits with their

spouse's blessing... Perhaps Sir Chris supports such infidelity. I've heard that as a royal knight, he wasn't for want in the terms of romantic pursuits."

Sonia tensed as each word came out of Pamela's mouth. "...Huh? This is the first I've heard that..."

"I listened in on the gossip while on standby for my Debutante Presentation. You two drew quite a bit of attention during your audience with King Patrice, you know?"

Pamela began to retell the gossip she'd overheard.

"So Sir Crisford has finally decided to settle down."

"Do you suppose he'll live in his wife's house once he ties the knot?"

"If only I could have shacked up with him once first!"

"It's a good thing you didn't! Rumor has it he's had a recent falling out with the Crown Prince and his wife."

"Really? I wonder if the rumors of his trysts with the Crown Princess were true after all."

"Perhaps that's why His Majesty is trying to distance Sir Crisford from the palace."

"It goes to show some ladies are hands off, even for the great Diamant Knight."

"Does the Clare girl know any of this?"

"I heard she's spent most of her life in the Royal Abbey, so I doubt she's aware of such worldly gossip..."

"Does she know what it takes to satisfy Sir Crisford? What do you think?"

"She's from one of the richest houses in the kingdom. Isn't that alone enough to satisfy him?"

"But the Clare line also—"

"I quietly eavesdropped up to about there, but then my name was called, so I had to go up to the platform. I don't know what was said after that..." Pamela concluded. Her voice was dripping with sympathy but fell on deaf ears.

It was only the inconsiderate gossip of a handful of ladies at the ball. But the content was more than enough to hurt Sonia.

He's having an illicit love affair with the Crown Princess. Is that why Sir Chris keeps pushing off the marriage? Did King Patrice choose Sir Chris for me as an easy way to get rid of him? I can't believe he'd do that after I've treated him like a father. Was I nothing more than just a pawn?

Renowned as the strongest Diamant in history, other nations feared Crisford Cortot to the point they warned each other, "Don't hesitate to retreat if he appears on the battlefield." King Patrice couldn't simply exile him for committing a crime of romantic intrigue. In which case...

"...Was King Patrice using our marriage to kick Sir Chris out of the Royal Palace while ensuring he remained in Pharrell...? And he picked me because I'm ignorant of the affair...?" Sonia surmised. As the situation came to light, it pushed down heavily upon her heart. Struggling for air, she had to take several deep breaths.

"Sonia, are you all right?" Pamela asked. Her hand wrapped around Sonia's shoulders. She wound up supporting Sonia's weight as she sunk down.

"...Should I go along with this...? I'm not sure anymore," Sonia replied. She knew this marriage with Chris was desirable both for herself and the Clare line. She realized it was difficult for those of noble birth to wed for love alone. Relationships could always be built after the vows were said. Such was the nature of marriage among nobility. Sonia had never been discouraged by this because her parents were an example of one such marriage, and she'd seen how they grew to love and care for one another. But Chris already loved the Crown Princess.

And here...I...was starting...to develop feelings for Sir Chris... Sonia could not marry him if he did not return her feelings.

"Is that why...Sir Chris told me to associate with a bunch of people? That way he could..." Sonia trailed off.

...be with the Crown Princess? she finished in her mind. Was he going to use me as his front for seeing her...?

Doubts rose relentlessly one after the next. Despite realizing they were self-centered assumptions, the overflowing suspicion pooled out of her heart, permeating the rest of her body. Sonia wrapped her arms around her trembling body. She shivered horribly despite not being cold. Her body didn't want to listen once shock had seized control. It was a sensation she knew well, from when she had lost her family all those years ago.

"Pamela...!" Unable to hold herself back, Sonia cried out and leaned against Pamela.

"Sonia... You poor dear..." Pamela pulled Sonia into a kind hug and patted her on the back. "...Say, Sonia. Why don't you call off your engagement with Sir Crisford?" she suggested.

"I can't... King Patrice arranged this. It's not my place to make that call..."

"What are you saying?! You're from the most financially powerful household in the kingdom! If the Lord willed it, wouldn't you be sitting on the throne instead? His Majesty won't ignore the opinion of someone from such a prominent house," Pamela insisted.

"But..."

"Sonia, you should go tell the King. Then you and Prince Severin can finally be together after all these years of pining for him..."

"Pamela..."

Sonia noticed that Pamela's smile looked eerily dark as she continued to push and prod, but she convinced herself it was due to the hanging shadows of night.

THE second day of the birthday celebration had come.

The surrounding mood was boisterous when Sonia finally completed her Debutante Presentation. That hardly came as a surprise. She was from the most prominent of affluent noble houses in the kingdom. Not to mention, the King himself was her sponsor. He was a powerful and wealthy patron.

Furthermore, Sonia was the young and charming mistress of the Clare line. Her pure innocence was reminiscent of a pink rose in first bloom.

Although Pamela had been with her at first, Sonia realized her friend left somewhere along the line. Sonia kept up the sugary act as she tried to escape from the crowd of hangers-on, but they stuck to her like glue with smiles plastered on their faces. Growing increasingly frightened, Sonia's eyes reflexively searched for Chris. But he was nowhere to be found. Instead of disappointment, anger surged forth.

What's wrong with him? He hasn't come to talk about last night or offer an excuse or anything! He can go enjoy his tryst with the Crown Princess, for all I care!

"Sonia?"

Sonia's eyes fell onto the young man who had approached her from the cluster of hangers-on and rested a hand on her waist.

"Prince Severin!"

Severin offered her a sweet smile. He turned to the crowd of men and said, "You'll have to excuse us. King Patrice was calling for Duchess Sonia," with a challenging gleam in his eye.

Severin was King Patrice's second-born son. Under his threatening gaze, the noblemen had no choice but to quietly back down. The disgusting sound of several men clicking their tongues was loud enough for Sonia to hear.

"This way," Severin said, briskly leading her to the balcony. With some distance put between her and the cacophony of music and excitement, Sonia felt the tension between her shoulders melt. The gentle breeze was all it took to cool the rising temperature of her body.

"Here, have a drink," Severin said, while offering her a delicately crafted glass. Sonia accepted it gratefully.

"Thank you. I was dying of thirst..."

Seeing Sonia empty the glass in a single gulp, Severin chuckled lightly. But a moment later, a sour expression replaced his mirth.

"Unbelievable! Out of all those men, not a single one of them had the decency to offer you a drink..." he grumbled in annoyance.

Taut nerves finally relaxed, Sonia smiled as she thanked Severin. “But you noticed, Prince Severin. Thank you. I was having a hard time pulling away from that crowd.”

“Well, I was watching you the whole time,” he confessed in a sweet whisper.

“Huh...?”

Severin smiled wryly at the sight of Sonia’s heartfelt surprise. He slowly drew close, as if he were nestling up to her, as he leaned against the balcony railing.

“Did you forget what I said last night? I meant every word,” Severin said.

“*May I steal you from Chris?*” flashed across Sonia’s mind. As did his attempt to kiss her before Chris showed up last night. Sonia’s face turned bright red at having Severin’s beautifully chiseled face so close again.

“You still haven’t kissed Chris, have you?”

“...Huh? Uh, w-well, actually...” Sonia’s voice faded out to an inaudible murmur by the end.

Severin squinted and prompted, “Eh? What was that?”

“I-I said...we, uh...haven’t...yet,” Sonia despondently confessed with her head hung low, causing Severin to burst out laughing merrily.

“You’re just like a child when I tease you, Sonia!”

“Y-You’re awful, Prince Severin!”

“I couldn’t help myself... You’re just like when we played as children back in the day!” Severin exclaimed. He was doubled over with his forehead pressed against the rail because he was laughing so hard.

“I’d forgotten about that... We used to come up with pranks all the time, but we were always quick to get caught...” Sonia recalled.

“You were a bad liar. You’d give the prank away by going to apologize before we could pull it off,” Severin pointed out.

“Only because I thought all of the pranks you came up with wouldn’t be any fun if I had been on the receiving end,” Sonia said in her defense.

“Really?”

“Really. Remember how we filled the sugar pot with caterpillars? Or set a cat we caught on our piano teacher who hated animals? I was constantly a nervous wreck...” Sonia reminded him. *But I loved you so much, I was constantly chasing after you...*

“I’ve outgrown that sort of stuff. I’m a mature adult now,” Severin said. After the words left his mouth, he gasped, “Ah!” as if a thought had suddenly occurred to him.

“You don’t still see me as the ‘Prankster Prince,’ do you?” he asked.

“No, not anymore... You were a superb escort back there.”

“Thank goodness,” Severin whispered upon hearing Sonia’s response. “It’d be awful if you still saw me in that light. Especially since I’m trying to propose to you.”

Struck speechless by his words, Sonia stood staring at Severin in a daze. He gently held her hands, and her aquamarine eyes opened wide in bewilderment. There was a hint of embarrassment in the expression on his face that looked as gentle as the hands that held her own felt.

“...I’ve never proposed before. So, well, I’m struggling to find the words that will sweep you off your feet, but I mean it.”

“...Why would you want me after we’ve been apart for so long...?” The words Sonia finally managed to choke out sounded hopelessly dubious. She couldn’t help but feel uncertain. This was the first time anyone had ever proposed to her.

“Remember what I said? During our much overdue reunion, when I went to wish you well...I felt destiny the moment I laid my eyes upon you. I thought, ‘I want to protect you.’”

“Prince Severin... But King Patrice has already decided upon Sir Chris as my betrothed...”

“Not a problem!” Severin reassured Sonia, squeezing her hands and drawing his face unnervingly close. “Let’s go see Father—no, King Patrice, together! We’ll tell him of our love for one another and have him call off your engagement with Chris! Let’s go right now!”

Claiming that it was best to strike while the iron was still hot, Severin tugged at Sonia in an attempt to pull her into the ballroom.

“W-Wait... Now hold on, Prince Severin!” she said with her heart pounding slightly faster than usual from finally reeling him in. “This is all so sudden... I’m not ready yet...”

“You’re supposed to act in the heat of the moment at times like this... Or does the thought of marrying me...bother you?”

“...No...it doesn’t bother me,” Sonia answered, her face beet red.

Although Severin’s arrogant response, “Of course it doesn’t,” did strike her as strange, she continued to explain her reasoning.

“...But Sir Chris has most graciously looked after me for some time now. I took great comfort in the encouragement he offered... I’d like to discuss this with him before we speak with His Majesty...”

“Does that mean you accept my proposal?”

Sonia bashfully nodded. “Sir Chris is away on business tonight, so...tomorrow. I’ll tell him during the last night of the celebration. I’d like to hold off on telling His Majesty until then...”

“Very well, Sonia,” Severin replied, flashing her a brilliant smile.

This is for the best. Sir Chris is in love with someone else, anyway. Even if nothing could come of that romance, Sonia doubted she could compete with a lady he loved with the devotion to stay single and true for all these years.

Besides, Prince Severin was my first love. This is the right thing to do, I’m sure of it. It’ll all work out if I’m with him...

Royal Central Church

THE boisterous music and jovial laughter filling the Royal Palace did not travel this far out. Here, there was naught but pure, calm silence.

Chris knelt before the altar and offered himself to intent prayer. He had but one wish...

“Sir Crisford, sorry to have kept you waiting,” the Pope said to Chris, stepping out of a room from the back of the chapel.

“It’s fine. I haven’t been able to take the time to pray at length for a while...so I found this most cleansing,” Chris said as he stood to face the Pope.

His attention was drawn toward a parcel the Pope held tenderly with both hands. It was long and wrapped in the rich, golden cloth of a vestment.

“Is this the...?”

“It is. The head of the Clares asked his dear friend, the then Pope, to make this two generations ago. Please take it.” The Pope held it out to him. Chris accepted it timidly.

“May I look at it?” With the Pope’s permissive nod, Chris carefully began unwrapping the material. “This is...!” He gasped upon removing the cloth.

It was a sword with the blade connected to the hilt. Emitting a silvery light, it was blinding. Wrapping his hand around its hilt, Chris thrust the blade to the heavens. It overlapped with the outline of the cross decorating the altar in utter perfection.

“...Did they intentionally make it in the shape of the cross...?” Chris asked.

“So I would suspect. Duke William claimed, ‘*He* does not realize he has ceased serving the Lord’ when he commissioned this,” the Pope answered.

“...It is most unfortunate it wasn’t ready in time to save Her Grace’s parents or brothers...” Chris said remorsefully. At his words, the Pope also dropped his head.

“Duchess Sonia’s brothers died on their way to retrieve this sword. I can only imagine their remorse.”

“...I must save Her Grace, no matter the cost!” Chris avowed, holding the sword shining white up to the cross.

“Sir Chris, I’m confident you will succeed in this quest. I have faith in you, the strongest and luckiest man in the kingdom.”

“You have my word I will use all my power and luck to save Her Grace from this dreadful curse.”

Seeing the adamant will burning in Chris’ eyes, the Pope imparted, “I shall pray from a distance that the Angel of Victory smiles upon you two,” and made the sign of the cross.

Chapter 5: The Cruel Truth...

GO on, Sonia! Tell Sir Chris what you're going to do!

It was the third day of the birthday celebration. Sonia wore a simple, pale orange dress with lace embellishments that evoked the image of a warm, sunny spot on a spring day. Seeing as this was the last day of festivities, she went with a somewhat mature look by boldly revealing her shoulders.

Her neck was adorned with a necklace featuring one of the Clare treasures, a large diamond. Large diamond earrings of the same design dangled from her ears.

She was immediately greeted by Chris upon leaving her chambers. "I've come for you, Princess. I'm sorry I wasn't here for you last night," he said.

His usual gallant and cheerful demeanor made Sonia feel guilty, causing her to inadvertently avert her eyes.

"...No, it's fine. Prince Severin was kind enough to escort me in your absence," Sonia answered.

"Prince Severin did?" he asked incredulously.

The disbelief plainly written on Chris' face as he took her hand was just the push she needed. *If I'm going to tell him, the sooner the better. Besides, there aren't many people here to overhear us.*

"We confirmed our feelings for each other at the ball last night... And, well...I'd like...to accept his proposal!" she blurted out.

I did it! I said it! While she was relieved to get it off her chest, the indescribable pain in her heart made her ball her hands into tight fists.

Chris' response came instantly. "You mustn't! It would be another matter if it were someone else, but Prince Severin isn't worthy of you as he is now."

"...Huh...? Why not...?" Sonia was surprised that he shot her down so quickly, but his attitude shocked her even more. The frigid expression on his face matched his aloof demeanor. Pinned under his stern stare for the first time, Sonia found herself fidgeting nervously.

"Just because you've finally seen Prince Severin again doesn't mean he's the same as when you were young. Don't look at him through the rose-colored lens of your nostalgia. You'll only end up crying if you do," Chris admonished her.

I'll end up crying? I've already done that. And Prince Severin is still as kind as ever. Why shouldn't I rely on that kindness?

"...I've already 'ended up crying,'" Sonia quipped, borrowing his words.

Chris didn't catch what she said. "Come again?"

"Sir Chris, how do you feel...about me...?"

Chris' eyes flew open in surprise at Sonia's sudden question. He muttered, "Give me a break," while rubbing his head.

"Look, what matters isn't how I feel, Princess, but—"

"Why won't you call me by my name? Why won't you call me *Sonia*?" she cut him off, throwing the question at Chris that had been nagging at her since day one. "Why do you constantly call me 'Princess'? Are you trying to avoid forming any intimacy with me by saying my name?"

"Prin—"

"Stop it!" Sonia's scream of rejection stopped Chris mid-word, his eyes still wide with surprise. "Sir Chris, you were going to marry me when you've already sworn your heart to another... How could you be with me while harboring feelings for her? You hardly have any right to speak ill of Prince Severin! I can't believe you'd put yourself on a pedestal and criticize him...!"

"But I...!"

Chris appeared clearly shaken; this verified the rumors Pamela had heard.

"At least Prince Severin actually proposed. He wants to go tell his father, King Patrice, the good news. His actions and words came across sincere. I intend to appear before the King tonight to ask that he call off our engagement so I may be with Prince Severin!"

"Princess...!"

"Leave me alone from now on!" Sonia shouted. She slapped Chris' hand away

and raced to put the scene behind her.

Prince Severin! Where are you, Prince Severin...? Although he had told Sonia to wait for him in her chambers, she didn't want to remain there any longer. She imagined he was making his way to her chambers, so he shouldn't be far. Yet, he was nowhere to be seen around the room she was using.

If Sonia entered the ballroom, the young lords were bound to swarm around her again. Instead, she decided to head for the nostalgic arbor where she had met Severin a mere two days ago. When he realized she wasn't in her chambers or the ballroom, it might occur to him to search for her there.

Sonia made her way into the depths of the garden, where the secretive atmosphere of twilight drifted. Carefully choosing her steps to avoid any embarrassing spills, she noticed the arbor was already occupied by the time it came into view. It was hard to discern the couple in the poor lighting, but she thought it was a man and woman.

What should I do? This is hardly any better than spying. I can't stay here forever. I'll have to go somewhere else. Just as Sonia was about to give up on the arbor and leave, the voice of a man she knew all too well stopped her in her tracks.

"Like I said, I'm doing this for us. Why else would I propose to that naïve little princess? I thought you knew my type... Yeah, I'm only interested in women overflowing with mature charm, like you."

Prince Severin?

"You're only saying that to assuage me," replied a sullen woman's voice. Her voice held an endearing ring despite her sullen complaint. Even Sonia could tell that voice was reserved for him.

"She's the mistress of the Dukedom of Clare," Severin responded.

"What? That means she's from the 'Cursed Family' line! Will you be all right approaching her?" the woman asked. Not only did she stop resting her head against Severin's shoulder, she shifted her entire body away from him.

Severin lightly chuckled at the woman's open fear. Sonia could only see their backs from where she stood, but she imagined he was gazing at the woman

with his lips quirked into a kind, polished smile.

“See for yourself. Does it look like I’ve been struck by the curse?”

The woman shook her head back and forth in answer to Severin’s question.

“I suspect the curse has latched onto her fiancé, Crisford. Knowing him, he’s bound to break the curse sooner or later. After all, he was chosen in a divine revelation,” Severin said.

“In the meantime, you’ll win Duchess de Clare’s heart and marry her once Sir Crisford breaks the curse... Does that sound about right? Oh, you’re terrible!” The woman giggled as she laid her cheek back on Severin’s shoulder.

“I’m doing it for us. You can’t spend money freely anymore under your husband’s scrutinous eye. I was financially cut off myself when all that splurging incurred Father’s wrath. I was only using that money to spend time with you, darling... Father just doesn’t understand how I feel...”

“Prince Severin... I don’t know what to say. I’m so happy you’re willing to plunge into a loveless marriage for me...” the woman said.

“Catherine, I won’t let you go without,” Severin promised while wrapping his arms around the woman called “Catherine” to embrace her passionately. The two slowly pulled apart after ardently kissing for a time.

“Don’t fall for Duchess de Clare, okay? My darling Severin!”

“Of course not. Although we’re childhood friends, I don’t think of her as anything more than that. But after we’re married, I’ll have to perform my duties to leave an heir and have a child—Ah!” Severin exclaimed as if suddenly remembering something and jumped to his feet.

“I was supposed to pick Sonia up at her room so we could receive my father’s blessing! I’m going to be extremely late!” he cried.

“Oh dear! What if she gets angry and changes her mind about the whole affair?”

“She’s enamored with me since I’m her first love. I’m sure she’s patiently waiting at the door.”

“Hurry on, now,” Catherine urged, but Severin held her hand longingly,

showering it with kisses. “Really...! Get going already!” she pushed, not altogether annoyed.

“I’ll have the messenger pass on my next letter. Bye!” Severin returned her bewitching smile with a broad grin before leaving the arbor.

And there *she* was.

“Prince Severin...”

Sonia stepped out from the shadow of a tree to block Severin’s path. For a moment, he forgot to breathe. He could clearly recognize Sonia’s pallid face even in the poor light of the torches. Not only was her face devoid of color, it was devoid of all expression as well.

“S-Sonia...! Perfect timing! I was just about to go get you. I’m sorry I had some business that I had to attend to first,” Severin said, pulling her hand in an attempt to lead her away from the arbor.

Is he buying time for the woman to get out of the arbor? That was how it looked. So Sonia turned on her heel and called out to the woman trying to hide in the darkness beyond.

“*Not so fast!* I heard everything! Don’t you realize the man you love is planning to marry a woman he doesn’t love?”

The woman kept running as quickly as her legs could carry her without so much as turning back in response to Sonia’s question. She wobbled awkwardly, having to hike up the floor-length dress with its long train. The heels she was wearing were ridiculously high. Not to mention narrow. There was no way she could run at full speed in those things. Actually, it was already dubious if a noblewoman would lower herself to the act of running at full speed. She would never live it down in court if any of the gossiping ladies caught sight of her.

On the other hand, Sonia had never worn anything but low heels during her many years at the Royal Abbey. Consequentially, she had attended the ball with heels of a lower height that she was more comfortable with. Not to mention, she was confident in her lower body strength.

All that arduous mopping at the abbey paid off! If I don’t put these muscles to the test now, when will I? Sonia thought, exerting all her strength running in the

most inappropriate of places.

Her well-toned legs must have paid off, for she caught Catherine in a matter of moments. Sonia flung question upon question at the woman, demanding, “Why didn’t you try to stop Prince Severin if you love him? He was doing this for my money, but is there a reason you’re that hard off?”

The poorly illuminated woman whipped around to face Sonia with widened eyes framed by overdone makeup. She looked at Sonia as if Sonia were a freak. Fighting her urge to break out into tears, Sonia fixed her eyes upon Catherine.

“Come now!” Catherine exclaimed with a belittling laugh as she returned the glare. “Isn’t it obvious this is all in good fun?”

“...Huh?” Sonia croaked out.

“Would you unhand me? It would be a breach of social conduct for me to flick your hand away.”

Overpowered by her cold tone, Sonia let go of her arm. Hiking up her hem, Catherine halfheartedly curtsied to Sonia, making it clear by her attitude that she only did it as a matter of protocol.

“You’re Duchess Sonia, I presume? The last to inherit the de Clare title... My name is Catherine de Chalier. I’ll have you know, I’ve already tied the knot.”

She has a husband?

“You’re married...? But aren’t you and Prince Severin...?” The words spilled numbly out of Sonia’s mouth on their own. Her mind was about to short-circuit from an overload of shock.

“That is why I said it was all a game, didn’t I? I like enjoying faux romances with men beside my husband. Sometimes I pretend I’m single again, and we promise our future to one another. Other times we resign ourselves to a platonic romance. Then there are those times I enjoy giving myself over to a night of pleasure.”

“That’s obscene...! How dare you break the vows you swore before God...! It’s unforgivable!” Sonia berated her.

“Unforgivable or not, the sons and daughters of nobility don’t get a say in

who we marry beforehand. We aren't allowed to love whoever our heart desires. Don't you find it far more 'unforgivable' for a loveless couple to swear their love before God?"

"Well..."

Catherine slowly closed in on Sonia as she fumbled for words. The older woman came across as patronizing, as if Sonia was an obtuse little girl.

"I've heard you spent a long time at the Royal Abbey, so you're ignorant of the ways of the world. Duchess Sonia, did you realize that out in the real world, it takes money to do anything? Especially if you aren't a married couple. Don't we all want to indulge in some gambling, recreation, and romance?"

Her hand touched Sonia's shoulders. It felt as if her sticky, grubby hand was clinging to Sonia's skin, making her jump.

"Would you like me to educate you in the ways of the world, Duchess Sonia de Clare?" Catherine asked, her crimson red lips curling into an enchanting smile.

"Lady de Chalier!" a stern voice called. "If you wish to get acquainted with Her Grace, please consult the matter with your husband and King Patrice first."

The voice made Catherine bolt straight up. Her shoulders jerked up, disgust radiating from her as she turned to face the owner of the voice.

"...Sir Chris." The one who said his name was Sonia.

Chris strode past Catherine and the silently gawking Severin. Upon reaching Sonia, he planted himself in front of her as if shielding her from the other two.

"I see your husband's warnings were insufficient. Would you prefer His Majesty to scold you personally? You and your husband will be severely punished if it comes to that!" Chris snapped.

"Wh-What have I done to deserve this...? I was simply offering to teach Duchess Sonia court etiquette and the current games that are all the—"

"She doesn't need you to teach her anything. Moreover, as I recall, weren't you temporarily prohibited from entering the palace...?" he hissed with a glare harsher than his biting voice, making Catherine grow stiff.

Severin answered his question instead. "...I invited her. The guards watch me like hawks outside the palace...but I figured we could slip away together during a big event here."

"I see King Patrice didn't make himself clear enough to you as well," Chris growled.

"If he disapproves because Catherine is married, he can go to Hell! I love her. I want to be with her!" Severin appealed to Chris in earnest, then trailed off weakly, "However...she said it was all just a game..."

Severin's eyes shifted to Catherine as he begged her, "You didn't mean it, did you? It was a lie to pull out of this mess, right?"

With Chris before her, Catherine was apparently racking her brains to figure out how to respond. Unable to regather herself, her mouth popped open and shut.

Seeing her conflicted reaction, Chris sternly reproached, "If you truly love Prince Severin, return the money King Patrice gave you to repay the debt you and Prince Severin incurred by gambling. Then the two of you can pay the debt off together.

"But you can't do that, can you? It's the very reason why you and your husband came crying for help, remember? Hence, King Patrice provided that consolation money under the condition you never saw Prince Severin again, or did you *forget*?"

Chris turned to Severin. "I have some words for you as well, Prince Severin. You're no longer allowed to spend your time freely due to the debt you've incurred by gambling. You've tried to drag Her Grace into a problem you brought upon yourself! Moreover, you went after her fortune! Have you fallen so low that you don't have any remorse for taking advantage of your childhood friend?!"

"....."

Seeing the two fall into silence, Chris spat, "Lady de Chalier, please leave. I will send word of this to your husband later. Expect a thorough scolding. He might not let you out of the manor after this stunt."

Then he quietly said, "Prince Severin, come with me..." He cast his glance at Sonia and beckoned, "You need to hear this as well."

Sonia was standing in a motionless daze, her head hung low.

"...How much of Prince Severin and Lady de Chalier's conversation did you overhear...? Chris asked.

Sonia paled at the memory of Severin boasting to Catherine like a love-struck puppy.

"Please tell me...everything...you know..." she said, while staring down at her clasped hands.

TOO many shocking things had happened all at once. Nonetheless, she had to know. This was something Sonia had to hear. It had been nagging at her for so long now.

King Patrice sat across from Sonia on a well-cushioned, luxurious chair. Seeing Sonia across from him in such low spirits filled Patrice with concern. He had recommended their conversation wait until she'd had a few days to calm down, but Sonia would have none of it.

Patrice had left mid-celebration upon receiving word from Chris. As it was the last day, the festivities were at their zenith. Until it was time for the finale, it was doubtful anyone would notice amidst all of the hubbub if the star of the party slipped away. With the Diamant Knight, Chris, at his side, anyone who saw him leave would breathe easy knowing he was safe.

I'm still flabbergasted by the stupidity of my son! Patrice glared at Severin, having heard everything from Chris. He couldn't believe Severin would propose to Sonia for her money. And he'd had the audacity to sneak Catherine, who was prohibited from so much as glancing at him, into the castle. And to top it off, he'd foolishly let his mouth run with an outsider about the Clare curse. If they were alone, Patrice would have loved to give the boy a good smack.

The wind had blown out of Severin's sails upon learning how the woman he thought reciprocated his love truly felt, but he had brought the heartache upon himself with his naiveté.

Blessed with extraordinarily good looks, Severin was popular with all the ladies, including his mother, from the time he was a young lad. He'd grown up showered with tender love and affection, constantly surrounded by a throng of idolizing women. It was hardly surprising for some of his admirers, men and women alike, to harbor impure intent.

Severin had learned the pleasures of sexual relationships at an early age. Patrice caught on and tore him away from the riffraff, but Severin refused to take Chris' training to heart. So he wound up running from Chris and falling in love with Catherine, who was a notorious gambler, temptress, and tramp.

There were a few lessons Severin had learned about women, based on his own experiences. They included: *Women are soft and kind.

*All women worship and praise me.

*There is no such thing as a woman who doesn't love me.

On the one hand, his feelings toward women and love were pure. Yet on the other, he never questioned or doubted them. If it came from a woman, he would believe even the most superficial lies.

I'm not sure if he's too trusting or just plain dumb... I'll deal with him later.
Patrice sighed to himself and looked at Sonia.

Her smile that could light up a whole room had disappeared, and her eyes dropped down to her hands balled into fists, as if she were fighting to hold her own. Her once clear aquamarine eyes looked clouded, no longer reflecting anything.

"...Sonia, I fear this will be too much for you to bear now," Patrice confessed.

Keeping her head bowed, Sonia shook her head in protest. "No, please tell me. I must know...! As Duchess de Clare, it's my obligation. If it's directly related to the deaths of my parents and brothers as well as the bizarre things occurring around me, then all the more so!" Sonia cried, her plea coming out a desperate wail that only made Patrice all the more hesitant.

Standing at the King's side, Chris pointed out, "Your Majesty, Her Grace knows that rumors are popping up around her. I believe it would be better for her to hear the truth from you than be swayed by the bits and pieces that slip

out."

After a brief silence, the King sipped his lukewarm tea. Upon quickly downing the cup, a look of determination covered his countenance as he faced Sonia head on.

"Sonia, I'm sure you will be terribly upset when you hear the truth. But take heart knowing you have people pouring their hearts and souls into finding a way to save you," Patrice said.

"...I will," Sonia assured him.

The worry painting Sonia's face once she finally raised her head filled Patrice with sadness as he said, "The Clare house takes pride as our kingdom's most prominent financial power. It reached its peak during the generation of your grandfather, William."

Patrice's voice was solemn as he told the story that began it all...

THE primary reason the Clare fortune expanded during William's generation was due to seizing the demesne allotted to the priest residing at Clare Castle at the time. Although the priest served God, his attachment to money and gain was no different than any secular man.

Perhaps entering and leaving Clare Castle as he pleased went to his head. Or perhaps he deluded himself into thinking he was a member of the Clare family. Either way, he began putting his own word in regarding the administration of the finances.

William told him to stop but left it at a verbal warning. He had decided to wait and see if the priest had learned his lesson.

"He serves God before he serves me," William had said. He believed the man knew where his duties lied, even if he proved to be a secular priest living in a secular society.

...Unfortunately, the priest didn't change. Quite the opposite, in fact. He sent a false report claiming that he was unable to collect taxes from the people of his demesne due to failed crops and pocketed the money. Come the third year,

William held a covert investigation. During the three years the priest supposedly hadn't been able to collect taxes, there had been lush harvests, and the serfs had paid in full. William finally confiscated the land from the priest for lining his own pockets and told him to leave the castle.

Supposedly, he spat out, "Be grateful I don't report this to the Central Church!"

But things took an unexpected turn later that night. The priest summoned William to the castle chapel. There, he warned, "Return my land. If you don't, God will no longer bless you with children."

"...Isn't...that a threat?" Sonia doubted her own ears, unable to believe that a priest would be capable of such a thing.

"William was a very devout man. The priest probably assumed that he could scare William into returning the land if he threatened him as a messenger of the Lord," Patrice said.

"But Grandfather refused, didn't he...?"

Patrice nodded and continued, "Apparently the argument continued for some time after that. The two escalated in their anger until eventually..."

The priest cried, "Deaf to the words of the Lord, you will no longer receive His blessings!"

"How dare you use the Lord as cover to sate your greed! You are the one who will incur God's wrath, Father!" William retorted.

"You dare ridicule me?! That is the same heinous act as ridiculing God! His wrath will not be assuaged until the Clare line perishes!"

"The moment the priest declared that to William, the statue of the Holy Mother in the chapel fell on his back, killing the man," Patrice said.

"I had no idea... So that's why the chapel in the castle was blocked off..." Sonia said.

"I've heard William felt God punished the priest. Seeing as he could no longer continue using a chapel soiled with bloodshed, he had a church built outside and replaced the priest..." Patrice stopped there and gulped.

"Let me call for a fresh pot of tea..." Sonia offered, but Patrice stopped her from calling a maid.

"No, water will suffice."

He poured himself a glass of water from the pitcher. Emptying the glass in a single swig, he continued the story now that he had wet his parched mouth.

"Although it came to an unsavory conclusion, the problem had been resolved. At least, that was what William told me back when I was the Crown Prince and my father was the King. I also felt 'divine punishment' had rightly been served, going by his story."

"...If that's true, how do you explain all of the terrifying, otherworldly things that have happened to me and the Clares?! Are you sure my grandfather didn't omit some of the facts?" Sonia asked in a trembling voice, but Patrice shook his head.

"Sonia, this is merely the prelude. The real trouble starts here."

First, illness began taking the lives of the Clares' relatives one after the next. Honestly, no one realized this was due to the "curse" at the beginning. Everyone assumed the series of unfortunate losses continued because they ate bread made from poisoned rye that had been refined into flour.

Not long thereafter, strange phenomena began to occur in the main residence, Clare Castle. William's wife, Isabella, was the first to lose her life to these otherworldly terrors. Then they took William's younger brother and his family.

To this day, I still clearly remember how haggard William appeared from fending off the curse and ghoulish trickery on the day he came to my father for advice.

"If this persists, my line will perish at his hands," William bemoaned.

"His hands? Of whom do you speak?"

"The priest... He has fallen to the other side in death," William answered.

"The late priest...cursed us...?" Sonia asked with a look of disbelief.

Patrice explained, "As long as you are a living being, even those in service of

the Lord are subject to temptation. They simply strive to overcome such worldly desires. However, that priest was unable to suppress his greed."

Recognizing the root of the problem, William wanted to resolve it before harm came to his sons and their families. As such, he asked the Pope at the time to commune with the priest at Clare Castle.

William intended to return the confiscated land to the priest's family in exchange for lifting the "curse." Alas, his demands had grown far greedier in death.

"Hand over the taxes collected while you kept my land," he insisted. "Return the wheat you harvested. If you can't, by the Lord, I swear the Clare line will no longer be blessed with progeny."

William shot back at the disembodied voice, "Your actions defile God! How dare you administer judgment beyond the grave! Do you think yourself a god?!"

The priest retorted in response, "I speak the words of God! You must be a demon to stand in defiance! I cannot turn a blind eye to this house of Devil worshipers! I shall set you on the right path from the other side!"

"...Then he vanished, bringing an end to the séance. Ultimately, the situation hasn't changed since then..." Patrice said, bringing the story to an end.

Everyone was at a loss for words.

The only ones present were Sonia, Patrice, Chris, and Severin, but the gravity of the situation held their tongues. Sonia seemed to have taken it particularly hard. Part of it was due to shock that curses did, indeed, exist; part of it was because the curse had been placed by a dead man, and not just any dead man, but a man of the cloth.

"In other words, God has forsaken the Clare line..." Sonia said, coming to a pitiful conclusion.

"That isn't true, Sonia!"

"Don't lie!" Finally snapping, Sonia shouted back at Patrice. "Otherwise, why didn't God save us before I was all alone? If that priest is in the wrong, He should have stopped this madness ages ago! ...It's still going on because my

grandfather sinned!” she yelled.

“Sonia...it’s not as though God helps us at each and every turn. We must wait until He does,” Patrice said.

“So is the Clare line supposed to die off? Is that why He’s waited this long? Because that’s what it looks like!”

Seeing Sonia grow hysterical, Patrice and Chris drew close in hopes to comfort her, but she pushed them away and tore at her hair. “Stay away from me! Leave me alone!” she screamed.

Given her rattled state, the three men decided it would be best to leave the room for the time being and stationed a guard outside the door.

“Princess,” Chris called as he was stepping out. Sonia was trembling, her head buried in the sofa armrest. “Please don’t forget. There are those who wish to save you.”

“...I’m nothing but an inconvenience to you. The cursed Duchess abandoned by God is just a burden for the Diamant Knight, Sir Chris,” Sonia spat sourly without bothering to lift her head up or turn to look at Chris. “Leave me alone!”

With no choice but to grant Sonia’s hysterical plea for solitude, Chris left the room with heavy feet.

Alone in the room, Sonia kept her head buried in the sofa armrest. She couldn’t face reality—a reality that no mortal man could fight. It was terrifying.

She had lost her parents at the same time. Then her brothers. Her grandfather. Everyone. Tears of frustration sprung forth at the thought that this curse had taken her whole family.

It also became evident why King Patrice had chosen Chris for her husband. He couldn’t afford to let the Clare family die off. On a strictly political outlook, if Sonia died, the King would have to supervise how the massive assets she left behind were divided among the nobility dispersed throughout the kingdom. Although there were past cases of reallocating the land and wealth due to the end of a family line, disputes of varying size inevitably broke out.

Wealth equivalent to the national budget... Oh, how enticing that must look.

If a noble could snatch it all for himself, he could obtain an entire country. Usurping the Crown wasn't an empty pipe dream. It could pull the kingdom—perhaps the neighboring kingdoms as well—into outright war.

Even if I spent the rest of my life in the abbey, there would still be war after I died...

But the paranormal phenomena had resumed due to her leaving the abbey. These unearthly spectacles endangered the life of her fiancé.

That's right! Sir Chris is being targeted because of the children we'd have if we married... Jealousy was never a factor.

Chris knew better, but he claimed a "spirit was jealous." He was the kingdom's highest ranking knight, blessed with protective magic from God.

"...But what good has that done? It hasn't kept him from harm at all!" Sonia wailed.

Severin had noticed the curse had turned on Chris.

That's why he was willing to touch me later, even though he wouldn't when we were first reunited.

If Chris broke the curse while it was focused on him, Severin could take Sonia and the Clare fortune for himself without getting hurt.

Then he could live in the lap of luxury with Catherine...

"Heh heh... Keh hah hah! Aha ha ah!" Sonia burst out laughing, filled with the urge to laugh even though it wasn't the least bit funny.

The nerve, claiming he'd never proposed before! Severin was perfectly willing to whisper false words of love for his high living. And rather than stop him, his lover was outright pleased with his debauchery.

Money. Everyone was after this burdensome fortune. The King only wanted to prevent her assets from sending Pharrell into turmoil. Severin merely wanted it so he could live in extravagance with his lover. Chris...

...What does Chris want from me? The question surfaced, but already overcome with exhaustion, her mind refused to think about it. *I bet it has to do with a reward presented by his beloved Crown Princess. If not that, it's because*

the “King ordered” him to.

I’m all alone. No one in the world loved Sonia for who she was or truly worried about her.

Sonia trembled in loneliness. Suddenly, feeling horribly cold, she wrapped her arms around her shoulders and huddled in on herself. If only she’d never left the Royal Abbey!

The happiest days of her life were when she would daydream with Pamela over what their doting future husbands would be like.

“Pame...la...! Pamela...!” Sonia yelled her best friend’s name while crying.

As Pamela’s name left her mouth, she noticed a hand softly rubbing her back. She swerved her head around, not bothering to dry her face soaked with tears. Behind her she faced Pamela, looking at her with brows arched in concern.

“What happened? I noticed King Patrice, Prince Severin...and that knight...all looked serious as they left the room. I know it was stepping out of bounds, but I had the maid outside let me in. But I’m glad I did. It looks like I made the right choice,” Pamela said.

“Pamela!”

Cradled like a small child, Sonia wrapped her own arms around Pamela. Comforted by her warmth, Sonia burst into tears once more.

“You’re the only one, Pamela! Only you! You’re the only person who sees me for who I am! Everyone else is just worried about my wealth or how to obtain it!” Sonia cried.

“Sonia... You’re right. Nobody has your best interest in mind. Nobody but *me*. I’m the only one who cares about you.”

“Pamela...”

Noticing Pamela wasn’t her usual self, Sonia lifted her head up. Pamela’s face was very close. The two had pressed their foreheads or cheeks against each other countless times back at the abbey, so there were numerous occasions Sonia had seen her face up close. But it was different tonight. Sonia could sense something was wrong from the expression on her face.

The black eyes looking at her were oddly seductive. Her mouth twisted cryptically into a forced smile.

“Sonia, I’m just like you... My uncle decided to marry me off to a much older man because of his debts,” Pamela confessed.

“That’s horrible...!”

“He introduced us, but the man is despicable! I could practically feel his hands all over me as he looked me up and down. Then the creep laughed, ‘I’m sure she’ll produce plenty of fine heirs!’ I felt so violated!”

“In that case, I’ll lend him the money! I can’t let you marry someone you don’t approve of...!” Sonia offered.

Although she appreciated the sentiment, Pamela refused Sonia’s offer. “If you do, my uncle will try to take advantage of you... He could use that to smooth talk his way into your life. He’d think nothing of it... I don’t want him to ruin our friendship...”

“Pamela...”

The two hung their heads.

“I’m being taken hostage to ensure he repays his debt. You’re paying for your ancestor’s mistake... We’re pretty similar, aren’t we...?” Pamela self-deprecatingly sneered at their unbearable plight. “Nothing good has happened since leaving the abbey. It’s been the same for you, hasn’t it?”

“...There was one thing,” Sonia answered. She was about to say that it was how she got to see Pamela again, but before she could...

“Don’t lie!” Pamela shouted, suddenly enraged. Sonia was so surprised that she snapped her mouth shut.

“You haven’t had anything good happen, have you? No, not a single damn thing! There’s no way! You don’t want to keep living like this, do you? Well?!” Pamela demanded. The glint in her eyes was frightening as she grabbed and shook Sonia by the shoulders.

“P-Pamela...?”

This wasn’t the same Pamela she knew back at the abbey. She wasn’t the

same mild-mannered person who brought a sense of calmness to those around her.

Despite the dark pool of emotions in her black eyes, they sparkled eerily as she glared at Sonia. Was it her uncle's fault she changed? Or was it because she left the abbey?

"Sonia... I'd like to ask for a favor. May I?" Pamela asked, narrowing her eyes as she formed a smile. It made her seem slightly less creepy, but something still seemed off. Much like Sonia, she must've been growing emotionally unbalanced after suffering constant mental fatigue.

Poor Pamela... She's just like me.

"...Sure. You name it," Sonia promised, squeezing Pamela's hand.

"Thank you...Sonia. I love you," Pamela replied. She smiled as she squeezed Sonia's hand in return. The two smiled at each other, holding hands for a while.

"This is torture. It's sheer torture. I've found a great way out of this... But I couldn't bear to do it alone."

"Goodness... There is such a thing? Tell me! If you don't want to do it alone, I'll join you," Sonia replied.

My only value lies with the Clare fortune, anyway. I might as well stick with Pamela the whole way through. If she wants, I wouldn't mind if the two of us ran off to some other country.

"Really? I'm happy to hear that, Sonia!" Pamela said, her smile deepening. She held Sonia's hands clasped tightly, ever so tightly, in her own.

"Won't you die with me...? Sonia...?"

The horribly deep voice that came from Pamela's mouth as if crawling from the darkness was that of a man's...

Chapter 6: You're the One I Believe **PATRICE** paced in front of his throne, heaving an endless number of sighs.

About the only time he stopped was to take a sip of wine. Over in the plush armchair set to his right, Severin sat dejectedly with his shoulders hunched over.

Chris stood beside the door, watching the King and Prince. But it wasn't as though he was calmly watching over them.

Will Her Grace be all right on her own? His mind was filled with thoughts of Sonia.

It would have come as no surprise for any normal girl to have grown depressed or lost her mind long before now. Sometimes when Sonia faced an unearthly phenomenon her mood fell, but even then, she continued to smile bravely. It was only natural that his feelings shifted from the sole desire to protect her as a knight to the desire to protect her as a man.

At first, he had planned to save her cursed house and then withdraw from their marriage arrangement. *He would break the curse!* The very idea made his blood as a Diamant Knight stir with excitement, which was why he accepted the King's request. Once freed from the curse, countless young noblemen from distinguished families would undoubtedly come lining up to propose to Sonia.

Although Chris hailed from a noble family himself, it was of inconsequential standing. As the third-born son, he had no claim to the family title or fortune. It didn't help that he was a middle-aged man in his early-thirties. He doubted a young lady would take an interest in him. That was why he accepted the role.

But I... The feelings that blossomed in him had been unanticipated.

He glared daggers from a distance at Severin, who began playing with his fingers out of boredom.

CLICK! The door swung open and the Queen rushed in, her golden hair

streaming behind her. The Crown Princess continued after her.

Queen Cordelia made a beeline straight for Severin. Before he could rise, she screamed, “YOU DAAAAMN FOOOOOL!” and struck him so hard it sent him and his chair to the floor in a mighty crash! She pulled him up and was about to land another punch when the Crown Princess screamed at the scene unfolding before her and begged for help.

“Please stop, Your Majesty! Chris, stop her!”

“Certainly, Your Highness!” Chris replied. Although he wanted to let Cordelia keep at it, he couldn’t defy the Crown Princess’ orders. Slipping behind Cordelia, he pinioned her arms to hold her back.



“GRAH! *Unhand me!* I’m *fed up* with this spoiled brat! I need to thoroughly beat out the wickedness that compelled him to use his downtrodden old friend for his own selfish desires!” Cordelia cried.

“If I could, I would love to let go so you may do with him as you would, but this is the last night of the birthday celebration! It’d bode ill to end it on a family dispute!” Chris said in an attempt to reason with her.

At the same time, the Crown Princess begged King Patrice, “Please bring the situation under control!”

“Keep it within the realm of a swollen face, my Queen. On second thought, he might stop attracting unsavory women if you make him outright deformed.”

Cordelia could tell exactly how Patrice felt from the irritation dripping from his words. “Patrice is of a like mind! So let go, Chris!” she snapped.

“May I let go?” Chris asked Patrice.

“D-Don’t! I’m begging you, don’t let go of her!” Severin pleaded while protecting the cheek Cordelia had punched.

Cordelia was the type to hit first and ask questions later. Plus, she was quick to lose her temper. Though it was hard to imagine her doing so with her willowy frame, she was capable of kicking in stilettos or throwing a punch without paying heed to the pain in her knuckles. While her strength commanded the fear of her husband and children alike, she had always coddled Severin with tender love and care as her favorite.

Naturally, his mother had never given him a taste of her “corporal punishment” before. Not even when his affair with Catherine had been busted. Nor when his parents discovered the debt he had incurred from gambling. But this time, she had administered her “punishment punch” the moment she opened the door.

“You’re being cruel! Mother! You’ve never punched me over anything before!” Severin screamed. He was horribly rattled at getting punched and scolded by his mother, the one person he thought would be on his side. Tears slowly trickled down his cheeks.

At that sight, Cordelia shot back hysterically, “I’m responsible for raising you to be such a *disgrace*, so I chose not to stand up for you! I was just allowing Patrice to call the shots...! But you’ve pushed me *too far* this time! How DARE you scheme and toy with Patrice’s cousin, the child of my dear friend...! I’ll admit, when you two were little, I thought it’d be nice if you fell in love someday. But I *certainly* didn’t mean for you to profess fake feelings of love and propose for your own benefit...!”

Hysteria must have unleashed her strength several fold, for Cordelia’s rampage made even the mighty knight, Chris, tremble in his boots as he held her back.

“...I’m more worried about Sonia than your face... I can only imagine how shocked she must be...” Cordelia lamented. Seeing Patrice with his head hung low between slumped shoulders, Cordelia finally lowered her fists.

“Knowing how hard she’d take it, I’ve been trying to figure out how to break it to Sonia softly,” Patrice admitted. “But then I received word from the Pope that ‘God has shown the way in a dream regarding the Clare Curse.’ Hearing that, I grew hopeful we could use this to save Sonia. I thought...perhaps we could put an end to it before telling Sonia everything. That way, perhaps Sonia wouldn’t give up on life...”

“Where is Sonia...?” Cordelia asked Patrice, realizing the girl was missing once she regained her composure. “Is she alone now? I need to go to her right away...!”

“She was terribly shaken and yelled at us to leave her alone...”

“I shall go comfort her. Chris, take me to her,” Cordelia ordered. As she reassuringly rubbed Patrice’s shoulders with the airs unique to a wife, she told him, “You should head back to the ballroom.”

Then Cordelia threw a wink at the Crown Princess, who had accompanied her, as if telling the younger woman that she was leaving the rest to her.

“...I...” Severin suddenly whispered. Sitting on the floor as he rubbed where Cordelia had hit him on the cheek, Severin looked like he was sulking after a scolding. “I’m a victim here, too... I just had the worst thing happen to me... And I didn’t do anything wrong...”

POP! Chris was so furious, he could swear he heard his blood vessel popping. “Your Royal Majesty! Your Majesty! Permission to scold him!”

“Sure, I don’t mind,” Patrice consented.

“Let him have it!” Cordelia encouraged.

The moment he received their permission, Chris loudly stormed over to Severn and slammed his foot square against the prince’s back.

“BWAH!” Severin yelped out unceremoniously as his body went flying a good meter.

Chris roared at the prince groaning on the ground, “You are in for some harsh disciplining once the issue with Her Grace has been resolved! No matter where you run, I WILL hunt you down! I’ll make a fine man out of you, even if I have to lock you in the dungeon! I *swear* I will make you mend the error of your ways!” After stressing the point three different ways to underscore it, he escorted Cordelia out of the room.

Cordelia followed his lead and said quietly, “Chris, I’m sorry we always place the unpleasant tasks on you...”

“What are you talking about? I’ve never once considered them unpleasant. Even now, the thought that I may assist Her Grace fills me with joy,” Chris replied.

Cordelia looked intently at Chris from behind as the knight smiled softly. She sensed a change in him. “But I know you don’t intend to truly marry—”

“Your Majesty!” Chris interjected. He pressed his index finger against his lips and went “Shh!” as if he was trying to say some things were best left unspoken. Cordelia realized her blunder and quickly covered her mouth.

“Who’s to say when *he’s* eavesdropping? Admittedly, he seems to hate me, so he doesn’t cling to me like a love-struck puppy. He must fear my beard. I actually think I may keep growing it when this is all over with...” Chris commented.

“I know the Pope instructed you to grow a beard, but why do you suppose he said that? Message from God or not, it doesn’t make any sense...”

"I figured it out when I visited Clare Castle. It wasn't meaningless."

"I see," Cordelia said with a nod, struggling to follow after Chris. Not only was there a difference in their strides, but a woman in heels and trailing skirts had to practically run to match the pace Chris kept. Cordelia grew fed up and snapped.

"Hey... *Chris!* Show some consideration! It's awful trying to follow you!"

Finally realizing he had been walking too fast, he apologized, "I'm sorry," and slowed his pace.

"You've never had this problem before... What's gotten into you tonight? Did you forget your manners while at Clare Castle?"

"No... I'm worried about Her Grace. Something doesn't feel right," Chris answered. The expression on his face when he turned back was hard. Cordelia raised her eyebrows in surprise to see him unlike his usual confident self.

He hastily spoke on, without pausing to breathe, his pace quickening with each word out of his mouth. "The shock could lead her to take her own life. And even if it doesn't, she could be terrified after the reality of the cruel fate she must bear sets in. In any event, I must hurry to her..."

He needed to get to Sonia as quickly as possible! Although he usually treated Cordelia with the utmost respect, his impatience made him come across as rude.

"Uh-huh," Cordelia said with a smile, realizing the true reason for his behavior. "You're in love with Sonia, aren't you? You love her as a woman, I mean."

"GACK!" Chris made a strange, guttural sound and came to a halt. Ever so slowly, he turned to face Cordelia.

"My, my!" Cordelia laughed gleefully at the look on his face. "I'm glad love blossomed before you got married."

"...The Princess is more important than my feelings," Chris replied. As Chris resumed walking before Cordelia, his face was so red that it stood out even in the poor lighting of the candlelit hallway.

WHEN Chris and Cordelia entered Sonia's chambers, the scene made Chris' blood curdle. Rushing over, he yelled at the unconscious guard, "Hey! Hang in there!"

The guard moaned as he slowly came to. He squinted up at the man holding him as he weakly croaked, "The moment a young lady came up to speak to me...I was hit on the head... Is the Duchess inside all right...?"

The guard cradled the back of his head as if it still hurt. Chris entrusted him to Cordelia and charged into the room, his hand nestled over the hilt of his blade. Immediately upon opening the door, he found the maid on duty unconscious on the floor, just as the guard had been. After checking her pulse, Chris dashed to the door that connected to the inner chamber.

Sonia had holed up on the other side of that door. But according to the guard, some "lady" had also gone inside after Chris and the others took their leave. The moment Chris' hand grasped the doorknob, he heard Sonia's muffled voice through the door.

"Pamela...you're right. There might not be any point for either of us to go on living..."

"Yes, exactly, Sonia... Your blood is filled with greed. Only someone possessed by a demon could steal land from a servant of God."

What is this? The voice of the woman with Sonia seemed strange. Actually, was there both a man and woman in there trying to lead Sonia astray? The male and female voices were speaking as one, like they were perfectly harmonizing each word without fail.

But...

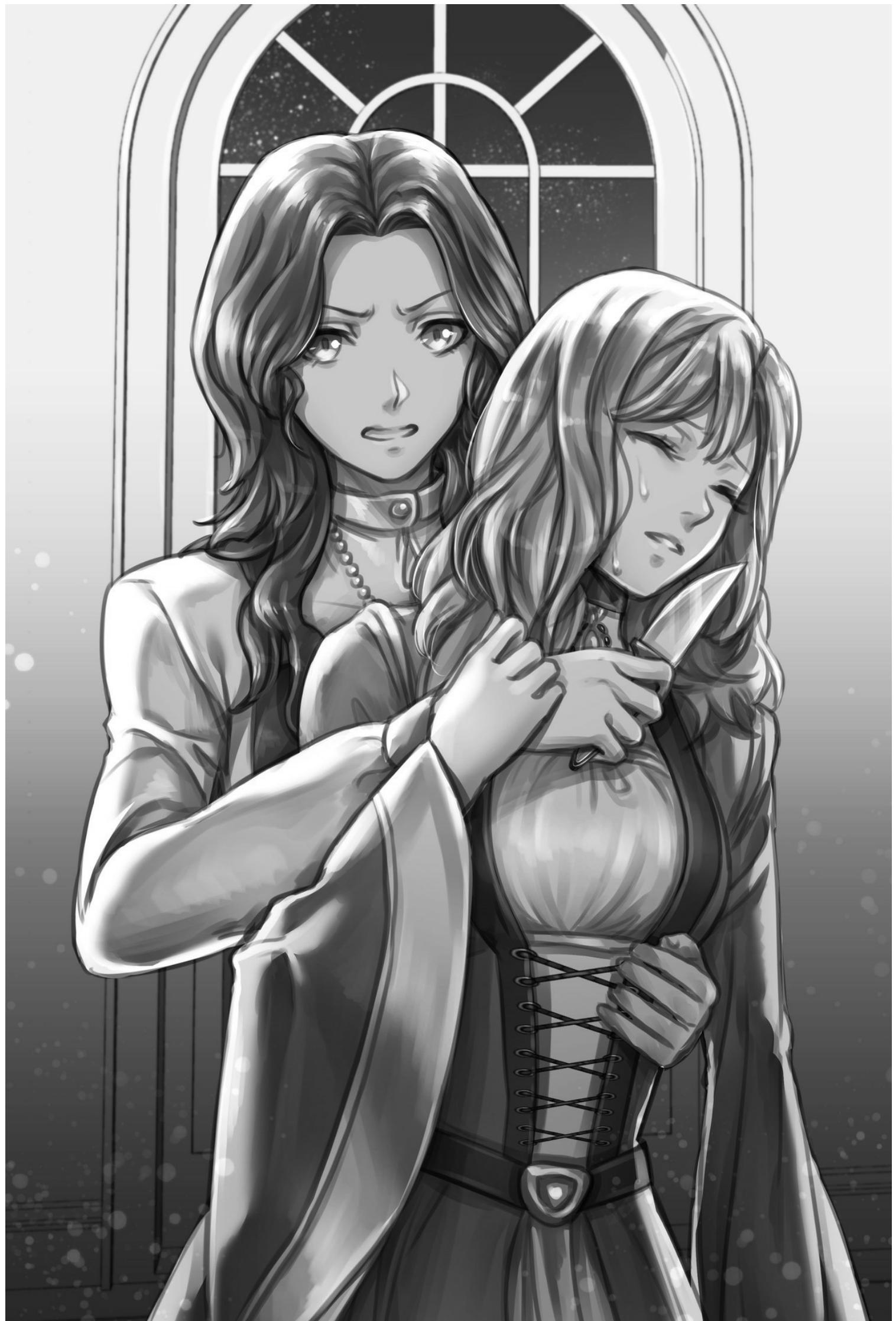
"Sonia, you can't let your vile bloodline tarnish the world... So why don't we die? I'll go with you so you aren't lonely."

The aura of malevolence crossed the door, seeping into Chris. They were speaking of confidential information regarding the Clare lineage!

"Princess!" Chris cried. As if in an attempt to drown out his fear, he flew into

the room.

"AH!" he gasped. He was met with the sight of a black-haired young lady holding a practically unconscious Sonia. Both girls were holding a sharply gleaming dagger in hand, aimed for Sonia's throat.



“DON’T!” Chris shouted.

He started to run toward them, but the black-haired girl sharply commanded, “Stay back!”

From the looks of it, she was roughly the same age as Sonia. *I’ve seen her somewhere before...* Indeed, this was the young lady standing beside Sonia when he had first gone to retrieve her from the Royal Abbey. Sonia brought her up frequently.

“...Lady Pamela...?”

In response to Chris’ question, the young lady threw an alluring, yet sinister, smile.

“What are you doing? Such a dangerous blade doesn’t suit you. Put it down.”

A possibility had crossed Chris’ mind, but he didn’t know for fact if it were true. Seeing as they were best friends, Pamela may have heard about the Clare Curse from Sonia. However...

“The guard and maid were knocked out. Was that your doing?” he demanded.

It didn’t look like her scrawny arms, which had never so much as held a sword, could muster the strength to knock out two adults, and a haunting voice of a man overlapped with hers when she spoke—there was only one conceivable explanation.

Chris took a step forward. Seeing him move cautiously, Pamela smirked faintly as she declared, “You’re too late! This spells the end of the Clare line!”

“NO!”

Sonia’s limp head slumped back, revealing her white neck. Pamela swung the dagger to pierce through her exposed flesh, but...

“GET AWAY FROM SONIA!” the Queen roared. Outraged, she threw a high heel right at Pamela’s face.

“Gyah!” Pamela cried. The moment the dagger pulled away from Sonia’s neck, Chris sprung into action.

CLANG! In a sound of metal clashing upon metal, the dagger slipped to the

floor. At the same time, the force of the impact sent Pamela's light body tumbling to the floor.

Chris rushed to Sonia as she suddenly came back to her senses. He pulled her close before raising his sword...and pointed it at Pamela!

"How *dare* you move into the Princess' irreplaceable best friend to get close...! *Leave her body!*"

"...Sir Chris? What's going on? Don't hold Pamela at sword point!" Sonia screamed. Confused by the tense situation before her, she tried to stop Chris from directing his sword at her best friend.

"Sonia! I'm scared!" Pamela was her old self again as she wailed with fear in her eyes as she looked back and forth between Sonia and the sword.

"Sir Chris! Please lower your sword!"

"She is at once both your best friend and not her! Don't you realize she tried to kill you?" Chris protested.

"That's...because...we were going to die..." Sonia responded.

"You were *what?*" Flabbergasted by Sonia's confession, Chris shifted his eyes to her.

"You heard her! DON'T GET IN OUR WAY!" Pamela bellowed in a man's voice once more. The words were barely out of her mouth before she flung herself toward Chris' sword.

"Pamela, DON'T!" Sonia yelled. The moment she did, Pamela's body went sprawling off to the side.

"Your Majesty!"

Cordelia had struck her across the face, knocking Pamela away from the tip of the sword.

"...I swear, something is wrong with you. Some stinky, old man's voice keeps speaking over the voice of a fresh, young maiden! So tell me, who's possessing you?" Cordelia demanded while looking down at Pamela, who was sprawled out on the ground. At the same time, she shook out her hand to ease the sting from slapping her.

“Please get back, Your Majesty!” Chris shouted.

Pamela’s hair began to rustle without the aid of a breeze as she lay slumped with both hands pressed against the floor. It was an eerie sight to behold, resembling a swell of countless snakes writhing on her head. Sensing the impending danger, Cordelia jumped back.

“CURSE YOU... How dare you thwart me time and again...!” the deep, male voice crept from Pamela’s mouth just before she snapped her head toward Sonia.

“Eek!”

The face was no longer a reflection of Pamela’s gentle personality. Instead, the visage that glared viciously at Sonia was transformed: bloated from excessive gluttony, the red complexion revealed spiking blood pressure. Pamela’s features were warped into a hideous button nose, beady eyes, and a pinched mouth.

“Y-You...aren’t Pamela...! You aren’t Pamela...but that’s her body...!” Sonia exclaimed. She fell into confusion, unable to grasp the situation. Chris grabbed her by the shoulders and pulled her close.

The sight of Sonia staring at her in fear made Pamela cackle creepily as she rose to her feet. She looked down upon Sonia as if she were a mighty king, her arms spread open.

“I am taking this body. It’s nice to have such a comfortable dwelling. I had also considered that prince, Severin, but...it is far more comfortable inside this girl, where she’s *agonized* and *suffered* in housing the polar opposites of a pure body and a corrupt heart. This heart fills me with pure bliss through its constant, desperate search for salvation.”

Corrupt heart?

“Where...did Pamela go? You said she’s corrupt...but what did she do?” Sonia asked.

“Unable to cope with her lot in life, she turned to God. To God’s messenger, *me!* Do not worry...I will slowly, *slowly* assimilate her, so that we will be one. It is a great honor. Now come here...” The priest held Pamela’s hand out to Sonia.

"Your one and only friend can put an end to you and your accursed bloodline for all eternity. Consider it my show of benevolence."

"...What are you going to do with Pamela?" Sonia asked.

In response, the man reverted Pamela's face back to normal. The corners of her mouth dropped in an expression of sadness.

"I'm suffering...horribly. The enterprise my uncle undertook failed, and he used up the inheritance my parents left for me... But even then, the debt continued to pile up... So he's giving me to that crooked moneylender's son as collateral. But...I don't want to marry him! I really don't want to! I have to put on a smile in front of them and act like I'm enjoying myself when I'm not...! Nothing's changed! It's just like back at the abbey when I was around you! I still have to put on a show...!"

"Pamela..."

"Sonia, I've always been jealous of you. You've always had people who cared about you. People gather around you before you know it. The sisters and all those girls who came to the abbey for etiquette training—they were all drawn to you.

"I was desperate... As roommates, I was closer to you than anyone else. But I was terrified you'd grow to hate me or treat me like the dead... You could use your status as Duchess de Clare to have me expelled from the Royal Abbey at any time. I knew that if I was kicked out, I'd have nowhere to go. My uncle and his family stole my home, so that was the only place I had left... I was desperate!"

"I was a nervous wreck, constantly living in fear as I tried to put on a smile so you wouldn't hate me. I was genuinely relieved when you left the abbey," Pamela said with a small sigh, a look of relief crossing her face.

But sadness quickly washed over her face once more. Placing her hands over her chest, her face contorted as if she was struggling for air as she forced out, "But...but then my uncle came to marry me off! I thought you really did order him to come for me! That was the first time I outright *hated* you!"

"I...still haven't seen your uncle...!"

"Right, I quickly realized I was mistaken... But you see, it clicked after that. I've *always* hated you. I've always been *jealous* of you. With all your wealth, you didn't have to do *a damn thing* for people to shower you with love...! Even though we're both orphans! Why? Why are *you* so blessed? Why am *I* so wretched? At the very least, I want to spend my life with a man I love! So why must *I* devote my life to an unlovable *scumbag*, while *you* get to be with a *gentleman* you could grow to love? I've HAD it!" Pamela yelled.

She clutched at her chest with her head lowered. When she looked up to face Sonia again, her face had returned to that of the man.

"No! NO! I'm going to live freely, following my heart... I don't *care* if no one loves me. I don't care if people hate me. I'm going to listen to my heart! *I'll hate you!* *I'll covet you!* And...then...*I'll...kill...you...*"

I can't believe it, Pamela. You were only happy about my marriage because you were excited to get away from me? You didn't like me? You hated me? Does my position only warrant your jealousy? We used to laugh, cry, bicker, and console each other. Was that all a lie?

Sonia's thoughts spiraled. They were all questions for Pamela, but, unable to voice them, Sonia simply stared at Pamela in a daze. Large tears dropped one after the next from her eyes.

Not Pamela, too. Even she doesn't see me for who I am. It really would be for the best if I died. I'm responsible for driving Pamela so mad she wound up like this. If I was never born, Prince Severin probably wouldn't have tried to become a gold digger. And King Patrice wouldn't have spent all those years worrying about me...

"Princess, don't let him deceive you."

The strength of the arms pulling her into a tight embrace brought Sonia back to her senses.

"Sir Chris..."

The beard she had thought frightening was close—extremely close—so why? She found his smile reassuring, filling her heart with a warmth that seemed to

spread throughout her body. Why did his smile give her the confidence, that “*it’d be okay*” and “*they would overcome adversity*”?

I’ve always taken courage from his heartening smile. Chris was offering her a faint smile, so Sonia tried to smile back in a desperate attempt to stop crying. Then they turned to face Pamela, their eyes united with determination.

“Despite having said you’d ‘kill’ Her Grace, you aren’t coming after her. Why is that?” Chris asked.

The man possessing Pamela contorted his face in frustration.

“Shall I answer for you, *Father Ferns*?!“ Chris’ voice resembled a roar as it reverberated through the room. “You’re *afraid of beards*! Since I’m standing at Her Grace’s side, you can’t get near her!”

“Ugh... G-GGH...! NO, you are mistaken...” Father Ferns claimed, but he was grinding Pamela’s teeth loud enough for them to hear.

“Are you yourself aware...why you’re afraid of beards? If you were, you wouldn’t continue to call yourself a messenger of ‘God’!”

“How...How dare you...! I was *chosen* by God! Chosen to exact punishment in His holy name!”

“Then *I dare you* to approach me! God has blessed me with protective magic. If you are acting under the word of the Lord in death, then you should be able to approach me!” Chris challenged.

“GRRR...! Damn it! *Damn it!*”

Pamela’s already warped face contorted further, her body twisting in frustration. The features of a man overlapped with her feminine figure.

Seeing his chance, Chris sprang into action. Like a charging bull, he leapt toward Pamela. “Leave this woman!” he shouted as he wrapped his arms tightly around her—or so he thought. Pamela’s body vanished like a puff of smoke before his eyes.

“...!”

Having slipped through Chris’ arms, Pamela slid toward the balcony.

“AHAHAHAHAHA!” Ferns laughed with Pamela’s mouth opened wide, her head spinning in circles at the neck. Sonia nearly fainted at the ghastly sight. From where she had been watching the scene from a safe distance, Cordelia had already fainted.

The moment the head came to a stop—twisted backwards—the body also stopped moving. Chris raced back to Sonia and held her tight.

Ferns hissed at Sonia, who was trembling in fear, “I will exchange this girl for you, *the last of the Clare bloodline*. I’ll be waiting for you at the chapel in Clare Castle.” With that, they vanished into the darkness.

Sonia’s head swayed heavily.

“Duchess Sonia!” Chris exclaimed in surprise, propping her head up from behind, which brought her back from the brink of unconsciousness.

“I’m fine...” Sonia said meekly. Slowly raising her head, she looked up at Chris. “...You finally called me by my name...”

“...I’m sorry. I was indulging myself.”

“How so?” Sonia asked a blushing Chris.

He first made sure she was firm on her feet before pulling away. “There are so many misunderstandings between us, I’m not sure where to begin... At any rate, we can discuss it in the carriage. We must hurry after Father Ferns, the priest who stole your friend’s body!”

“Pamela...hates me, doesn’t she...?” Sonia asked, a forlorn expression sunken into her face. “I can’t believe I’m so dense. Not only did I fail to notice her sadness and anguish, I was outright hurting her... I’m the only one who thought we were best friends...” Sonia said softly. She had no idea Pamela held such hatred behind her gentle smile.

“It looks like...I might have hurt a lot of people without realizing it...”

Chris placed a hand on Sonia’s shoulders, which were shrinking in her sadness. She looked up at his serious expression.

“Are you uncertain about rescuing Miss Pamela?” he asked.

“No! Pamela may have had different reasons for being kind to me, but I was

able to overcome so many hardships because of her! If she's like that because she's suffering, I want to save her this time!"

"You truly are optimistic," Chris said with a smile for Sonia's determination.

"...I'm not optimistic. Truth be told, I nearly lost to the temptation of death..."

But then when Sir Chris came next to me...the strength of his arms...

"I remembered what you and King Patrice told me... To 'Please remember there are those who want to save you.' I could sense that you truly wanted to save me, Sir Chris..."

Sir Chris is strong in body, mind, spirit, and luck. It isn't simply because of the "protective magic" bequeathed by God. His very presence fills those around him with light. I'm going to strive to become like him. I will aim to become strong and resilient. His strong arms helped me remember the resolution I had made.

"I will save Pamela. And I will defeat my destiny!" Sonia declared.

Chris cracked a smile at her resolute eyes. "Then let's go to Clare Castle!"

"But first, we must help Queen Cordelia..."

Chris rushed over to Cordelia and lifted her up before calling for assistance.

AFTER tending to Queen Cordelia, Sonia and Chris made haste to Clare Castle. Patrice offered to arrange for reinforcements, but they turned it down. Their opponent wasn't human. He wasn't even alive. No matter how well trained the soldiers might be, they doubted any could stand a chance before such a foe.

"I suppose you could send word to the Central Church and ask the Pope to pray for us," Chris told Patrice and escorted Sonia, who had changed into casual clothes, to their carriage. Chris boarded the carriage with the cloth-wrapped sword in hand.

"**PRINCESS**, why are you bringing that?" Chris asked, pointing at the bottle Sonia carefully held.

He recognized it. While she had been resting at the Royal Abbey, the Central

Church entrusted him with it “to pass on to Lady Sonia.” He had handed it over to her himself. As he recalled, the Abbess had commissioned the Central Church to sanctify the body oil inside, which Pamela had fragranced.

“Well,” Sonia began, “I thought it might prove useful. I’ve already covered myself with it.”

At her suggestion, Chris decided to let her rub some on his hands. His fingers were rough with calluses from the sword, and bushy hair covered the back of his hand and fingers. But Sonia wasn’t the least bit afraid of touching him now.

“...I was afraid of your beard and body hair because I was possessed by that ‘man’ you called ‘Father Ferns,’ wasn’t I?” she asked.

“Yes,” Chris answered with a nod.

“This Ferns is the priest who is cursing the Clare line, isn’t he?”

“...That’s right.”

Sonia pinched the back of his hand, making Chris cry out, “Ouch!” as he pulled it away.

“You should have told me when we first met...” Sonia pouted with puffed cheeks. Chris couldn’t help but find her adorable, despite the gravity of the situation. He smiled wryly to himself.

“I’m sorry. Honestly, His Majesty didn’t tell me the full story. He simply said, ‘I want you to save the last living heiress to the Clare name from the clutches of a demon.’ I didn’t know which of the countless demons was lending its strength to that priest—now a demon in his own right. Why did God send a message for me to grow a beard? Since neither the King nor the Pope knew, I had to search for clues before I could do anything. I didn’t want to tell you something wrong and distress you...”

“Is that why you called yourself my fiancé...?”

“That’s right,” Chris answered. “I thought I only appeared in the divine revelation because I’ve received protective magic as a Diamant, the highest-ranking knight in the Order of the Birthstones.”

“So did you figure it out? Do you know why you had to grow a beard?”

"I sure did! I found the hint in a painting hung in Clare Castle!"

"A painting... I know there are a great deal of paintings hung throughout the castle...but it must be a religious painting for it to be relevant," Sonia said, the gears turning in her head.

Her grandfather, William, was an art collector, so countless paintings in the castle were preserved unseen. But Chris had just said it hung on the walls within the castle. That meant it had to be one of the religious paintings currently displayed somewhere in the castle. Furthermore, it had something to do with a beard...

"Ah! I think I've got it!" Sonia exclaimed. There was one painting that fit all of the criteria. "A long time ago, Grandfather commissioned an artist to paint a scene from a dream he said kept revisiting him!"

Before she could say more, Chris held his index finger to his lips and hushed her with a "Shh!"

He leaned in close and whispered, "You never know when or where *he* could be listening. We don't want him to devise a strategy to counter us."

Chris was right. They were facing an otherworldly being capable of the supernatural. If that weren't bad enough, he was receiving assistance from the worst adversary possible—a demon. This was only compounded by the fact that the priest was unaware he was using the dark powers of evil he had fought against in life.

"...Are you sure he—Father Ferns—doesn't realize his soul has fallen into darkness? If we make him realize the truth, will the terror of his sins make him retreat? Then couldn't we save him as well?" Sonia asked in an equally hushed voice.

It would likely be hard for him to come to this realization on his own, as his personality appeared so set in his ideas. Plus, the reaction of others had only made him dig his heels in deeper.

"From what I heard, it sounded like my grandfather and the priest kept rubbing injury into insult. It reached the point where neither was able to back down," Sonia pointed out.

“...You truly are kind, Princess,” Chris whispered in awe without thinking.

“I told you to stop calling me ‘Princess!’” Sonia snapped, bringing a smile to Chris’ face as he rubbed his head awkwardly.

“Sorry about that! Although it would make things much easier if he came to repent for his sins, it will be hard making him come to the realization that he’s been in the wrong all along. His hatred hasn’t ebbed away with the passage of time...but rather, I fear the desire to annihilate the Clare line has carved itself into his very soul. The body can heal with time, but the soul...is outside of our domain...”

“I see...” Sonia replied, holding the rosary nestled between her bosom.

“For now, let’s focus on devising a plan to rescue Lady Pamela and breaking your curse.”

Nodding her head in response, Sonia said with a smile on her face, “Right!”

CHRIS patted the sword wrapped in cloth leaning next to him. He had told Sonia about how her grandfather had the church make it specifically for fighting the priest. Her brothers had tried to retrieve it but never came home alive.

Sitting across from Chris and the sword filled Sonia with a strange feeling. *If I fail, not only will I die, but so will Sir Chris and Pamela...* She was rising to a life-or-death occasion. Nonetheless, there wasn’t a sense of urgency charged with grim determination, or any tension hanging in the air between them.

Going by the looks of Chris alone, he was as tranquil as if they were going out on a picnic. Sonia was worried about Pamela, but she herself felt strangely confident. Watching Chris hum a light tune, she couldn’t help but giggle in delight.

“This is so strange,” Sonia confessed.

“What is?”

“Watching you makes even the hardest of times seem not so bad. I feel like everything will be all right if I have you.”

“You think too highly of me, Prin—I mean, Duchess Sonia,” Chris quickly

corrected himself under her sharp glare.

“Really!” Sonia sighed and jutted out her lips in a pout. She asked him anew, “So why do you call me ‘Princess’? You said that you were indulging yourself, didn’t you?”

“Well...” In the blink of an eye, his face turned bright red. He rubbed the palms of his large hands over his face several times. As he did, he grew increasingly redder, his skin growing flushed clear down to the tips of the fingers rubbing his face.

“...Are you willing to keep it a secret? I’ve never told this to another living soul...” He stopped rubbing his face and dropped his head between slumped shoulders, as if trying to hide his embarrassment.

Sonia batted her eyes, opened wide in surprise. “...? S-Sure...”

After a long pause, with his face still beet red, Chris finally admitted, “It was my dream...to serve a ‘princess’...”

“...O-Okay, and...?”

“I decided to become a knight because of the stories I read as a child... I admired the image of ‘the knight protecting the princess from any harm that may come her way.’ I swore in my heart that ‘someday I will become a great knight and protect a noble princess from all harm!’ The years went by, and I did, indeed, become a full-fledged knight.”

At this point, Chris heaved a great sigh.

“I was charged with serving King Patrice. Then Queen Cordelia after him... It’s not as though I’m unhappy with it. Quite the contrary; I consider my post a great honor. I forgot about my unfulfilled dream as time passed. But then I was assigned to pose as your fiancé as a cover to serve as your guard. When I saw you...it made me remember my old dream...”

After another long pause, Chris muttered, “...Sorry...I got carried away.”

Sonia’s mouth dropped. She never dreamed he addressed her that way over something like this.

“I didn’t mean to give you mixed signs over my selfishness...! I had no idea

you hated being called 'Princess' so much... Gosh, I truly am sorry!"

"...I thought you viewed me as a child still... I was worried that's why you were calling me 'Princess' all the time..." Sonia admitted.

"Hardly! I've seen you as a child, remember? You've matured considerably since then, becoming quite the lovely lady... I was so happy when I saw how...you resemble the way I imagined a princess to look back when I was young..." Chris replied.

They fell into another long pause of silence.

Sonia giggled, finally breaking the silence.

"I knew you'd laugh... This is what I get for bringing up my childhood dream..." Chris mumbled.

Seeing the large man drop his shoulders in disappointment, for the first time ever, Sonia thought he looked cute. "Oh, Sir Chris, you're adorable!"

"Please don't tease me... And this is our little secret, remember? Don't tell anyone, not even the King or Queen, okay?"

"Very well, I'll keep it a secret. But I think it's a shame you don't share that adorable story!"

"D-Don't share it! Please don't tell a soul!" Chris protested. Sonia forgot all about the horrifying foe they were about to face as she laughed at the sight of Chris half rising in the cramped carriage to frantically protest, his face beet red.

FOR all their fun, tensions instantly grew high the moment the carriage pulled to a stop and they were informed that they had arrived. As Sonia stepped down from the carriage with Chris' assistance, she looked up at the home of her birth, Clare Castle.

Amplified by the darkness of night, the castle donned an eeriness as high as she could see. The walls that had been left unrepainted due to the paranormal phenomena now appeared to belong to a castle that had been abandoned for years.

Sonia had paused on the footrest, but drawing her mouth into a grim line, she

now stepped down, filled with determination.

“Duchess Sonia! Sir Chris!”

Sonia was afraid Matthew and the head steward would be terribly surprised by her sudden return, but she could see that wasn’t the case by the look of relief on Matthew’s face as he came out to welcome them.

“Has anything in the castle changed?” Sonia asked. “Has anything different from the usual happenings—”

“Absolutely!” Astounded that Sonia already seemed to know what he wanted to discuss, Matthew jumped straight to the point, “Human voices and banging are coming from the castle chapel that is blocked off! We can’t get inside to investigate, even though we’ve moved the bar!”

Sonia gave Chris a meaningful look and they nodded in unison.

They’re there. Waiting.

“I understand. Sir Chris and I shall contend with it. Matthew, I want you and the others...yes, I’d like you to have everyone ready to evacuate the castle if necessary.”

“What are you saying?! We’re going with you! The castle guard is already on standby!” Matthew protested.

But Sonia shook her head. “This isn’t another living human. We can’t afford to charge in blindly only to sacrifice more lives to this villain... Please leave this to Sir Chris and I.”

“Duchess Sonia...”

Matthew realized when Sonia turned her lips up in a beautiful smile that she had learned the truth. He also recognized it was a smile of fatal determination...

“I...I shall accompany you! I have devoted my life to the Clare family! Even if we should fall, I will nevertheless fight at your side!” Matthew pleaded to Sonia with tears in his eyes.

“As will I...!”

“And I!”

The head steward and housekeeper both chimed in. They sounded as if they thought nothing of dying for Sonia.

Surprised by their desperate pleas, tears welled in Sonia's wide eyes. She told them, "...Thank you, everyone. It makes me happy...to know I'm...not alone..."

"What are you saying?! We've nurtured you with love ever since you were but a babe! We're eagerly awaiting the day you find happiness! Your special day is so close at hand... We won't let anyone take that from you!"

Embraced in a group hug by the three middle-aged castle staff, Sonia began to cry.

"I swear I will break this curse!" Sonia promised to them and herself with the conviction reforged from the familiar warmth of their support. Then she told them, "You've made your point, but only Sir Chris and I are entering the chapel."

"Duchess Sonia!" the three cried in protest, but Sonia absolutely refused to budge.

"The adversary is trying to throw me into despair and crush my will to live by taking away everyone and everything I hold dear... If you go with us, I have no doubt he will go straight for you. So please wait outside. Let me carry the desire to continue living with you into battle."

"Duchess Sonia..."

Their lady's determination was resolute. It seeped into her very manner of speech and gestures. As much as it pained them, the three staff pulled away from Sonia.

"...Please, be careful."

"We will be waiting for you."

The head steward and housekeeper spoke one after the other. Finally, the chamberlain, Matthew, went up to Chris.

With tears in his eyes, he grasped the knight's hands as he said, "Please take care of Duchess Sonia."

"You have my word I will break this curse!" Chris vowed seriously.

"Let's go, Sir Chris!" Sonia urged.

"Right!" Chris replied, and then he whispered softly in Matthew's ear, "Have several men wait outside the door ready to break in and rescue Duchess Sonia if things should go awry."

Matthew nodded gravely in response to Chris' instructions. His stern tone and expression allowed for nothing else.

He is prepared to die for Duchess Sonia, Matthew thought as he watched the knight walk away. And then he offered a prayer to God for their safety.

"**WOW...**" Sonia whispered to herself.

The enclosed chapel was supposed to be vacant, but it was plain for anyone to see by the pained creaks of the bowing door and the crashes coming from inside that the situation was abnormal.

"I didn't think he was the self-assertive type," Chris appraised in an impressed voice from where he stood at Sonia's side.

"He might be angry you've seen through him..."

"Why? Anyone could have if they thought to do a little research. It was easy to figure out he's Father Ferns."

"No, not him, but—" Just as Sonia was about to answer Chris' question, BANG! The chapel doors flung open with a crash, followed by a mighty wind—or more like a small twister.

"EEK!"

"Duchess Sonia!"

The wind tunnel caught Sonia in the blink of an eye to sweep her inside. Chris grabbed onto Sonia as she was lifted by the wind and held her close while they were pulled into the chapel, but the wind dissipated the moment they crossed the doorway. Pulled high in the air by the twister, the two plunged to the ground when it dispersed. Chris protected Sonia from the fall but came out the worse for it.

"Did you get hurt, Duchess Sonia?" he asked.

"I'm fine, but what about you...?" Sonia looked at him with eyes drawn in concern.

"I'm fine! I've trained for this!" he said with a smile, to set her mind at ease.

Noting someone's presence, Chris leapt to his feet with a gasp and stood in front of Sonia as if to defend her.

"Pamela!" Sonia yelled her friend's name, the name of the young woman floating where the statue of the Holy Mother once stood.

"Get away from Lady Pamela!" Chris demanded.

"You heard him! Pamela has nothing to do with this!" Sonia shouted. Ferns continued smiling obscenely at the two, heedless of their cries.

"Leave her body," Chris ordered as he lowered the sword he had brought strapped across his back.

Once Chris removed the sword's cloth bindings to reveal the blade, Ferns' smile faded. Made of platinum, the sword shone divinely without any light striking upon it, as if emanating the light itself.

"Keh...! I didn't know you had it... And here I've spent so long trying to hunt it down so I could destroy the blasted thing...!"

"Ferns, this sword has been carefully stored at the Central Church all these years. You couldn't see it because of this." Chris held up the cloth that was used to wrap the sword: a dalmatic with cross embroidery.

"All of the previous Pope's devotion flowed through this dalmatic. It served as a blindfold to keep you from seeing the sword!"

"This is outrageous! How dare His Holiness, a fellow servant of God, support the Clare's villainy...! That previous Pope must not be forgiven for turning his back on the Lord!" Ferns bellowed. The news must have come as quite a shock, for Pamela's body wobbled unsteadily in the air.

"SILENCE!" Chris shouted, his voice echoing throughout the vacant chapel. "Has it yet to sink in, Ferns?! Your soul is *damned*! You were unable to see the sword hidden by the sanctified garb of that previous Pope's dalmatic because

your eyes have been *tainted by a demon!*”

“Spare me your twisted views! This power was a gift from God Almighty! God gave me this power to punish the Clare line so that I might preside over their land! He told me as such!”

“Seeing as I was bestowed protective magic, no harm should come to you if I strike you with it.”

“Ugh...” Ferns groaned in frustration, lowering Pamela’s body to the ground.

“Aren’t you afraid of me? You’re scared of men with beards. Do you know why that is?” Chris prompted.

“SILENCE... Still your tongue!”

Of course, Chris had no intention of obeying his foe’s orders.

“Shall I tell you? It’s because you received those powers by swearing allegiance to the demon *Baphomet!*”

“L-LIES! Filthy lies! This power is proof that in death, the soul stands on par with God, even without a body!” Ferns protested.

Chris slowly inched toward the deeply shaken and staggering priest with the sword clutched in both hands.

“I’ve heard Baphomet challenged Michael to a battle eons ago and lost miserably. The battle was portrayed in a painting here in Clare Castle. It didn’t follow the current artistic trend of using dashing young men, but depicted bearded warriors fighting long and hard, never stopping to sleep or rest. You’re afraid of beards because you still vividly remember losing that battle!”

“That can’t be!” Ferns screamed. Pamela’s body convulsed as if being struck by a never-ending bolt of lightning.

Chris draped the dalmatic that had concealed the sword across his shoulders, as if he was donning armor for battle.

“It’s time you faced the facts! You’ve sold your soul to a demon! Now get out of Pamela’s body!” He thundered imposingly. Pointing the sword at Ferns, his body began to emit a faint light. The gentle, white light was— *protective magic?* Sonia had never seen divine protection so clearly before. Mesmerized,

she was awestruck anew by his power as a Diamant.

Pamela's arms dropped weakly to her sides, her head flinging back. Disheveled hair covered her face, making it impossible to read her expression.

It looked as though she had taken her last breath on her feet. Filled with the sinking sensation Ferns had passed to the other side and taken Pamela with him, Sonia slowly approached her friend's body.

"Duchess Sonia, get back!" Chris shouted. He stopped Sonia from drawing closer to Pamela, but the moment he took his eyes off the lost sheep—SMACK! A piece of rubble came crashing down from the ceiling with the intensity of a catapult shot...right on Chris's head!

"SIR CHRIS!"

A man's shrill laughter echoed throughout the chapel. The jubilant cry, "I did it!" ringing in Sonia's ears filled her with indignation, but she had to prioritize Chris. Rushing to Chris' side, a shrill scream escaped her lips when she saw him pressing his hand against his forehead. Fresh blood trickled through the gaps between his large fingers.

This is my fault! Her face must have given her thoughts away, for Chris seemed to realize she blamed herself as he said, "I'm glad that didn't hit you! This is nothing for me!"

He offered her a smile and tore off the bottom of the dalmatic draping from his shoulders.

"I'll do it..." Sonia offered. Taking the scrap of dalmatic, Sonia wiped away the blood that ran clear into his eyes. "I'm sorry. It's my fault you were so badly wounded...!"

"Wounds to the head and face bleed worse than they actually are. This is nothing to worry about!" Chris assured her.

Sonia's vision blurred, a well of tears on the verge of spilling over. Chris patted her head reassuringly while she fought to hold them back as she quickly wrapped the scrap of material around his head.

"Look out!" he suddenly yelled.

WHOOSH! The sound of something cutting through the air was followed by the sound of heavy bodies colliding. Those were the only nearby sounds Sonia could make out.

Chris had flung himself over her in the blink of an eye. Just as she realized the weight of his firm shoulders and strong arms were pressing down on her, it eased up. The darkness created by his body slowly gave way. Although it felt slow to Sonia, this probably happened in the span of a few seconds. THUD! His massive body collapsed onto the stone floor.

“...SIR CHRIS!” Sonia screamed. A piece of debris the size of an adult’s head tumbled beside them.

“HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!” The man who had taken over Pamela’s body laughed ecstatically on end. “You figured out who I am! I can’t allow you to live!”

“Sir Chris! Hang in there!” Sonia cried. Chris had fallen on his back, allowing her to brush his face.

He isn’t dead, is he?

“Sir Chris! Sir Chris!” she called out to him.

“Ugh...!” He grimaced slightly. His head swiveled as he desperately fought to answer her. “I...am...just...fine...” he managed to force out in a whisper, his head still swimming from shock.

“Oh, yes!” Ferns suddenly said. “Sonia de Clare! You wanted me to return this girl’s body, didn’t you?”

Sonia shielded Chris as she turned to face the voice, which no longer belonged to Ferns and certainly didn’t belong to Pamela. This was the voice of the demon Baphomet.

“Let’s trade. If you relinquish your body to me, I shall leave this girl.”

“...Really?” Sonia pressed.

“I have more to gain from possessing your wealthy vessel than remaining inside this girl. Sonia, haven’t you come to realize you are nothing more than a marionette tied to the strings of mass fortune and a title? For the sake of your noble house, you will be forced into a marriage against your will and spend the

rest of your life administering the demesnes and assets. You must plunge into this lonesome, dreary life before reaching twenty years of age. Are you okay with this? How could you be? You would be far happier to pass on and start over from scratch."

"...Will you return Pamela alive and in one piece?" she asked the demon.

"I might be a demon, but that doesn't mean I don't keep my word. Your wealth, prestige, and youthful body are more than enough. I will return this girl with her body and soul unharmed," Baphomet assured her.

Sonia slowly stood up. She fixed her unwavering gaze upon Baphomet in Pamela's flesh. Her face was completely devoid of expression. But Baphomet knew what that meant.

This is the face of a girl ready to die, the demon recognized.

Sonia took one step forward. Following her lead, Baphomet also moved forward.

"It's time, Sonia de Clare..." Baphomet said, raising both of Pamela's hands up toward Sonia.

Sonia elegantly raised arms light as feathers in a gesture that looked as though she were accepting an escort to a dance. In her hands, she held the bottle of sanctified body oil!

"GAAH!"

It was too late by the time Baphomet noticed. Opening the bottle, Sonia splashed the body oil at Pamela.

"What are you doing?!" Baphomet shrieked at Sonia, unable to comprehend her actions. The echo of his piercing scream cut through the air.

"Pamela!" Sonia shouted as she ran to Pamela and flung her arms around the young lady's tender body. She embraced her tightly so as not to let go.

"Pamela! Snap out of it! Don't lose!"

"NGH! Clare WENCH! You covered yourself in holy water! LET GO! You're burning me!" Baphomet screamed. The stench of burning flesh stung Sonia's nostrils.

"Stop this! LET GO! You'll burn the girl with me!" the demon howled as he writhed in agony, but Sonia only held on tighter.

"Pamela isn't the one suffering from the burns! This is only burning you, the demon inside her! Pamela made this for me! She'd never make something that would burn her!" she shouted at the demon.

Then Sonia addressed her friend, "Pamela, listen! *I love you!* I don't care if you hate me! I don't care if we can't be friends anymore! Even if you hate me...I could never hate you! Having you in my life saved me! Now *I want to save you!* Pamela, snap out of it! I *will* save you! I swear I will!"

"So...nia..." came Pamela's trembling voice.

Pamela! Pamela!

"Don't lose! Please don't lose! Force those villains out!"

"Sonia, I...love you...too..."

But the surge of jealousy rose again and again without end. I hated myself for it. I deserve to be cursed! That was how I felt. I didn't want you to know I was seething with jealousy, Pamela thought in a surge of emotions, returning Sonia's embrace. Sonia felt that she did it of her own will. Sensing Pamela's feelings course through her body, Sonia hugged her even harder.

"Stop! What are you thinking?!" Baphomet cried out.

Pamela resembled an insect molting its exoskeleton as white mist came out of her back. The mist appeared heavy and solid.

"Pamela! Over here!" Sonia yelled and began tugging at her friend's body, which had suddenly slumped limply on top of her. On the brink of falling unconscious, Pamela fought with all her strength to move her feet.

"Duchess Sonia!"

The doors swung violently open as Matthew and the house steward broke in.

"Gentlemen! Were you outside the door?" Sonia asked in shock.

"As per Sir Chris' orders! He instructed us to take you to safety if the worst should come to pass!"

While the house steward carried Pamela away, Matthew held Sonia close as he tried to draw her out of the chapel.

"No, let GO!" Sonia snapped and shook Matthew's arms away. Her eyes were shining with determination.

"This is my chance to break the curse! I can't let the misfortune that struck Grandfather, Mother, Father, my brothers, and everyone else start all over again!" Sonia shouted in a booming voice as she picked up the sword strewn at Chris' side.

"I must protect the Clare line. And I must protect the lives of the people who live on this land. I can't back down for Pamela, or for you, Matthew, or for my knight in shining armor, Sir Chris! I can't, for all the people who care about me! I have the will and the desire to break this curse! I won't lose to him!"

Sonia walked unsteadily toward the white mist still writhing in agony on the floor...dragging the sword behind her.

"G-Grandfather...! I wish you took into consideration that a woman might wield the sword...when you had it made...!" she panted out.

It was too heavy to lift. The tip of the blade slid on the ground. Nonetheless, Sonia dug her heels into the ground as she put all of her strength into raising it.

I swear I'll protect everyone! As the thought crossed her mind, someone from behind put their hands on the sword's hilt and lifted the blade up with her.

"Duchess Sonia! Sorry for the wait! I shall help you!" Heedless of the blood drizzling down his forehead, Chris was smiling cheerfully.

"Sir Chris!"

"I'm sorry. I must have dozed there for a second, but I'm fine now! I'm wide awake, pumped, and raring to go!"

He's abnormally hyper!

"While I was asleep, I could see His hand appear in the light and point the way! It was a sign God is lending us a helping hand!"

Wasn't that a near-death experience? Sonia wanted to point out, but couldn't bring herself to when Chris was so moved his eyes sparkled. *This isn't the time*

for that, anyway!

With Chris' support, Sonia held onto the sword and commanded, "Sir Chris, please lend me your strength!" She glared at the white body of evil healing itself before her eyes.

"But of course! Allow me to show you the true essence of protective magic!" Chris answered.

Protective magic...

Modeled after the twelve birthstones, twelve knights were chosen for the Order of the Birthstones. God blessed these chosen knights with magic of "divine protection." The protective magic split into three subcategories befitting a gift of God: defense, recovery, and purification.

Purification was particularly important for knights and soldiers who frequently entered the battlefield. The negative energies shrouding the battlefield once the fighting came to an end brought out the wandering souls of those who died with regret or didn't realize they were dead. Demons, as specialists at seducing hearts weakened by tragedy, would tempt those no longer of flesh and blood with their sweet, silver tongues, luring them into an even crueler realm.

Protective magic could be used to keep this from happening. These twelve knights were blessed with this power more strongly than all others. Among the knights in the Order of the Birthstones, Chris stood as the pinnacle as the Diamant.

CHRIS held the sword grip along with Sonia.

"Come on! Repeat this incantation after me."

"O-Okay!"

"Ye kingdoms of earth, kneel before God. The Lord shall guide thee, wherein
—"

"Ye kingdoms of earth, kneel before God. The Lord shall guide thee... Forget it. I can't remember all this in one go..." Sonia muttered.

She couldn't memorize that after hearing it only once... Reminded just how

poor her memory skills were, she could feel her gusto deflate almost instantly.

“Then we’ll just have to smite him! We’ll slay the demon! We can’t let this curse defeat us! Go at it with an indomitable attitude!” Chris declared. His words of encouragement boosted Sonia’s spirits once more, and she gave a heartfelt nod in response. She crouched down, tightening her muscles.

“Do you know what demons fear most?” Chris asked.

Thrown off by the sudden question, Sonia said, “No,” with her head craned back as she awkwardly shook her head.

“There are two things. For one, they are afraid of us discovering who and what they truly are. I have already revealed his identity by calling out his true name. A painting on display here in Clare Castle gave me the hint I needed.”

“The one of the bearded archangel?” Sonia asked.

“Right. That alone should have halved his power. And the other thing they fear is...”

Chris’ hands tightened over hers clasped around the sword grip. They held the blade before the root of evil as they pushed forward. Chris hoped Sonia would take courage from his hands around hers.

“...indomitable courage! The will to push aside all temptation! A strong heart without any openings for a demon to weasel through! We won’t lose! Let’s do this, Duchess Sonia!”

“Yeah!” Sonia answered with a smile before facing forward to fix her eyes on the demon.



I won't lose! I have Sir Chris with me! As long as I have him, I can't possibly lose.

I won't crumble under the vast fortune I must shoulder alone. I'll have to deal with all of the temptation, schemes, trickery—all of the greed and hatred that it entails. But I won't lose!

"I won't submit to anything! I will defeat you, for causing my family so much misery!"

"You, defeat me? Don't make me laugh! You haven't even realized you wouldn't be here if not for your ancestors' boons! If not for them, Clare, you are nothing more than a whore! You'd be no different from the peasants crawling upon the earth!"

Sonia's shoulders trembled in shock from Baphomet's malicious claim.

"Don't lend him your ears. It's a demon's job to deceive human hearts and drive people insane," Chris comforted Sonia as he glared daggers at Baphomet.

"Then we shouldn't offer him any assistance, should we?"

"Exactly! Let's utterly ignore anything he says!"

"Don't be ridiculous! How DARE you make a fool of a Great Demon such as I! I won't let you get away with this! I shall rain countless calamities upon you both!" Baphomet cried.

"AH!"

Even more calamities than before? Is he going to do something to Matthew and the others?

Baphomet's lips curled into a smile at the sight of Sonia's face wrought in fear. The sinister smile unique to demons looked pleased that she was playing right into his hands. But then...

"Well, well!" Chris bellowed merrily. *"You've got a bunch of disasters in store for us? I take it that means you're going to let us continue living on this earth! It's the exact opposite of your proclamation that you'd kill us!"* He chuckled. Baphomet began to tremble, almost as if he had been struck by his own words.

“Sir Chris...” Sonia said, smiling up at Chris, who was supporting the sword from behind.

“Clare wench that you are, what about you? Aren’t you *miserable*? Aren’t you *sad*? Your family has already died, leaving you alone in the world! If you followed me, I could let you see the souls of your family again. Simply relinquish your body to me! Don’t you want to see your family?” Baphomet enticed.

Why did demons offer such sweet words of temptation? Because they were masters at drawing out desires tucked away in the dark recesses of the human heart.

I want to see my family. I’d love to return to those happy days when we were all together. I wish Mother and Father could smother me with hugs and kisses. I’d love to fight, laugh, and cry over stupid little things with my brothers. And then I’d want to hear them say, “Sonia, I love you.” But...!

“I know those days will never come back! And I know it’s your fault for taking them from me! *Baphomet!* I don’t trust your deals!” Sonia denounced.

She took a deep breath before throwing a dazzling smile at Baphomet.

“Right now, I only believe what Sir Chris says!”

“...What...?” Baphomet said.

Having heard the whole exchange, Chris also opened his eyes wide in surprise. He looked down at the back of Sonia’s head and broke out into a big smile.

“HA HA HA! Baphomet! You’re out of luck! She’s rejected you!” Chris said with a laugh. Growing serious, he raised the point of the sword at the demon. “Now return to the bowels of Hell!”

The moment those words left Chris’ mouth, light engulfed both his body as well as Sonia’s.

“*Behold the power of God’s protective magic!*” Chris roared.

The two swung a large arc at Baphomet. Emitting a clear ringing sound, a semicircle of light burst out, shooting straight and true. The moment it struck him, the radiance of the light increased as if unleashing an explosive reaction.

“UWWAAAUGHHHHHH!” Baphomet screamed so terribly it shook the entire

chapel.

The light covered everything in its blinding brightness, even drowning out the demon's screams. Sonia shielded her eyes with her hand as she desperately tried to see through the light.

What she beheld was Ferns' last moments...

Chapter 7: I Shall Profess My Love First

A procession of magnificent carriages passed through the busy afternoon castle town. The carriage in the center was particularly extravagant with four beautiful white horses trotting proudly in front. Standing to the side so as not to get hit by the carriages, the villagers watched the parade with eyes wide in awe.

“Those are some carriages! Are we receiving a guest from another country?” a town girl whispered to herself while imagining what it would be like to dress up and ride in such a fancy carriage.

“No, look at the crest at the back of the carriages! See, there? They belong to the single wealthiest noble family in Pharrell, the Clares. The Duchess is probably on her way to attend the Summer Solstice Festival,” said a young man peddling fruit to the town girl. During his explanation, he pointed to the back of one of the passing carriages.

Not only did the town girl and the nearby villagers preparing to open their stalls fly into an excited flurry, so too did the nobles watching from afar.

“That’s Duchess de Clare!”

“The brave Duchess said to have fought off a demon!”

“I wanted to see her face!”

“I’ve heard she’s most charming. Isn’t it amazing? Not only is she beautiful, she also had the strength and knowledge to break that curse.”

“God has blessed her with everything.”

PHARRELL was abuzz with news that “the current Duchess de Clare has broken the curse that plagued their line for many a year.” Word of the incident spread like wildfire among the kingdom’s peasantry and its nobility.

"The current Duchess is not only wise and courageous but also young and beautiful," the people claimed. These past two months, Sonia was the talk of the kingdom.

ACCOMPANIED by carriages directly in front and behind it, the most luxurious carriage in the center of the procession split off from the parade bound for the palace. Following its lead, three carriages changed directions, pulling to a stop in front of the Royal Abbey adjacent to the Central Church.

The young footman hopped down from the platform behind the carriage to open the door. He respectfully took the white hand held out to him and made sure the noble lady's footing was sound as he helped her to the ground.

She wore a pale green dress fitting for early summer. A lace veil draped over her slightly wavy golden-blond hair. Her large, pale blue eyes were as invigorated as the clear blue sky. Orange lipstick brilliantly outlined her dainty lips, which formed a cheerful smile.

Waiting at the abbey door to greet her were the Abbess and Pamela, who called out in a jovial voice, "Sonia!"

"Pamela!" Sonia called the name of her friend in a voice equally joyous.

They were like magnets drawn together in an embrace.

"How do you feel? Are you okay?" Sonia asked.

"I'm all better! I plan on going all out taking care of you from here on out," Pamela answered.

Nearly two months had passed since Pamela was exorcized of Ferns and the demon Baphomet, who had continued to control the fallen priest even in death. Since she had been possessed by a demon as well as by Ferns, she was transported to the abbey because she had grown horribly weak. She had been in recovery ever since.

"...Pamela, are you serious? About serving me, I mean... If this is about paying me back, I've already discussed the matter with your uncle, and we've set up a payment plan. You don't have to do this, okay?" Sonia insisted.

Due to his failing enterprise, Pamela's uncle had burned through the inheritance her parents left for her. But still unable to make ends meet, he was going to add to the ever-growing mountain of debt by marrying Pamela off to an unscrupulous moneylender.

In exchange for lending Pamela's uncle the money to pay the debt entirely at zero interest with no collateral, Sonia had Pamela's marriage called off and took over the enterprise. Placing Pamela's uncle under the supervision of someone trustworthy, she allowed him to continue running the business for her while he relearned business administration. She had received reports that he was applying himself to his studies while working hard at the business, so the supervisor dispatched by the King must have done the trick.

Pamela threw a smile at Sonia, who looked at her with brows pulled down in concern. "No," Pamela said as she shook her head. "I want to do this. You've helped me personally a great deal. This is meant to serve as both a form of penance and repentance for questioning your friendship."

"...But..." Sonia protested, nonetheless reluctant.

"I won't stop being your friend just because I'm your maid. Will it change how you feel about me?"

Sonia quickly shook her head. "We'll still be friends! You're my very best friend!"

"See what I mean?"

The two giggled and pressed their foreheads together with hands interlocked, just as they had always done.

"Besides, I'm extremely happy about this setup. Now I can be with you all the time," Pamela added.

"I'm happy, too."

"But I'm going to treat you like my mistress in public, so be ready to bounce between how you treat me in public and private, okay, Duchess Sonia?" Pamela said and quickly stuck out a sliver of her tongue.

Sonia laughed at her teasing and replied, "It is a pleasure to have you,

Pamela,” with a curtsy worthy of a proper lady.

“Well, we shouldn’t stand around out here forever. Let’s go inside. I am personally eager to hear of Sonia’s great battle,” the Abbess said, urging them into the Royal Abbey.

The last time they had met, Sonia’s heart was filled with suspicion toward the Abbess. But now she felt at peace speaking with her, almost as if the feeling had flown off into the distance. Sonia felt refreshed, like she had finally overcome a long illness. It was as if the demon took everything with it when he vanished.

The Abbess had been one of the first to come running to Sonia when she heard the curse had been broken. Without bothering to wipe her flood of tears, she had cried, “Thank God!” as she rejoiced for the young Duchess’ safety. It was hard to believe Sonia had ever doubted her love.

I had plenty of weakness for the demon to exploit to his advantage, Sonia thought to herself as she smiled at the Abbess, before taking a sip of the tea the older woman had served. The expression on her face as she gazed upon Sonia was filled with compassion like always.

“So, you haven’t had any interactions with the demon Baphomet since then?” the Abbess asked Sonia worriedly.

“Right. Apparently, demons generally don’t obsess over a single person. I know his true identity and hurt him, so he probably won’t try to reach out to me again. According to Sir Chris and the Pope, demons tend to be really cautious.”

“...I suppose that means Father Ferns was the one who was obsessed with your family all these years. Only a human is capable of such dogged devotion,” the Abbess said with a disappointed sigh.

The Abbess likely couldn’t bear to imagine how a fellow servant of the Lord had been consumed by greed and ultimately went to Hell with a demon, but after Sonia and Chris had swung the sword, the face that vanished amidst the ear-shattering screams belonged to Ferns. Baphomet must have recognized the threat and quickly escaped.

The Abbess made the sign of the cross before her chest. “Damned soul or not,

he was once a colleague. I can't help but pray he realizes the errors of his ways soon so he may find redemption..." she concluded.

SONIA bid farewell to the Abbess before the sun set and sped off in her carriage to the Royal Palace, where she had been invited to the Summer Solstice Festival. Naturally, Pamela was with her.

As Sonia's handmaid, Pamela wore a high-neck, Nile blue dress with puff sleeves and a straight low-waist skirt. Sonia had complained about the simple design and added a large, pure white lace detachable collar to it to give it a sense of youthfulness.

"...It's cute, but you didn't have to do this..." Pamela pouted as she tugged at the expensive collar.

Seeing this, Sonia protested, "It's fine! Who knows what chance encounter is waiting for you? You need to be sure to look your best at all times!" and readjusted the skewed collar.

"You're right! As your handmaid, I'm bound to encounter countless wonderful gentlemen of influence!" Pamela realized. As soon as the topic turned to romance, her eyes began to sparkle. Her demeanor made it clear she hadn't given up on marrying for love. Sonia smiled faintly, glad to see her friend hadn't changed from their days at the abbey.

"I hope the man I fall in love with is open-minded—like Sir Crisford!"

"You may find one of Sir Chris' friends to your liking," Sonia pointed out.

Pamela didn't miss the expression that briefly flashed across Sonia's face when she first mentioned Chris. "You haven't seen Sir Crisford since then, have you?" she asked.

"No," Sonia answered with a sad smile. "But we've been sending each other letters. He responds within three days and sends adorable gifts along with the letters... So I'm sure he thinks fondly of me."

"Are you sure he doesn't *really* have any feelings for you?"

Chris had posed as Sonia's fiancé to deceive Ferns and the demon in order to

keep her and those around her out of harm's way. While defending her, he had uncovered the true identity of the demon behind the curse and fought him alongside Sonia. She could still remember the warmth of his hands supporting hers on the sword.

"You'll be all right now, won't you...?" Chris had asked with a smile. With all the respect of a knight, he had kissed the back of her hand and taken his leave.

"He's mentioned in his letters that his days are busy disciplining Prince Severin, but I went ahead and asked him to escort me to this upcoming Summer Solstice Festival," Sonia said.

"And what did he say? Is he going to?"

"Yes. I also put in that I could use his advice on how to contend with the influx of suitors. They have been sending gifts and letters to Clare Castle on a daily basis, some even coming to pay a visit. With so many asking for my hand at once, I'm afraid a fight will break out regardless of who I choose. Seeing as Sir Chris is so widely known and respected, I thought perhaps he could offer some advice on how best to handle the matter. When I added that, he gave a most favorable response," Sonia explained.

Hearing that, Pamela inwardly gave a sigh of relief. She knew all too well how Sonia felt about Chris. She reached across the carriage and firmly grasped Sonia's hands.

"I'll be cheering for you from a distance!"

"Thank you, Pamela."

Sonia thought to herself, *I want to tell Sir Chris exactly how I feel at the Summer Solstice Festival...even if he doesn't view me as a mature woman...*

EVEN at the Royal Palace, Sonia was the center of attention. The Summer Solstice Festival didn't start until the next day. Sonia was bound for the audience chamber to greet King Patrice and Queen Cordelia first and foremost.

On her way there she could feel the eyes of the court officials burning holes through her. Some of the officials were young men who hailed from noble

families of high prestige. They stood out by a mile.

These were the men in ostentatious garb who would make certain to enter Sonia's field of vision. In their gaudy garb, they might clear their throat just before Sonia walked by. Or they might drop a handkerchief and try returning it to her, saying, "Excuse me! Did you drop this?" They had a bag of tricks they would pull in hopes of getting close to Sonia.

Each step she took, another came out of the woodwork. Sonia had gone from flabbergasted to genuinely annoyed.

I'm not getting anywhere! How many men were waiting to ambush her in this corridor that led straight to the audience chamber? Sonia wanted to turn 180-degrees and go back home!

"Sonia!"

The moment everyone realized who was running up to her as he called her name, they hastily fell into deep bows at the waist. Also taken by surprise, Sonia dipped into the most formal of curtsies.

"I heard what was happening here, so I came to get you."

"My...! I never dreamed you would escort me personally, Prince Henry! I'm unworthy of such a great honor!"

"Don't be so stiff and formal. I wish you'd call me ReeRee like in the good old days," Henry said with a cheerful laugh before taking her hand and leading her down the corridor.

"Gentlemen, the festival hasn't started yet. Save fighting for the lady's favor for tomorrow and focus on your duties today," he announced in a dignified voice to reason with the young men who sent vexed glares their way.

With the Crown Prince as Sonia's escort, they couldn't use lame excuses to approach her. She was able to walk without any further interference.

"Sorry about that. The palace is abuzz with stories of your accomplishment. I've heard the court officials are so eager to meet you, they can't focus on their work," Henry explained.

"I feel like the rumors are getting out of control... I couldn't have defeated the

demon and priest without Sir Chris. Still, it's hard to believe this has been blown so far out of proportion that it's interfering with court functions..." Sonia said and offered her sincerest apologies, earning her a brilliant smile from Henry.

"Hey, I know this isn't your fault. You don't need to feel bad," he told her. "Oh, truth be told, Chris is in the middle of a conversation with my parents and a dame. It looks like they won't be done for a while, so I came to invite you to join my wife and I for tea." He winked.

"Sir Chris is with...?" Wondering what the nature of the discussion could be, a small crease formed between Sonia's brow.

"Are you curious?" Henry asked with an impish grin. "It's about his future."

His future?

"...As in...getting...married?" Sonia tried to make the question sound smooth and natural, but her voice came out trembling.

"I'm not involved, so it's hard for me to say," Henry said and led Sonia to one of the drawing rooms.

Henry's gorgeous wife's pretty blue eyes welcomed them at the drawing room. Her lovely oval face, with lashes so long they shook when she laughed, only enhanced her brilliance.

Sonia was filled with mixed emotions as she sat across from the Crown Princess, whom rumors claimed was the object of Chris' affections. Unable to ask the truth regarding her relationship with Chris, Sonia's mind was elsewhere even after they had tea. Distracted during her audience with King Patrice and Queen Cordelia, she could hardly remember what they had discussed.

THE Summer Solstice Festival would begin that night.

At the crack of dawn, Pamela set about her role as maid and thrust open the bed canopy.

"Duchess Sonia, please get up," she said. But she was shocked to see Sonia sluggishly pull her body up. The rings under her friend's eyes were horridly dark. "Duchess Sonia, by any chance, were you unable to sleep last night?"

Sonia bobbed her head, her expression dark. Her eyes looked moist as if they were going to start raining giant teardrops at any second. It probably had to do with whatever Prince Henry told her about Sir Chris yesterday.

"...Sonia," Pamela soothed, dropping her mask as a maid and returning to Sonia's best friend. She sat down on the bed close to Sonia. "Are you going to give up and just be his good friend? And choose one of the slew of suitors who popped up the moment you broke the curse? Those men who see your wealth first and you second?"

Sonia weakly shook her head and replied, "...But Sir Chris' heart already belongs to someone else...so I don't have the courage to tell him how I feel. I never should have asked him to escort me tonight..."

Tears rolled down Sonia's cheeks. Pamela brushed them away with her pure white apron, gently and kindly. "Sonia, didn't you come to tell him regardless of whether he returned your feelings or not? Or have you forgotten that?"

"I haven't forgotten, but somewhere, a part of me was confident it would go smoothly—that he'd return my feelings. I'm sure of it." Otherwise, she wouldn't be so afraid of telling him.

"Then are you going to give up on telling him after all?"

"....."

If I do, what will I do? I'll simply spend the night enjoying the Summer Solstice Festival with Sir Chris. Even if it isn't a sweet night of romance, I can savor the happy time we spend together.

But when the night draws to an end, so will that happiness. I will have to treasure this special night as I choose another man to be my husband and Sir Chris dedicates his life to another... I can deal with that, but my heart still aches. It feels like someone is pushing down on my chest.

Pamela gently placed her hands over Sonia's tightly balled fists. "Sonia, you know, I'm jealous of you. I mean, you've found someone you love so much that it hurts."

"Pamela..." Sonia said and looked up at Pamela. Her friend was smiling gently as always.

"When you're of noble birth, don't your parents usually decide who you marry? Everyone goes along with the decision and falls in love after marriage... We do it in the reverse order of the masses, don't we? That's why I think when we wed, we harbor the fear 'can we love each other'? After all, most of us ladies have never had a brush with love before getting married. But you've learned how it feels to fall in love and care for a man."

"...Pamela."

Pamela tightened the grip of her hands over Sonia's.

"Are you sure you don't want to let him know? After all he's made you feel...are you really okay with not telling him?" Pamela asked, her words driving into Sonia's chest.

She was right. Sonia wanted Chris to know how she felt. That alone was enough.

"I...have been so very blessed... I want to tell Sir Chris I care for him. That was the whole reason why I came here...but then I got cold feet," Sonia admitted. She smiled at Pamela as she wiped away her tears. "Thank you, Pamela! I'll do my best! I'll tell him how I feel, regardless of how it turns out!"

"Sonia...!"

The two women hugged each other and laughed.

"Well, now that you've decided what to do, you should get some more shut-eye. You look atrocious after that bad night of sleep."

"Do I really look that bad?" Sonia asked, reaching for her hand mirror.

"I wouldn't if I were you. You'll never get over it," Pamela teased and stuck out her tongue.

"Really!"

After another fit of laughter, Pamela left saying she would make some chamomile tea to help Sonia get some more sleep.

"Thank you," Sonia mumbled as she watched her best friend leave from her perch on the bed.

THE big night had finally arrived. It was time for the Summer Solstice Festival. As if slipping into a midsummer night's dream, both the peasantry and nobility donned costumes to their liking. From fairies to beasts, the costumes came in any manner of style.

This year, demons, angels, priests, and knights were the most popular motifs found at the festival. Among the peasantry, the princess look was extremely popular. Naturally, Sonia paid the utmost of care when choosing the dress for her costume.

But I'm not about to dress up as myself, and I've had it up to here with demons.

The costume Sonia had made was a turquoise satin dress with fairy wings, made from a translucent material, attached at the back. Two of the four wings had rings sewn onto them that were large enough to fit her index fingers, with room to spare.

Finally, the key item for the Summer Solstice Festival was...the *mask*! Friends and acquaintances would quickly recognize one another regardless of their masks, but this prop was the key to the festival's great success, filling the ballroom with a sense of mystery.

Sonia was going to wear a plain white mask with an arabesque pattern in gold lamé glitter. The half-mask only hid her eyes. Although that was all it hid, it was as though the person looking back at her in the mirror was someone else entirely. It made her feel like she could do things she'd normally never do.

I think I'll be able to tell Sir Chris how I feel! She thought to herself in a surge of courage.

A knock at the door gave Sonia such a fright she bolted straight upright. The maid spread her skirts as she dipped into a brief curtsy.

"Sir Crisford has arrived," she informed.

"Tell him I'll be there momentarily," Sonia told the maid as she double-checked her costume with Pamela, who had been helping her get ready.

"Go have fun, Sonia," Pamela said encouragingly. Sonia gave her a big smile and nod.

"I've come to take you to the masquerade, Duchess Sonia," Chris said with a bow. When he stood straight again, Sonia couldn't help but drop her jaw and gawk at him.

"Sir Chris, your beard...and your hair..." she choked out.

Since Chris was also wearing a masquerade half-mask, she could clearly see everything below the mask. It emphasized his nose, mouth, and jaw.

The evenly groomed beard that grew from his ears down to the bottom of his chin had been shaved clean. The short hairstyle that had resembled a freshly harvested wheat field had been replaced with pretty brown hair that had grown out and was smoothed into a neat ponytail.

The extent of Sonia's surprise made Chris rub his cheek bashfully. "Have I changed that much?" he asked.

"Yes, I hardly recognized you..." she answered. Although it was partly due to the mask, Chris came across as a whole different person now. (Of course, she knew it was undeniably him by the sound of his voice.) "Well, I'd appreciate it if you thought of that as a costume I wore to defeat the demon..." Chris said. "Although, I had grown quite fond of it. I had considered sporting the beard and short hair look for a while longer, but..."

Chris rubbed his formerly fuzzy chin with disgust before continuing, "People began mercilessly plucking out hairs grown from my beard, claiming they were 'good luck charms,' 'protective charms,' or 'auspicious.' As if that weren't bad enough, they started pulling out the hair from the top of my head, too...!"

"Oh my!"

"It hurt like the dickens! I had to shave the darn beard clean off. I'd rather not go around with a shiny head, so I grew out my hair."

After hearing his explanation, Sonia simply stared at him dumbly for a moment or two...

"Oh, jeez! That must have been awful, Sir Chris," she said, hiding her mouth

behind her hand as she giggled.

"It really was, sheesh! My chin was a bloody mess there for a while," Chris insisted.

"I wish you told me in the letters. I would have sent some ointment that's good for rough skin," Sonia said.

"I should have. It didn't occur to me."

The two laughed for a time before Chris held his arm out. "Come on! Let's enjoy this night to the fullest!"

"Absolutely!" Sonia replied and placed her hand on Chris' arm.

"I see you're dressed as a fairy this Summer Solstice. The costume looks wonderful on you," Chris said, making Sonia's cheeks turn red.

"What are you supposed to be...?" Sonia asked. It looked like he was wearing the standard fare of dress coat worn at balls and soirees, not something based on any particular motif.

"I played around with a variety of ideas, but none seemed appropriate for tonight," he answered with a big grin that showed off his perfectly straight white teeth.

"...I see."

It was probably so the woman he loved could watch him. Perhaps it was the lady knight he was consulting with King Patrice yesterday. Pain pierced at Sonia's chest.

I'm sure he wanted to spend tonight with her instead of me... Feelings of guilt toward the dame only made the pain in her chest worse.

I'm sorry. Swallowing back the apology along with the pain, Sonia smiled up at Chris. *Please let me spend tonight—just tonight—with Sir Chris. I will close off my feelings for him after I tell Sir Chris exactly what he means to me...*

THE ballroom was bustling with excitement. Person upon person gathered in one place, where they danced, drank wine, and tried to read the faces hidden

behind masks as they conversed. If they removed the mask, would they find a beautiful smile or a visage warped with hatred?

Everyone looked at one another with searching eyes that burned with intense passion. That, too, added to the heated excitement of the ballroom, which further fueled their fervor.

“It’s hot...!” Sonia cried, also caught up in the feverish atmosphere. Her face felt hot as if blood had rushed to her head in the excitement.

“Would you like to cool off outside?” Chris asked. He took two glasses of sparkling water from a nearby maid serving drinks and offered one to Sonia.

The two talked as they went out to the veranda. Several other couples had already beaten them there and were showing displays of affection appropriate for an early summer night.

“I have another place reserved for us,” Chris said. He unlocked the veranda gate and led Sonia through the door to the courtyard.

Passing through the rose garden currently in brilliant bloom, they occasionally walked by braziers. The place he ultimately led her to was none other than—“The arbor...”

Restricted to the royal family, this was Queen Cordelia’s favorite place.

“Don’t worry. I’ve received permission from Queen Cordelia to use the arbor in advance,” Chris said, placing his empty glass on the table in the arbor. “So I came early and, well, see for yourself!” He pulled out a large basket covered with a cloth to show Sonia.

He smiled proudly as he removed the cloth, issuing a squeal of delight from the young Duchess. The basket held a bottle of champagne, cheese and crackers, and a spiced fruitcake, all beautifully furnished with roses.

“Amazing! You’re like a magician, Sir Chris!” Sonia marveled.

“A handsomely dressed magician?” he teased. “Now, please take a seat,” he urged, after spreading the cloth from the basket over the marble bench for Sonia to sit upon.

While Chris was wrestling with the champagne bottle, Sonia pulled the cheese

and crackers from the basket and cut the fruitcake into serving sizes.

“...Doesn’t it feel like we’re lovers or a married couple out here doing this?” she commented.

“...Eh?!” Chris’ hands froze in the midst of opening the champagne bottle.

Their eyes locked, and Sonia found herself frantically correcting herself, “Ah! Or, I-I know! Siblings! Siblings works, too, doesn’t it?”

She only said that because Chris was blushing so brightly, she could tell even in the torchlight.

“...Well, I suppose. Yeah, sure...” Chris muttered, hopelessly tongue-tied.

Once the champagne was poured, Chris took one of the glasses. “For now, let’s simply toast to our safe reunion!” he proposed in an especially cheerful voice.

“Agreed!” Sonia said and picked up her glass. She gently clinked it against his.

“Oh, right! You mentioned wanting to ask my advice in a letter...” Chris suddenly brought up, nearly making Sonia choke on a piece of cheese.

That completely slipped my mind... Panic seized her for a moment, but then she realized she could use this topic to lead into professing her love for him. Having come to that conclusion, she was able to calm back down.

Once her glass was empty of its champagne, Sonia put it down on the table. Then she removed her masquerade mask.

“Right... Shortly after that incident, news spread throughout Pharrell that the Clare curse was broken... I suddenly started to receive gifts and party invitations from complete and total strangers.

“While I could deal with that, some are trying to weasel into Clare Castle. For instance, we’ve had some go on long horse rides around the castle. During their ride, they’d come to the castle and say, ‘I’ve come all this way. Could you spare me a glass of water?’ Others have claimed they’re lost and need a place to stay for the night. I’ve had different lords coming with their wild excuses day in and day out...” Sonia said. Just remembering it made her sigh in frustration.

The moment word got out she was free of the family curse, the men went

wild over her. It was too much for Sonia. She had Matthew, the head steward, and even the housekeeper contend with her suitors, but some young men managed to slip through their fingers.

“The Central Church went all out publicizing the whole affair... I realize this is a prime opportunity for missionaries to collect donations, but still...” Chris grumbled as he removed his masquerade mask. He had a fretful expression on his face. “Even if His Majesty issued a mandate for them to exercise restraint, I don’t think it would do any good...”

“Right... There is no stopping them. I was most surprised by the man who tried to scale the castle walls to get into my private chambers...”

“What? And he wasn’t a burglar?”

Sonia silently nodded her head.

“I’ve heard that passionate young men can be rash on occasion... Did he harm you?” Chris asked.

He peered into Sonia’s eyes with such concern that she grew too embarrassed to meet his gaze and had to turn away. She could tell by the look on his face he was asking, “Did he do anything unscrupulous to you?” It was too much for her to bear.

Meanwhile, Chris trembled with rage that surged through his entire body. “...The fiend! How dare he sully you! Who was it?! Did he name himself?! The scoundrel better not have fled without saying who he was! What did he look like? Did he have any unique traits?” Chris demanded, suddenly dark red with rage, as if he was a pot of boiling hot water.

Sonia quickly continued the story. “I-I-I was fine! He didn’t do anything to me! Not only was he unable to do anything, he fell from the castle wall before ever making it to my room.”

WHIIEEE... Chris audibly cooled off. Seeing him calm down, Sonia heaved a sigh of relief.

“After that one incident...I’ve come to think people might settle down if I got married sooner rather than later... Well, that’s what I came to realize after a lot of thinking,” Sonia said.

“...You’re probably right. Things would probably settle down if you wed,” Chris agreed.

Sonia took a deep breath. *Tell him, Sonia!*

“If possible, I’d like an older man who is open-minded, cheerful, has the strength to overcome adversity, strong in arm, and can be somewhat adorable...I think...” she confessed.

“Someone who is older, open-minded, overcomes adversity, strong...does that mean he’s good with a sword? And yet is adorable...to look at?” Chris repeated.

He grumbled contemplatively as thoughts raced though his mind. *It sounds like she has someone in mind who she is describing*, he thought to himself with a heavy heart while he feigned trying to think of someone.

In that case, I should help her wed the man she desires. As that thought crossed his mind, he heard— “Sir Crisford Cortot, I...am in...love with...you!”

“Huh?”

There was a pause of silence. Doubting his own ears, he looked at Sonia to find her face beet red and her hands balled into nervous fists.

“I love you, Sir Chris. I know you love a fellow dame, but I wanted to tell...you...how I...feel...” Sonia said with tears streaming down her cheeks. Her attempt to hold them back only made her voice quiver.

Sonia had planned to start fresh after she told him how she felt and congratulate him when he should marry. But giving up on restraining the tears, she brushed them away as she continued, “You will never know how much your encouragement and cheerfulness saved me. I’m glad to have met you. If not for you, I would not be here safe and sound. I wish we could have spent the rest of our days together... But I realize you are in love with someone else... I won’t trouble you any further. I will treasure this night we’ve spent together for the rest of my life.”

“Hold up. Um, what dame...? Who exactly are you talking about?” Chris asked, interrupting Sonia with a look of pure confusion written on his face.

“Prince Henry told me about her yesterday! He said, ‘Chris is currently having an important discussion with the King and a dame!’” Sonia answered emotionally.

With that, the puzzle pieces must have clicked, for a look of exasperation washed over Chris’ face.

“Unbelievable! You don’t have to look so annoyed! Is my love for you really that big of a nuisance?!” Sonia yelled.

He was being mean! Big age difference or not, she had put her heart into conveying how she felt!

“Are you treating me like this because you think I’m just a child?!”

Surprised by Sonia’s interpretation, Chris protested, “I was annoyed with Prince Henry. When he said we were holding an important discussion, he was teasing you...and me as well.”

“...Huh?”

This time it was Sonia’s turn to be left in a confused daze.

“His Majesty was consulting us with regards to his plans to have Prince Severin train under someone. He has already decided where the training will take place and who will handle it, but he needed to decide how to handle the journey there. We decided to consider the journey part of the training and have two knights and a healer accompany him, making it a party of four. One of the four was the dame Prince Henry mentioned to you.”

“I see,” Sonia said, but her relief only lasted a moment, quickly replaced by sadness. “Since there will be two knights...does that mean you’re the other one...?”

“I was supposed to be, but I politely declined to go. I’ve spent two months trying to discipline Prince Severin...but I don’t seem to be getting through to him...”

Seeing Chris heave such a heavy sigh that it seemed like his body was deflating, Sonia could only imagine the hard time Severin must have given him.

“...Plus, I have something I fear I’ll regret if I don’t do it now,” Chris said, the

expression on his face changing. He gazed at Sonia with such intensity it made her catch her breath. Sensing passion in his intent eyes, Sonia felt the pounding in her chest grow faster.

"Really, I'm the one who should have said this to you," Chris said as he kneeled on one knee before where Sonia was perched on her bench. He gently cupped his hands over hers before he said, "I'm a man already in his thirties, and I'm only good at the art of war. But if you want, I will do my best to learn estate administration. If you don't like all my body hair, I will shave it off each day. I'll be careful not to grow a beard. I will never do anything to displease you. So I ask of you, please walk alongside me for as long as we both live!"

There was a long, drawn moment of silence. The tears had dried from Sonia's eyes, and she now stared in bewilderment.

She finally brought herself to say, "...By any chance...are you proposing...?"

"By no chance at all, I am proposing."

"No way...! I mean, don't you just see me as a child? Sir Chris, don't you prefer, you know? The more mature, ladylike type, like the Crown Princess?!"

"The Crown Princess?" Chris asked.

At first he seemed thrown off at the mention of such an unlikely candidate, but then he said, "Oh, that," as he knowingly rubbed his chin.

"As I recall, there used to be a rumor to that effect spread among the ladies in attendance at the palace. I hate to say this, but it stemmed from a few ladies who were jealous of the Crown Princess."

"What do you mean...?"

"It started when it was decided she would marry Prince Henry. The jealousy of the women he didn't choose grew so vicious, Prince Henry could no longer overlook it and personally went before the whole lot of them. I thought the rumors quieted down after he reprimanded and warned the ladies who spread the rumors to be more mindful in the future..." Chris explained. He sighed in disbelief that the rumors were still spreading and growing.

"...So it was all a misunderstanding..." Sonia said with a long sigh, feeling

exhausted. Seeing that, a great smile spread across Chris' face.

"May I try this again?" he asked. Feeling him press down on her hands this time, Sonia's heart began to race once more.

"I'm going to skip to the chase. Duchess Sonia, please marry me."

The knight before her looked straight into her eyes with sincerity. He no longer resembled the bear she saw him as when they had first met. Even if he was hairy or had a beard, he wouldn't scare her anymore. The man passionately proposing to her was one of the kingdom's treasured knights.

He extended his hand in my time of need, without heed to peril. Along with the warmth filling her inside, tears spilt down her cheeks, this time from joy.

"...I'm so happy... Are you sure I'm good enough? Don't I still come across as just a child?"

"What would make you say that? You're a wonderful lady, Duchess Sonia! I could tell as much even from the short time we've been together!" Chris insisted vehemently.

Sonia squeezed his hands back. "Please look after me now and forever, Sir Crisford."

Hearing Sonia accept, Chris broke into a broad smile. Unlike any smile he had shown before, it looked like a mixture of wanting to laugh and cry at the same time.

Epilogue: Strong Luck Must Surely...

THE two laughed and cried for some time, but once they eventually calmed down, Chris began to wipe Sonia's eyes.

Oh, he's wiping away my tears. It struck home they were lovers, making Sonia's toes curl with embarrassment. But it nonetheless made her happy, so she let him continue.

Chris suddenly drew his face up close. Knowing what was to come next, Sonia lightly closed her eyes. But!

"...Let's save the rest for later. I can feel several pairs of eyes glued to my back," Chris said.

Sonia opened her eyes and peered over Chris' back into the darkness. There, she found several masked men and women watching them, grinning from ear to ear... They were the King and Queen. Plus, the Crown Prince and the Crown Princess. Even Severin was there.

"...What is the Royal Family doing out here spying on us...?" Chris whispered resentfully.

THE wedding was magnificent and grand. Seeing as the Central Church, Royal Family, and Clares collaborated on the arrangements, that was the natural outcome.

Chris' own family, the Cortots, couldn't dismiss the sense they were being shown up but knew there was nothing they could do about it. As the third-born son, Chris wouldn't inherit any of the Cortot fortune. In other words, all he inherited from his parents was their surname. That notwithstanding, his family provided as much assistance as they could for the wedding, seeing as their son was marrying into the most prominent affluent nobility, the Clare family.

"If you were going to marry up the social line, I wish you'd kept it in reason," his oldest brother complained with a sigh.

Chris had personally saved some of his stipend working as a knight,

supplemented by the King's secret assistance, allowing him to keep up appearances.

But I never expected it to be this extravagant... Chris thought to himself. The parade sprawled as far as the eye could see, down the long road bound for Clare Castle. Who knows how long it's going to take to reach the castle so I can finally relax...

Chris had to fight for Sonia not to notice him stifle a yawn as she smiled happily next to him while waving at the masses.

Meanwhile, Sonia was of a similar mind. *I-I'm exhausted... Jostled around in the open carriage, she waved to the masses and tried to live up to their expectant stares—she would endure this!*

...Gah.... Lame jokes keep popping up in my head because I have nothing better to do...

Sonia regretted that she had underestimated just how massive of an undertaking the preparations for today's wedding ceremony would be. In truth, the ceremony they had imagined was an old-fashioned wedding held reverently at her main residence of Clare Castle, with only a handful of attendees and the priest. Then they'd hold a reception in celebration for a few days. At least, that had been what she planned with Chris.

But then the Royal Family and Central Church had to butt in, claiming, "The two heroes of the century can't have such a quiet, little wedding!"

Not like they're providing any funding or assistance... I'm going to pawn this open carriage off on His Majesty. Behind her smile, Sonia was already calculating the Clare budget as the head of the household.

The carriage progressed slowly, and by the time they finally pulled out of the castle town, both Sonia and Chris seemed to release all of the tension in their bodies as they sighed, "Phew..." Having done it in unison, the two turned to look at each other and burst out laughing.



“You felt the same, Sir Chris?”

“You too, Duchess Sonia? I’m already nervous enough as it is. On top of that, having to sit on display in this carriage is just plain exhausting,” Chris said. As he spoke, a dissatisfied expression formed across Sonia’s face. Chris tilted his head, finding this strange. “Is something bothering you?”

“You realize we’re husband and wife now, don’t you? It sounds distant when you call me ‘Duchess.’ Please don’t do that anymore.”

“Right you are!” Chris agreed with a lighthearted chuckle. He took Sonia’s hands and looked her in the eye as he said, “Sonia.”

There was something sexy about the masculine, low whisper used for her ears alone, making Sonia’s face burn red.

“...Say, um, what, pray tell, would you like me to call you?” she asked, still rattled.

Chris thought she was cute as he answered with a smile, “Whatever you want.”

“Ummm... ‘Sir Chris’ isn’t any different from what I’ve been calling you, but it’d feel a bit brash to simply say your name... What do you think of ‘Darling’?”

“That’s fine, if that’s what you’d like, Sonia.”

“Jeez! That doesn’t help me know what you’d like to go by, Sir Chris—Oops... I called you ‘Sir Chris’...”

Seeing Sonia grow flustered over her slip of the tongue, Chris laughed happily as he said, “There’s no rush. We can adjust gradually. We have a long future ahead of us.”

“You’re right. We don’t need to—”

Sonia’s mouth was covered—covered by Chris’ warm lips.

“Mmm,” Sonia moaned. After she made that stifled moan, his lips pulled away.

“The same goes for this. We’ve only kissed twice now,” he said with a wink. Something about him resembled a mischievous little boy. But even so, there

was no hiding the confidence of a mature adult.

Chris was the strongest knight in Pharrell as the Diamant Knight in the Order of the Birthstones. Strong and resilient yet also cheerful and kind. Above all else, he loved Sonia. Thanks to him, her curse had been broken.

“Perhaps I’m ‘lucky’ for getting to marry such a wonderful man,” Sonia whispered, too quietly for her words to reach Chris’ ears.

“Did you say something?” he asked, looking at her intently.

“There aren’t any spectators around right now, so I was saying we should raise the folding head and enjoy some alone time,” Sonia answered.

“I fully agree.”

The footman overheard them and was considerate enough to take it upon himself to crank the lever attached to the carriage body. The folded cover spread open to form a roof. The moment the top fully closed, the footman noticed the two draw close together.

He jumped down from the slowly progressing carriage’s groom’s seat to join the coachman with reins in hand. It was best to give the couple some privacy for a while. They had plenty of time before the parade, where they would have to put on another show. The carriage rocked and creaked as it pushed ever onward. They rocked it enough that the coachman driving their carriage had to stay on his toes as he took them to Clare Castle.

What became of them after that? Much the same as any good story, but nonetheless, an ending everyone wished for more than all else. It was as simple as that.

Side Story: Was I Crazy to Think This Was So Bad After All?

HOW *did it come to this?!* That was all I could say. No, I have a list of complaints a mountain tall. But, overwhelmed by dissatisfaction with the situation, I have no idea where to even begin venting my frustration.

“Prince Severin, pick up the pace. If we don’t reach our next destination by sunset, we’re roughing it outside,” came the voice as brisk as her pace, the voice of one of the knights of the Order of the Birthstones unique to my kingdom of Pharrell: the Améthyste Knight, Agnes Bell.

Ever since we left the Royal Palace, she’d driven me nuts following me wherever I go. She was a gorgeous blonde whose bark was as bad as her bite, but the babe didn’t have a feminine bone in her body. Meanwhile...

“I wish you would hurry it up. I don’t want to start off camping outside. Don’t you agree, Darling?”

“Yeah. I thought we’d be able to reach a hamlet or town by now, even if we walked.”

The giggling lovebirds flirting next to me as we walked were a married couple. The husband was another member of the Order of the Birthstones, the Emeraude Knight, Clement. His young wife was the healer, Clara. Much like Agnes, these two were my personal attendants in name only!

“A prince shouldn’t drag his feet!” Agnes scolded.

“It’ll be dangerous if we don’t get out of this forest before dark. Severin, pick up your feet!” Clara urged.

“We could run into bandits!” Clement warned.

What was with this demeanor?! And how dare Clara call me “Severin”?! They weren’t showing me a lick of respect as their prince!

“Shut up! If you’re so eager to push forward, why didn’t you bring horses?! I’m not accustomed to walking!”

“As we said when we first left, this is part of your training. ‘Try your best to

reach the destination relying solely on yourself.' That was the order issued by His Majesty, your father," Agnes explained.

"We've told you countless times, but your father, the King, ordered, 'There is no need to view Severin as a prince during his training. I'd like you to interact with him and hone him as you would any young man,'" Clement added.

"Right! Although we also serve as your guards, it's our responsibility to teach and guide you. Out of the four of us, you're the biggest loser. I can't believe you just boasted, 'I'm not accustomed to walking'!" Clara said.

Daaamn it!

"We've been repeating the same thing over and over. Do you still not get the position you're in?" Agnes asked with a sigh. Between the frustrated words and the sigh, blood rushed to my head, and I picked up my pace.

Why did things turn out like this? The reason why, well, was because of what I'd done...

Oh, my beloved Catherine... Raised in a privileged environment, there was nothing I couldn't obtain. Except, of course, the woman whom I loved with all my heart. By the time I met Catherine, she was already a married woman. But that reality only fanned the flames of my love.

Alas!

Even now, I felt bad about plotting to take advantage of my childhood friend. But I, too, was hurt when my heart, gifted with the purest of love, had been toyed with. If I'd been reunited with Sonia before I met Catherine, perhaps I would have fallen in love with her instead.

"...Man, my timing sucked," I whined, a sigh slipping out. And then it hit me.

That's it! It's not too late yet! With my youth and bright, long future, not to mention my status as prince, I was far more appealing than that old fart Chris, who had nothing going for him but his title as a knight! And then there was Sonia, now a married woman... The delicate and pure flower must now surely waft the sensual aroma unique to married women.

If memory served, we were going the right way! In fact, Clare Castle was one

of the checkpoints on the way to our destination!

“Ew, I can tell by the look on your face you’ve got dirty thoughts on the brain!” Clara jeered, bringing me back to reality.

“D-Don’t stare at my face! It makes walking harder!”

“I bet you’re planning to seek help from your old friend, Duchess de Clare.”

Ugh! Damn you, Agnes!

“And while you’re at it, woo her under the covers?”

Eek! Clara?

“Keep dreaming...”

Clement? What was with that look of sympathy?!

Now I’m ticked! They were getting under my skin! But I was afraid they’d pay me back a hundred-fold if I let them have it, so I wouldn’t throw any punches. Yet, their disrespect toward their prince and, “Forget it. No woman would ever fall for you,” attitude was as painfully obvious as the stench of something rotten.

Of course, they were clearly mistaken. I was constantly surrounded by ladies back at the Palace. Some would cry tears of joy if I spoke a single word to them, claiming they would treasure that moment for the rest of their lives. Sparks flew over who would get to dance with me first.

Sonia, on the other hand, had spent most of her life in the Royal Abbey. Ignorant of the world, particularly men, she must have seen Chris as the ultimate figure of a man, the way he risked his life to protect her.

...True, risking his life to protect her from a demon was...amazing. I was willing to admit that much. But! Even making such allowances, my status, youth, and beauty all surpassed his!

I'll do it! I'll start over! This time I will court Sonia with a heart full of the purest of intentions!

“Let’s reach Clare Castle today!” I declared.

“We can’t get there in a day. It’d take two in a carriage,” Agnes said.

"Seeing as we're walking, it's going to take at least four days," Clement added.

My motivation withered under their sharp words.

"But if we keep this pace, we'll reach the transient town relay point. Keep it up, Severin!" Clara said and slapped me on the back.

"Ow...! That hurt! Jeez, exercise some feminine reserve around me! I'll have you know, the ladies in service at the Royal Court were far more graceful, refined, and prettier than you!" I yelled.

"I'm also a Royal Official. And do you seriously believe all the ladies of the court are graceful, modest, and pretty? You were looking skin deep, huh? Ha ha ha!" Clara said and burst out in a dry laughter. Next to her, Agnes snorted.

Th-The looks on their faces!

"I wish there was a mirror for you two to see the looks on your faces now. Jealousy for the young, beautiful ladies has twisted you into monsters! Jealous old hags truly are hideous! A true terror to behold!"

I was dying to silence them once and for all. They had been lashing out at me for some time now, completely heedless of the fact I was their prince. I was going to make them remember that as court officials, they must obey me.

Unfortunately...

"Who are you calling 'old hags'?" Agnes retorted with an exasperated sigh. "If you think we're old hags, Lady de Chalier is ancient history."

"...Huh?"

"Severin, don't you know how old Catherine is?" Clara asked.

"No... It's rude to ask a lady her age, b-but can't you guess a rough estimate just by looking?" I responded.

Agnes rested one hand on her hip and pointed at herself with the other. "I'm 26, Clara is 23, and Lady de Chalier is 35."

"....." No words would roll off my tongue for a while. I couldn't get the gears in my head to turn. Once the ages Agnes had proclaimed finally sunk in, I

realized what exactly that meant. “WHAAAAT?!”

That supple, smooth skin. That tiny waist. Not a wrinkle or blemish marred that face. Perky breasts that didn’t droop. Lustrous black hair without a single white strand to be found.

“You’re lying! Agnes, how dare you! Don’t lie just because you’re upset I called you an old hag!”

“It’s no lie. I haven’t said anything but the God-honest truth,” Agnes smoothly shot back.

Standing next to her, Clement dropped another shocking truth. “For the record, I’m 23. I’m the same age as Clara.”

“Now you’re definitely lying! You’re obviously over 30-years—Sorry!” I blurted out an apology after Clara used her staff in hand to whack my rump with a fierce look on her face.

“This goes to show you can’t judge a woman by appearances alone. Isn’t that how you were tricked?” Agnes stated in a calm, monotone voice, dissipating any desire to contest the point further.

“...Let’s hurry... I’m eager to get to an actual bed.”

“You’re the main one holding us up, Severin!” Clara snapped harshly, perhaps still angry over how I’d demeaned her husband, but her words fell on deaf ears.

I thought Catherine was younger... She had cried, telling me that despite how young she was, her freedom had been taken away by an elderly husband with striking white hair...

But thinking back, there may have been signs indicating as much. She might not have wanted to meet in the bright afternoon because I would see the wrinkles and blemishes in the light of the sun that makeup couldn’t quite hide.

Forget it. I’ll place my hopes on Sonia... I know her, so she can’t lie about her age. I’ll have her heal the sadness in my heart.

AFTER the sun sank below the horizon, we finally reached the transient town. We arrived late enough that we were only able to get one room at the hostel.

Or so Clement said.

We could have stayed at an inn that catered specifically to nobility or one of the royal estates, but Agnes claimed, “Our funds are limited. We can’t splurge right from the get-go.”

She is so hardheaded! That’s what I hate about soldiers. Chris also nagged about avoiding unnecessary expenditures. He claimed that instead of burning through money playing with the local ladies, honing my body was healthier for my body and mind.

What’s wrong with playing every now and then? (The problem was that Severin didn’t realize he hadn’t limited it to every now and then but practically every day.) “Severin, have you taken your bath yet?” Agnes asked, coming back from the bath.

I didn’t bother to look at her as I answered while gazing out the window, “I can’t use a public bath. Those things are loud and filthy. Besides, I have no desire to go near that place.”

“Loud and filthy, eh? Your wealth of knowledge never ceases to amaze,” she responded.

I could tell there was a hint of scorn in her words, rubbing me the wrong way.

“That’s what I’ve heard!” I turned and yelled at Agnes, only to catch my breath.

Having removed her breastplate and burgonet, she was down to just her shirt and tights. A faint haze of steam rose from her body, fresh out of the hot bath. Free from its tightly woven braid, her half-dry blond hair hung damp down her back.

Purple eyes worthy of her title as the Améthyste Knight appeared to sparkle with emotion. And last but not least! There were two mountains rising under her shirt.

She has a surprisingly large chest...

Agnes must have noticed me staring in wonder.

“...Wh-Where do you think you’re looking! It’s not like this is anything new to

you!" she snapped. She hid her chest behind her arms and turned angrily away.

I didn't miss that her cheeks were ever so slightly flushed.

"It's none of my business if you don't bathe, but don't blame me if you miss out on the girl of your dreams because you stink," she said. I'm sure it wasn't just my imagination, she sounded a little softer than usual.

"...I suppose experiencing how peasants bathe wouldn't be so bad from time to time," I said.

I pulled a towel out of my baggage and made my way out of the room. As I walked by Agnes, our eyes locked. She looked young toying with her unbound hair in embarrassment.

It struck me then. I must be simpler than I ever realized. That was all it took for me to think this training journey might not be so bad after all.

I imagine the feeling that has come over us is just passing. No, it probably is.

(Sure enough, Severin was back to being nailed into the ground the next day.)

After Story: I Went to Protect Her as a Knight, But This Was Unexpected I'VE always admired courageous knights who would protect the princess, no matter the peril...

"Crisford Cortot, why don't you get married?" my lord, the King Patrice asked, making me heave a long, heavy sigh. I'm sure all of you must find such insolent behavior before my lord worthy of a thousand deaths, but hear me out.

I serve as a knight in Pharrell under King Patrice's reign. I've boldly fought invading countries and put a stop to their aggression for the sake of our kingdom. As a result, I have been bestowed the highest rank as a knight, Diamant.

Having become this kingdom's guardian angel, I swore to myself I would dedicate my life to protecting Pharrell. Besides, I'm a wanted man outside the border. There was no way a woman married to a man such as I could live a normal life.

For the reasons given above, I've declared I would remain single till the day I die. I've told His Majesty all of this before, and he understood at the time. Was he going to start harassing me to "get married" and "settle down" like my parents back home?

He must have been able to tell what I wanted to say. Perhaps it was written on my face. His Majesty said, "Now, now," with a faint smile, urging me to hear him out.

"Although I skipped straight to marriage, you'd naturally start with an engagement. And not just any engagement, but one meant to deceive the enemy."

"...What do you mean?"

"You're familiar with the Clare family, aren't you?" His Majesty asked.

The Clare family. Looking at him face to face, I straightened my posture.

"As I recall, Duchess Sonia de Clare is currently the last living member of the line... I've heard she is residing at the Royal Abbey," I answered.

"The Pope says that lately he has been having the same dream every night. It has been visiting him long enough that he is certain it must be a divine revelation, so he came to seek my counsel."

"And this dream is related to me...?"

"Indeed," His Majesty agreed and continued gravely, "The contents of the dream are always the same. It is of a fierce battle unfolding between a demon and a knight. Eventually, the knight seizes victory. In the midst of battle, that knight's face changes from that of a certain man to yours, Crisford."

"...My word! But why does the Pope believe the dream is related to the Clare family?"

"Didn't I say the knight's face changed during the battle? The face before yours undeniably belonged to one of the former masters of the Dukedom of Clare, Duke William de Clare."

"...?!"

"Isn't it safe to assume that multiple visitations of the same dream means it's a divine revelation regarding the Clare family?"

I paused for the span of a short breath before I told His Majesty, "...I understand the situation. My orders are to protect Duchess Sonia as her 'fake fiancé' and defeat the demon, correct?"

After William de Clare's demise, the Clare Curse had quickly ravaged the Clare family. Those with Clare blood in their veins were doomed to die young, leaving the direct heiress Sonia de Clare the last of her family. In order to protect the last survivor from the demon's clutches, Duchess Sonia had been sent to live in the Royal Abbey.

"I swear I will see this monstrous undertaking through! I shall carry out my duty marvelously, so I don't tarnish the Diamant title!"

"Uh-huh. I'd like you to save the cursed Clare's last heiress from the clutches of the demon," His Majesty said.

My blood was boiling. The land was filled with peace these days, the battles between nations having come to an end. As such, I was entrusted with guarding the Royal Family and teaching them swordplay.

It didn't change the fact I hoped these peaceful times would never end, but I couldn't help but feel empty inside over having lost a place to test my prowess. Not to mention, this was the very "Knight Protects the Princess" scenario I've dreamt of ever since I was little!

I first began admiring the role when I was seven and aimed to become a knight at the ripe age of 17. But His Majesty only had two sons, so there was no call for a knight in shining armor.

But finally...! At long last! I can play that role...! I only had to wait till I was 34...!

"So here is the deal, Crisford. In tune with the revelation, I'd like you to alter your appearance somewhat," Patrice said.

"Certainly, Your Majesty!"

Holding my happiness in check, I knelt on one knee and lowered my head into a deep bow. *I swear I will save the princess from the demon's grasp.*

After all, knights exist to save princesses. Only, I didn't expect...to have to cut my hair short and leave whiskers that looked as if I'd just crawled out of bed.

Nor did I expect Duchess Sonia to have grown into the dainty image of the "Princess Whom the Knight Protects" in the ten years I hadn't seen her.

...Here I was a grown man. How could I have foreseen I would fall for a girl sixteen years younger than me?

Afterword **HELLO**, everyone. I'm Uta Narusawa. Thank you for buying a copy of *The Cursed Princess and the Lucky Knight*. This novel was completed as a serialization in Japanese on the free upload website "Syosetuka ni Naro," also known as "Let's Become a Novelist" in English. It's a user-friendly site for authors and readers alike, and I've been using it for a long time. This was actually one of the earlier stories I uploaded there.

Out of over 500,000 novels uploaded on the site, it was truly exciting for my story to be chosen for publication.

I was really interested in an individual named William Marshal before I began writing this story. Those in the know will recognize him as the first Earl of Pembroke. He's a popular knight overseas, and I believe there are many novels starring him.

But he isn't all that popular in Japan. As of now, I don't think any novels about his life have been translated into Japanese.

At the time, I went nuts scouring books and the net gathering information on him. I had a blast imagining him as an individual and the life he led. As I did, I was struck with the desire, "I want to write a story imitating him!" And thus, one of the stories I spun out was *The Cursed Princess and the Lucky Knight*.

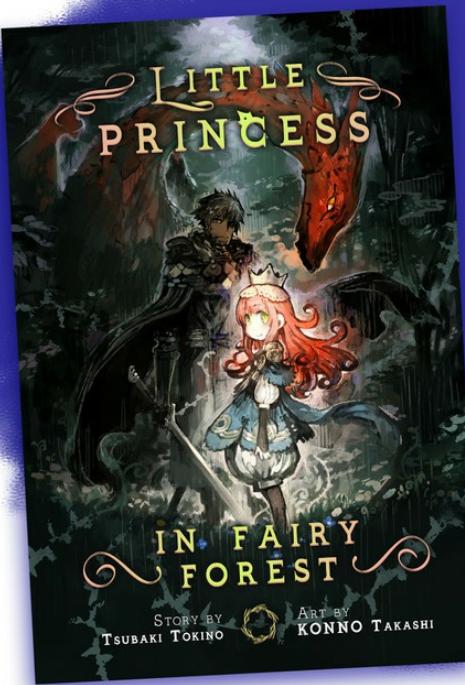
Crisford Cortot is the hero based on William Marshal. And Sonia de Clare is based on his wife, Isabel de Clare. But that having been said, I did alter the cast and make it a fantasy story, so history buffs familiar with the real life individuals might get a bit annoyed. Bearing that in mind, I hope you enjoy this book.

Also, I'd like to extend my gratitude to Cross Infinite World for translating this work and releasing it to the world. Thank you very much!!



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LITTLE PRINCESS IN FAIRY FOREST

STORY BY: TSUBAKI TOKINO
ILLUSTRATION BY: TAKASHI KONNO
STANDALONE / OUT NOW

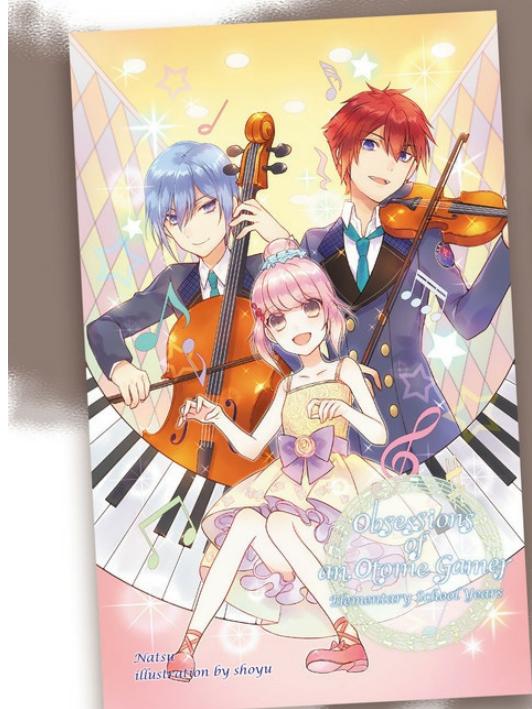
Join Princess Lala and Sir Gideon as they flee for their lives from the traitor who killed the royal family and wants to wed Lala! Gideon is willing to do anything to protect his princess, even if it means engaging the mighty dragons in combat! Tsubaki Tokino's fairy tale inspired Little Princess in Fairy Forest!



AKAONI: CONTRACT WITH A VAMPIRE

STORY BY: HIRORO
ILLUSTRATION BY: MOKOPPE
VOL. 1 OUT NOW

Akaoni is a supernatural romance about a powerful vampire who can't drink blood and a girl hunted for her blood!



OBSESSIONS OF AN OTOME GAMER

STORY BY: NATSU
ILLUSTRATION BY: SHOYU
VOL. 1 OUT NOW

Follow Mashiro's escapades as she tries to avoid bad endings and pursues the life of a pianist when she's reincarnated into a music otome game world in Obsessions of an Otome Gamer!



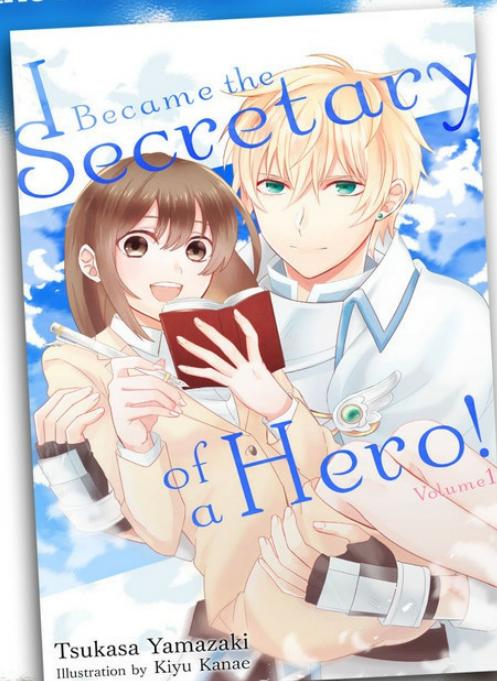
cross infinite world



THE ECCENTRIC MASTER AND THE FAKE LOVER!

STORY BY: ROKA SAYUKI
ILLUSTRATION BY: ITARU
VOL. 1 OUT NOW

Fly with Nichika into a magic journey in another world with witches, shapeshifters, inventors, summon spirits, princess generals, homunculus, and a quirky master-apprentice duo in The Eccentric Master and the Fake Lover!

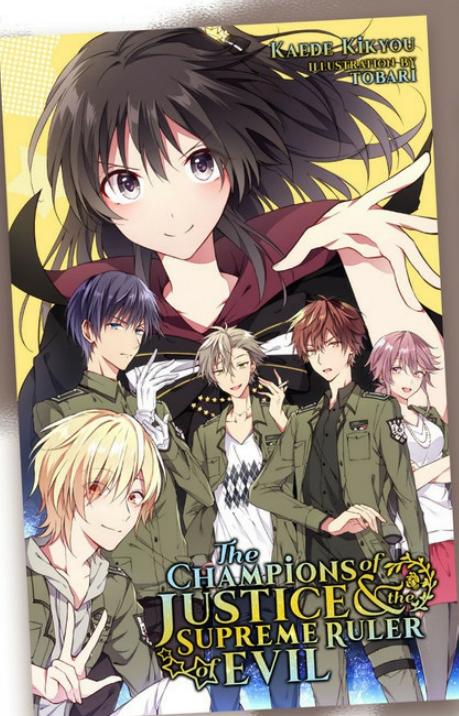


Tsukasa Yamazaki
Illustration by Kiyu Kanae

I BECAME THE SECRETARY OF A HERO!

STORY BY: TSUKASA YAMAZAKI
ILLUSTRATION BY: KIYU KANAE
VOL. 1 OUT NOW

A romantic comedy light novel about a paralegal who ends up becoming a hero's secretary in a fantasy world!



THE CHAMPIONS OF JUSTICE AND THE SUPREME RULER OF EVIL

STORY BY: KAEDE KIKYOU
ILLUSTRATION BY: TOBARI
STANDALONE / OUT NOW

A comedic story about a villainess who lacks the tact to exact her evil schemes and the Champions of Justice who lack motivation in stopping her. Join Mia as she finds love, friendship, and the truth behind her world-breaking magic.

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