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The Cursed Princess and the Lucky Knight

Uta Narusawa

Translation by Jackie McClure

Illustration by Takashi Kiriya

Title Designer: KC Fabellon

Editing by Ingrid Chang and A.M. Perrone

Proofreading by Yvonne Yeung

Book Design by A.M. Perrone

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The Cursed Princess and the Lucky Knight

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contact@crossinfworld.com

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"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 clenching 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..."

[&]quot;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 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 mummer 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 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.

"AHAHAHAHA!" 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 unrepaired 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.

"HAHAHAHAHAHA!" 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! 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.

"UWWAAAUGHHHHH!" 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 shuteye. 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 doublechecked 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.

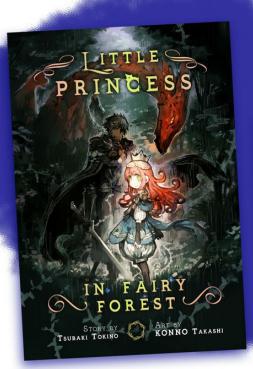
I was really interested in an individual named William Marshal before I began writing this story. Those in the know will recognize him as the first Earl of Pembroke. He's a popular knight overseas, and I believe there are many novels starring him.

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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