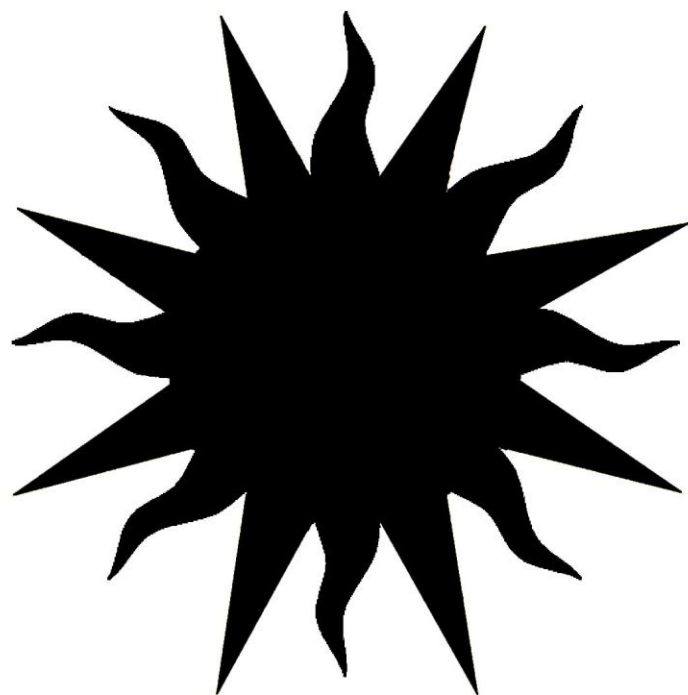


SOLEIL



SOLEIL

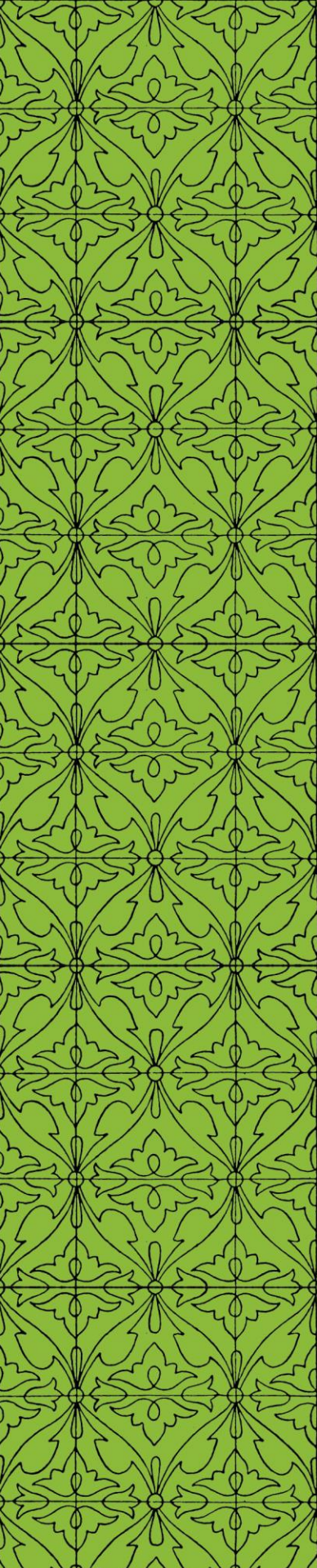
by Leandro Feliciano Salazar



Spring

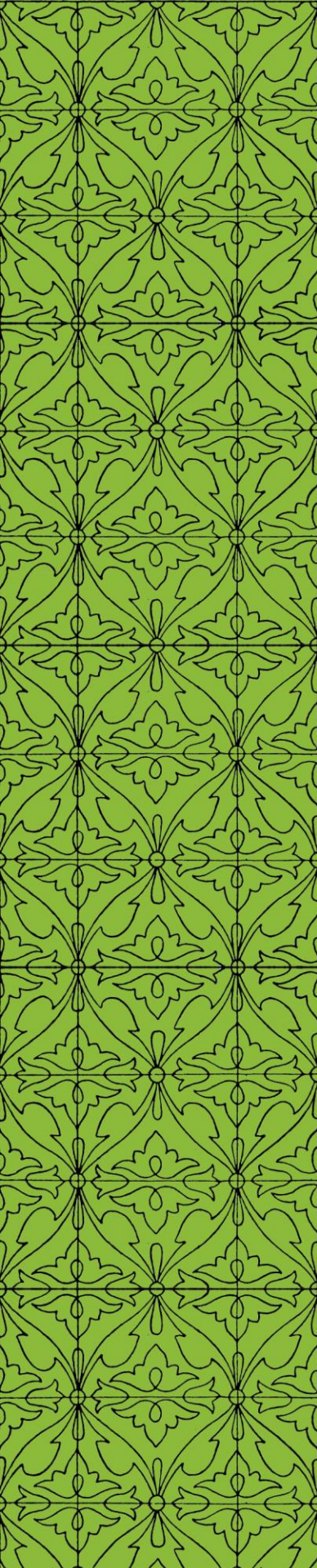
The day is still young as Prince Caius ventured into the forest with his best friend, Nicholas. Armed with their bows, arrows, and ingenuity, they scour the trees and bushes looking for game. "If you don't stop being stupid, I will use all my arrows on you instead of the animals!" Caius said as Nicholas once again tripped on a stick that startled yet another potential kill. On and on they went, and round and round they have gone but still, there was no trace of any bird or creature to be found.

Alas! They have sight of what looks like has fox ears and it is moving fast. They made their way slowly to get behind the prey and this time, Nicholas was being careful. He crept behind Prince Caius as his Highness led the way. They hid behind a tall, thriving bush and waited patiently. The two were surprised when they heard singing instead of animal noise. The voice was as sweet as a nightingale's and as clear as crystal. Every word and melody brings joy to the soul and heart that hears it. Curious, Caius stepped out of the shadows to see where it was coming from. The voice came from a lovely lady in red. Her hair bore the ears that Caius and Nicholas saw a while ago. Her dress and face were covered in mud and grass yet her beauty is like of an angel, so pristine and divine. She screams upon seeing the prince, startled at the bow and arrow pointed at her. He slowly placed it down. "It's ok, my dear angel, I have come not to hurt nor harm you" he said. The lady in red curtsied and left hurriedly, leaving the prince in awe and amazement.

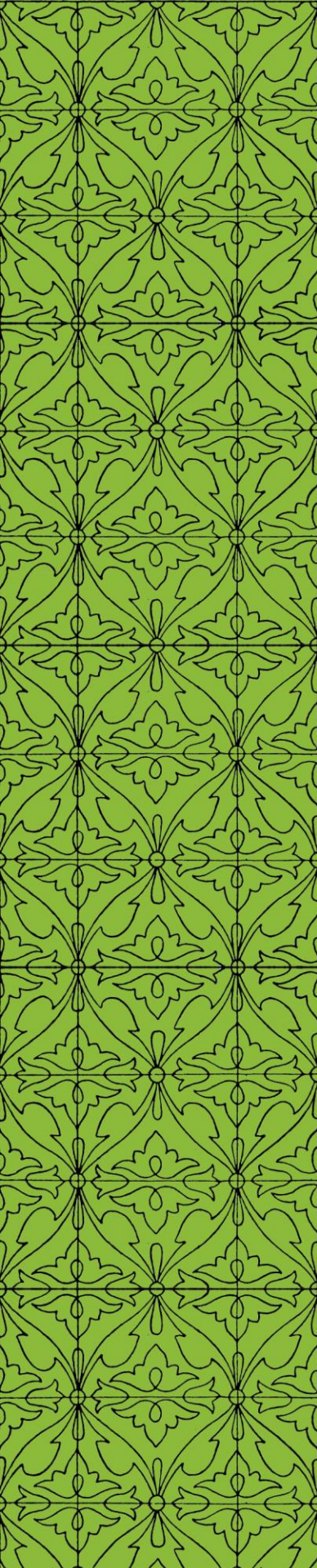


They went back to the castle as a ball was to be held that night. The King and Queen of Demetrus were waiting at the door as Caius and Nicholas came. Caius has told them of the lady in red. "She is the flower that blooms in the middle of winter, the oasis in the desert of my heart, the song that brings me joy and happiness during a rainy day" he proclaimed. But the King and Queen were not amused; they were in fact, worried. They still have not told him of the arrangement that they and the King of Aerione had regarding the marriage of their offspring and that the ball was the time for them to finally meet. "My son, you are to be married to princess of Aerione to unite our kingdoms. That is the agreement we shall fulfill." the king said. More so, he said "You shall meet her Highness tonight, at the ball. And you shall never speak of and forget this lady in the forest". The prince, devastated, went into the castle without a word. He knows that it is his duty as the lone heir to fulfill his father's command not only for their family, but for the whole kingdom.

The grand ballroom is filled with people, each one dressed and decorated to the sixes and nines. Caius, along with his parents, awaits the arrival of the King of Aerione and his daughter. And while they wait, a familiar face approaches the prince. She has the face that is likened to the one that brought a thousand ships, a face so rare and fine. The only difference is her semblance is a contradiction of her character. She is baleful, iniquitous, tough, careless, and hurtful; her name, Elaine. She grabs Caius by the arms and begins her serpentine descant. "I know you think about me all the time. I do, too. Let's get back together, I want you" said Elaine. He looked puzzled. "There never was us, I never think about you and I never loved you, never had and never will do." replied Caius sternly. She and Caius had a bad past. Not so long ago he had secret affections for Elaine and she used this pursue deceptive interests. She used him to garner the trust and devotion of the elite and exploited their kindness for personal gain in society. When he found out about this, he exposed her and lost the fondness he had for her. His secret admiration was never known to anyone except him. The ball is where



they finally meet again, two old acquaintances now nonchalant. Elaine glared at him, "What are you talking about? Never loved me? Do you remember the days and nights we spent, together? You said you love me and cannot live without me. Are those words untrue?". "Yes. You manipulated me and used me, then left. Any affection or love you thought I had for you is gone." said Caius. "No. I will not let this be. I will not let you be the one that got away" Elaine demanded, but Caius answered, "How can I be the one that got away if you never had me?". He doffed her grip then left. Elaine is left with nothing to do but deplore. "I'm going to get you back. One way or another, I will have you once again." declared Elaine to herself. The trumpets sounded and doors opened wide. King Jakobe and his daughter have finally arrived. He and his daughter entered and he gave his salutations to the prince and the King and Queen. Right after, he presented his daughter, "Your Highnesses, my daughter, Serra of Aerione". Caius' mouth opened in surprise. Not only was Serra the most beautiful woman who ever graced the castle, she was also the lady in red that he saw in the forest. He approached her precariously. "My fondest greetings, Your Highness", said Caius, "I believe we have met before, yes?" Serra showed indifference as she does not want her father to know that she sneaked behind his back to explore the forest. "I beg to disagree, my dear Sir. I have not yet met your acquaintance." she replied. "Well then, I believe it is but proper that I ask you for a dance." insisted Caius. The princess obliged. The whole time they were dancing, he thought of how this dashing lady rounded up in his arms when earlier in the day, he tried to shoot her. They did their final bow and went back to their parents. "My dear Serra ", said King Jakobe, "I believe it is about time you know about the agreement". "What agreement?" asked Serra. "You and Prince Caius are to be married in order to unite our kingdoms. The wedding will happen in a year's time." declared King Jakobe. "What? How did this happen? Do I get a say in this?" Serra asked. Her father nodded in disagreement and she ran off not knowing where to go. Caius follows her outside while their parents discuss the unification of their realms.



Serra ends up in a garden filled with flowers and crystal chandeliers. Caius arrives and sees her crying beside a statue of Cupid, the god of love. "Why the sad face, my dear? Forlornness impairs beauty." he asked. "If you had not been paying attention, Your Highness, we are to be married, and soon." Serra replied crankily. "I know, isn't it exciting? Two of the most beautiful and handsome people, joined in matrimony. We'll be the couple of the century!" said Caius. This only made her cry even more. "Hey, I'm just kidding. I'm just trying to cheer you up.", he said. "How could I cheer up? My whole life is being planned for me, I have no chance of choosing anything." she lamented. "I just want to be free, to be happy, to make my own choices and be who I want to be. Is that too much to ask?" she added. "For people like us, yes. These things are luxuries we can't afford. It is our duty to do everything necessary for our kingdom, may it be something we desire or not. I only learned about the agreement this morning and I was enraged. But when I found out it was going to be you, all I could do was smile. I felt like the luckiest guy in the world." he said. This made Serra smile. "Hi, I am Princess Serra of Aerione, your future wife." she said. "Hello, I am Prince Caius of Demetrus, your future husband." he replied. They exchanged handshakes. "There, now we have a connection!" he said as they walked back to the castle. They did not know that throughout their conversation, someone was listening. It was Elaine. She hid behind a tree when she heard the footsteps of Serra and stayed until they left. Their every word pierced her cold stone heart. And now, she is more determined than ever to get the one that got away.

The following day, Caius and Serra meet at the florescence court, a garden sprawling with spring flowers, old roman columns and a font. They sit side-by-side on a marble bench and dwell in each other's company. He gives her a golden band with a sun which she wears with a smile. "I lost my mother when I was young. She, uhm, left us for another man and she eloped with him on the night of my birth. My father was devastated and swore to never forgive her. News came years



after that she died on a shipwreck along with her new husband. Father was crushed and I know it because I know he still loves her albeit her mistakes. Years have passed and I can say we both moved on. But through the years, he has been over-protective and controlling. He decides everything I do and chooses the people I can speak to. I have no friends because I'm locked up inside the castle. They say I'm royalty but for me, I'm just a prisoner dressed in fine clothes and jewelry." Sierra said. "Father said he'll never love again and that was the day I told myself the same. Yet when I met you last night, I think you're the exception." she added. "I understand you", he replied. "I, too, am sheltered from the world. It was only through my best friend Nicholas that I get to explore the world, to know what is outside the castle walls. I never had freedom from my parents. They allow me to do things like hunt and travel but when they give me orders, I dare not complain. It is destiny that I found you, my golden sun. You are my treasure." he added. They talked about their lives until the sun has set and ordered them to leave. "It was nice talking to you", Serra said. "Likewise, my lady, shall I see you in the morrow?" he asked. She replied, "Yes, that would be delightful." The courtship went on and on until the break of autumn. She fell for him as he fell for her. It was like a match made in heaven. And as the leaves started to fall in autumn, so did the love they built in spring.



Return

Orange and brown are the leaves and trees. Fall now begins with cool and cold winds. Night was breaking when Caius went to see Serra.

At the garden's court, he was surprised to see that instead of chandeliers, candelabras lit the lot. And at the center, he sees a familiar shape clothe in a familiar cape. The figure removes the hood of the cape and reveals brown locks. Serra has golden locks so this could not have been her as oppose to his premonition. The figure then loses the cape, revealing a sleek black dress-clad woman. And when she turns, it's Elaine. She approaches Caius. "I would give my all, all that I am, all that I can, just so I could have you, even for one last time." Elaine pleaded. She hugged him, begged and held his face. He turned around in disapproval. "Come back to me, I'm begging you, I can't live without you!" she said as she hugged him from behind. He could not pull away from the embrace. And it was just long enough for Serra to see. She saw them from the back so Caius and Elaine didn't see her. Instead of confronting them, she ran away and dropped a silver band with a moon she was supposed to give him. "Let go of me. Are you insane?" demanded Caius. Elaine lets go. "I love Serra. My heart belongs to her and only her." he said. He walked past Elaine and noticed a shining object on the ground. He picked it up and the read the ring's inscription. "I will love you forever, S" the ring read. All he could do was whisper, "she was here", as he ran off. Elaine was left on the cold, hard ground, alone.

The next day, Caius went to Aerione to talk to Serra. Upon his arrival, he was met by King Jakobe. He doesn't look happy. "Good day, Your



Highness, may I speak with your daughter." said Caius. "She's in the throne room." the King said acridly. He rushed to the throne room and found Serra sitting on the leftmost chair, staring blankly at the walls. He pulls out the silver ring and kneels on one knee. "My dear Serra, my one true love, will you take my hand in matrimony?" he asks. Serra slowly stood and walked to him. She bends down and abruptly took the ring. "You don't deserve this." she said. "I saw you, I saw you together." she added tearfully, "I thought you were different!". "It's not what you think. Nothing happened between us. Please believe me, you're my one true love!" he said. She started bequeathing from him. "I believed you. I trusted you. I thought you were my treasure, I thought wrong. Take away your golden band. A treasure is irreplaceable, but you are not. I can have another you that will truly love me. Leave. Now." she demanded. "No. I will never leave you. Serra, I lo-- ", he shouted until he was dragged by the guards away. Serra sat back on her throne, staring at the symbol of her love; a ring that should've rested on Caius' finger now lay coldly on her palms.

Alcohol is now Caius' best friend. He spent the night drinking while Nicholas sympathized with him. ""I swear on my own grave nothing happened between me and Elaine. Serra said goodbye, but I know it means nothing at all but she still loves me yet she's afraid to admit it. And it was I who scared her." Caius said. "I believe you, my friend, the problem is, does Serra believe you? The dream is not yet over. Fight for her. Don't let her go." Nicholas replied. The stars on the midnight sky twinkled as the tears of Caius sparkle in the moonlight.

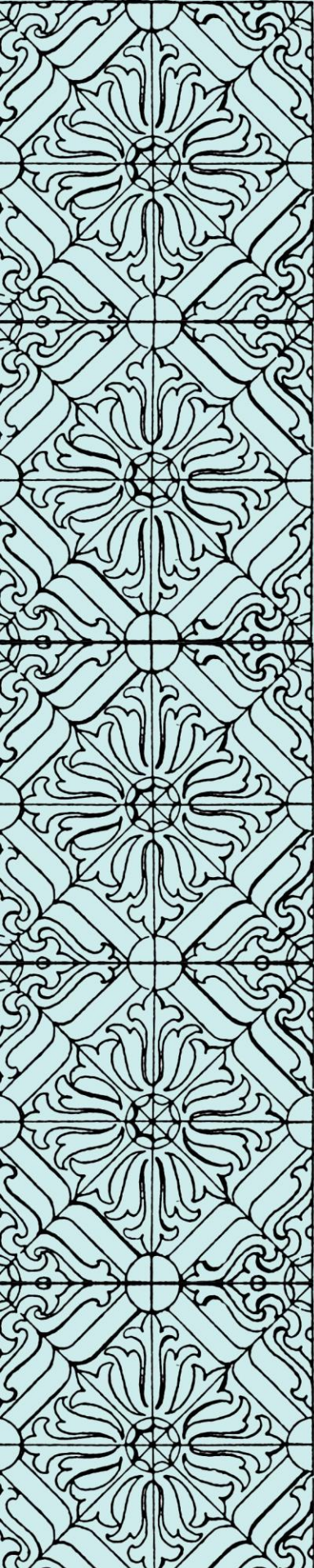


Winter

White and fluffy snow covered the once green meadows. Snowflakes fall like magic dust from the sky. Winter has brought cold winds, cold days, and cold hearts.

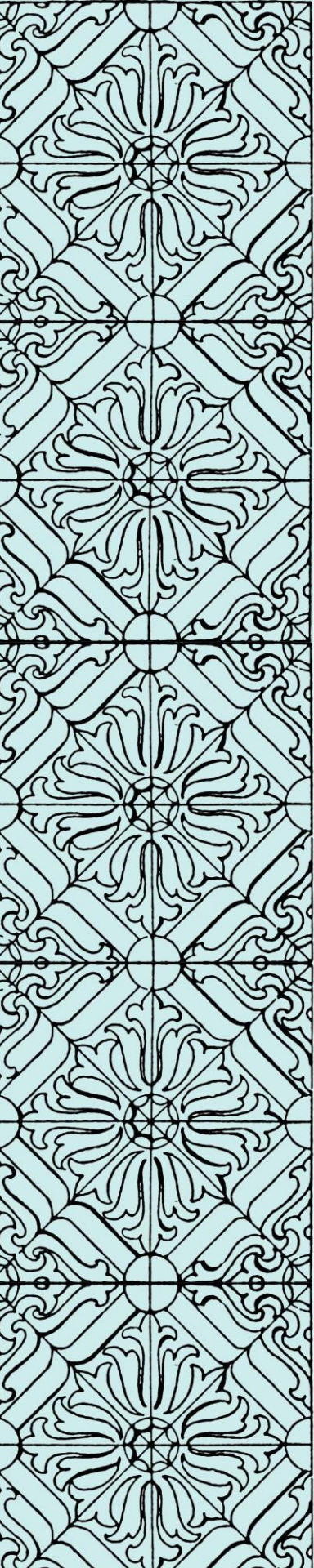
Nicholas' family is known for throwing extravagant parties, and the beginning of winter was no exception. They invited royalties, statesmen and commoners from different kingdoms to a snow and ice masquerade. Crystals, ice sculptures and an ice crystal chandelier decorated the grand room. Everyone was happy except for two.

Caius and Serra were invited but neither knew one was coming. At the party, the host asked everyone to occupy the floor and choose a random partner for the dance. The attendees' identities were hidden the masks. Obediently, everyone obliged by the host's command. Before the music started, the host had one more request. "My dear guests please remove your masks." he said. Each one removed their mask and no one was more surprised than the couple in front. The pair was no other than Caius and Serra. Consequently, Serra tried to leave but the music started and Caius pulled her into his arms. Serra had no choice but to dance until the music ended. "I'm so glad you're here. I will not stop saying sorry for what you think I did. I wish I realized what I had when you were mine because being away from you is nothing but grief, longing and pain." he said to her. She was silent all throughout the dance. And when the music stopped, it was like everything came to halt. "I'm hearing what you say but I can't make myself believe. You tell me you need me yet you leave me just like that. It's too late to apologize. War is



declared by my father to your kingdom. The agreement is off. Goodbye and may we never see each other again." she said sternly. She stormed off leaving Caius aghast and dismayed. Hands slipped between his arms and embraced him from behind, it was Elaine. "Let me go!" he said as he broke free from her grasp. "This is entirely your fault! You wrecked my relationship and you wrecked my life. War is now upon us because of you. I hope you're happy!" he added then left. Elaine couldn't figure out what to do. "I never meant to start a war. I just wanted you back. All these years, I always wanted you. I didn't wreck you. You wrecked me.", she said. Then the whole scene faded to black as she screamed in pain, sorrow and guilt.

The next day, Elaine went to see Serra. The palace was heavily guarded so she disguised herself as a maid and sneaked in. She went around and found Serra in her room. "Serra, it's me, Elaine", she introduced. "What are you doing here? Who are yo--.", and Serra starts to recognize her. "It was you; you who dare touch the one not you're betrothed. Why have you come here? To further destroy my life? Well let me rain on your parade, I'm already torn. I feel nothing anymore. And it's all because of you." Serra told her. Then Elaine made a step closer to her. "I know you don't know me so let me introduce myself. I am Elaine. I was supposed to end up with Caius but I screwed it all up. I was supposed to be his first love but took his love for granted. It didn't take long for me to realize what I lost so I longed to have him again. Your engagement was my clincher. I did everything I can to get him back. The night when you us together, that night was my ultimatum. I told him that I would give up everything for him but he rejected. He really, really loves you Serra. I came here to say sorry and goodbye, sorry for what I did and goodbye because I am leaving for good. I also came here to tell you to not miss this chance of love. He is a great man and his love for you is genuine and true. I do not want you to end up like me, losing someone then come to wreck everything to get him back. You are a nice girl. You deserve happiness. You deserve love. Don't miss this chance." Elaine said. Serra,



realizing what Elaine had said was true, could do nothing but embrace her. "I'm sorry for being narrow. I should have listened. Thank you." was all Serra could say. Outside, the war was brewing without restraint.



Summer

The Checkerboard was an old battleground where ancient wars were held. It was dead but has now come alive through the beating of the drums and the stomping feet of the legions.

The two kingdoms were fast approaching headed by their respective leaders. The trumpet sounds and all come to a halt. On either side, Caius and Serra stand by their armies. Keeping Elaine's advice and apology in mind, Serra mouths a faint "I still love you" to Caius which he understood perfectly. The two descended from their chariots and ran to each other. King Jakobe saw Caius running towards them. In defense and anticipation, he yelled "Guards!". Serra was terrified. She yelled "No!" just as she reached the front of the battalion gesturing them to cease, but it was too late. A lone arrow flew then everything went silent. Everyone stood still, breathing heavily. Caius falls. Serra, panicked at the sight of her lover's state, rushes to his side. "I'm here. Caius, are you alright? Don't worry. I'm here. I love you." Serra told him. Caius struggles to speak. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry for everything. Please believe me I love only you", he said. She replied, "I know. Now, I know". He points his finger up to the sun. "You, my love, are much like the sun. My world revolves around you and you alone." he said before closing his eyes. "Caius? Caius!" she shouted while trying to wake him up, "Caius! Say something! I won't give up on you, not now, not ever!". Healers came to try to mend him. Serra stood patiently waiting. The moment the doctors shook their heads, she ran again towards him and placed her head on his chest. "Come back to me, please, I need you." she whispered as she cried. Then as if by magic, he opened his eyes, reached for Serra's back and embraced her. "Please don't cry. I'm here, now and forever", he said.



Her eyes suddenly filled with tears again, but this time, of happiness. "The agreement is back!" yelled King Jakobe then trumpets sounded all over.

The day of the wedding came, everyone ready to witness the unification not only of two people or two kingdoms but of two hearts, two souls. Caius prepares for the occasion when Elaine mysteriously appeared behind his back. "Hi, did you miss me?" Elaine said. Caius just stared at her, unsure of what to do. "I would just like to say sorry for, like you said, 'wrecking' your life, but I reckon all is well now. I am also saying farewell. Thank you for the memories, although some were not so good, I'm still thankful." she said. This time, Caius hugged her. "Thank you and goodbye" he said to her ear. She left the moment he let her go. "Never should you mind me, I will find someone like you, or better. Just kidding, goodbye", she said happily. He had never heard of her ever again.

People filled the cathedral at Arione. Caius stands at the end of the aisle, waiting for his forever. The doors open wide. With the sunlight as her spotlight, Serra walks down the aisle. From the lady in brown to now the lady in white, they have gone through so much before reaching this moment. They exchanged vows and then sealed it with a kiss. And they begin their walk, their first walk as husband and wife, their first step to spending life together, forever.