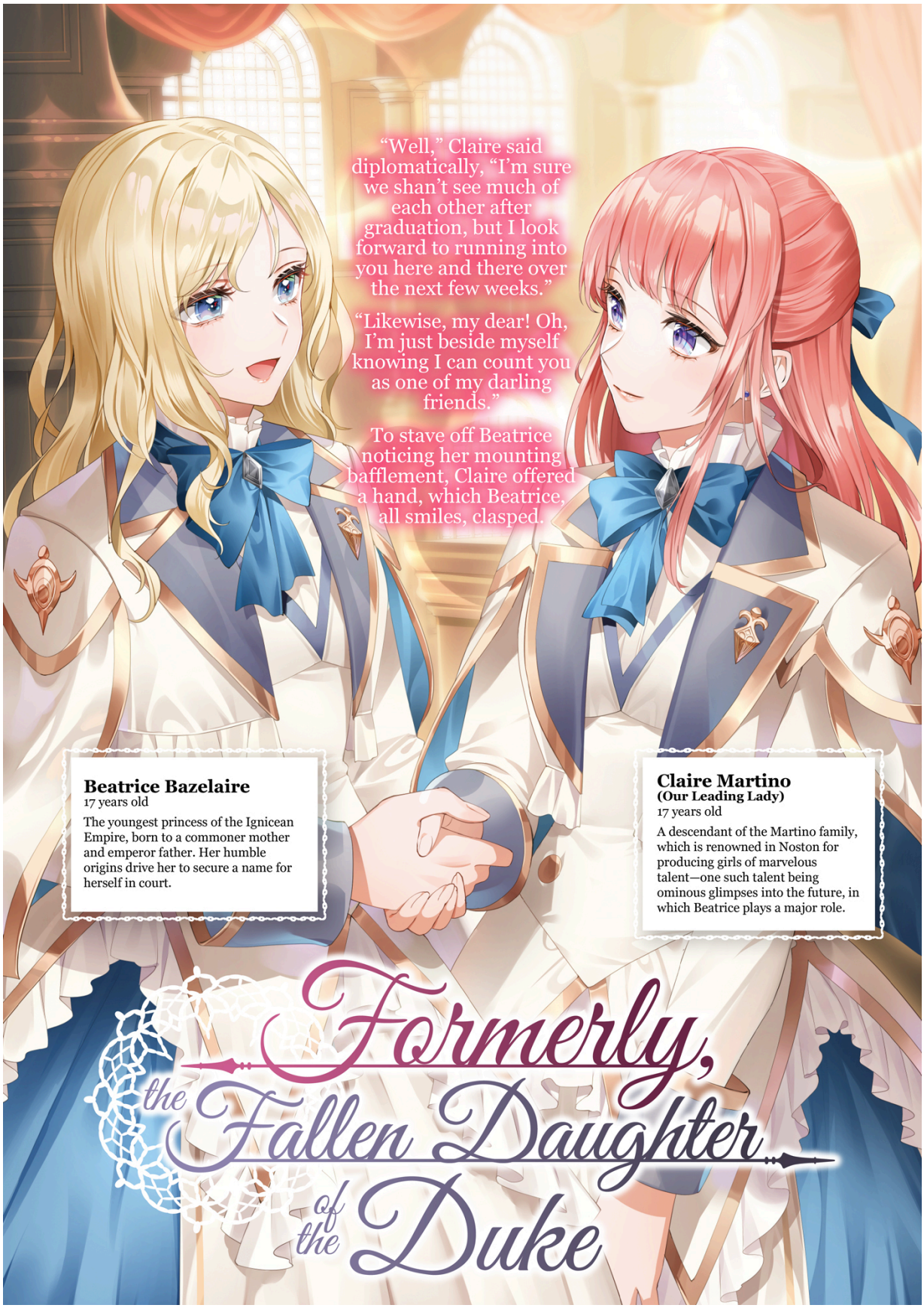

Formerly, the Fallen Daughter of the Duke
5
Ichibu Saki
Illustrated by Nemusuke
Character Designs by Ushio Shirotori


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"Well," Claire said diplomatically, "I'm sure we shan't see much of each other after graduation, but I look forward to running into you here and there over the next few weeks."
"Likewise, my dear! Oh, I'm just beside myself knowing I can count you as one of my darling friends."
To stave off Beatrice noticing her mounting bafflement, Claire offered a hand, which Beatrice, all smiles, clasped.
Beatrice Bazelaire
17 years old
The youngest princess of the Ignicean Empire, born to a commoner mother and emperor father. Her humble origins drive her to secure a name for herself in court.
Claire Martino
(Our Leading Lady)
17 years old
A descendant of the Martino family, which is renowned in Noston for producing girls of marvelous talent—one such talent being ominous glimpses into the future, in which Beatrice plays a major role.
Formerly, the Fallen Daughter of the Duke


A brisk autumn breeze swept across the terrace, but Claire, basking in the warmth from the hall, didn't feel the chill. She noticed, then, that it was just her and Vik out here. Their companions must have slipped away—remaining close, to be sure, but just far enough to give the two lovebirds their privacy.
Claire gazed out over the laughing, dancing crowd of familiar faces.

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Prologue

It was startling how quickly one and a half years had gone by since Claire had first moved to study abroad in the grand kingdom of Paffuto.

A pleasant breeze wafted in through the window, bringing with it the last remnants of the dying summer's heat and rustling the mountain of paperwork burying Vik's desk.

"My goodness," Claire said, a bit startled. "After how hard you worked yesterday, I would've thought there'd be less to do this morning."

"You're telling me," groaned Vik. "I suppose everyone's remembered it's the last day of the summer holidays. They'd better get my seals on their documents now before I'm off to school again."

The weary prince was not alone. His desk was only one in a line of four, the other three occupied by his retainers. Yet unlike Vik, Lui and Denis flew through their paperwork at blistering speeds and remained perfectly unruffled.

"I sympathize with your panicked petitioners," Lui said. "You're an exceptional prince in many ways, but when the school term is in session, you seem to forget paperwork exists until the weekend."

"Paperwork's a breeze if you handle it on a routine basis," Denis chimed in. "I don't see why you put it off, Vik. What's so boring about it?"

"I can't stand being cooped up in my office," Vik said by way of defense from this scathing criticism. "We all have our duties we struggle with."

That sounded like an excuse to Lui's ears. "I beg your pardon, but who is this *we*?"

And there was no arguing with that, now was there?

Claire giggled. She pushed back her long, flowing locks of a milk-tea hue and picked up a document from Vik's pile. *Ah, this relates to*

his investiture ceremony next spring, she thought. *Why, after all this lead-up, it's hard to believe it's only half a year away. We're sure to be far busier in due time.*

With all the events of the past two years, her time in Paffuto had passed in the blink of an eye. She and Vik were due to graduate from the Royal Academy next spring, whereupon Vik would be invested as the crown prince. The ceremony promised to be a more grand affair than any function or gala she had attended thus far. The mere thought made her stressed.

As if all that isn't enough, this will be my debut into society as Vik's fiancée, she thought. *My first time standing beside him as his future bride. I feel prepared, but I can't help but worry the people of Paffuto might not accept me.*

Lui noticed the tension in Claire's hand as she gripped the paper. "What is it, Claire? Do you have a question?"

"Oh, no. I'm afraid I'm simply a tad tense thinking of the upcoming ceremony."

"Your diligence is admirable. If only someone else would take a leaf out of your book."

"Someone else, you say." She and Lui shared a smile.

"Hmmph," Vik grumbled. (His princely demeanor had long since vanished.) "You two've been awfully chummy ever since that trip to Lupty."

"Oh yes," said Lui. "I daresay she likes me better than you now."

"Wh— Don't you dare suggest that!"

Lui, unperturbed, smirked in Vik's scowling face, and Claire simply had to giggle. There was nothing dearer than these moments of banter and good cheer with her precious friends.

Claire was, at present, living her so-called "second" life. In her first life, she had failed to meet the societal expectations visited upon all girls hailing from her eminent ducal house. She soon became an outcast, and there was little Claire could do save blame herself. She resigned herself to her fate as a pariah, and soon found herself ousted from her privileges and position in the Royal Aristocratic Academy—to say nothing of her home—by her half-

sister, Charlotte. Claire had no recourse save to flee the kingdom.

It was on this fateful flight that she met her new companions—chief among them Vik, the Crown Prince of Paffuto blessed with shining golden tresses and eyes of emerald green. An unapproachable figure at first blush, he proved to be a young gentleman of no inconsiderable heart once Claire grew to know him.

As for the others, Prince Vik's guard knights comprised Lui, a woman as curt as she was beautiful; Denis, an affable young man of modest build who was never far from a smile; and Keith, a gentleman whose strapping muscles belied his no-less-robust heart.

It was thanks to their unflagging kindness that Claire found the strength to start anew and throw open the doors to a new life in Paffuto. Alas, no sooner had she crossed the threshold than disaster struck.

Charlotte's machinations wrenched Claire's new loved ones from her hands and snuffed out their bright futures. Paffuto and Noston teetered on the brink of war. All hope seemed lost.

None of this would've happened if not for Claire! But as she lamented, she recalled that she possessed a mysterious power—the ability to reload her save data. Claire lived in a so-called "dating sim," one whose saves were hers to reload as she saw fit. Summoning every scrap of magical power at her disposal, Claire rewound the clock and transported herself back to an earlier save.

Curiously, she did not find her old life waiting for her. This new world wasn't the one she had known. It was most puzzling, but Claire did not let her confusion stop her from pursuing fresh friendships with her old companions, saving the world once more, and penning a new chapter in her love story with Prince Vik.

Now, with the calamitous tornado behind her, no further impending tragedies weighed on Claire's mind. The future looked bright. Her loved ones' once-lost future awaited.

Nothing more to stress about! Claire said to herself. *No more reason to fear. All my friends are here and well.* She concluded her short trip down memory lane with a smile of relief at precisely the same moment Vik addressed her.

"Say, Claire," he said. "Now that we've gotten that beastly trouble with Prince Gilbert and the tornado out of the way, is that everything? You don't know anything that comes after, do you?"

"I don't," she said. "It's all new to me from now on. Goodness, what a relief that is!"

"Don't celebrate now," he warned. "This is where it starts getting hard. What with the preparations for my investiture and our upcoming graduation exams, we'll be too busy to hear ourselves think."

"Graduation exams?" Claire repeated. She hadn't heard the term. "What are those?"

Claire's home kingdom of Noston had no such exams. This wasn't to say that Noston's Royal Aristocratic Academy lacked examinations of any sort, but seeing as school was rather more an opportunity for young lords and ladies to mingle in high society with their peers, the tests Claire had sat in her youth were little more than formalities. Her ex-fiancé, Asbert, as a crowning example of the Nostonian adolescent aristocracy, had graduated this very spring without ever sitting a special exam. His formal training to be king would continue elsewhere.

Asbert had good company and a constant supporter in Nicola, Vik's cousin and Claire's exuberant pen pal. The descriptions of the commencement ceremonies in Nicola's many letters had given Claire the impression that one could graduate from all such noble Academies with little fuss or fanfare. *However*, she reflected, *I suppose it makes the most sense the other way 'round. Paffuto's Royal Academy is made of sterner stuff than Noston's. I shouldn't assume their graduation requirements are similar either.*

Claire's own negligence made her feel rather caught off guard. Her eyes widened in alarm.

Lui hastened to explain. "Vik mentions the exams as they're a trifle involved. If it were only writing the main thesis, it wouldn't be so bad. However, most people find the written and practical exams wickedly difficult. Pupils can't buy their way into top marks either. You'll find that a good number of students fail every year—not that you'll be one of them, of course."

"We can't give you any further details," Denis added. "Rules are rules. No past examinee is allowed to say what's on the test. But you two are good students, and hey, Lui and I passed! You two will be just fine."

"Do you really think so?" Claire said. By all accounts, Denis and Lui had been exemplary students at the Academy. Denis's last comment rather unnerved her.

"My lord father—His Majesty—says the graduation exams are an experience of a lifetime. Some students will fail, but it's nothing you or I should worry about. Point is, there's no getting around them."

"I...see."

Claire did not see. If anything, the examinations were growing more mystifying by the moment. *But I mustn't try and bow out with the excuse of preparing for the upcoming investiture*, she chided herself. *Vik's sure to be busier than I am, and he has to sit his exams too.*

Claire no longer knew what the future portended; she had not lived through this period in her previous save. All sorts of new adventures awaited unbeknownst to her or Dion. However, she didn't need to see the future to know Vik, a brilliant student, would pass with flying colors. His tendency to procrastinate on paperwork aside, he really was every inch the perfect prince. She needn't worry about him.

No, her anxieties were centered on herself. *I suppose if I cram, I might scrape by*, she thought. *Or I certainly hope I will.*

"Why do you look concerned, Claire?" Vik asked. "You placed top in the year on our finals. You'll blow these exams out of the water."

What if I'm to be held back a year? Claire's mind raced. *I could never debut as Vik's fiancée with that on my record!*

"Yes, and you should have seen the look on his face when you outstripped him," Lui quipped. Then, after a pause: "Claire? Are you listening?"

I must work my very hardest to earn top marks. I shan't make a fool of myself.

"Claire? Claire!"

Claire was too worked up to register any of her friends' voices. It

must be said that she could be rather too dutiful for her own good—more so when, henceforth, she swore to devote an even larger portion of her weekends to her studies.

Chapter 19

Claire returned to school the following week. With the summer holidays at end, the Academy was abuzz with activity—more so than usual, Claire sleepily mused. The news of the impending examinations had compelled her to stay up cramming into the wee hours of the morning all last week. Drowsiness hung over her like a pall she couldn't quite shake.

A knot of people converging before the school noticeboard prevented Claire from getting a close look herself. She tried to squint over her classmates' heads when her friend Lydia, who'd evidently come much earlier and missed the crowds, called her name. "Lady Claire! Have you seen the notice yet?"

"I'm afraid not," Claire said.

"They've posted what's to be on our graduation exams."

"Oh dear." The mere mention of Claire's latest source of anxiety turned her stomach.

Lydia, however, did not share in Claire's unease. Having an older brother as she did, Lydia hardly found the exams a surprise. "The contents of the exams are certainly comprehensive, just as everyone says. It seems we'll have to write a thesis as well."

The notice on the bulletin board read thusly:

The graduation examinations shall entail:
A written thesis on a magical curio of your choice
Curios may be of any variety
Curios may be acquired by any means
Paper and practical exams on all general and elective subjects
Exams shall cover the entire curriculum

"A thesis on magical curios?" Claire read aloud.

Curios—tools or artifacts powered by magic—were relatively

commonplace in Paffuto but complete rarities in Noston. What awful luck that they were to be the subject of Claire's final thesis! Why, she was already behind.

"Oh dear," Lydia remarked. "My older brother always said the exams were a dreadfully laborious process, but I'm afraid I know little more than that. I believe it was the thesis that gave him the most trouble."

"If it troubled him, then I'm sure we'll struggle with it just as much," Claire said.

"No doubt we will. Being a research institute, the Academy won't suffer its students to submit sloppy work." She paused. "And as much as I excel in magic, I don't have much of a head for curios. I fear I haven't the foggiest where to find one to study."

Lydia placed a hand on her cheek in consternation.

Yes, Claire thought, *I suppose aristocrats with powerful magic would have little need for such tools. Oh, I wish I could choose my mother's bracelet for the subject of my thesis! But it is one of the royal treasures of Old Lindel. I fear that would be bending the rules.*

The two friends lapsed into thought before a sudden revelation made Lydia jump. "Oh goodness, I just realized! You'll have a harder time of this than I, won't you? I can speak to my father, but you don't have any family in Paffuto, do you?"

"No, but why should I?" Claire asked.

"Did you notice how the announcement stressed curios may be obtained by 'any means'? They must want us to source curios from our houses and produce brilliant research any Paffish noble would be proud of. You simply must ask Prince Vik for help, Claire. It's a requirement."

"That seems rather like cheating," Claire said.

Not having any real political power of her own, she hesitated to ride on Vik's coattails. Why, oh why, was every option available to her completely inappropriate for a school assignment? Claire felt her smile growing stiff.

Conscious of her friend's distress, Lydia continued in soothing tones, "Never you mind, Lady Claire. It matters not if you bend the rules a bit, so long as the work gets done. The sooner our

preparations are complete, the sooner we can look forward to the fun. I, for one, am looking forward to spending the graduation trip with you."

"What graduation trip is this?"

Lydia pointed to a second slip of paper in the center of the noticeboard hidden by the earlier crowds.

"See that?" she said. "During the course of the examinations, we shall be boarding together in a sort of retreat. Students from the Academies all over the kingdom attend, along with the occasional foreign guest. It's quite a big event."

Lydia was right. The notice in question announced one such retreat indeed.

"That sounds like a rather festive occasion for sitting exams," Claire said.

"Isn't it? It's our last hurrah. It signifies our final opportunity to mingle with our high-society peers prior to graduation—particularly those from other campuses."

"Ah." That made sense. Paffuto had more than just the one Royal Academy in the capital. Wurtz's Academy boasted the largest campus, to be sure, but such a sizable kingdom must necessarily require other schools in the provinces. The academic curricula were likewise tailored to meet the needs of these young aristocrats who, in conjunction with their noble parents, often traveled between their provincial fiefs and the court in the capital. *Dion once attended one of those provincial schools*, Claire recalled. *The one closest to the Mead estate. He transferred into our Academy later.*

At any rate, these exams upon which graduation hinged sounded like a lengthy affair. It was plain that Claire would have much more to do than merely sit a few papers.

She scrutinized the bulletin board, armed with this new knowledge. The examination would be held in winter at a lodge owned by the Academy—or, perhaps, a lodge in name only. Claire could only imagine a lodge meant to house aristocrats was as sumptuous as any lord's villa. In hindsight, this explained Lydia's excitement surrounding the graduation trip.

Claire had her own experiences with dormitory life from when she

was a pupil of the Noston Royal Aristocratic Academy. Between her hall's strict rules and her decidedly unpleasant ousting, her memories of the place were rather less than fond. Yet she could not claim that cohabitating with her dear school friends had been entirely joyless. Exam anxieties aside, Claire enjoyed her current academic experience, and at the thought of boarding with her new friends, she could not conceal a flutter of excitement in her heart.

"While it may be a tad frivolous of me to say so," she confessed, "this retreat sounds awfully fun."

"Oh, but it is. Prince Vik will be there too. I know you've gone on trips with him before, but never with him and the entire class. Why, it will be a whole new experience."

For someone always the picture of calm, Lydia's eyes held an unmistakable gleam of delight.

It may be an examination, but she's right, thought Claire*. I should treat it as an opportunity to take a trip with all my dear friends!*

On any other occasion, these daunting exams would have left Claire a ball of nerves. Now, in anticipation of the upcoming fun, she couldn't wait for them to arrive.

The shrill chime of the detached palace's front door startled Claire out of her studies a few mornings later. It was still quite early; she had just finished breakfast and her morning toilette and had been about to buckle down for some serious cramming. *Who could it be at this hour?* she wondered.

Sophie went out to the foyer to answer the door, only to scream, "Miss Claire! Oh, Miss Claire!"

Claire, alarmed, rushed out of her bedroom and stopped short with a shriek of her own. Whatever was this pile of rubbish?

"What is all this, Sophie?" she asked.

She could barely see the foyer floor for the mess. The hodgepodge of household goods faintly tickled her magic sensibilities, leading Claire to suspect this "rubbish" was a collection of curios gone mad.

She paused a moment to collect herself and take stock of the

scene. An enormous wheeled box that resembled nothing so much as a wardrobe hampered most of her view. Its design was opulent to the point of gauche gaudiness. That, coupled with its enormous size, made it something of an eyesore. *By far the most eye-catching item in this collection*, Claire thought, *it is certainly not the last!*

Indeed, that was not the only oddity to have made a home for itself on Claire's foyer floor. There was a cask probably meant for fermenting grapes, an odd stone inexplicably carved to resemble a footstool, a chair-shaped object that had no business calling itself a chair, an unsettling set of tableware redolent of magic, a streetlamp that looked quite out of place indoors, a curiously empty glass bottle... In and around such objects were a number of what appeared to be purely decorative items. However, Claire was loath to judge these "books" by their innocuous covers. Given the magical aura of these would-be knickknacks, these, too, were magical curios. In fact, everything in the room gave off a faint whiff of magic.

Claire bit back another scream as her eyes traveled up the heap of magical goods. "Whatever are all these objects doing here?" she said instead.

By way of answer, a man stepped out from behind the pile with spectacles agleam. His was, she'd daresay, a very familiar face.

"Long time no see, dear sister," said Oscar Martino.

"Oscar!" Claire exclaimed.

Her eldest brother was the head of House Martino. No doubt he had employed his own magical powers to use the portal between Noston and Paffuto to teleport himself and his load of strange trinkets here.

He ran a hand over the enormously distracting wardrobe and told Claire with pride, "I received your letter. You said you needed a curio for your graduation thesis, yes? Quite a tall order, sister mine! Curios are few and far between in Noston, but even so, I was able to scrape together a few things that might suffice."

Words failed Claire. "I...thank you?"

Rather quick on the draw, wasn't he? And could he not have selected a handful of suitable items, rather than teleporting the entire contents of his search into her parlor?

Try as she might, Claire could not conceal her bewilderment.

Fortunately, Oscar was blissfully unaware. "Take this fine box, for example. It is an antique curio that played a noble role in a bygone chapter of Noston's history. I took the liberty of borrowing it from Prince Asbert's room."

"Asbert's?" she cried.

"But of course. Did you know it sends anything placed inside to a pocket dimension?"

Claire looked at her brother in horror. Had he really swiped one of the prince's personal possessions?

Upon second thought, perhaps this was not as unrealistic as she feared. Noston lacked for many magical artifacts, and as such, these objects tended to float upward into the hands of the royalty and aristocracy. And was it not Asbert who had requested Claire be treated as an honored guest in Paffuto? Perhaps he thought nothing of lending his wardrobe for his once fiancée and current friend, Claire. Oh, but what a headache!

That aside, if the wardrobe stored its contents in a pocket dimension, was it truly necessary for the exterior to be so, well, elephantine? Claire suppressed that thought—it was a little unkind to her distant ancestors' rulers—and turned to her brother.

"Oscar, I did indeed send you a letter describing my graduation woes. However, I do believe I said I was hoping for a suitable thesis subject. I don't recall ever writing 'please ransack the kingdom and bring me every magical artifact under the sun.' If you would be so kind as to remove these from my foyer—"

Oscar, not one to be refused, cut her off. "Oh, Claire, Claire. You must feel so ashamed, marrying into royalty out of a sorry family like ours. I think of the wretched stain that would have been upon our house if not for your intercession on our behalf, and I know I am a pitiful fool of an older brother. I want nothing more than to repay the debt by doing everything in my power for my dear little sister."

"Oh, Oscar," Claire murmured. She was almost moved by his kindness before she realized that way lay danger; she hurriedly shook her head. She was not about to fall for his tricks. Oscar could spin tales of worry for his sister all he liked, but she knew he was

possessed by the social climber's instinct. Once, he had plotted to wed Claire to Vik and Charlotte to Asbert—at the very same time! This show of affection, too, was no doubt a carefully calculated scheme to see Claire safely married to the Paffish prince.

Oscar realized he'd been had and pushed his glasses up his nose with his index finger. "Well, I'm sure you'll have no trouble on these examinations, given your studious self. Still, should you run into complications, know that I am here to provide help—and strengthen our ties with the Paffish royal family."

"My dear brother, you are saying the quiet part out loud."

The guilt and humility Oscar had displayed at Claire and Vik's engagement ceremony half a year prior had evidently gone out to lunch and never returned.

Claire eyed the rubbish pile once more. She had to giggle—and sigh*. It must have been quite an undertaking to hunt all these curios down within just a few days*, she reminded herself. *I'm sure I can find something in here that would make for a suitable thesis subject. Lady Lydia said the examiners demand rare and valuable artifacts, and well, what should be rarer than something from another kingdom altogether?*

"I had planned to ask Prince Vik for a suitable curio," she said, "but you've saved me the trouble. You're most kind, Oscar."

"I beg your pardon? You would have gone to the prince?"

"Oh yes. I haven't any family in Paffuto who might provide me with a curio of my own, you see. Had I failed to find one myself, I would have gone to the prince and most shamefully begged one from him. But with a veritable treasure trove to choose from, I needn't impose on his kindness. Now, which of these lovelies would be best...?"

"Wait! Claire. You had the right of it the first time. You simply must go to the prince and remind him of your connection to him—and his royal family. I'll send all this rubbish home at once."

"Oscar?"

(Oscar possessed the unique talent of ruining a nice thing with his social-climbing tendencies.)

Claire's instinctual intention was to pick the wardrobe wrenched

from His Highness's bedchambers, but before she could, a second His Highness remarked, "Seems like quite a ruckus for so early in the morning."

"Vik!" Claire exclaimed.

What was he doing here? At this hour, Vik should have been finishing breakfast, not appearing behind Oscar in Claire's foyer. Judging by the exasperated frown courtesy of Lui—Vik's guard for the day—this sudden appearance had not been on the prince's morning agenda.

"Your Highness," said Oscar, "it's an honor! How long has it been—I don't believe I've seen you since the ball? You have my endless gratitude for taking such good care of my sister."

"Well, I should think I would," Vik said. "Most men tend to take care of their fiancées. And Claire has done her fair share of brightening my life as well."

Claire started. She didn't think Oscar meant much of what he said—those were only formalities—but Vik's response undoubtedly came from the heart.

Oscar ate it up with a delighted nod, leaving it Lui's duty to butt in, annoyed. "Our dear prince has something he wishes to ask of Lord Oscar, never mind his *exceedingly busy* schedule this morning."

"You do?" Claire asked. She turned to Vik.

There were no lessons at the Academy today, but that made little difference for Vik's agenda. As a rule, he had no time to squander, doubly so when there were no classes. The already teetering stacks of paperwork had no doubt swelled to even more dizzying heights since his last brief sojourn at his office desk. Catching wind of Oscar's arrival was not difficult or time-consuming; Claire assumed Vik had simply checked the portal's records. Yet why had he forsaken his many duties just to come and see her brother?

With perfect nonchalance, Vik responded, "But of course. Why are you surprised?"

"Why shouldn't I be? Neglecting your duties to come see my brother is quite a surprising thing, Vik!" Claire's cheeks puffed with indignation. Vik was not the sort to poorly prioritize his obligations. This was inexplicable.

"Claire, you wouldn't be here if not for your family." Vik's expression was dead serious. "I should think it quite natural to want a good relationship with your brother."

The princely confidence sold it. Vik really did never change—he had expressed much the same sentiment back in Claire's first life via his attempts to be a part of her life even in his busiest moments. It warmed Claire's heart and provided her a much-needed source of comfort. She'd had nothing but butterflies in her stomach for days anticipating her debut at his upcoming investiture.

"Thank you, Vik," she said.

"But of course. Now, what's the deal with that giant box?"

"That would be Prince Asbert's wardrobe. My brother went *out of his way* to bring it to me."

"Huh? You mean, not as a joke?"

Vik's confident smile evaporated into a childish scowl (making Claire wonder if her newfound relief might have been misplaced).

Just then, Lui inquired, "What is this?"

Claire turned around to look. Lui held one of the objects crowding the foyer, a ceramic vessel of sorts. A small cabriole-leg incense burner, perhaps? Apart from the curious blue pattern marking the white exterior, the incense burner was entirely unassuming in appearance—but it gave off a faint hint of magic. It, too, was a curio.

Oscar turned to Lui with a beam. "I happened to come across it among our late grandmother's possessions. I believe she used it in her years of service as a holy woman."

"Intriguing." Lui turned to Claire. "Didn't you mention your grandmother had especially powerful magic? She purified a tornado several decades ago, if I recall."

"Yes, indeed. I am told she had silver magic," Claire said.

She sifted through her memories of her grandmother. Claire's grandmother had been a woman without peer; alas, she had passed away some time ago. According to Claire's Aunt Anne, a holy woman of Noston in her own right, Claire's grandmother was blessed with the same prophetic visions as Claire. One such oracular dream revealed Claire's broken engagement and fall from societal grace,

enabling her to help Claire thwart this doom. If not for that, Claire would never have been baptized in the proper location and subsequently made a home for herself in Paffuto.

Lui nodded in satisfaction at the word "silver," it being the most powerful form of magic in the world. "I see," she said. "It's faint, but I feel a trace of her power within this vessel."

"Of my grandmother's?"

"I should think so. I don't feel anyone else's, which suggests to me that your grandmother was the only person who ever used it. It must have been a special device indeed—one befitting a person with silver magic."

"Really? Do you mean to say no one but my grandmother *could* use it?"

Claire took the incense burner from Lui and scrutinized the unassuming little thing. *Hmm*, she thought. *I don't recall ever seeing my grandmother with this, but I feel a curious connection to it.* Had she seen it somewhere after all? Surely so. She searched her memories as far back as they would go, but alas, she found nothing. And if even Lui, who knew everything there was to know about magic, didn't recognize the purpose of such a device, Claire had little hope of knowing herself.

Yet for some odd reason, she couldn't shake the feeling there was more to this curious incense burner than met the eye.

Oscar returned home not long after, claiming some business to attend to in Noston. Unfortunately, despite Claire's wishes otherwise (was it really asking too much for him to take that wretched wardrobe?) the curios did not go with him.

"Don't be shy! Enjoy them all!" Oscar called on his way out the door, leaving her with a pile of magical artifacts and a beaming smile.

Claire's own smile was a fair bit more restrained. She appreciated the thought, but really, whatever was she to do with this assortment of magical knickknacks? After much deliberation, she opted to stow them all in the wardrobe.

That evening, Claire dimmed the lights save for the lamp beside

her bedside table and climbed under the covers. Her grandmother's ceramic incense burner occupied the place of honor on said table; it was the only one of its fellows to escape being stuffed in the wardrobe.

"Lui was right," Claire murmured to herself. "I can feel a faint hint of magic too. I suppose it must belong to my grandmother."

Claire was but a very young child when her grandmother had passed away. She hadn't been blessed with magical powers herself at the time, so she had no recollection of what her relative's magic felt like. Still, sensing the old remnant of those powers now brought her grandmother's familiar face to mind.

Mulling over memories, she reached for the incense burner and held it carefully in both hands lest it fall. She turned it around to have a closer look at it. Her eyes traced the blue pattern on the white ceramic and lingered on the speckles of bright color provided by small fragments of stone. It was a beautiful artifact that could easily have made a fine addition to any room's interior decor. Perhaps it had sat in Claire's grandmother's bedroom just as it lived in Claire's now. Claire couldn't explain where that flash of intuition had come from, but something in her heart told her it must be right.

"What is your purpose, little curio?" she asked it. "How do I use you?"

It was so gradual she failed to notice—but the curio was sucking magic from her hand! She started in alarm and reflexively yanked her hands back. The artifact tumbled onto the bedsheets; Claire scrambled for it—"Don't break!"—and snatched it up again.

"Oh, thank goodness," she sighed. "That gave me a fright." Once she confirmed that the heirloom hadn't suffered a scratch, she carefully placed it back on her bedside table. "Perhaps I was just imagining things. It may not have taken my magic after all."

Still, she kept a wary eye on it, just to make sure it didn't perform any odd magical transformations. It didn't. It sat there and looked very much like an incense burner should.

Claire ran a hand over it. The hard porcelain was cold to the touch.

She smiled. *My grandmother once held you and used you in the*

same way, she thought. *You bring back such fond memories of her. Between this and Oscar's surprise visit, why, today has been nothing but happy moments with my family. I'm sure I'll have the sweetest of sleep and pleasant dreams.*

Unfortunately, fate had other plans.



Claire awoke in a pitch-black space, facing something rather like a cinema screen. She looked down and found herself lying on something soft—she *thought* it was a bed, but it was difficult to be certain. She appeared to be in some sort of dark room.

There was something white and shining above her, floating suspended in the darkness. *What is that?* she wondered. She peered at the object and was just able to make out that it was her curio. The white light that shone from it projected an image on the wall in front of Claire.

Claire's world contained no such video technology. Some of her wires must have gotten crossed with someone else's, she decided, as she turned to face the screen.

The projection showed a comely young lady with blonde waves of hair and eyes of a deep, striking indigo blue. She wore a uniform Claire hadn't seen before, but the other young people about her were all Claire's schoolmates. This suggested the mystery girl was another of Claire's peers, and yet she was a total stranger to Claire. Who could she possibly be?

As if in response to Claire's question, a strident voice—the girl's?—played from the projection. "Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. Might I introduce myself? I am Beatrice, hailing from the Ignicean Empire."

Ignice? Claire thought. *From across the sea?*

No sooner did the question cross her mind than Beatrice's image grew blurry and warped, as if obscured by an ever-growing black fog. What was happening to the picture? Claire squinted, trying to make it out, but Beatrice only vanished from sight.

The scene reformed moments later, in a grand library of whitest marble. Everything from the walls to the bookshelves was white as snow, lending the cavernous hall a most magnificent grandeur. The domed glass ceiling was so high one could be forgiven for assuming it was simply not there. If Claire craned her neck, she could make out the clear blue sky above, but the glare was so bright that her poor night-blind eyes had to squint.

Where is this? she wondered. *I've never seen this library in my life.*

Presently, a familiar voice interrupted her trying to make sense of the scene.

"Here it is, Claire. This is what you were looking for, is it not?"

"Co-lor me sur-prised. Gil-bert has his mo-ments af-ter all."

"Oh, shut it, you beastly bird. I'm just as much of a scholar as Miss Claire here! I'm perfectly capable of hunting through a few archives."

"Ah, look at you. Work-ing hard in the hopes Sir Lu-i even-tu-al-ly no-tic-es your charms. Brings a tear to one's eye. You *do* know she turned you down?"

Yes, Claire decided. The inane bickerers off-screen were undoubtedly Gilbert and Pooh. The content of the exchange aside, the third party to the conversation was evidently Claire—not the Claire lying on the bed watching the "film," of course. There must have been another Claire off-screen too.

Of all people, what possessed me to dream of Prince Gilbert? Claire wondered. Gilbert was not an individual who occupied much of Claire's thoughts, save for when she received the occasional letter from him begging her to put in a good word with Lui.

I wonder if that was *whatever I was looking for*, she thought, turning her attention back to the screen. *What could I have been searching for in the first place?*

Naturally, the individuals within the projection paid no heed to her curiosity.

"I must say, Claire, I'm impressed," came Gilbert's voice from somewhere just out of sight. "You're still researching curios after you finished your thesis? I could never. I lost all my drive the moment we

dodged that dreadful bad end." (Here, Pooh put in, "You nev-er had drive to be-gin with.") "Frankly, some part of me wishes I could forget I ever learned the truth about this world we live in. I respect you, Claire, I really do."

The off-screen Claire made some response that was too quiet for on-the-bed Claire to hear. She only caught Gilbert's reply of, "Yes, I suppose this is nothing more than dodging another bad end." Muffled mumbling. "But it's just—" More mumbling. "And it might pull in Lupty, you know. I simply pray everything works out in the end."

I missed half of that, Claire thought. *What's all this talk about avoiding bad endings?*

But Claire was not to find out, as the view changed again—this time, to an image of the incense burner with light pouring out of its top. Then, with a cacophonous crash, the ceramic artifact shattered into hundreds of little pieces all over the floor. The camera craned up to show a girl standing just above the broken bits of crockery. Blonde hair, indigo eyes—it was Beatrice. Her face was pale, expressionless. A drop of blood oozed from one finger. Had she picked up a shard of the broken incense burner, perhaps?

"This wretched thing is better off gone," Beatrice hissed. "What good is a curio no one else can use? Is this not the very thing that is leading us to war? We're all better off without it. That's precisely why I smashed it."

Claire, off-screen, said something, but on-the-bed Claire once again failed to catch any of it.

Beatrice's response, however, came through crystal clear. "Your lady grandmother is dead, Claire. If you can use it, it must be yours. Oh, it makes no difference—the thing is broken anyway. Say goodbye to your little prognostication abilities."

The vitriol in Beatrice's voice, more than anything else, sent a chill running down Claire's spine. The soulless cast of Beatrice's vacant eyes made for a disquieting dichotomy with the violence of the shattered curio. When a black haze burbled out of Beatrice's hand and began to occlude the image of her spiteful grin, Claire's

heart filled with dread.

But just then, Vik appeared without warning and grabbed Beatrice's hand, snapping Claire out of her terror. Her breath caught in her throat. Vik's eyes blazed with a cold fire unlike any Claire had ever seen in him.

"Whose orders are you acting on, Beatrice Bazelaire? The emperor's? Or—"

Claire strained her ears but failed to catch the word.

"Return the—"

And again.

"—at once."

Return the what? she wondered in vain. *I couldn't make it out in the slightest!*

She caught one further sound bite of Vik's harsh tone, but then the scene was whisked away to be replaced with another. So enraptured was she in the previous conversation, her eyes boggled as she tried to take stock of the new—new— What was she looking at? It was a large, open space, to be sure: a plaza. The ground was aswirl with puffs of sand; the sun overhead beat down incessantly. Her throat burned with the sudden dusty heat. Four off-white, closer to tawny ocher, walls ringed the plaza—no, a castle square in some far-off land, she decided—she found herself looking upon. The place was ominously silent. Sand gusted across the camera lens at periodic intervals, but save for that, there was little and less to look at.

Is there no one around? she thought, and as if on cue, the scene shifted again.

She now stared down a long, somber table in a red-carpeted council room at which a handful of monarchs sat in full formal dress. The tension in the air was palpable. Judging by the variations in attire, Claire deemed there was more than one kingdom represented at this table.

This is no meeting of a single royal family, she thought, *but kings and princes from across the land. Whatever could be happening? What is this scene showing me?*

Unsettled, she clasped her hands before her chest.

The camera zoomed in on a familiar figure—Vik! Lui and Denis stood just behind him, their expressions unreadable. Vik's seat neighbor was Asbert, and Asbert's own guard knight, Salomon, fixed the center of the room with a fierce glare.

The silence was broken by an ominous pronouncement in a foreign tongue: *With no further ado, let the negotiations for peace begin.*

Negotiations for peace? Claire repeated to herself. She felt like she had been doused in cold water. A peace conference—as in, negotiations following a war? But if that were so, then why weren't the kings of Noston and Paffuto in attendance? Why only their sons?

Perhaps it was merely a dream. Perhaps Claire's fantasies were running away from her as a consequence of a recent respite from finishing lessons. Yes, she told herself. That must have been it.

She attempted to console herself but was soon distracted by Vik and Asbert once more. Upon second glance, the pair looked rather more grown-up than Claire knew them to be. The maturity might have been a mere consequence of age, but Claire did not think so. It was not the weight of years that bowed their shoulders but life-sapping, world-weary fatigue. She wished she could have said their eyes held the fierce determination of youth; alas, she could not. Their eyes were defeated—depressed, sunken caverns—and it turned her heart to ice.

What am I seeing? she thought. *What is this?*

Warning bells pealed in her head. Just as she forced apart her trembling lips, the vision winked out and was replaced with another.

This scene was a far cry from the last—for it showed the Noston Royal Aristocratic Academy. The Academy should have stirred up feelings of warmth in Claire's breast, but something did not seem right. It simply did not feel real. It was rather as if she were viewing a static image in place of the real Academy.

Just then, two cheerful, feminine voices played over the oddly still scene.

"Did you find the incense burner from Claire's granny?"

"Nope. Not yet."

"Okay. Skip the main story and come back once you have it. You should play the side story chapters instead! You have a random chance of receiving the incense burner there. Isn't it wild how some key items only pop up in the tutorials or opening chapters of the side stories?"

"Totally. What were the developers thinking? If I don't get that incense burner, am I screwed?"

"So screwed. Spoiler alert—there's this *huge* war, and depending on what route you're on, the protag's country can get pulled into it. It tanks your playthrough every time. You have to get the incense burner no matter what."

A war, my grandmother's incense burner, and more bad endings. Claire's mind reeled. *What is going on?*

The conversation was reminiscent of those overheard when she used up all her magic, but she had done no such thing this evening. Even more puzzlingly, she was not a part of the conversation. She was granted only the audio and the static screen.

Is my incense burner the same "key item" they mentioned? Claire wondered, trying to make heads or tails of it all. *Then, my grandmother's curio is nothing but an item in the game?*

The image blurred and the voices faded away while her thoughts still raced. The last thing she caught was a final fragment of speech: "It lets the protagonist see the future—Claire with her cheat-code items strikes again. No wonder all that fighting breaks out over it. Anything that powerful is bound to be dangerous in the wrong hands."

A chill ran down Claire's spine. *What am I hearing?* she thought. *This feels too real to be a dream. This must be related to the peace negotiations!*

The screen winked out and the curio, the only source of light in the surrounding darkness, soared to Claire's hand. Her head was awhirl with confusion. It was almost like the artifact was begging her to touch it. She reached for it, and the motion brought her mother's bracelet into view.

Oh! she thought. *The point of connection.*

She'd last encountered the term prior to Asbert's graduation. Her mother's bracelet was, in truth, a magical treasure of the kingdom of Lindel, an icon of blessing, whose function was to eliminate these so-called "points of connection."

Could it do the same here? Could it breach the barrier between Claire and the world on the other side of the light screen?

Thinking better of it, she withdrew her hand, and that moment—everything turned white. The plush bedding firmed up beneath her, gravity weighed her down, she—

She woke up. For it was morning.

Sophie opened the curtains to let in a ray of bright sunlight. "Good morning, Miss Claire," she said.

Claire's mumbled "Good morning" was as thick as her muzzy head felt.

I had the strangest dream, she thought. *It wasn't like any other I've ever had. I wasn't in it, and there was precious little I could do save observe the goings-on. No dream...*

No dream had ever felt as real. No dream had ever left her so sluggish, so drained—almost as if she'd used a great deal of magic—just moments after waking. Claire was blessed with bountiful magic, heaps of magic, really. She never felt spent after casting spells short of teleporting herself to the next kingdom over. Why, then, did she feel so oddly fatigued?

There's no call for that, she thought, *especially after a good night's rest. Curious.*



Exhausted as she was, she forced herself to sit up. She eyed the incense burner on her bedside table. It was right where she had left it, and it appeared perfectly unchanged—save for one thing.

"Why is there smoke coming out of it?" she asked.

For indeed, there was a thin, curiously rainbow-colored plume of smoke wafting from its tip. *That* was certainly not there earlier. Claire could not recall having lit the burner, but evidently someone had. Who? Claire had not the foggiest notion.

She left her bedroom in pursuit of answers. "Sophie, did you or anyone else happen to burn incense while I was asleep?"

"Oh no, Miss Claire. I haven't touched the stuff, and no one else went into your chambers while you were sleeping."

"Interesting. Thank you."

Well, that was that.

But I mustn't forget that it's magic, Claire reminded herself. *A magic tool my grandmother once used.* Why, last night, it almost felt like it had absorbed her magic at the touch. The idea nagged at her, and soon her shaky hunch solidified to firm conviction.

"What if this were not an ordinary curio?" she said. "What if it casts special spells and only my grandmother could use it?"

Curios—magical tools—were quite useful devices. Some modulated a spellcaster's magical powers, while others augmented the strength of certain spells. They could be, and often were, a boon to the lives of common folk not blessed with magical powers themselves. *I've never heard of a curio that casts spells without the input of its owner, but I shouldn't think it impossible*, Claire thought. Perhaps the burner had cast one such spell last night as she lay unawares, manifesting as that odd dream that had left her drained of magic upon waking. *I can't fathom what purpose that would serve, but I highly suspect I'm right.*

Being right came with a whole host of its own anxieties. Claire could not forget what her Aunt Anne had once said: her grandmother had been blessed with visions.

"Which suggests that everything I saw will come true..." Claire whispered. Her words floated up and away on the dwindling plume of smoke.

The mysterious girl shrouded in a black haze, Claire's prince sterner than she'd ever known him, the bone-chilling snippets of conversation, the peace council, the girls claiming the incense burner was a key item—were these all visions?

"Something is coming," Claire said. "Something that threatens to destroy my happiness again."

It couldn't be true. It just couldn't. The very words made her shiver.

At length, she rallied herself. *It won't do me any good wringing my hands over it*, she told herself. *First things first, I'd best learn all I can about this Lady Beatrice of Ignice. Let's save the fretting for once we know she even exists.*

The dream still clung to her as Claire rose from bed, but so too did a sense of determination.

Claire rushed straight to Vik's office and demanded the moment she crossed the threshold, "Vik, do you happen to know a Lady Beatrice Bazelaire of the Ignicean Empire?"

Vik looked up from his tedious paperwork. "...Oh no. Why do you ask?"

She hadn't expected such a ready answer. Her heart sank. "I heard a bit of a rumor is all." She paused and shifted tack. "I take it you two are acquainted."

"In vague terms," Vik admitted. "She's the youngest of the emperor's daughters, although that wasn't public knowledge until a few years back. Long story, I suppose. I've never met her myself, but I recognize her name from formal relations we've held with the emperor."

"That would make her a princess, then?"

So, Beatrice not only existed but could prove to be a powerful enemy. This new information only unsettled Claire further. *So far, my dream is proving true*, she thought with dread. *I imagine she and I will be seeing all too much of each other soon...*

Claire's friends were blissfully unaware that they lived in a fantasy story. They understood that Claire had rewound time to save them all, but they fancied this was through some sort of spell. The terms

"save data" and "dating sims" were nonsense to them. Only Gilbert, the second-eldest Prince of Lupty, shared Claire's understanding of the world.

They all think I possess time travel powers, she thought. *Alas, I most certainly don't. And until I explain the situation in more detail, I can't share these potential visions of mine.*

That was certainly not a pleasant thought.

Vik eyed Claire with curiosity. "What sort of rumor did you hear, anyway?"

"Oh, nothing of any importance." She knew she was being vague, but how could she ever tell Vik she'd *dreamed* about the girl? What a preposterous notion.

But Vik knew more than he let on. "She comes from an interesting background, Beatrice does," he said. "She's of the emperor's blood, but her mother is a commoner. The crown only recognized her as a legitimate child after she turned fifteen. It was at her baptism they discovered she had special magical powers only found in the imperial bloodline, and next thing she knew, she was being called to court."

"What magical powers are these?" Claire asked. "Are they something like Dion's Collective Magic curse?"

"Exactly. She has a rare curse that rears its head every few generations in the imperial bloodline."

The edge in Vik's voice convinced Claire more than ever that Beatrice was trouble. "What kind of curse are we talking about?"

Vik almost didn't want to answer. Finally, he admitted, "She swaps bodies with other people."

Claire started in alarm. She couldn't have guessed that had she tried.

"I hear the curse lifts on its own within a few days," Vik went on, "unless the other fellow breaks it first. It's a lucky thing she has a low magic color. Any court mage worth their salt can stop her curse in its tracks with a good ward."

"I've never heard of such a spell." The description alone was startling, but the scowl Vik had leveled at Beatrice in Claire's dream was even more frightening. *I can only imagine what havoc Princess*

Beatrice could wreak were she to take over the wrong person's body. And if she weren't caught? Why, that would be terrifying! I shudder to think what would happen if she should make an enemy of Paffuto.

Vik mistook Claire's sudden silence for personal fear and hastened to soothe her. "It isn't so bad as all that. Should you ever cross paths, you'll be just fine. Dion's curse rebounded right off you, didn't it? And besides, we all have the very best wards in Paffuto. There's nothing to worry about."

Dion, who up until this point had been a silent listener, chimed in. "Rebounded? Claire, you turned my curse right back on me. Your wards are almost *too* strong."

He returned to his paperwork with a smile, but Claire's consternations were not so easily assuaged. Now that she understood the purpose of the incense burner, she felt rooted to the spot.

Princess Beatrice is real, she thought. *These visions of mine must be like my grandmother's visions—not prognostications we can control at will but random snippets of what is to come.*

Which only served to raise further concerns! The vision suggested Beatrice Bazelaire would enter Claire's life in all too short of a time, ill portents in tow: the black haze, the broken incense burner, a fury in Vik's eyes unlike any Claire had known. *Of course he would be upset if someone broke a keepsake of my dear family member*, she thought, *but I can't imagine it would evoke such rage in him.* Surely he was upset over more than a little broken crockery. Only a threat to one of his loved ones could've produced such a gripping anger.

And I mustn't forget those half-heard conversations, nor all that talk of peace negotiations and world wars. "There's this huge *war, and depending on what route you're on, the protag's country can get pulled into it"—whatever was that about?*

Claire shivered. She felt dreadful.

Grandmother saved me once, she thought, *by begging Salomon to escort me to Asbert's graduation gala. Now it is my turn to be like her and save all those I hold dear.*

A tall order, that. However was Claire to accomplish it?

Vik lapsed into a thoughtful silence alongside her. "Being as it's

such a big to-do," he eventually said, "I imagine Princess Beatrice will be invited to my investiture next spring."

It took great effort of will for Claire to feign calm. "Ah, have we already sent her an invitation? I don't recall seeing her name on the guest list."

Sending the invitations was one of several duties Claire had taken on in the lead-up to the momentous event.

At length, Vik responded, "Well, yes. I suppose she's on there somewhere."

Claire cocked her head in confusion. Why was Vik giving her the runaround? Surely he wouldn't have procrastinated on sending an invitation to an imperial princess. That left only one other option...

"I see," Claire said, not unsympathetically. "You haven't decided whether to invite her for fear of her curse, is it? I could imagine there would be backlash were she to attend a function with so many important dignitaries from all over the world."

Vik grimaced in wretched discomfort. "Yes, well." He paused. "Yes. The fact of the matter is, I haven't got around to deciding yet."

Lui was not impressed with his lack of answer. "How very *noble* of you, my prince," she teased.

"Hush, you."

"You see, Claire"—paying Vik no mind, Lui continued—"Princess Beatrice is an avid letter writer to our good Vik. *Very* avid. He's chosen to send out her invitation at the last possible moment propriety will allow. We don't want to get on the princess's bad side, but neither do we wish to field a tedious flood of correspondence in the lead-up to the ceremony. And by we"—here Lui's voice dropped to one of ill-concealed rage—"I mean I."

Claire could do little else but blink in surprise. "I beg your pardon?" she finally managed.

"To his credit, Vik has mentioned that he has already chosen a fiancée. However, for all that the news made Princess Beatrice lose heart, I'm afraid it did not break her letter-writing spirit. He can hardly tell her to quit badgering him, alas. It'd be sure to upset her."

"I-I would certainly think so," Claire stammered. "I see."

There was little else she could say. She understood both sides of

the tricky equation, perhaps all too well. The expression on Lui's face made no secret of the terrible nuisance Beatrice posed, and in the sympathy she felt for her friend, Claire all but forgot what had alarmed her just moments earlier.

"The investiture can't come soon enough," Lui finished. "Once Claire is presented formally, I will finally be free of these dreadful letters."

"I'm terribly sorry, Lui," Vik said. It was perhaps not appropriate for someone of his station to grovel before a retainer, but that did not stop him in the least.

Nor did propriety prevent Lui from shooting him one final glare before making a show of opening one of her desk drawers. Letters bulged out of it in every direction. Given the recent conversation, Claire could only imagine a single letter-writing culprit. Beatrice, Claire realized, lacked the ability to take a hint. Switching her correspondent to a retainer in place of her prince did little to assuage her habit of sending three letters for his every one. Lui was a perfect gentleman to ladies as a rule, but her patience had clearly worn thin.

"We received this one"—she lifted the offending letter as she spoke—"and this one, and this one, and this one, and this one all within the same month. She sends them even when we don't write back. We cannot snub an imperial princess, much as we might like to, so I shall reply to them all—eventually. All five of them. Such is my duty."

"Lui, *please*," Vik groaned. He studiously looked everywhere but at her.

Claire stepped in to save her floundering prince and took the letters from Lui. The handwriting on the envelopes was immaculate, to be sure. The salutation was likewise as charming and ladylike as any critic might have wished. Was this really the Beatrice from Claire's dream?

Mightn't I be allowed to read these letters? Claire thought. It would no doubt incense Beatrice, which was why Claire contented herself with one quick glance at the top letter before sliding it back into its envelope—or she would have, if not for the curious mark that

caught her eye. *What is that?*

Beatrice's signature was adorned with an intricate crest of a hawk. Most letters ended with signatures only, or else perhaps a seal with the—in this case, imperial princess's—coat of arms. *Rather manly for a lady's crest*, Claire thought.

It arrested Claire's attention; alas for Vik, there was no stopping Lui on the warpath. "If we receive one more blasted letter after your investiture, so help me, I'll hex—"

"Enough, Lui, enough! I know you're upset," wailed poor overwhelmed Vik.

Beatrice's correspondence must have been a formidable trial indeed. Claire knew Lui meant the threat in jest, but from the look in her eyes, she was one straw on her proverbial camel's back away from taking it seriously. (Vik, perhaps, ought to have remembered that the ringleaders of coup d'états were too oft one's own retainers. A dangerous thing, a retainer.)

There was nothing for it but for Claire to step in. "Lui, if it's quite all right, I'll write to Princess Beatrice and invite her myself."

"That would be lovely of you. Would you be so kind as to sign it and say it's from you?"

"I'm afraid I couldn't."

"A shame."

Why, I think she rather means that! Claire realized with alarm.

Lui's letter-writing woes aside, Claire opted to make herself a game plan for Beatrice. She would give the princess a wide berth and never, ever leave her grandmother's curio in the other girl's possession.

If only that were the end of it. But glassy-eyed Vik spoke up once more. "Incidentally, I did have something to tell you about Princess Beatrice—oh, but it doesn't matter now."

"No, don't say that," Claire responded. "What was it?"

"Did you know she attends the Academy too? Not the one in the capital. She boards—and writes letters, evidently—at a school in the southern provinces."

"Oh my."

Evidently, Beatrice Bazelaire was not to be tucked away in a far-

off kingdom and ushered onto Claire's life's stage purely for state ceremonies. And as if that weren't surprising enough, Vik added, "Princess Beatrice is in her third year of school, like us. She'll be sitting the graduation exam alongside us. The retreat is several weeks long, so we're bound to cross paths at least once."

Claire started.

"Our wards should be strong enough to repel her curse, but I'm sure I don't need to tell you to keep your distance. I want to take precautions, seeing as you're already hearing rumors about her."

If the incense burner's prediction was right, then Claire would meet Beatrice during the exams. The memory of the black haze made Claire shudder once more. *Her curse worries me*, she thought, *but my biggest fear is the scene in that dream coming true.*

She vowed to have as little to do with Beatrice Bazelaire as possible. Unfortunately, as luck would have it, this proved not to be so simple a task.

Chapter 20

The trees lining the capital's boulevards blushed a deeper crimson with every passing week. Drifts of leaves carpeted the roadways in burgundy, and a chill crept into the air with such little fanfare that by the time it was noticed, autumn was truly here to stay.

Claire's visions occurred in the first forays of autumn and set an unsettling tone for the busy season. Nevertheless, she pushed past her unease and filled her days with cramming for the exams that were just around the corner.

Soon, the eventful day arrived. Claire and her classmates rode half a day's journey by carriage to a nearby town and the lodge which would be home to the Academy's pupils for the duration of the exam.

Their accommodations were not as rustic as the term "lodge" might suggest, for an old manor had been renovated and outfitted to serve the Academy's purposes. Now, it was such a splendid place to stay it rivaled a nobleman's holiday villa. Ancient walls of stone ringed the marble buildings, courtyards, and charming garden of autumn-blooming roses. Unlike the royal palace in Wurtz, it looked like something out of a fairy tale. Why, there was no better place for a group of young lords and ladies to spend a holiday.

What a gorgeous manor, Claire marveled. *I quite understand Lydia's excitement now.*

Her classmates shared similar opinions; there was a palpable sense of excitement among the student body as they spilled onto the grounds.

Claire, too, allowed herself to be swept up in the holiday levity and the manor's charms while she set off for her first day of lectures. She found a seat in the lecture hall that was to host their orientation and admired her spacious surroundings.

"Good morning, Claire," said Lui. "You look quite fetching in that

uniform."

"Why, thank you."

The uniform in question was not the Royal Academy's standard attire for young ladies; those sitting exams were outfitted with a special wardrobe. *The professors told us each uniform is charmed with a fixed-strength ward*, Claire recalled. *Whatever is that about?*

Wards were, in everyday circumstances, at the sole discretion of the pupil. Claire, being a powerful mage in her own right, cast her own wards, but those lacking her talents enlisted the help of dedicated mages. Vik's nigh-impregnable wards were typically Lui's doing, although Claire had been known to cast them from time to time. The truly foolhardy might not even have had any wards at all, but no pupil of the Royal Academy would ever be so negligent—hence the lack of need for warded school uniforms. Perhaps it was only tradition to outfit the whole student body for the graduation exams. As a sort of good luck charm, say.

I'd prefer to think of it that way, Claire told herself. *It certainly makes these prospects less daunting.*

Apart from the wards, the new uniforms were unique in several other aspects of their design. For the ladies, an aqua satin ribbon sat snugly about the collar of the white blazer. A skirt, one panel matching the ribbon's aqua blue, was much like the usual Academy frock, if a bit shorter. *This sort of design must be popular in that "other" world*, Claire supposed.

The ruminations on her clothing did little to allay her growing fidgety feeling. Looking around, she wasn't the only one with a case of nerves. Her classmates were no more accustomed to the new design than she was, and judging by their behavior, most weren't entirely taken with it.

Vik came up behind Lui. "This camp has attendees from all the Academies around the kingdom," he explained. "The faculty suggests new uniforms—well, they standardize our wards, for one—break down barriers between us, letting us rub shoulders and cooperate on research in the scant few weeks we have to work with."

"My, how interesting," said Claire. "We never wore uniforms back in Noston. I had no idea such thought was put into their choosing."

"Speaking of interesting, get a load of these two." Vik nodded with a mischievous grin at the two knights flanking him.

Yes, interesting was a good word for it, wasn't it? After all, Lui and Denis certainly weren't graduating pupils. However, as the exams would last several weeks, it had been deemed only appropriate that Vik be granted a guard as a special exception to the rules.

"Talk about a blast from the past, having to wear these uniforms again. I just hope they don't make me sit the exams a second time!" Denis joked.

"I wouldn't mind having another go at it," Lui said. "We'd see who would get the better marks *this* time. I shan't go easy on you, you know."

"Are you still going on about that? You know it was a fluke that I scored better than you. Just forget about it."

"Shan't."

Lui and Denis were outfitted in the same white uniforms as Claire and Vik, allowing them to blend in with the rest of the student body.

"You both look dashing in your old uniforms," Claire told them. "Why, if I didn't know better, I would've thought you were fellow students. I'm sure the pupils from the other Academies won't bat an eye either."

The heartfelt tone in Claire's praise brought proud smiles to both knights' faces. "Me, dashing? But of course," said Denis.

"I should hope so," Lui added.

It had been two years since they had sat and passed their exams, and Claire could picture what that experience must have been like from the easy banter they traded. Sharing her lessons with these two new "classmates" made everything seem fresh and exciting.

Two? That wasn't right. Claire looked around. "Where is Keith?" she asked. "Did he not come?"

"Oh, he's too old to be stuffed into a uniform." Vik, seeing the look of reproach on Claire's face, hurried on. "I was kidding. Actually, he was asked to fill in for another division of the knights while I'm away from the palace. It's a bit overkill to have three knights on such a security-conscious retreat. And it's only for a short time. I

have no qualms about lending him out."

"Oh."

"He did want to come with us, mind you. He seemed rather put out that he couldn't."

Vik's tone was casual, but his facial expression was anything but. Vik was a compassionate soul, and his heart went out to his older friend. Vik's retainers were some of the finest knights in the kingdom (even if their shenanigans might've led one to believe otherwise). *There's always someone ready to snap them up at the slightest opening in their schedules*, Claire thought. So while she missed Keith, she accepted his absence readily enough.

"We'll simply have to bring him lots of souvenirs," she said.

"That we will."

She and Vik shared a smile. With Lui, Denis, Dion, and Lydia there to watch out for the two of them, they would be fine.

Claire looked out over the sea of white-uniform-clad, chattering students and let her thoughts begin to run. *This is the same uniform Princess Beatrice wore in my dream, but I don't see her anyway. I've kept a careful eye out for her; I should think I'd recognize her if I saw her. Perhaps she isn't here after all.*

Considering that she was from abroad, could Princess Beatrice have forgone sitting the exams? If so, then Claire had no chance of encountering her or any of the subsequent worrisome things in her visions. Perhaps in the days since she'd had her dream, she'd done something to change the future.

Now there was a reassuring thought. Claire allowed herself to relax just in time to catch a snatch of familiar conversation.

"Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. Might I introduce myself? I am Beatrice, hailing from the Ignicean Empire."

Claire's shoulders twitched. *I know that voice!* she thought. Those strident tones felt all too familiar. She turned her head to see—yes, that was indeed the very same girl from her dream.

Beatrice's long blonde hair fell to her waist and shivered with every step she took. Her eyes were a deep, kindly-seeming indigo—but they were trained directly on Claire. She may have looked rather more plebeian than one might have expected of an imperial

princess, it was true. Yet from tip to toe, from her friendly smile to the bow tied at her breast, she was undoubtedly the imposing princess from Claire's visions.

She now directed that same smile at a certain member of Claire's party. "My name is Beatrice Bazelaire, as it pleases Your Highness. Why, I haven't seen you since your baptismal ball! Have you had a chance to read the book I recommended to you in my latest letter? You've no idea how long I've looked forward to discussing it with you!"

Claire wasn't sure what to make of this girl, nor how best to approach her. She couldn't possibly show discourtesy to an imperial princess, but she likewise wasn't eager to be too sociable for fear of causing her frightening vision to come true. Perhaps it was best to exchange greetings and no more, Claire decided.

Yet Beatrice paid anxious Claire and the retainers no heed. She had eyes (and words—many of those!) only for Vik.

Why, it's like we're invisible! Claire thought.

Most of the student body was loath to simply strike up a conversation with their prince; the pupils from the provincial Academies especially gave Claire's group a wide berth. It rather surprised her, then, that a complete stranger could approach Vik on such friendly terms.

Vik, being Vik, was not perturbed. He snapped on his most charming smile reserved for formal occasions and, in the crisp tones of his prince persona, said, "Well met, Princess Beatrice. I hear you're studying in Paffuto now? Then you must be finishing your course of studies along with the rest of us."

Beatrice was taken aback for the briefest of moments—Vik had completely refused to entertain her attempts at familiar conversation. However, she soon assumed her bright smile once more. "Indeed I am. I must admit, I came here in the hopes I'd have an opportunity to see you. But enough of all that! Thank you for your lovely letter the other day. I was just thrilled to be invited to your investiture."

There was a distinctly Lui-sounding tongue click and mutter of "Don't read too much into it, Princess," behind Claire; thankfully,

Beatrice remained blissfully unaware of it.

Her eyes unglued from Vik for the first time since she had stepped into the room, and she turned to his companions. "Oh, I'm so sorry! I'm afraid I was just too excited to see Prince Vik that I quite forgot to tell you about myself. As a member of the Ignicean imperial family, I am in the possession of a rather unique curse. You mustn't be frightened, though! I cannot do a thing to anyone with proper wards. Well, now! That's done. I suppose we'll all be spending a lot of time with each other the next few weeks. Do let us be the best of friends."

Claire found Beatrice's habit of barreling through her speech to arrive at the end flushed and breathless rather endearing in a childish sort of way, but she was reluctant to welcome the girl from her vision with open arms. She settled on a rather inoffensive response instead. "It's lovely to make your acquaintance, Princess Beatrice. I don't believe we've met. I'm Claire Martino, your fellow pupil far from home, at your service."

"My, my! Then you come from abroad, just like me?" Beatrice's smile was dazzlingly bright.

"That is correct. I was born and raised in Noston."

"You lucky dear! I would've done anything to be Vik's school friend. If it wasn't for my curse, I might've enrolled in Wurtz's branch of the Academy. Isn't it such a shame?"

Beatrice did indeed look crestfallen, making Claire blink in surprise. *My goodness*, she thought. Vik and Lui had no love for Beatrice (the glut of letters was to blame); they were downright curt with her. Claire did not have a dog in *that* fight, but Beatrice's assertive approach to conversation was, perhaps, a tad overwhelming.

"Well," Claire said diplomatically, "I'm sure we shan't see much of each other after graduation, but I look forward to running into you here and there over the next few weeks."

"Likewise, my dear! Oh, I'm just beside myself knowing I can count you as one of my darling friends."

To stave off Beatrice noticing her mounting bafflement, Claire offered a hand, which Beatrice, all smiles, clasped.

I don't see so much as a trace of that black haze from my dream, Claire thought. *Perhaps it will come into play somewhere later down the line.*

While Claire had little and less idea how to handle Beatrice's personality, her spirits did rise a fraction. There was a glimmer of hope that everything might turn out all right.

Which was precisely when she felt something snap.

Hm? Claire thought. Something, something very slight, felt wrong. Then she realized what it was, and her eyes shot wide open in shock. The ward on her palm had just activated! *But whatever for?* she wondered.

Wards were basic defensive spells. Anyone with an aptitude for magic could cast them, although one's magic color and magical proficiency determined the potency of the spell. Claire's own wards in her period of social disgrace had been little more than cantrips, but now her wards could repel even the direst threats. Small dangers never broke her wards, but at sufficient degrees of deadliness, she would be sore pressed to fix the wounded ward.

The ward that had just activated had merely cracked, she judged. Nothing had broken the protective cocoon of magic enshrouding her. Yet even that in itself was surpassingly odd. She had applied wards of her own over the uniform's wards, thus enfolding herself in a double layer of protection. It was her own ward that had activated, one she had made sensitive to twinges of even the slightest danger.

With Paffuto being such a bastion of safety, my wards hardly ever react, she thought. *It's almost as if Princess Beatrice tried to cast a spell on me. Yet I can't reconcile that with her friendly behavior!*

"Lady Claire?" Beatrice asked, giving Claire a genuinely puzzled look. If anything, she seemed concerned for her suddenly stiffening companion. "Is something the matter?"

"No, forgive me," Claire said. "It was nothing."

Claire could feel Lui's perceptive eyes on her. "Claire," Lui whispered, shooting her a meaningful look. "Let's talk later."

Which she wouldn't say unless there was danger afoot, Claire thought. She nodded.

Presently, Vik cut in. "Princess Beatrice, might I have a word?"

“Oh? Yes, of course.”

Her eyes widened in pleasant surprise, yet Vik’s tone held no warmth for her. “I think it’s best you know that Claire wrote your invitation to the investiture.”



"Beg pardon?" Beatrice seemed not to grasp the implication.

Vik was too ruthless to let her confusion slide. He continued: "That is to say, Lady Claire Martino is my bride-to-be. We planned to make the announcement at the ceremony, hence why she's helping with the preparations. The invitations were all her doing—including yours, Princess Beatrice."

Claire froze. Not once, not in her wildest dreams, had she expected to be introduced as Vik's fiancée in such a fashion. He must have taken Lui's threat to hex him to heart.

Beatrice, too, struggled to hide her shock. She took a moment to compose herself before she stuttered out, "O-Oh. So that's how it is. I was not..." She rallied herself and plunged on. "I was not aware you were engaged to a fellow student. One who writes your letters for you, no less..."

If there was more to follow, she did not say it. She failed to meet Vik's eyes for several seconds more before she managed to paste a smile on her pale face.

"Well, then I suppose congratulations are in order. Prince Vik, Lady Claire—congratulations on your engagement. It was an honor to receive your—Lady Claire's—invitation. I appreciated the personal touch. It's been a comfort to me in these rather troubled times of mine."

"Thank you," Vik said—a formality only.

Claire followed suit. "We're most grateful, Princess Beatrice."

For a split second, Claire could have sworn a frown passed across Beatrice's face. But it vanished as quickly as it came, and the princess turned on her heel. "I'd best be off now," she said. "Orientation will be starting any moment."

There was something almost dazed and faltering in her gait as she traipsed away. A few other girls, no doubt her retainers, rushed to her side and departed with her. The girls, Claire noticed, were dressed impeccably, with not a hair out of place in their matching high updos. Even their hairpins were identical. Their style was so unlike Beatrice's homely air that Claire could only assume they were not school friends; these girls must have followed their mistress from Ignice. There was something almost odd about them, but Claire

couldn’t put her finger on what. She watched the group depart until they vanished among the crowd of students.

Ever since she had accidentally summoned a vision, Claire had tried many times to coax back a continuation of that dream. However, no matter how often she put the incense burner to use, she only ever saw the same scenes, only heard the same indistinct conversations. Try as she might, she could glean no new clues from these scattered fragments of foresight.

I’ve oft considered what might happen if I touch the curio in my dream, she thought. *But the notion terrifies me.* She felt, deep in her gut, it would suck her into that other world. *Just how is Princess Beatrice involved in all this? What is her part in how the future plays out?*

Once orientation was over, the pupils were excused for lunch.

Denis sat next to Vik, with Lui claiming the seat opposite the prince. Dion and Claire helped themselves to the seats on either side of Lui, and Lydia completed the arrangement by sitting across from her friend.

Today, the group was in a rather more festive mood than usual.

“Has anything on the menu caught your fancy?” Lydia asked Claire. “I’m partial to the roast beef myself.”

“Why, then I might try it as well. Although I must say,” Claire commented as she turned to the young lady next to her, “it feels awfully odd sharing lunch with you in uniform.”

“Isn’t it?” said Vik. “I’d almost forget she and Dion are our seniors. They certainly don’t act like it.”

“Your Highness, kindly don’t be so rude to Sir Lui,” Lydia interjected hotly. “You *do* know she has more fans than you? Among us ladies, at least.”

“Why, Lydia!” Lui exclaimed, touched.

“Ho ho,” said Denis. “Vik, how come every girl you know’s got a backbone of steel?” Here, his attention was diverted by their last dining companion’s culinary choices. “Dion, have you got your food already?” he asked. “My goodness! That slice of chocolate cake is enormous. You need a hand finishing that?”

"Oh, I'll manage quite all right on my own," Dion said with a beam. "In fact, I think I'll go back for seconds."

Claire and friends proceeded to select their favorite dishes from the lodge's cafeteria-style service with similarly lighthearted conversation before returning to their seats. No one dared sit at the neighboring tables due to the presence of the prince; it was the student body's wont to give him privacy.

Amid a lull in the conversation, Lui leaned over and whispered, "Claire, we need to talk about what happened in the lecture hall earlier. Do you remember the moment you shook Princess Beatrice's hand?"

"Yes, and I was just thinking now would be the perfect time to bring it up," Claire whispered back. "I take it I wasn't the only one who noticed something was off."

"You were not. I sensed magic in Princess Beatrice's palm. It was faint, but it was there. When she touched you, your ward experienced a momentary *flicker*. The princess can't possibly be powerful enough to break your wards, and I didn't want to raise a fuss about a flicker. That's why I didn't say anything in the moment, but I've got my eye on that girl, and that's a fact."

"Well, so long as you don't think it's anything to worry about... Still, suppose she does try to harm me. If my ward doesn't break, what's the trouble?" Claire was mostly trying to reassure herself, really. She added a smile for good measure.

Lui, however, frowned. "I might've said as much had you asked me earlier, but I don't think so anymore. There's something curious at work here."

"What is it?"

"You've learned that the more magic training one has, the easier it is to see magic's movements, I should think."

"Yes, I have. I can do little more than sense it as of yet, but I trust it's visible to you."

Lui met Claire's inquisitive gaze head-on. A beat passed, and Lui inclined her head.

"Yes. It is." Another pause. "But not so regarding Princess Beatrice."

It took a moment for Claire's mind to catch up to the implication of Lui's words. "I beg your pardon?"

"On her, I saw nothing. Nothing at all. I didn't even see a ward on her uniform. All the uniforms should have weak wards on them, so I assumed she had merely removed hers. Now, I'm not so sure. I saw no trace of magic on her retinue either."

Claire was struck dumb at the news.

"Nor did I see any spells cast upon the princess herself," Lui continued. "It's always possible she might've removed the uniform's ward if it clashed badly with her own magic, but I shouldn't think an imperial princess would go anywhere without powerful wards. There must be more to this story than there appears."

"Let me see if I'm understanding this," Claire said. "Do you think Princess Beatrice isn't using a ward because there's some sort of plot afoot? Something that would require stripping the ward off her uniform?"

"Precisely. You do remember what the Ignicean royal family's curse is, yes? They call it body-swapping magic. I've never heard anything more substantial than idle gossip, mind, but I believe her magic powers get rather muddled whenever she returns to her own body. She can't wear wards in the immediate aftermath."

Claire's fork stilled on its way to her mouth. The wheels in her head began to turn. If what Lui was saying was true...

She thought back on Beatrice's bright smile at the moment of introductions. Now, it chilled her.

"Do you mean she goes around casting curses often? Why, I can scarce believe such a thing. She herself just said I had nothing to worry about, for her curse can't possibly slip past my wards!"

"She said that for Vik's benefit. She may very well have a less potent magical color than you, but that's no reason for us to be lax about our security. Better yet, we cannot say for certain that all this body swapping is her own doing." Lui paused. "Imagine, say, she was under someone else's control."

Her tone was remarkably restrained for such a horrifying thought.

"That's a dangerous thing to be caught saying," Vik put in. "Have a care, Lui. We're in public."

"Words are words, my prince, and little more. You must remember that Denis and I are here to protect you, and we will do just that. I will speak of dangers when I deem it necessary, be it in public or in private."

"Lui, please—"

"All right, break it up," Denis interjected. "Let's all just agree to keep an eye out for the princess. Okay? Are we good? Great. Let's get back to the business of eating before our food goes cold..." He trailed off, then suddenly sprang to his feet. "Oh, Princess Beatrice! We were just talking about you."

Sure enough, there she was. Denis sent a friendly wave her way, and the group fell silent—should she come over, that was the last they could talk of the princess.

However, Beatrice failed to notice the young knight waving at her. She had finished her own lunch, and she swept out of the cafeteria with her large flock of followers.

Denis whistled in appreciation. "Now that's a passel. They don't make princesses like that in Paffuto! How many retainers does she have, do you think? Where'd she find so many girls that look exactly alike? It's not just the uniforms. They match down to the hairstyles."

"They're chaperones from Ignice, I would imagine," Lui said. "You know the princess was a commoner before her father summoned her to court. Ignice must be eager to give her only the best care now."

"Ah, that would do it. That explains why she was all friendly-like earlier too. I was impressed at how smoothly Vik turned her down!"

Claire only half listened to Lui's levelheaded analysis and Denis's decidedly-less-so commentary. *I can't stop thinking about what Lui said*, Claire mused. *If Princess Beatrice does often swap bodies, and it isn't her own doing...* She didn't like to think it, but what other option was there? *Then the empire must be behind it.*

If only Beatrice used her powers for such childish pranks as skiving lessons! Alas, there was no such luck. A curse was not a mere plaything in the hands of an imperial princess.

What did that curious feeling when she shook my hand portend? Claire wondered. *My ward is the highly precise variant Lui taught me*

how to cast. It wouldn't activate at random.

Once again, she thought back to the image of Beatrice wreathed in a black fog. Just what was that exactly? How come Claire had seen no such thing when she met Beatrice in the flesh?

She cast a sidelong glance at her friends. The rest of the bunch had put the ominous conversation from before out of mind and had returned to their earlier lighthearted mood. Claire alone could not join them.

I can't tell them I saw the future in a vision until I have a better understanding of what it all means, she thought. *All the same, if I see a good opportunity to bring it up, perhaps I should seize the chance.*

The program of events for the graduation exam was divided into two parts thusly: the thesis period and the examination period. During the two-week thesis period, pupils were to write and submit theses on the subject of magical curios. Much emphasis was placed on the importance of this thesis, and this year's topic had been posted well in advance to give every pupil a chance to procure a curio of their choosing.

Following a three-day break postsubmission, the pupils would sit their academic exams. Their scores from both halves of the test would be summed, evaluated, and deemed permissible or not. The grading was infamously strict; not a soul could afford to neglect their studies.

However, each student was largely free to spend their time in the first two weeks as they willed. Outside of the compulsory group lectures, pupils were permitted to make use of their professors' office hours, conduct research in the library, or otherwise devote themselves to their studies in whatever manner they saw fit.

With their repast complete, Claire split off from Vik to pay a visit to the library outbuilding. Dion accompanied her, as he ever did at the Academy.

"Where's Prince Vik off to?" Dion asked her. "To see a professor about his thesis?"

"Yes, so he said. I've finished finding sources for my thesis

already, so I thought I might pop by the library and see what it has on offer."

"I knew you'd go running off on your own the moment I heard there was a library," Dion teased her. "Good thing I planned for that. Prince Vik told me not to take my eyes off you for one minute. The worrywart!"

Claire took in her surroundings as they walked. The sprawling old manor that served as the Academy's lodge boasted numerous outbuildings: research laboratories, a library, dormitories... Were that not enough, students could climb a small hill and look out over the pond adjoining a wide, grassy lawn and a pretty park. Really, Claire and her classmates couldn't have asked for a better place to spend the next few weeks.

Dion walked forward a few paces more before a serious frown stole over his face. "Say, don't you have a curse of your own? All this talk of Princess Beatrice's curse brought it to mind. It's a good sight more powerful than my Collective Magic, yours is."

Claire hesitated before saying, "Yes, in a manner of speaking."

He meant the so-called "spell" she'd used to reverse time. Claire had couched it in magical terms for ease of explanation, but in truth, it was not magic at all. *Really, all I did was reload a save file*, she thought. *Which I cannot do any longer. I'd be hard-pressed to call it a curse, then.*

Dion remembered his first life too, but unlike Claire, he had no idea they lived in a video game.

He took no notice of Claire's indirect response. "Don't you have your grandmother's curio on you—for safekeeping, was it? Why, then, did you say you'd write your thesis on Prince Asbert's gargantuan wardrobe? The incense burner seems loads more fascinating."

"First of all, Dion—" Claire almost told him off for the frivolity of his concern (the incense burner's talents were orders of magnitude more important than Asbert's wardrobe and as such not suited for a school report), but she broke off when she spotted a girl at the end of the corridor. Her slender back and long, silky blonde hair drew Claire's eye. *That better not be who I think it is*, she thought.

Before she knew what she was doing, Claire grabbed Dion and ducked behind a column to hide. She peeked around it and stole another look at the girl. *Oh dear, what am I doing?* she realized too late. *There's no call for hiding from her just because we're all a bit wary.*

Dion whispered in her ear. "Is that Princess Beatrice?"

"Yes. I wonder what happened to the rest of her entourage."

Most of the flock had vanished, save for a single girl. Considering Claire's first encounter with Beatrice and the subsequent sighting in the lunchroom, traveling with a single companion was not Beatrice's style. Curious. Claire couldn't take her eyes off the pair. *Why is she alone?*

The corridor was ill trafficked, unfortunately for Claire and Dion. Now that they had hidden, there was no way to tactfully extricate themselves from their position. So they merely watched, rather too hesitant to step out and say hello, when they noticed another figure—an older gentleman with gray hair and spectacles.

"Who is that?" Claire whispered. "Oh, what's his name... Professor Lesley! He conducted our orientation. I believe he typically teaches at the Academy in the southern provinces."

"That's the one," said Dion. "What's a math professor doing here anyway? I thought the *magical* thesis was the focus of the exam."

"Our Academy in Wurtz sent several general education professors too," Claire reminded him. "We wouldn't have enough chaperones with only the magic professors, and they couldn't ask the king to send his men and risk understaffing the palace. I would assume Professor Lesley is responsible for various administrative functions."

"Ah, that makes sense. I suppose you wouldn't need strong magic for a support role."

"No, I suppose not."

Claire turned her attention back to Beatrice. To her surprise, the distance between the princess and the professor had shrunk considerably. The professor, naturally, would never approach an imperial princess without absolute need; it was she who was trying to catch up to him.

Manners forbade young ladies from making direct physical

contact with those of the opposite sex, but Beatrice paid little attention to that rule as she reached to grab the professor's hand.

"Something's not right," Dion whispered. "Princess Beatrice's friend isn't trying to stop her. She's just standing there *watching*."

"You're right. I wonder what's going on."

Beatrice hurried forward the final few steps and snatched up the professor's hand—a dim light shone from the place their hands touched.

What in heaven's name is that? Claire thought.

Beatrice's eyes flashed a fiery red—but weren't they a deep indigo blue? Nothing made sense anymore—so bright Claire could see it from her hiding place. A breeze whipped through the grass in the courtyard the passage faced, and as it blew past Claire's pillar to tickle Beatrice's bangs, Claire detected a faint whiff of magic. Was this what she thought it was? Claire's skin crawled. Yes, she'd seen something just like this before.

"Claire," Dion whispered, "am I going mad, or is this like when I used Collective Magic on you?"

Claire said nothing. She couldn't believe the evidence of her eyes. It was only when Beatrice began to cast a spell that whatever "magic" had been rooting Claire to the floor broke. *I can't sit here wringing my hands*, she realized. *Beatrice is casting a curse!*

Were word to get out of malignant spell casting occurring at the manor housing Paffuto's crown prince, every kingdom and then some would have words for Ignice. Claire knew she must do everything in her power to stop it.

Thus she shouted, "Princess Beatrice!"

Beatrice blanched, and she let go of the professor's hand like she'd been scalded. "L-Lady Claire?"

Professor Lesley shuddered and scrambled away from the princess until his quivering back hit a wall. Princess Beatrice's companion summarily rushed over to catch the tottering professor before his legs gave way and then clamped a handkerchief to his mouth. Her motions were as fluid as if she'd done the same thing a thousand times before, a fact Claire found most odd. Offering a handkerchief was one thing, yes. But covering the professor's

mouth?

She rushed over to the odd pair. “Whatever is going on here?” she demanded of Beatrice.

“N-Nothing, I assure you.”

Claire looked over at the professor. Gone was his unsteadiness, yet now a vacant cast occluded his eyes. *He wasn’t like that moments before*, Claire thought. *Why, the professor looks to be on the verge of falling asleep standing up.*

He made no move to offer his own explanation, which presented a rather distressing problem for Claire. It made her out to be no more than an obnoxious busybody interrupting a conversation between her superiors—one of whom was an imperial princess, no less. How appallingly rude!

Claire thus diverted the conversation to another, less socially inappropriate channel.

“Pray forgive me, Your Highness, but would you happen to be going to the library? If so, perhaps you might be so kind as to let me walk with you. I’m afraid I can’t make heads or tails of this map. Why, it was truly a stroke of luck I bumped into someone else at all!”

“Erm.” Beatrice looked everywhere but at Claire. Her rather laconic response, when it finally came, was “I’m afraid I don’t know the way. My apologies.”

It was a clear signal that she wished to end the conversation and run away with her tail between her legs, but Claire was loath to let her do just that. Not after Beatrice had nearly cast a curse!

Still, social niceties prevailed. Claire was forced to beat around the bush. “My, what a pity. I suppose you were asking Professor Lesley for directions, then.”

“Yes. Erm. I suppose I was.”

Presently, Professor Lesley looked up and turned his vacant eyes on the girls. Claire dearly wanted to ask him what was going on, but before she could say a word, the professor raised a hand and mumbled a mushy “Please excuse me,” before staggering away.

“Professor Lesley!” Claire called after him.

The professor did not respond. It was as if he had no recollection of the curious incident just moments before. How could Claire ask

him anything about the curse when he was in this state? *And how did he wind up like this?* she wondered. *Was it because I interrupted him before Beatrice could finish casting her curse?*

It was a shame that Beatrice would provide no answers. Worse, with the professor gone, Claire didn't quite know what to say to dispel the lingering awkwardness. At least Beatrice was in the same boat; her eyes kept wandering around the corridor. She clearly wanted to bolt, but she didn't want to leave such a poor impression of herself on someone in Vik's inner circle.

Thank goodness for Dion, who wouldn't have known what awkwardness was had he looked it up in the dictionary. "Oh dear," he said, apropos of nothing. "I hope we weren't interrupting anything important."

Dion, you sweet fool, whatever are you saying? Claire's eyes nearly bugged out of their sockets.

Fortunately, Beatrice was just as flustered and lacked the presence of mind to call out his uncouth remark for what it was. "Oh no," she stammered. "Not at all. Professor Lesley and I barely know one another—"

She tried to give him the same bright, charming smile she'd employed in their first meeting. Dion returned it with a smile of his own. "Oh no," he interrupted her. "That wasn't what I was implying. I meant, I do hope we weren't interrupting you casting a curse on him."

Dion?!

Claire's second silent scream registered with Dion no more than the first. He carried on, in most cheerful spirits. "You'll forgive me for assuming, I'm sure. But really, what else are we to make of it? A clandestine meeting in a secluded corridor is the perfect setup for curse casting. I would know. I've a bit of a history with the subject myself."

"How dare you talk to me like this?" Beatrice spluttered. "I'll have you know, I would never dream of casting curses in this manner. Think of the scandal!"

So she said. But Beatrice's mask was slipping.

Dion served her a polite bow. "Oh dear, where are my manners?

Dion Minogue, at your service. I was once the successor of the Mead line. You might have heard of us and our curse."

"What curse is this?" said Beatrice. "I wasn't aware Paffish folk possessed curses."

"Oh yes, some of our great families do, just like in Ignice. The similarities don't end there—the manner in which we cast curses is quite comparable. So you see, we couldn't help but speak up when we noticed you casting one of your own. Isn't that right, Claire?"

Beatrice's fidgety demeanor worsened as the last of the color drained from her cheeks. It was a clearer admission of guilt than any they'd get all day, Claire deemed. She fixed the princess with a stare.

"Your Highness, as it so happens, I was present on one such occasion of Dion casting his curse. It pains me to say this, but I did indeed notice something quite similar when you grasped the professor's hand. Hence why I took the liberty of speaking up."

"I-I don't know what you're talking about," Beatrice stammered. "I don't even have very powerful magic! I couldn't possibly cast a curse on an Academy professor of magic even if I tried. You'll grant that, I hope?"

"I would," said Claire, "but Professor Lesley doesn't teach magic. He's a mathematics professor. I'm afraid his wards wouldn't be strong in the slightest."

Beatrice gasped like she'd been had. Claire teetered on tenterhooks for a few seconds before Beatrice bit her lip.

Tears and words spilled out in equal measure. "Oh, bother! I really don't know what it is you mean. Everyone is like this. Back home, they call me the heroine of our local Cinderella story, but I'm no princess with silver slippers. I'm only a girl who sat in the ashes and just happened to be whisked off to the royal palace when her special powers appeared."

"Oh, Your Highness! You needn't be so unkind to yourself," Claire said. She understood why Beatrice was avoiding interrogation, but she didn't know how to handle this level of self-disparagement from a stranger.

Dion smiled at Beatrice with none too much warmth. "Don't be

like that. You're making it out as if my lady is picking on you."

"Hush, Dion! Don't be rude," Claire chided him. She knew he just wanted to help, but now was not the time to antagonize Beatrice further.

Unfortunately, her rebuke came too little and too late.

"I, I didn't mean to," Beatrice whimpered. "I'm sorry."

"No, Your Highness, *we* apolo—"

But before Claire could finish, Beatrice buried her head in her hands. Dion's words must have struck home! She and her friend turned on their heels and rushed away.

Oh drat, Claire thought. *We let her get away. Now we have nothing to go on, and she shan't want to talk to us again, I'll wager. Not that pinning her down would've been an easy thing to begin with.*

Claire sighed, and as she made to leave herself, the tip of her shoe bumped against an object. She looked down. A vial with a green, pointed stopper rolled to a halt on the ground near her feet.

"What is this?" she asked.

Something dropped by the fleeing princess, no doubt. In her haste, neither she nor her friend had chanced to notice the lost vial.

Claire picked it up and peered at it. "If she really was trying to swap bodies," she asked Dion, "whatever would she want to swap with Professor Lesley for?"

"To swipe the exam answers, maybe? Award herself higher marks? Could be any number of rotten things. Swapping bodies turns my stomach. I had enough of being my family's pawn; I'd never dream of doing it to someone else."

"You and me both," Claire said.

She held the vial up to the light. A few drops of liquid sloshed inside it.

I should think Beatrice understands just how foolhardy it is to cast a curse on a person in her host country, she thought. *What in heaven's name could possess her to be quite so blatant about it?*

Looking back on things, Claire had felt just a very little blip of magic indeed—perhaps due to Beatrice's not especially potent magic. Had she not been the victim of another person's curse and

felt such an uncomfortable sensation in her gut, she might well have missed it entirely. If Beatrice's curses were likely to go unnoticed, were there other targets apart from the professor?

I shouldn't dismiss her on the basis of her weak magic, Claire thought. *Why, this curse of hers is frightening stuff. Should she swap with the wrong person, she could ruin someone's life or bring a kingdom to its knees. No, this curse is nothing but trouble in the wrong hands, and it matters little whether or not the caster is an accomplished mage herself.*

Dion interrupted her pondering to ask, "What's in the vial, Claire?"

She paused before answering. "A potion of sorts, I suppose. Did you see the way Professor Lesley looked? I would imagine it's something to make one feel confused and out of sorts."

"Nothing you would have to worry about, then. Your wards are too strong."

Dion smiled and began walking on ahead of Claire. She sighed, then wrapped the vial in a handkerchief and hurried after her companion.

She resolved to tell Vik all about this later—it would've been a pity to pass up the library when she was already halfway there. The matter of Beatrice, for all her concerning behavior, could wait. Claire was here to pass her exams.

Focus, Claire, she told herself. *We have exams to sit!*

Presently, Dion asked, "Say, how come you didn't sit next to Vik?"

Claire blinked in confusion at the non sequitur. "I beg your pardon?"

"Was it because of Princess Beatrice?" he continued. "Is that why you gave him such a wide berth?"

Rather belatedly, Claire realized he was talking about the seating arrangement at lunch. But what a random question. She hadn't the foggiest what compelled Dion to bring it up now. *Does Dion think Vik and I are having a tiff or some such?* she wondered.

Yes, she had made a conscious effort not to sit next to her prince at lunch—but really, this was the middle of their exam period. It was

hardly the time for whispering sweet nothings over a meal, especially when Dion and the guard knights were there to watch. Claire thought it only courteous to sit apart from Vik for the group's collective comfort.

However, if Dion thought it was out of misplaced jealousy, Claire didn't care to correct him. She responded, feigning shyness, "Is that what it looked like?"

"Mm-hmm. I know some of the other girls in our class thought the same thing, even if they didn't say it to your face. Word's going around that you and Prince Vik had a row."

"We most certainly did not!"

Yet Dion rather liked his own theory and didn't let her objection put him off it. He carried on breezily: "It was quite smart of Prince Vik to put a stop to Princess Beatrice before she could get too far in her nonsense. Why, introducing you as his one true love? That's pure class, that is."

Oh, Claire thought. *Now I see. Dion believes I'm keeping Vik at arm's length to avoid hurting Princess Beatrice's feelings. It's clear as the nose on her face that she's head over heels for him.*

"Yes, I suppose it is a classy move," she agreed. It wasn't what had motivated the seating arrangement, though.

She opened her mouth to tell Dion that and shut it once more; it was impossible to get a word in edgewise. "I'm sure he'd be understanding if you sat down with him, Claire. Had a real heart-to-heart. Don't be put off just because he called you his fiancée in front of the princess. His Highness is an understanding, capital fellow; everyone says so."

"He is, but—"

—that wasn't why we sat apart, she did not get a chance to say.

"I'm sure you two will kiss and make up in no time. He truly cares for you, you know. I heard he even left work—and you can bet Lui didn't like that one bit—to see your brother on his recent visit."

"Dion, I fear you misunderstand. Vik and I—"

"Oh, good! There's the library at last."

—aren't having a row, Claire might have said, had their untimely arrival not intervened.

The sight of the library banished any further thoughts of conversation from her head. The floor was an unbroken expanse of marble the same alabaster shade as the walls, which soared skyward to meet a glass ceiling overhead. Claire admired the bright blue sky above. If it wasn't for the librarian's desk and a lovely little reading nook, she wouldn't have thought she'd stepped indoors at all.

"Why, it's like we're in a whole new world!" she exclaimed (the matter of Dion's misunderstanding having been forgotten).

"You said it," Dion agreed. "I've never seen a library so beautiful."

"Nor have I."

Yet something about this evoked a sense of déjà vu. When had she been here before?

"Here it is, Claire. This is what you were looking for, is it not?"

"Co-lor me sur-prised. Gil-bert has his mo-ments af-ter all."

"Oh, shut it, you beastly bird. I'm just as much of a scholar as Miss Claire here! I'm perfectly capable of hunting through a few archives."

"Ah, look at you. Work-ing hard in the hopes Sir Lu-i e-ven-tu-al-ly no-tic-es your charms. Brings a tear to one's eye. You do *know she turned you down?"*

Oh! Claire realized. *That conversation!* She placed it almost immediately—it was one of the scenes in the vision evoked by her grandmother's curio. White walls, white bookshelves, marble floors, a magically delightful glass-domed ceiling, dappled sunlight playing over the backs of chairs—*Yes*, she thought, *this is the same library as in my dream!* There was no doubt about it. This room was one and the same.

A chill ran down Claire's spine. First meeting Beatrice, now discovering a location from her dream? It felt like an omen, a sign that her dream was coming true.

But in the dream, wasn't I here with Pooh and Prince Gilbert? she consoled herself. *These graduation exams are for Paffish students. Prince Gilbert couldn't possibly be here.*

She could do little more than begin to console her shaken nerves

when the resident librarian spotted Claire and Dion and rushed over in a fretful hurry. “Beg pardons,” she said, “but I’m afraid we aren’t accepting visitors today. The library has been reserved for the use of a single guest.”

“Oh?” said Claire.

“Forgive me, but I’ll have to ask you to leave.”

Claire hadn’t heard tell of anyone reserving the library. What sort of person would think to do such a thing? And, goodness, why?

“Probably a fellow looking up something he doesn’t want to get caught looking at,” Dion opined. “Must be something pretty awful to warrant reserving this whole library.”

“I’m sure it has something to do with the exams,” Claire said. “They must need the library’s full collection of reference materials. Perhaps it’s the professors writing the exam questions.”

Claire and Dion were satisfied with those explanations, but the apologetic librarian said, “Ah, I’m afraid it’s not that.”

“Oh?” Claire cocked her head.

Just then, she heard a shout—“Miss Claire?!”—echo across the marble floor. Her eyes went wide.



She turned to the source of the noise. Lo and behold, descending the stairs was a familiar young man with locks of shining silver, a suit of purest white, and a snow-white owl perched upon his shoulder. Claire couldn't have mistaken him for anyone else if she'd tried. The prince and his owl were her friends from another kingdom.

"Prince Gilbert?" she cried in astonishment. Whatever was he doing here?

But Gilbert provided no answers. He merely jogged up to the group and explained, "Oh, splendid! I was hoping to run into you here. How're the exams coming along? Ah, and how's His Highness? Hope you're all in good health—Dion too, of course. And might I ask about Sir Lui?"

Claire did not know which question to answer first. She settled on none of them.

Unabashed, Gilbert rattled on. "Lupty lacks Paffuto's robust school system, you see. If only we had your form of higher education, then our aristocracy wouldn't be in the sorry state it is now. But we don't, and they are! Now that the tornado crisis is behind us, it's high time we set up proper schooling for all. That's why I've come to watch the exam process, and since I had the chance, I thought it'd be just capital to rent out the library and poke around a bit."

Claire needed a moment to digest all that. Finally, she managed to say, "So, you're here to observe our exams?"

Gilbert beamed. "Yes. And now, where might I find Sir Lui?"

Claire lacked the faintest idea how to respond, or how to compose her features. There was but one thing she did know: Whenever Gilbert eventually tracked down his quarry, Lui would be frightfully wroth.

Princess Beatrice—Part 1

Two sets of footsteps clacked across the buffed floors of the castle's laboratory wing. One belonged to Beatrice; the other, her companion in the recent altercation with Professor Lesley.

Beatrice's stride was so brisk she panted under her breath. *Where is everyone?* she thought furiously. Where were her "friends" and coconspirators? Now that she had been caught dead in the act of curse casting, she needed them.

Just my luck to be caught talking to the professor, she swore. *Worse yet, Lady Claire guessed I was casting my curse! I can only pray she bought my fib.*

She reached the end of the long corridor, left the laboratory wing, and crossed into the main manor house, which contained both lecture halls and the cafeteria. Surely she could find at least *some* of her associates there.

Beatrice wouldn't have called any of these girls bosom companions, but they understood well the mission with which Beatrice had been tasked. They were willing to lend her their bodies at any time.

I'll try again on Professor Lesley later, once the timing is right, she thought. *But what do I do about Lady Claire? Even if I managed to fool her, I don't trust that boy who was with her. He says he has a curse of his own—but then why was he using it around his lady? No, I don't like this one bit. I want to get to the bottom of this.*

Despite her public insistence that her curse was harmless, Beatrice was a startlingly frequent curse user. Ignice teemed with loyal subjects willing to bequeath her their bodies for her usage. Why, many people would die for the chance of serving a princess with a rare spell of such selective pedigree—very few members of the royal bloodline ever possessed its ability. And of course, no one was fool enough to defy Beatrice's imperial brother's edict. By hook or by crook, the crown prince's will would be done.

Beatrice's life had turned upside down two years prior, on her fifteenth birthday. She had grown up a commoner but was known to be of the emperor's bloodline. Once she was old enough, she was summoned to the palace to be baptized on the off chance that she presented the much-coveted curse. For Beatrice, being baptized was like rolling the dice in a gamble that would decide her entire future. How lucky for her that the dice had worked in her favor.

Her life was transformed in a flash. She was whisked off to the palace and given a room of her own with an enormous four-poster bed. Her old secondhand clothes vanished; a fleet of tailors sallied forth to make her a new wardrobe of ball gowns and frocks. Her sorry vegetable-peel soups were swapped for hearty meat stews.

She had everything delicious to eat and everything lavish to decorate her life. All her dreams had come true. The world was her oyster at last; the poor commoner had departed her dreary little life of helping her mother with the chores in their tiny rural hamlet to become a princess.

No one was more ecstatic at the news than Beatrice's poor, sickly mother. She had been expelled from the palace when it was learned she was with child, but all throughout the long years after, she had never stopped loving the emperor. To this day, she clung to Beatrice as the one final thread connecting her to the man of her dreams. She wished, and she waited, to one day be reunited with her prince.

Alas, not all folk were so delighted by Beatrice's turn of good fortune. Chief among these malcontents was her new older brother, the crown prince Maxim. It was hardly surprising, Beatrice supposed, that he shied away from welcoming a newcomer to the royal family. Yet it still pained her whenever he snubbed her.

The mission he had tasked her with promised to bring them together at long last. If all went well, Prince Maxim would not be so quick to treat her like the scum under his boots. Best of all, if Beatrice proved herself, perhaps she would finally feel like she belonged at court. And should she make a name for herself, perhaps she could bring her mother to the palace and make the poor woman's dreams come true.

I cannot let my mother down, she thought to herself. *Every curse*

I cast is for her. It may be a difficult task, but so help me, I will *secure a place in the palace's politics and make the emperor—my lord father—proud of me. There's no reason he shouldn't raise my mother up to princess status. She can live in the lap of luxury once more and recover from her ailments!*

The cheering thought quickened her steps.

"Oh!" she exclaimed.

She spotted a girl with a black updo at the far end of the corridor. Nery, that was her name. Nery was the younger sister of one of Prince Maxim's friends and daughter of an Ignicean viscount. Beatrice counted her among her closest and most loyal companions.

Surely Claire and her male chaperone hadn't paid much attention to Nery when they saw her but briefly in passing. She was the perfect choice. All Beatrice needed to do was slip her skin, fly into Nery—and presto! Her tracks were covered.

Beatrice paused for a moment to catch her breath—it was all that running she'd done—before raising her voice. "Nery, dear? I need your help."

"But of course, Your Highness," Nery said. She looked a bit startled at the urgency of the request but readily complied nevertheless. "I am yours to do with as you see fit."

Nery's uniform contained no more wards than Beatrice's, but precious few souls would ever have noticed such a thing. Not even the magic professor of Wurtz's Academy had shown any sign of recognition when he and Beatrice exchanged hellos earlier this morning.

I'm quite safe, Beatrice assured herself. *No one shall ever notice we stripped the wards off our uniforms to aid in curse casting!*

One curse later, and Beatrice smiled with Nery's face.

"I've an appointment with a professor to look over my thesis," she informed her friend. "Would you be a love and trot along to his office in my place? The one on the third floor. I've put together everything you need right here."

"As you command, Your Highness."

"Beatrice's" waves of blonde hair dipped as Nery executed a

perfect, princessly bow and set off into the heart of the manor with Beatrice's other companion in tow. Beatrice would've preferred not to be alone, but the other girl had been spotted by Claire and Dion too. It was best if she kept a wide berth from her mistress in this new body.

Beatrice sighed involuntarily as she watched her two friends depart. *I wish I could walk with half their grace*, she thought. *Then perhaps Prince Maxim wouldn't shun me so.*

Beatrice lacked the sort of deportment a girl only acquired by having it drilled into her head from a young age that she was to be a *lady*. It filled her with admiration, and no small amount of jealousy, whenever she saw such lucky individuals.

She wasn't cut out to be a spy, really. The only reason her brother had trusted her with such an important mission was her curse. If it wasn't for that... Well, as Beatrice often reminded herself, she ought to have been grateful.

She crossed to the courtyard fountain and peered at her reflection rippling on the water's surface, mindful to avoid the spray. The girl staring back at her had a cool, measured gaze and a tightly bound loop of black hair. Beatrice reached up and switched the hairpin to the opposite—the left—side of Nery's head. This was her signal to her companions that she was the princess in another person's body. Perhaps it was unneeded, now that they weren't in Ignice, but old habits died hard.

She smoothed down her dress, lifted her chin, and marched off in the direction Claire had gone.

The bulk of Beatrice's body swapping was done for information gathering. Her curse allowed her to slip seamlessly into the target's community and witness crucial events firsthand, thus cutting out the self-interest and personal interpretation that plagued secondhand accounts. The curse being a true "swap," Beatrice's own unattended body was inhabited by the curse's target for the duration of the spell. This mattered little; the right potions could make the unlucky victim slumber until the spell was lifted—or merely forget it had ever happened. Conversely, willing collaborators like Nery required no such medicinal coaxing.

One other rule shaped Beatrice's curse casting: She was never to use it on members of her own royal family or anyone else with a powerful ward for fear of the curse rebounding. It had never happened to Beatrice, but one of the very first things they'd impressed upon her after coming to the palace was to always, always check the strength of her target's ward.

This limitation put a damper on the efficacy of Beatrice's curse. Still, her powers were by no means useless. In fact, Beatrice thought them very handy indeed. The world was full of people with very little warding and no end of access to valuable information. And why not? Who would ever dream someone might come along and steal their body?

Hence why I must get to the bottom of this, Beatrice thought. *How much does Lady Claire know? If word gets out about my curse, there's no telling what might happen.*

Her heart sank when she imagined reporting the failure to her brother. Oh, anything but that!

But fear only made Beatrice more dogged than ever; her steps never flagged. "So long as Prince Maxim continues to back the Church of Ignealism," she said to herself, "I truly have no choice but to do whatever he says."

Beatrice moved with such haste she soon found herself nearing the library. Her jaw dropped open in shock as she approached the building. *Why, it's like something out of a fairy tale!* she thought. She drank in the pristine and antiquated marble, the charming windows, and the glass dome capping the library roof. Excitement bubbled up in her breast. She would never have dreamed of setting foot in a place like this back when she was a commoner.

Just before her fantasies swept her up entirely, she heard a voice. "Say, how come you didn't sit next to Vik? Was it because of Princess Beatrice?"

Followed by another: "I beg your pardon? Is that what it looked like?"

The voices belonged to Claire and the boy!

Eager not to reveal her disguise, Beatrice crouched behind a

hedge and strained her ears. The area around the library was curiously deserted, almost as if someone had gone and reserved the place for private use. So much for Beatrice's hope of slipping into the crowd and engaging in some unobtrusive eavesdropping! As one of only three individuals nearby, she would have stood out no matter what she did. There was no choice but to hide.

I must have fooled them earlier, or else they'd be discussing my curse, she told herself. (Claire and her companion's conversation was about anything but.) *Or else reported it to Prince Vik.*

"Mm-hmm. I know some of the other girls in our class thought the same thing, even if they didn't say it to your face. Word's going around that you and Prince Vik had a row."

"We most certainly did not!"

"It was quite smart of Prince Vik to put a stop to Princess Beatrice before she could get too far in her nonsense. Why, introducing you as his one true love? That's pure class, that is."

"Yes, I suppose it is a classy move."

Beatrice didn't quite know what to make of Claire's noncommittal response. She blinked a few times in surprise. *They're talking about this morning in the lecture hall*, she realized.

Upon arrival at the lodge, Beatrice had sought out Vik first thing, in the hopes of catching him before orientation. She wanted to say her hellos—alas, the simple greetings ended in a catastrophic cock-up for Beatrice's romantic ambitions. She had been living abroad in Paffuto for a year now and had always yearned to see her prince in person. Finally, she received a chance to make her dreams come true! She tried to engage him in conversation on every conceivable topic in the hopes that *one* would endear her to him, but nothing she said could persuade the prince to remove his mask of courtesy. And then he had introduced the girl next to him as his fiancée! It was the clearest signal of rejection she could think of.

Well, I know Prince Vik thinks I'm an awful nuisance, Beatrice reminded herself. *Don't think I don't. His half of our correspondence was nothing but canned formalities. And it shouldn't come as a shock that someone of his status is already engaged.*

And yet Beatrice could not bear to abandon her ill-omened suit.

After all, it was her brother who had ordered her to ingratiate herself with Vik—and who was she to disobey him? Failure to follow orders meant a fall from favor in Ignicean society. Failure meant disappointing her mother. Failure meant her mother's dreams would never come true.

It was bad enough that someone had caught Beatrice in the act of casting her curse. Once Maxim learned she had failed to cozy up to Vik as ordered, well—the thought alone made her shiver.

She simply had to carry out her duties. No matter what it took, she would see this mission done.

Her last written exchange with Vik taunted her as she peered at Claire and Dion through the hedge. *Why, the invitation to his investiture was written in such warm, friendly tones*, she thought. *That's because Lady Claire wrote it, if Prince Vik is to be believed. And I certainly can—it felt unlike any other letter I've had from him.*

The letter, when it came, had felt like a godsend. Letters from Vik were few and far between, but it wasn't that which had made it such a welcome treat. Rather, the few short, compassionate lines embedded amid the formalities had captured Beatrice's heart.

For a princess surrounded night and day by her retinue, Beatrice felt so very *alone*.

She told herself that it bothered her little; loneliness was an old friend. Besides, it wasn't like there was anything she could have done to alleviate it even had she wanted to. All the same, she couldn't deny that her isolated tenure in the palace, well—it made her feel a bit *gray* inside at times.

Between these turgid emotions and the powerful, undreamed-of magics swirling within her, Beatrice felt like she had lost control of herself. The letter, then, had felt so very kind to its troubled reader. Its gentle touch opened the curtains within Beatrice's gloomy heart at last. It had stuck with her, truthfully. It made an impression upon her soul she now found impossible to dislodge.

Now I feel a proper fool knowing it was written by my rival for Prince Vik's affections, she thought. *But it's been ever so long since anyone's sent a caring thought my way. And then when Prince Vik introduced Lady Claire as his fiancée, she sent him the most*

reproving look. Why, I think Lady Claire has a heart made of gold.

How torn she felt. Had she not been a princess, and had Claire not been Vik's bride-to-be, Beatrice thought they could have got on just fine. Why, thinking of the letter, she rather hoped they might become the fastest friends.

But it was not to be. Beatrice's need to make a name for herself trumped her desires. It was her duty to do as her brother said.

Gingerly, Beatrice rose from the hedge and tiptoed out of her hiding place. She was rather relieved that the overheard conversation hadn't revolved around her. *I rather take it Lady Claire isn't overly fond of Prince Vik*, she thought. *I wonder, then, why Vik should have taken the trouble of calling her his fiancée. Unless...perhaps I still have a chance?*

Her brother's stern gaze weighed heavy on her mind. She shuddered.

"Buck up now," she chided herself. Nerves or no, Beatrice had work to do. "For my mother's sake."

She slapped herself on the cheeks and strode off, back to the manor house where Nery and her body awaited.

Chapter 21

The graduation exam retreat was truly an enormous event. Over the course of its few weeks, each pupil was expected to complete a thesis, sit written exams, and perform all sorts of practical exercises. However, as stressful as this description made it sound, Claire soon discovered it was nowhere near as bad as she'd feared.

On her first evening there, the professors threw a casual dinner party crossed with an informal get-together. Students from across the kingdom mingled in the cafeteria—the great hall had been forgone for this event—with plenty of chatter and good cheer to go around. Claire found herself relaxing.

That was, until Gilbert's happy-go-lucky voice boomed at her elbow. "Sir Lui! I hope you've been well."

Lui did not dignify that with a response. She merely looked down into her glass and sighed.

Claire mentally grimaced in sympathy. *I may not have known about the Princess Beatrice debacle, but I* do *know of Lui and her Gilbert problem. There's no end to the deluge of invitations addressed to her.*

With Paffuto and Lupty's new portal linking one kingdom to the other, Gilbert could pop over to Paffuto with (truly astounding) ease to bury Lui in invitations to every event imaginable. She was never in the habit of responding at the best of times, and these days, her eyes frequently slid right over the letters without ever once cracking the seal.

Claire, at least, felt sorry for the poor boy. She had been known to respond to the odd letter or two—signing her own name, of course. This was not a frequent occurrence; she didn't want to give Vik any cause for jealousy. Really, Lui treated him quite beastly considering he was a prince, to say nothing of a prince of a different kingdom. But in her defense, the volume—and content!—of his

letters was at least equally wretched.

The letter avalanche had begun with an invitation to a hunting tourney; it did not end there. "Would you be opposed to joining me for tea the next time you're free?" one letter asked. "I'd love to go for a stroll somewhere in your fine kingdom. Would you be so kind as to show me around?" another read.

If it had stopped there, that would have been more than enough. But Gilbert was not such a gentleman as to have tact. Some of his entreaties read as a tad skittish, such as the infamous letter that went "I'm so very troubled I haven't a notion what to do. I must please speak to you, Sir Lui. It's very important I see you; I cannot write what plagues me." Others were just absolute nonsense. For example, one said, "Oh heavens, I'm afraid I can't decide what color necktie I should wear tomorrow. Wouldn't you please come and help me pick one out?" (Claire had not passed these latter along to Lui, although Vik and Denis had shared a mean-spirited giggle over them at Gilbert's expense.)

The less-than-enthusiastic response had not, evidently, stopped Gilbert from gate-crashing the retreat with the intent of making further moves on Lui. She showed absolutely zero desire to return his advances; nevertheless, Gilbert would not be stopped in his relentless march towards a broken heart. The sheer mental fortitude was, Claire reflected, almost impressive.

Denis snickered as he watched Lui's would-be suitor approach. He raised the pitcher of orange juice in his hand. "More juice, Your Highness?"

Gilbert complied, only to yelp when Denis's zealous pouring method caused some juice to jump ship and stain the cuff of Gilbert's white suit. "Th-Thank you," Gilbert stuttered.

Pooh wheeled over the group's head. "Poor you, Gil-bert. Serves you right for go-ing with-out a ward."

"Hush, you."

This perplexed Vik. "Do you often go to other kingdoms without a ward, Gilbert?"

"Oh no, not in the slightest. I'm afraid it's just that Pooh's wards are rather too strong. They don't agree with me, and as I figured

nothing untoward could possibly happen today, I opted to go without."

"My," said Lui. (The topic of magic intrigued her enough to acknowledge Gilbert's existence.) "Pooh is a spirit, isn't he? Are his wards strong enough to defend against such trivial dangers as tragedy by orange juice? Most intriguing."

Gilbert's eyes lit up. "Sir Lui! By any chance, would you be able to cast my ward for me tomorrow? As I said, Pooh's don't agree with me, but while I'm here touring the retreat— That's it! Gilbert, you're a genius. I'd almost forgotten about the practical exams! With spells being slung about left and right, it wouldn't do for a prince to be caught in the cross fire. Don't be shy, my sweet knight. Lay your lovely hands on my back and ward away!"

"No, my good prince, I don't think I will. I'm afraid you'll simply have to take your chances with the orange juice. Incidentally, you ought to know of the gag order on retreat veterans. Anyone who sits or audits an exam is strictly forbidden from disclosing its contents. While Your Highness may be permitted into the lodge, you shan't be allowed to attend thesis lectures or the tests themselves."

"Am I not?" Gilbert exclaimed. "Oh no! That was the whole purpose of my visit."

His shoulders slumped under the combined weight of that unpleasant discovery and Lui's awe-inspiring (to Claire's mind) rejection. Claire, a bit surprised to find he truly had nobler intentions beyond wooing his favorite knight, felt bad for the prince. She decided to throw him a bone. "That may be so, Prince Gilbert, but you should be allowed to use all the same facilities we do. Don't write off your inspection just yet."

"You're too kind, Miss Claire. Oh, you're the only one who ever shows me any goodwill! Just know my heart belongs to Sir Lui."

Claire fell silent. She wished she could take the bone back.

At least he was in good spirits again—unlike the other prince, grim-faced with concern over Gilbert's lack of ward. "Prince Gilbert," Vik said, "do you know the princess of Ignice?"

"I can't say I do," Gilbert replied.

"She has a curse that allows her to swap bodies with other

people. She's here at this very retreat, in fact—she's been studying in Paffuto for the past year. I think you ought to give yourself a ward; there's no sense in asking for trouble. Consider this a royal warning."

"I beg your pardon? Why, I shouldn't share the same space with someone so dangerous! Not without a ward!"

Which is what they had been saying—but it bore no sense repeating.

Only Pooh, still flying circles above the group's head, deigned to respond. "Cast a ward, Gil-bert. Now i-sn't the time for your hang-ups."

Gilbert snatched for the owl, but Pooh soared far out of reach. Gilbert jumped after him—and just then, the cafeteria door opened.

In walked Princess Beatrice, flanked by her retinue with their matching pins and immaculate hairstyles. The Paffish students thought little of a foreign princess in their midst during lessons, but her appearance in the cafeteria during downtime caused a mutter to go up from all corners—

—save one.

"Oh!" said Gilbert, who seemed about as wary of her as someone who'd never heard of the concept. He took another sip from his glass of juice. "You were talking about Beatrice Bazelaire. I see."

The group stiffened. *What?* Claire thought. "Your Highness, do you know her?"

"Yes, of course. Beatrice Bazelaire is a rival character, isn't she? The name of her kingdom—empire, rather—never came up in the you-know-what. That's why I didn't put two and two together until I saw her face."

Claire started. Gilbert spoke like this was the most self-evident thing in the world, but it wasn't. She was the only one here who had an inkling of what he meant, and it sent chills racing down her spine. She felt her hands go clammy with sweat. *Prince Gilbert is talking about the other world*, she thought. *Where Princess Beatrice is but a character in a video game. Oh heavens, he and I need to have a talk.*

What did any of this mean? How was this related to her vision?

The situation was growing more terrifying by the minute.

Once released from the evening's shindig, Claire returned to her room and collapsed onto the bed.

"Whatever do I do now?" she asked her empty room.

Gilbert's information rattled her. *Princess Beatrice Bazelaire, a video game character,* she thought glumly. *I couldn't have asked for worse news.*



When Beatrice came over to the group to say her hellos to Vik, Claire and Gilbert took the opportunity to slip away. They found a place at the far corner of the cafeteria from which to eye Beatrice and compare notes.

Gilbert kept his voice low. "In the route that I know—that is, in the sequel game—Beatrice Bazelaire is a rival character. She tries to thwart the main character's romances."

"A rival," Claire repeated to herself. "But why should a rival appear now? Hasn't your route 'ended,' so to speak?"

"I would think so, but I'm hardly an expert on the subject. Wait. No, I misremembered something. Beatrice vanishes from the plot for a time after an attempt to ruin the protagonist's—yours, Claire—love life, but reappears at the very end of the story alongside the final boss."

"Oh dear," Claire said. "A final boss." She gulped. She didn't like the sound of that one bit, especially not when coupled with the visions from her curio.

That explains those disconcerting omens, she thought. *The peace negotiations, my dream conversation with Gilbert... It all lines up.*

Heedless of Claire's growing unease, Gilbert continued. "In the bad end of my route, the whole world gets destroyed by the tornado. Game over. Most other bad ends involve a war—and there's where the final boss appears."

"Does this 'boss' character have a name?"

"Yes, but...what was it again? Oh! I remember. Maxim Bazelaire,

the Crown Prince of Ignice. Come to think of it, there's a real prince named just like that."

Claire was too stunned for words. Her mind raced. *All these so-called "characters" Prince Gilbert knows are real people. Unfortunately, the player character—that is to say, me—is not following the script. Who knows what might change now?*

Claire had a theory, and she wanted to test it. "Do you know what happens on Prince Maxim's route?"

"Let me see. If I remember it right, you start off in Noston. A letter comes to your father from Ignice, and you're asked to journey to the empire to fulfill the role of holy woman. Not that you're a holy woman yourself, of course. It's just that Ignice doesn't have any holy women, and since you have such strong magical powers, they thought you'd be a good stand-in. Just to tide them over, as such."

Claire took a moment to sort all that out. "Well, that certainly didn't happen. I'm no holy woman, and I'm engaged to Vik besides."

"That you are. If you're curious, that route involves you thawing Prince Maxim's frigid heart—the usual isolated prince trope. It has lots of cute cutscenes. Cooking treats together, a walk in the desert on a date, tucking in Prince Maxim at night. The works."

Claire's face stiffened. That was so very absurd as to be appalling. *But I have no reason to disbelieve him*, she thought. *The world we live in is quite a bit different from its video game source material. I know very little about this sequel game myself. If Prince Gilbert has played it, he's far more knowledgeable about it than I.*

Claire knew that she lived within the world of a video game, but there, perversely, was where her knowledge ended. She had no idea what would happen next. She could not identify the main characters or key troublemakers. She knew none of the game's particulars at all. Gilbert was blessed with a different background and knew the game inside and out. With his assistance, maybe, just maybe, she could avoid the perilous future she saw looming on the horizon. *Although I fear it'll put off Lui*, she thought ruefully. *She seems rather intent on keeping Gilbert as far away as humanly possible.*

Suddenly, a realization struck her. "Prince Gilbert," she said, "what happens in the event that Prince Maxim fails to warm up to the main

character's advances?"

"Good question," Gilbert said. "I don't know myself. Do you remember how I've been stuck in a time loop? I hit nothing but Gilbert-route bad ends over and over, and I don't have a clue what canon has to say about what happens after that. Every time, my whole country was swallowed up whole, and— Poof."

An awkward silence passed between the two of them. *So we have nothing to work with*, Claire thought. *But whatever happens could very well be dreadful, if Prince Gilbert's route is any indication. Why, his bad end involves the destruction of an entire kingdom!*

She feared the worst. Even Gilbert showed uncharacteristic concern. "Wait," he said. "Do you think...the rival and last boss show up in his bad end? That can't end well."

"It cannot," Claire said. "You spoke of a war earlier when you mentioned Princess Beatrice. I fear the empire might come to blows with our respective kingdoms, and soon."

Just moments before, Claire had entertained the hope that things couldn't go *too* badly with Gilbert's help. But she had been sorely mistaken, for all he did was panic. Not that she could blame him—all his pains to save his kingdom from certain demise, and now another bad ending threatened his people!

"Oh goodness," he said. "Whatever are we to do? I should— Oh! I should consult Pooh. He would know."

Pooh had been lording over the conversation from his vantage point above Gilbert's head up until this moment. Now, he made a derisive bark of laughter with his beak. "Pah! Pooh would not know. I on-ly know as much as you do, Gil-bert."

"That can't be!"

"When would I have the chance to learn any-thing else when I can nev-er let you out of my sight? The on-ly things I know are your sil-ly hu-man things. Fool."

"Pooh! Must you always be so rude?"

Claire ignored their budding argument and squeezed her hands together over her breast. *First saving Lui and Vik, then preventing a war between Noston and Paffuto, and purifying a tornado on top of that... I thought I was done with hardships!*

Behind her, her classmates chatted and nibbled on the buffet of goodies. The lodge's cafeteria was a mess hall in name only, for the old manor was breathtakingly gorgeous in every way. It looked like something out of a dream. Had someone told Claire it was the setting of a dating sim, she would have accepted it in a trice. Between the soaring ceilings, stained glass windows, and live orchestra, it was a strikingly handsome venue.

Claire glimpsed Vik and Beatrice exchanging a few polite words in the midst of all this finery. Beatrice looked most pleased with herself; there was the faint hint of a blush on her cheeks. Was it fake, Claire wondered? Nothing more than an act?

I can only assume her attempt to steal Professor Lesley's body is a part of some important plot, Claire thought. *That and all her letters to Vik. Or even the fact of her studying in Paffuto. This all builds to something...but what?*

Claire was rarely one to think the worst of individuals, and as such she could not fathom what designs Beatrice might've had on her prince. The more she thought about it, the more her head ached.



Lying around reflecting on the events of the evening would do Claire no good. She rose from her bed and spoke sternly. "I must get a hold of myself. If this world is to be saved, then I am the one who must do something about it."

She wanted to talk to Vik first thing, but she didn't want to explain the video game aspect. She didn't want to hurt him; she cared about him, after all. Gilbert thought this wise as well. Yet how else was Claire supposed to make her story ring true? When she had first reset her save file, she'd used the knowledge from her old life to convince her friends that she truly had traveled back in time to change the future. But what did she know now? Little and less.

"If only I could take Vik with me into my visions," she mused aloud.

Well, what if? She rummaged in her box of valuables she kept

guarded by a spell and produced her grandmother's dear curio. She admired its beautiful blue pattern and white porcelain. Once upon a time, only her grandmother used such a vessel. Perhaps that was due to her magic powers, in which case, Claire alone could use it now. Vik didn't share her strong silver magic, and neither did the rest of their friends. Even were she to light the incense burner and have Vik sleep in her chambers, she doubted he would be pulled into the vision alongside her.

Still, Claire sent up a prayer as she went to sleep and channeled her magic into the incense burner. Alas, it produced the same visions as it always did. Not a thing was different. Claire woke up the next morning to a sigh of defeat on her lips.

She found it difficult to focus on the data analysis lecture later that day. Coincidentally, the class was led by one Professor Lesley. Claire sat in the dead center of the large, tiered lecture hall, with Dion on her right, and Vik and Denis on her left. (To her amusement, she noticed Denis leaning forward and listening with the rapt attention of a student.)

I want to speak to Vik about the incense burner and Princess Beatrice, Claire thought. *But I have precious little time to convince him with my thesis on the line. Why, the only chance I can tell him we need to talk is in class.*

In hindsight, the informal dinner party the night before had been the perfect opportunity, but she hadn't learned the crux of the unsettling information until it was almost over. What rotten timing.

She listened to the professor with only half her attention, ruminating on the Beatrice situation with the other half of her mind, until Professor Lesley said, "Very well. Work among yourselves and start on your analysis."

Now that the students were free to talk, Vik turned to her. "Are you sure you want your curio to be so...eye-catching? Couldn't you use, say, something of your grandmother's?"

He nodded to the wardrobe standing on the far end of the lecture hall. It was impossible to miss; its size and opulence dwarfed even the grand setting of this hallowed place of study. Most of the students kept their curios at their seats. Not Claire. Students all

around her kept throwing furtive glances at the wardrobe. Their expressions made no secret of their curiosity, but no one said a thing to their future princess. Claire was mortified.

"I'm afraid my family's heirlooms are too precious," she said. "They wouldn't be right for a school thesis."

"And Prince Asbert's wardrobe is?"

"Well, yes. He was kind enough to lend it to me, and I couldn't possibly send it back after Oscar lugged it all the way here."

(Speaking of lugging, Claire had simply teleported it to class. The professors were scandalized—such a powerful spell had no right to be reemployed as a makeshift courier service—and Claire couldn't apologize enough for the fuss.)

Denis smirked. "You sure, Claire? The graduation thesis is as important as it comes. Here in Paffuto, we don't put much stock in resumes when aiming for employment at court. All anyone cares about are your thesis and final marks. Are you *positive* you want to write your thesis on a possession of the man you might have married?"

"Oh dear!" Claire exclaimed. "Is that really how it is?"

She hadn't known, but she *did* recognize a dreadful faux pas when she saw one. She blanched until Vik shot Denis a disgusted look. "Quit teasing her. Claire," he said, turning back to her, "don't listen to him and his nonsense. *You* would never have to submit a resume at all. You will always have a place at court, academic achievements or no academic achievements."

His final words were drowned out by a sharp whistling, and Claire turned towards the source of the noise. A girl's artifact had gone off by accident, and the class erupted into whispers as the girl hastened to apologize.

Claire smiled at the girl, then turned back to the conversation. She felt a bit bashful at Vik's ready praise. "My good prince," she teased, "I must remind you we are in the middle of a lecture. Please do save the flirtations for later."

Vik responded in kind. "My good lady, what else am I to think when you use an item belonging to your former betrothed for the grand culmination of your studies? Is this not a display of feelings for

your surly once suitor?"

Claire would have continued if not for Denis groaning, "Ugh! I did *not* mean that as an open invitation to flirt."

Claire giggled, and her trepidation evaporated. *Vik will be understanding*, she thought. *As implausible as my story sounds, I know he'll hear me out.*

She turned to face the front again and, in the corner of her open notebook page, wrote in Noston's ancient script, *I must speak to you this evening.* She angled the book in Vik's direction, taking great care to let the action appear natural.

His reply came immediately in the same archaic language: *Noted. I'll be in my dorm room.*

"My goodness," Claire muttered to herself. "This certainly is a room fit for a prince."

She took in Vik's dormitory parlor with somewhat vacant eyes. She had once lived in a dorm herself, back when she'd attended the Noston Royal Aristocratic Academy, with a special suite of rooms of her very own. Nor was she new to royal lodgings, thanks to her visits to Asbert's lavish chambers. She had doubted any of the standard lodgings in these Paffish dorms would have surprised her, but Vik's chambers exceeded her expectations by an exceptional degree. They all but took her breath away.

Vik occupied the innermost rooms of the manor—the lord's bedroom and solar, Claire assumed, from the days when the manor had housed a proper lord of its own. The rooms were so very sumptuous they rivaled the royal palace's. Calling this a lodge dormitory seemed like a joke.

For starters, there was the inexplicable spiral staircase standing in the middle of the parlor. When Claire followed its dizzying turns up three full flights, her gaze came to rest upon a chandelier dangling from the lofty ceiling. The room was furnished with only the finest things; really, any of its furniture could've done the royal palace proud. It even had side rooms of its own for Vik's guards. Said guards were ready and waiting for Claire and Dion upon their arrival.

What a luxurious room, Claire thought. *Now I understand why his*

quarters are set apart from all the other students.

"So, what is it, Claire?" Vik asked. "It must be awfully important if you couldn't even *mention* it earlier."

"Important doesn't begin to cover it," she said. She took her seat next to him.



The table seated six, but today a group of five occupied it: Claire, Vik, Lui, Denis, and Dion. It was a rather strange, almost new, sensation for there to be an empty seat. Or "Feels weird without Keith here," as Denis put it.

"I'm sure Keith has his hands full without us," Lui said. "The king's younger brother has plans to visit the Ignicean Empire, and Keith's been added to his guard detail."

Claire's eyes widened. "Duke Windsor is going to Ignice?" she asked.

"Yes," Vik said. "Paffuto maintains a close relationship with Ignice, and we make periodic visits to one another. We'll invite the Igniceans to my investiture in half a year's time too."

The king's brother was uncle to Vik and father to Nicola—the cousin currently in Noston.

My goodness, Claire thought. *Lady Nicola's father, in Ignice. As a part of a formal delegation, no less.* That discomfited her in a way she struggled to put into words, but she brushed it off and returned to the conversation at hand.

"I asked everyone here today to discuss something related to Ignice. Do you recall when I told you Princess Beatrice tried to swap bodies with Professor Lesley?"

"Yes," said Vik. "But given her station, there's little I can do to follow up on an incident I didn't witness firsthand. I've put in a private word with the general ed professors to be more careful about their wards. The magic professors have offered to grant wards to the rest of the faculty—so that's some comfort."

Claire had already reported yesterday's incident to Vik, but due to their exams, they hadn't been able to spare much time for a thorough talk. This was the first opportunity to sit down and discuss the matter in detail.

"Apart from the frequency of her curse casting, I am concerned about one more thing," Claire said. She picked up the incense burner and rested it on the table in front of her.

Denis hadn't seen it before. He examined the little object with curiosity. "Wow!" he said. "What a pretty incense burner. Is this a magic curio? There's something strange about it, that's for sure."

"You are correct; it is a curio. My grandmother, the only holy woman in Noston with silver magic, was the sole person who could use it. That's what makes it so special."

"Hot dang! What does it do?"

Claire paused to take a deep breath before answering. "It lets me see the future."

"Pardon?" Vik leaned in, startled.

"I have no control over what it shows me," she clarified. "I believe it's random. I only first activated it by accident, and all it showed me were snippets of assorted larger scenes."

That such scenes were associated with a video game's bad ending, Claire did not say. Even without that information, Vik and her friends understood the serious nature of Claire's concern.

"You mean," Vik said, "you saw something bad in our future. Something to do with Ignice."

Claire hesitated for the briefest of moments before she said, "Yes. Would you mind if I tell you more about it?"

Claire relayed the visions she had seen in the incense burner: the odd black haze wreathing Beatrice; Beatrice breaking Claire's curio on an order from the empire; Gilbert and Claire searching the library for documents and something related to a war; Vik and Asbert seated, drawn and grim-faced, around a peace conference table.

She was able to see all this, she explained, because her magic rivaled her grandmother's. Were it not for that, she could not possibly have activated the device.

When she finished, Vik was the first to speak. "I have a few questions. Who created that device of yours? How likely is it that all these things you speak of will come true? Is it possible for us to change the future?"

"I asked my family," Claire said, "and it appears we have no record of its maker. Oscar turned the house upside down trying to find clues, but...unfortunately, he was not successful. We don't even know where it came from, strangely enough. We've known that my grandmother and aunt could both predict the future, but we had no

idea until now that my grandmother used a magical device in the process."

"How accurate were your grandmother's predictions?"

"Spot on, for the most part," Claire admitted at some length.

Truthfully, if it hadn't been for her grandmother's warnings, Claire would have run straight into a bad ending herself. She only fled the Royal Aristocratic Academy the day before the graduation gala thanks to those prophecies. *Unbeknownst to me*, she added to herself, *my grandmother saw a vision of the future wherein Prince Asbert denounced me as his fiancée before a crowd of gala attendees. Thus, she made a request to Lord Salomon that he escort me to the gala in Prince Asbert's place. Prince Asbert used the opportunity to end our engagement in the student council chambers the day before the ball, and I fled that very night.*

The first time Claire had used the incense burner, she could scarce believe that it offered glimpses of the future. Yet meeting Beatrice at the retreat and hearing Gilbert's ominous warnings solidified the facts in Claire's mind. Above all else, her own rescue from fate was proof to her of the incense burner's virtue.

"We know that Princess Beatrice is using her curse often," Claire said. "Whether it is on someone else's orders, we cannot confirm or deny. However, I find it difficult to believe this is all unconnected with the potentially upcoming war."

"I agree," said Vik. "If I may be frank with you, Claire, I think everything Princess Beatrice said about having weak magic was all an act. She wants us to think her curse isn't a threat. I mean, it isn't a very princessly thing to do, is it? I would wager she wants us to grow complacent around her. She's a crafty one! I shudder to think who might be pulling her strings."

Vik fell into silent contemplation, and Lui took up the thread of the conversation. "No place is ever safe, Claire, so long as we live in it. You know this as well as I do."

Claire hesitated. "Yes," she finally said.

The Meads once planned a coup d'état against the throne. Remember? We had to catch them in the act, she reminded herself. *And in my first life, Noston and Paffuto almost went to war against*

one another. In all the recent peace, she'd quite forgotten the reason she had reset her life in the first place.

Unease prickled under her skin. She would've felt overwhelmed if not for Vik's steady gaze and firm voice.

"Right," he said. "Well, that sounds like a nasty bit of business. I vote we postpone sending the Duke to Ignice until all this blows over. Lui, would you send word to Keith? Tell him to come join us as fast as he can. Things aren't looking too good over here."

"Yes, Your Highness."

Lui's habitual placid gaze sharpened into a serious frown. She rose and departed to prepare the letter.

Group gatherings were usually cheerful affairs, but every one in the little circle of five felt the weight of emergency upon them. No one had the heart for jokes or banter. All they could do was sit in silence and listen to the rapid click of Lui's heels carry to the ceiling stories above their heads.

Princess Beatrice—Part 2

There was a fire inside Beatrice that day as she made to attend a group lecture on the graduation exam theses. The Empire cared little if she earned proper marks; her academic pursuits were of no one's concern but her own. Her sole goal in Paffuto was to carry out her brother's orders, but she loathed the notion of returning home to snide snickers.

"She has the ignorance of a commoner," some would say.

Others, "She's a princess in name only."

Paffuto's academic excellence was renowned the world over. If Beatrice could earn fantastic marks here, she might even win the approval of her naysayers at court. *I may have come from commoner stock*, she thought, *but I'm still a princess through and through. I won't make a fool of myself! I'll see to it that I score top marks.*

This aspiration drove Beatrice—unbeknownst to her companions, of course. *The graduation thesis is shrouded in such a veil of secrecy*, she thought. *But rumor has it, it's the most important part of the entire graduation exam. I mustn't trip up here!*

Beatrice sailed up the stairs, brimming with conviction, and thrust open the doors to the lecture hall. She glided in among Nery and the other girls who made up her retinue.

Her eyes immediately alighted upon a cluster of particularly illustrious figures: Prince Vik—the Crown Prince of Paffuto—and his entourage. They occupied a set of seats at the center of the room. It was the best place in the hall to catch the lecture, and yet the seats around them were curiously unoccupied.

"Why doesn't anyone sit near the prince?" Beatrice asked her retainers.

It was one of the new girls, one who hadn't come from Ignice, who answered with some trepidation, "Prince Vik is too noble for the likes of us, Your Highness. He was rather popular in his first year, you know. Everyone wanted to curry favor with him. However, he's

made it quite plain that he has his companions and consort, and the rest of us have...well, backed off, Your Highness."

"Ah. Do you count yourself among those ex-sycophants?"

"As much as it pains me to admit, yes, Your Highness. I'm afraid I gave Prince Vik many presents in my first year as a pretext for talking to him. But once he and Lady Claire became fast friends, I thought it best to give him distance. Send my love from afar, as it were."

Aha, I see, Beatrice thought. That explained why Vik had given her the boot so easily upon their first day at the retreat. It was a habit his classmates had instilled into him.

Well, that was some comfort. Beatrice still had a chance. *For my job is to cozy up with him, and if I don't do so at this retreat, then I shan't get another chance. Every little bit of information helps!*

It is perhaps worth mentioning at this point in the chronicle that a not insubstantial number of the ladies in Beatrice's retinue viewed their princess with envy. For Beatrice indeed received the royal treatment in the Ignicean Empire (excepting certain rude individuals at court), and quite a few of Beatrice's companions had borne witness to this special treatment for years. Such girls had come with her to Paffuto and boarded alongside her at the Academy.

"Do you suppose Prince Vik and Lady Claire get on as well as everyone says?" Beatrice remarked. "To be perfectly frank, I think it's all for show."

Beatrice's recalcitrant conversation partner started in alarm. "Your Highness, what makes you think that? Why, everyone knows the two are truly in love. You mustn't even suggest otherwise in front of the crown prince. You'd make him ever so displeased."

Beatrice paused before responding, "Yes, I suppose so. Forgive me. It was just an idle thought of mine."

Her retainer bobbed a curtsy. "No, forgive me for my impertinence."

Beatrice smiled at the girl, but she just couldn't shake the suspicion, no matter how hard she tried. *It's curious*, she thought, *no matter what they say. What about that rumor of the two of them having a row?* Why, she'd heard as much just the other day when

she tailed Claire to the library in Nery's body. The boy with Claire had insisted as much, and Claire's flustered response all but proved it.

I couldn't see their faces—that's the trouble with hiding in hedges, Beatrice thought, *but it hardly sounded like Lady Claire was at all happy with Prince Vik. And then there's what her chaperone mentioned. I do find it curious that Lady Claire has a man in her retinue; in Ignice, all my ladies are—well, ladies. Is there something scandalous afoot? Or does Lady Claire perhaps not come from a very good background?* The latter speculation was not without its sympathy. Beatrice hadn't lived in high society until she was fifteen herself. She had undergone a crash course in the societal know-how any lady of high birth needed, but much of what was common sense to the aristocracy went right over her head. Many of their practices seemed odd or barbaric to her, and perhaps Claire felt the same.

Beatrice looked around the room and pointed at the exact middle—where Vik and Claire sat. "Today, we'll sit behind the two of them," she told her retainers. The other students may have seen fit to give Vik his space, but she was a princess! She and Vik were on roughly equal footing, and she certainly outranked Claire.

Her ladies refused to meet her eye, but they followed her and sat where she bid. Presently, the teacher joined the students in the lecture hall. Class was about to start.

Too bad, Beatrice thought. *I was hoping I could say hello to Prince Vik and Lady Claire. It'll have to wait until after.*

She took out her journal and scrupulously jotted down the professor's comments on data collection methods. She had originally intended to keep her attention on the pair in the row in front of her, but in her dedication to her grades, she soon found herself hanging on the professor's every word.

It was only later, when Vik leaned over to Claire, that Beatrice was reminded of her true goal. She looked up from her notes.

"Are you sure you want your curio to be so...eye-catching?" Vik was saying. "Couldn't you use, say, something of your grandmother's?"

"I'm afraid my family's heirlooms are too precious," Claire

responded. “They wouldn’t be right for a school thesis.”

“And Prince Asbert’s wardrobe is?”

“Well, yes. He was kind enough to lend it to me, and I couldn’t possibly send it back after Oscar lugged it all the way here.”

The two spoke in little more than whispers, but the young man in uniform—Vik’s guard knight, Beatrice assumed—paid little attention to his own volume. “You sure, Claire?” he said. “The graduation thesis is as important as it comes. Here in Paffuto, we don’t put much stock in resumes when aiming for employment at court. All anyone cares about are your thesis and final marks. Are you *positive* you want to write your thesis on a possession of the man you might have married?”

What in heaven’s name? Beatrice thought. *Her thesis subject belonged to her ex-fiancé? Whatever is that about?*

Beatrice hadn’t even known Claire had been engaged to another young gentleman before Vik. She might not have been in high society long, but she knew what that made Claire: damaged goods. *And holding a candle for her old flame, at that!* Beatrice added to herself. It boggled the mind.

She scowled. What had possessed Vik to offer his hand in marriage to such an unlikely candidate? Had he been forced into this engagement? Well, that certainly lent credence to the theory that Vik and Claire were not as close as they seemed.

Meanwhile, Claire whispered back, “Oh dear! Is that really how it is?”

“Quit teasing her,” said Vik. “Claire, don’t listen to him and his nonsense. *You* would never have to submit a resume at all. You will always have a place at court, academic achievements or no academic achievements.”

At that precise moment, a sharp whistling noise interrupted the conversation. Someone’s magical artifact had gone off. The class erupted in a frenzy of muttered whispers such that even once the whistling had stopped, Beatrice could not make out the rest of Vik and Claire’s conversation. *A shame*, she thought, *as I went to all the trouble of sitting behind them.*

Eavesdropping was not ladylike, but Beatrice was more than just

a lady. She was here in her capacity as a spy. She wished she could have listened in longer, but what she did hear was enough to paint a clearer picture of the prince's relationship to his fiancée.

If Lady Claire's academic record matters little, Beatrice thought, *Prince Vik must not expect her to act in any official capacity as a queen. He doesn't trust her. Odd, though, that a girl he doesn't trust should write his letters for him.*

At least it explained the row Beatrice had heard so much about. The differences in their birth and upbringing were walls, and some walls were simply insurmountable.

Now that I look back on it, Beatrice recalled, *Lady Claire seemed unsettled at our first meeting, and she reacted strangely when Prince Vik called her his fiancée. Now I think I see why. It's all connected.*

Claire may have been betrothed to Vik on paper, but all was not as it seemed.

At first, Beatrice had taken a special interest in Claire as the rival for Vik's affections and the kindhearted correspondent. Yet the more Beatrice learned about her, the more she couldn't help but realize what similar circumstances the two had grown up in. Her heart went out to the poor girl.

Really, Beatrice's Cinderella story was not all it was cracked up to be. She was ostracized from most of high society, and she knew so very little of customs and manners that calling her an imperial princess was something of a joke. Even her own brother, the crown prince, saw her as a laughingstock. Beatrice withered under the constant scrutinizing gaze of her adult critics.

Thus, even though Beatrice thought Claire ill-educated and backward, she did so with empathy. It warmed her heart to think perhaps there was someone else out there just like her.

She recalled the letter written in Claire's hand and signed with Vik's name. *Perhaps I felt such a warm affection from her words because she hasn't been tutored in all these manners and malarkey either. Prince Vik seems to think so. He won't trust her with a position at court once she's queen.*

Now that she had convinced herself of the matter, nothing could

change Beatrice's mind. In her imagination, Claire was little more than an uneducated waif saddled with marriage to a crown prince by some misfortune as yet unknown to Beatrice. *I suppose these sorts of things happen everywhere*, she thought. *Again, I can't fathom why he chose her, but it's really for the best if I dissolve her engagement and let her go free. It's the kindest thing to do.*

Yes, Claire and Vik couldn't possibly be happy with one another. Beatrice was sure of it.

Chapter 22

The retreat ran for four weeks and was divided into two broad portions. In the first week, students consulted with professors and drafted their theses. They would, if necessary, conduct experiments on their curios to collect and analyze data, whereupon they would spend the following week polishing their budding reports. These activities constituted the first half of the retreat.

Following a three-day break, students proceeded to the second, testing portion. All pupils sat written exams on week three and demonstrated their aptitude in practical exams on week four.

Marks were posted on the final day, at which point it was determined which students were eligible to graduate. The unlucky pupils who failed to net the required scores were demoted to second-years and were unable to continue the graduation festivities with the rest of their class. The decision could not be overturned. Even the most powerful monarch or richest nobility could not force the Academy's hand and ensure their prized pupil passed without having the marks for it.

A lavish ball once marked the end of the retreat, but when a young man of particularly prominent standing had failed to graduate and the event became a rather more somber affair, commencement was celebrated with a casual get-together at the halfway mark of the graduation exams. With the challenging theses out of the way, it served as a chance for students to catch their breath before plunging into the testing block.

Claire was just leaving the cafeteria at the end of lunch when Beatrice, eyes glowing with excitement, stopped her for what proved to be the very last thing Claire would have expected.

"I beg your pardon?" she said. "You would like me to attend the post-thesis party with you?"

Beatrice bestowed a charming grin upon her. "Oh yes. I hear it's rather casual, being a school function and all. We shan't need any gentlemen escorts, now will we, dear? I thought this the perfect opportunity to get to know each other better. Please do say yes!"

"You're most kind. I'm honored you'd even ask," Claire said. But internally, she thought, *How do I get myself out of this one?*

The ball marked the halfway point in this long and arduous process. Claire's classmates assured her that everyone forgot all about marks and social standings during the festivities. If there was ever a time to let one's hair down and rub shoulders with their superiors, it was this. And now here was Beatrice, inviting Claire to do just that.

Claire wanted to give Beatrice as wide a berth as possible. She was horribly torn. *If this isn't motivated by some treachery, then I would be thrilled*, she thought. *But I'm not so naive. Especially not now.*

Not when there was trouble afoot. Vik had ordered Keith's return a few days past, but Keith had never shown up. Instead, the group had received a laundry list of excuses from the guard captain who had borrowed Keith: *"Now isn't the right time."* And *"Duke Windsor daren't do a thing without Sir Keith."* And *"I'm afraid he's very busy with important duties, and I cannot send him back until his work is complete for fear of leaking state secrets."*

Having made no headway there, Vik sent an apoplectic Lui to the castle to fetch him back in person. If anyone could talk some sense into that fool of a guard captain, it was her.

Unfortunately, that meant the person who usually cast the crown prince's wards was gone. Now it fell to Claire to protect Vik.

Vik is perfectly capable of casting his own wards, Claire knew, *but he wouldn't dare with Princess Beatrice and her curse around. And I shouldn't dare to leave him alone either. Were his ward to break, I would need to be there to recast it at once.*

Claire might have accepted if the timing were better, but the last thing Claire and Vik needed now was Beatrice hovering around. Besides, Claire found it odd that Beatrice should be so eager for her company—but she lacked the authority to snub an imperial princess.

She could have asked Vik to swoop in and save the day, but that had the potential of developing into a horrible scandal.

She shot Vik, standing a few paces away, a look with her eyes telling him to stay where he was. She would figure this out herself—but how?

Fortunately, she never needed to find out, because that was when Gilbert butted into the conversation. "Lady Claire! Say, are you talking about the ball? Might I be allowed to join you?"

"Prince Gilbert?" she said, thanking her lucky stars. (Gilbert was the Prince of Lupty and, besides Vik, the closest person to equal status with Beatrice.) "I wasn't aware you had permission to attend."

Gilbert beamed with triumph. "You tease. I won't be *un*welcome, surely. I've been kept out of most of the exam proceedings to avoid leaking state secrets, so it's the least the professors can do to allow me to attend the ball."

Ah, Claire thought. She eyed Pooh taking lunch atop his chatty owner's head, using his beak to adroitly hollow out and swallow the flesh of a crop of deep-red berries. (Claire was under the impression owls were carnivores who might have preferred meat or bugs. Presumably, this was artistic license on the part of the game's creators.)

Gilbert, unconcerned with the lunching passenger on his head, was in high spirits—evidently, at being "allowed" to go to the ball. Claire smiled in secondhand embarrassment at the habitually unprincely prince.

"Well, aren't you lucky," she said, not unkindly.

"About that—" Beatrice began to say, but just then, a ripe red berry exploded atop Gilbert's head. Sticky juice splattered his shoulders and face. Gilbert squawked in alarm.

"Pipe down," said the unrepentant owl.

"Pipe down?! You covered me with your meal! And here I am without a ward—"

Beatrice jumped.

Oh no, Claire thought. She stepped in to rescue Gilbert. "Without a ward to target berry juice, you mean," she said. "Which is the case for all of us, I should imagine."

Gilbert shot her a confused look. “Oh no, I haven’t any wards at all. Why would I need them? This retreat is full of professors, some of whom are the best mages around!”

Oh, goodness gracious, Claire thought. *Gilbert, you are...one of a kind.*

Her rescue may not have been the most elegant; she granted that much. It was difficult to improvise. Even so, his response was perhaps the most asinine thing she’d ever heard. She had wanted to hide Gilbert’s less-than-ideal ward-wearing habits from Beatrice. She hadn’t expected he would flat-out rebut her.

Vik stepped in and caught her shoulder before she could collapse on the spot from Gilbert-induced exhaustion. “Prince Gilbert, that strikes me as a bit negligent. You aren’t on your home soil, you know.”

Gilbert started. “Do you think so? Well, yes, I suppose. Pooh, could you put a ward on me? Just for safety’s sake. To be clear, I—I was already wearing a ward! But it never hurts to have another.”

Finally, Gilbert grasped the urgency of the situation and turned his back to Pooh. Really, what was he doing? He knew that Beatrice was a rival in the game!

“As you com-mand, Your Roy-al Hand-ful.” Pooh tapped a wing to Gilbert’s back, and a magic wind sprang up, ruffling Pooh’s feathers.

I’ve never seen Pooh cast a ward before, Claire thought. *Goodness, that must be a strong one. Just look at how much magic is coming from his wings.* It was a stirring sight. One didn’t have to be Lui to be intrigued.

But Claire forgot all her curiosity when Gilbert groaned and began to be ill. Claire turned to him in alarm. His face was pale; he looked like he was in excruciating pain.

Did someone slip something in his lunch?! she thought. If he was poisoned, there was nothing to be done for it. Without a ward, any such contaminants would go straight into his system.

“Prince Gilbert, let me run and fetch a doctor!” Claire exclaimed.

But Pooh stopped her before she could go far. “He’ll be fine.”

“How can you say that? Just look at him!”

“Don’t wor-ry. It’s the ward. He nev-er does well with my wards.”

"I beg your pardon? What?"

She looked from Gilbert to Pooh and back. Gilbert heaved himself into a chair and slumped over the tabletop. He listlessly lifted his head and, eyes hollow, muttered, "This always happens. I hate Pooh's wards... Oh, Sir Lui, please do come back to me soon..."

"Even when she does, she won't have anything to do with you or your wards," Vik said. He draped his uniform jacket over the other prince's back to lessen the sting of his words. "And I'm not exactly looking to lend out my retainers, you know."

"This is the nicest example of being rotten I've ever heard of," groaned the half-dead Gilbert. "Or maybe the rottenest example of being nice."

When Pooh said his wards didn't agree with Gilbert, I had no idea he meant anything like this, Claire thought. *Small wonder Gilbert hates wards.*

"If I might ask," she said, "if you knew it would affect you so badly, why didn't you bring one of the court mages from Lupty to cast your wards?"

"Oh, you know no one in Lupty gives a fig about me," Gilbert sighed. "No court mage in their right mind would accompany a good-for-nothing second prince like me. Isn't it sad? Ugh, let me sleep this off in the infirmary. Take me there, Pooh."

"Shan't."

"But Pooh!"

The ensuing drama of getting Gilbert to the infirmary distracted the class for the rest of lunch.

"You know what?" Vik remarked when it was all over. "Prince Gilbert's a funny fellow. I think I'd like to try one of Pooh's wards too."

The smile on Claire's face froze in an awkward rictus. "Vik..."

In all the hubbub, they quite forgot about Beatrice. But Beatrice did not forget about them. Oh no. *She* watched the proceedings with great interest.

The next few days passed in a whirlwind of activity. Soon, only

three days remained before the theses were due. The student body was a veritable beehive of nerves. The playful mood that had hung over the retreat in its first few days was all but gone. With graduations on the line, tensions climbed higher than ever.

Claire was swept up in the studying fever as well. She worked well into the evening inside the laboratories, her pen racing across the fresh white sheets of paper.

Eventually, she signed off on the final paragraph.

"Done at last!" she cried.

Claire was ahead of many of her fellow pupils, as she had begun her research the very day she'd arrived at the retreat. She was, in fact, the first in the room to finish.

She stretched, and as she did, she noticed Dion had nodded off in his seat next to her. *He said he only has a bit more to go himself*, she recalled. *He's been cramming as hard as I have these past few days.*

It was already dark out, and precious few students lingered in the laboratory at this hour. One of them was Vik, still writing a few seats away. He was so engrossed in his work Claire hated to distract him. And what of Dion—should she wake him up?

Before she could make up her mind, there was a knock on the door. A professor wouldn't have knocked. Nor would a student within the same study group. Perhaps it was a student from another laboratory, or a completely unrelated figure. *Although, I shan't think the retreat allows any random visitors*, Claire thought. *It's probably someone come to check on a friend.*

She crossed to the door and opened it to find—

"Good evening, Miss Claire. Could I borrow you for a quick word?"

—Gilbert. Yes, that was about as completely unrelated as it got.

If he came to fetch me at this hour, she thought, *perhaps he has some new information about Princess Beatrice.* She'd already mentioned to him that she had filled in Vik, Denis, and Lui. If he had fresh news to share, it was only right that they hear it too. Yet why hadn't Gilbert asked for Vik too, when Vik was in the very same room?

Claire nodded, but something about this just didn't seem right.

To avoid disrupting the other students still hard at work, Claire and Gilbert seated themselves on a bench just outside the room.

"Lady Claire, how is— Excuse me. Miss Claire, how is your thesis coming along?"

Why had he stopped to correct himself? That was odd. "Fine, thank you," she said.

"I was hoping to learn more about these graduation theses, and I was wondering if you might show me yours."

Claire hesitated. "Why mine?" she eventually said.

"To learn more about the Paffuto Royal Academy. The theses are part of the Academy's curriculum, and so I really ought to see a student's paper."

"As in, you want to check the rigor of our data? That sort of thing?" It was an unusually studious request, coming from Gilbert.

He nodded. "Precisely. Paffuto's top-class curriculum is renowned the world over. I'd love it if my kingdom could catch up."

"I see," Claire said. *He has a point*, she thought, *but I can't possibly give him my thesis before I turn it in.*

Then she had an idea. "Why don't you ask the professors? I'm sure they'd be happy to show you the very best theses once the exams are over. Mine hasn't been graded yet, so I'm afraid it may not be up to snuff."

Gilbert looked torn. "Oh no. That simply won't do."

Why? Was Claire's suggestion really such a bad one? Something about this made her feel uneasy. *He's acting off tonight*, she thought. *If nothing else, the Prince Gilbert I know would never have such a serious conversation with me.* She wasn't trying to poke fun; it was a legitimate doubt, given Gilbert's usual behavior.

He noticed her staring at him. "To be perfectly frank," he started, and then paused. "Your thesis is due in three days, isn't it? As a prince myself, I've had plenty of formal schooling too, you know. I could help you finish it up, if you'd like."

"I beg your pardon?" she said.

"Do let me see it. You must be almost done, surely."

Claire fell silent. He may have had a smile on his face, but his

repeated insistence to see her thesis made her deeply uneasy.

I was right, she thought. *Something is wrong with him. And this most certainly is not the conversation about averting the bad ending I thought it would be.*

Gilbert remained oblivious of her growing guardedness and carried on with his same affable grin. "Don't be shy! I'd love to help you, Miss Claire—as a friend. We are friends, aren't we? I'm so looking forward to spending the evening with you at the upcoming ball."

Claire did not know what to say. Surely everyone, the poor prince included, knew there wasn't a bit of brains rattling around in that noggin. Whyever would he offer to help her with her academics? Besides, Gilbert didn't care to ingratiate himself with Claire. He only had eyes for Lui. Claire could easily imagine him inviting Lui to the ball in such a straightforward manner, but the only person who wanted to spend time with Claire was...

Wait a minute, Claire thought. *Is Prince Gilbert...*

Dread swept through her. She sprang to her feet, and not a moment too soon—for she heard an angry voice calling her name. It was Vik's. Wasn't he working on his thesis? Why had he followed Claire into the hallway, and why was there such a scowl on his face, matched only by her look of discomfort?



Vik's arrival relieved her and caused Gilbert to scramble off the bench. "Why, Prince Vik!" he exclaimed. "What a pleasure to see you."

"What is all this about?" Vik said, ignoring the pleasantries. "You and Claire may be good friends, but this is going too far."

"Is it?" Gilbert asked. "Where's the harm in offering a friend help with her coursework? It'd be a good bonding activity—a chance to mend fences. Do say yes, Lady Claire."

"Let me rephrase the question," Vik said. His stern glare stood in sharp contrast to Gilbert's beguilingly cheerful smile. "Where is Pooh? Why isn't he with you?"

Gilbert tripped over his tongue. "He—He's in my room. Eating his supper of berries, last I checked... I see I've rather outstayed my welcome. Beg pardon." Then, he turned and scampered away.

Vik spared him a parting glance before turning to Claire. "Is there a way to tell if someone is under a curse?"

"No, I don't believe so," she said. "The spell caster's eyes flash red upon initiation of the curse, but once that wears off, it's nigh impossible to know."

"Damn. I'm sorry I didn't notice him creeping on you earlier. Are you sure nothing happened?"

His eyes flicked to Gilbert's departing figure once more before returning to Claire. She realized he shared her suspicions.

"Yes, I'm quite all right," she said. "He really did just want to talk to me about my thesis. Which is surprising, knowing Prince Gilbert."

"I wouldn't think anything of you and him talking, mind," Vik said. "It was just the tone of your voice that tipped me off. You sounded upset."

"Thank you. Yes, there was something very...odd about Prince Gilbert today. He wasn't himself."

Vik nodded. The unspoken—that Beatrice had stolen his body—passed between them.

"I agree. Pity I can't have her apprehended on the grounds of casting a curse while on Paffish soil. I didn't catch her in the act. And she's an imperial princess besides. We need solid proof, or all we'll do is breed international unrest."

Certainly, Claire thought. One needed to tread carefully when facing an imperial princess. Their circumstantial evidence would not hold much water in a court of law, and Beatrice could easily talk her way out of all charges.

"If we could perhaps catch Prince Gilbert in Princess Beatrice's body, that might do the trick," Claire thought. "But I doubt we'll be successful."

"I'd be shocked if she hasn't taken some precautions against that. Prince Gilbert is probably snoring away on a full dose of a sleeping draught as we speak." Vik paused. "Ah, I see now. This is a clever bit of business, and I would bet anything the crown prince is behind it. Well, that's troublesome!"

Claire felt as somber as Vik looked. *Prince Gilbert himself admitted that he wasn't wearing a ward*, she thought. *Nor do any of his uniforms bear wards. Small wonder Princess Beatrice targeted him.*

Yet she was still missing one piece of the puzzle. "If that was Princess Beatrice just now," Claire said, "what possessed her to come to me? I don't think I have any information worth much to a spy. Do I?"

Instead of answering, Vik looked off into the distance. He sighed. "You might be overthinking it. I imagine she wanted to drive a wedge between us by making it look like you were cozying up to Prince Gilbert. There's a political side to it, I'd wager. Ignice wants to be in Paffuto's good graces, and that's why they're sending their princess after me. I had taken steps to prevent this from happening, but, well—see how that went."

Claire was impressed at Vik's foresight. No wonder he had been so on guard in their first meeting with Princess Beatrice. *That explains why he went out of his way to introduce me as his fiancée in public*, she thought. *In hindsight, I suppose that was out of character for him. I should've noticed, but I was too preoccupied with these visions, and—and all this prophecy stuff! Oh, what a rotten fiancée I make!*

"I'm sorry," Claire said. "I had no idea about any of this."

"You have nothing to apologize for. What, you think a little thing

like this will stop me?" His voice softened. "That said, there's an awful lot of unexpected happenings these days. Couldn't have asked for worse timing either."

"Truly. Goodness... If Princess Beatrice wanted to make you mistrust me, hounding me about my thesis is an awfully funny way to do it."

Claire shared Vik's anxiety about the complicated web of politics closing in around them. However, when she looked up at her steadfast prince, the knot of fear in her chest loosened. With him there, perhaps everything would turn out all right.



Gilbert raced away from Claire's and Vik's distrustful looks until he finally staggered to a stop at the door of "his" room. He glanced around to make sure the coast was clear and slipped inside. Woe betide he who was caught sneaking into a girl's room! Or perhaps not. *That's the least of this fellow's troubles*, Beatrice thought.

Gilbert lacked the warded uniform of Academy pupils and was such a dunce that he hadn't thought to secure a ward from one of his court mages. A prince without a ward—what more could Beatrice have asked for? Of course she'd slipped into his body. His authority unlocked so many more opportunities for her. Maxim would be thrilled.

"Beatrice" slumbered on her bed with a handful of her companions seated around her. Nery looked up at her mistress's entrance and said, "Welcome back, Your Highness."

"I see he hasn't given you any trouble," Beatrice said. "Good. And thank you for your assistance."

Her companions were hers in name only. Truthfully, they answered to the crown prince. They were but Beatrice's assistants for the duration of this stay. She didn't trust them; she led them to believe she had taken Gilbert's body on Maxim's orders. *Which is a slight fib*, she thought, *but no matter. I am more concerned with Prince Vik and Lady Claire. They noticed "I" was acting strange. I wasn't aware that they knew Prince Gilbert well enough to spot such*

little details.

She picked up the hand of her slumbering body. There was a potion-doused handkerchief in the unconscious girl's grip.

"How much did you give him?" Beatrice asked.

"A strong dose, as Your Highness ordered," said Nery.

"Excellent. Thank you. We have extra reason to be cautious with this young man. He's a prince. Were someone to catch us, we'd be in no end of trouble."

The sleeping draught wiped the memories of Beatrice's unfortunate victims. She never used it when she swapped bodies with her companions, but on any other occasion, she made sure to press the handkerchief to their noses the moment the spell went off. One inhale, and the unlucky soul was out like a light. They never remembered a thing upon waking, save for a dull blur. Should the swap fail, as it had with Professor Lesley, she took care to wipe their memories but forwent the sleeping draught.

Such draughts, of course, never worked against those properly safeguarded with wards. *It was a lucky blessing Prince Gilbert admitted he was without a ward in the cafeteria earlier*, Beatrice thought. *Doubly so without a warded uniform. If not for that, I couldn't have claimed his body and slipped off to see Lady Claire!*

"Beatrice's" lifeless hand still in hers, Beatrice activated the spell. Everything went hazy. It was, she reflected, rather like her soul had come unmoored and was *floating* between bodies. She felt untethered, suspended, as she slipped into unconsciousness.

A few seconds later, Beatrice opened her eyes. She was on her bed, and her assistants helped steady an unconscious Gilbert as he staggered beside her. He wouldn't wake for another few minutes, she judged.

"Return him to his room," she said, "and take care not to be seen."

"What should we do about that owl of his, Your Highness? We saw it looking for the prince earlier, so we bribed it with more berries."

"That was clever of you. Let's hope it's still eating. It'll go looking for its master again once its belly is full—and by then, the prince will

be in his room to be found, now won't he?"

"As you say, Your Highness."

The girls packed the slumbering prince into a wooden chest and bore it—and him—from the room. The door closed behind them, leaving Beatrice alone with her thoughts.

"I had hoped Lady Claire would give me her thesis," she murmured. "Too bad Prince Vik intervened."

She had hoped to gain access to the thesis—it must have been nearly complete by now—and trash it before Claire could turn it in.

"For if I am to have any hope of wedding Prince Vik, Lady Claire can't score well on her exams. It will be very, very difficult to break this engagement, no matter how little love is lost between the two. No, it will take proving that Lady Claire is not fit for the role."

There was every chance Claire *was* a poor student; Beatrice had no way of knowing. But she doubted it. It wouldn't make sense with Claire's diligent attitude. Thus, Beatrice's plan was to borrow the thesis and, in such a way as to escape Claire's notice, nick a few of the pages. Claire's thesis would fail to satisfy the rubric, and then Claire could kiss her chances of passing goodbye.

"But I wasn't able to get my hands on it," Beatrice said. "Fingers crossed Lady Claire bombs it on her own..."

She sighed and turned to her desk. The letter to Vik's investiture still lay there.

"Every little girl dreams she'll leave home and have a prince fall in love with her at first sight, but oh! It isn't all it's cracked up to be, is it, Lady Claire? I can only wonder how a girl of such lowly birth should have wound up engaged to a prince—and she doesn't dare refuse him, because he's the best marriage opportunity she's ever bound to get. The poor girl."

The letter had wormed its way into Beatrice's heart. Why, she liked it so much she had brought it with her all the way from Ignice.

She picked it up and reread the words she had already read so many times that she had committed them to memory: *It must be lonesome and dreary, being so far from Ignice. However, I do hope you will find it in your heart to love Paffuto as a second home. Know that you have a supporter and friend in me. I will always be praying*

for your happiness from afar.

She knew these were mere formalities. But for a girl who was only her brother's pawn, a girl with no real friends, the first well-wishes she had ever received could mean the world.

Maxim told me to do everything in my power to make Prince Vik fall in love with me. But to be frank, I don't ever see it working. I may be a fool of a girl off the streets, with no education to speak of, but even I can tell he hates me, she thought.

She had written him letters like her life depended on it, and his sporadic responses only drove her to write with further desperation. Eventually, she began receiving replies in bulk, which was when she realized that they weren't being written by him. She only had the ear of one of the prince's retainers. Oh, those stupid, insincere words in their beautiful handwriting...

But then one day, a letter arrived in another lordly hand, and this one positively glowed with warmth. The handwriting did not match that of the rest of the letters. She was convinced: Vik had finally written to her.

Her illusions were shattered on the first day of the graduation retreat. Vik had not written to her at all. No, Beatrice's warmhearted writer was none other than Lady Claire of Noston, Prince Vik's fiancée.

The ensuing storm of emotions had almost overwhelmed her. When the clouds cleared, only a single feeling remained. It was not jealousy. Rather, it was pity.

"Here is a girl in a sorrier state than me," she said. "Oh, how I wish I could set her free from this unwanted engagement. I can never escape court due to my wretched curse, but Lady Claire, you have a chance! Wouldn't you be so much happier married to that Luptian prince?"

Had her plans not gone awry, she would have sunk both Claire's grades and her "romance" in one fell swoop. Alas!

A knock on the door interrupted Beatrice's ruminations. "Who is it?" she called.

She opened the door. It was Nery.

"We returned Prince Gilbert to his room, Your Highness," Nery

reported. "You also have mail—a letter from Your Highness's mother, and one from the crown prince. Please do take care not to leave him waiting."

Beatrice's heart sank. "I shan't. Thank you."

Nery's smile was frigid. What need did she have for Beatrice's gratitude? She bobbed a light curtsy, said her farewells, and sailed off down the corridor.

Beatrice clenched her fists around the letters. *What does my brother want now?* she cursed inwardly. *Not another of his awful requests, I hope.*

Then there was the other letter: the one from her mother, who still lived in the little rural hamlet Beatrice had grown up in.

She decided to get the worst over with first and undid the seal on Maxim's letter. The envelope contained only one sheet of paper, as per usual. It did *not* contain an iota of concern for his little half-sister all alone in a foreign kingdom, occupied with the nerve-racking work of a spy. It was all business.

"Let's see here," said Beatrice. "'I demand an update. Have you cozied up to Prince Vik yet?' Oh, I can't possibly tell him the truth."

She had not ingratiated herself to Vik in the slightest. She was no closer to him than any other pupil in her class. Her spirited efforts to charm him on the first day of the retreat had earned her nothing but total rejection. She had no progress to report—*but I daren't say that*, she told herself. She quailed at the thought of his inevitable anger.

Prince Maxim was a devout follower of Ignealism, a faith that had sprung up in Ignice in recent years. He would give his empire for his faith if he had his way. He did not, as his opponents were many, but Maxim was not content to let the voice of the majority stifle his ambitions. Were he to gain an unbreakable tie to the similarly powerful country Paffuto via his little sister's hand in marriage, he could bypass the many dissenting voices in the Ignicean court. Whether that was in the Empire's best interest, Beatrice did not know, but she was hardly in a place to challenge him. Her brother's orders were law. She was both a spy and just another piece on his chessboard. The game? To win Paffuto.

Truth be told, Beatrice feared Maxim might have asked too much

of her. But what could she do, save follow his orders? She didn't want to go back to grubbing in the dirt for her daily bread in her impoverished hometown. *Nor do I want my mother to brave that same struggle*, she thought. *My mother's life and livelihood rest on my shoulders.*

Thoughts of her mother fresh in her mind, she broke the seal on the second envelope. A thick sheaf of papers tumbled out of it, the antithesis of her brother's correspondence. It would, she judged, take several hours just to read through it all.

I do hope mother isn't faring too poorly, she thought.

Oh, her sweet mother. The peasant woman lived all alone in a hovel on the far outskirts of the Ignicean Empire and depended on the money Beatrice sent home. A commoner she may have been, but this commoner had given birth to an imperial princess. Didn't she deserve to live in the royal palace? Beatrice had once begged for that very thing, but her brother shot the idea down before the request ever reached the emperor's ears. Maxim hadn't even pretended to entertain the notion.

Thus, Beatrice was left trapped in her current predicament.

I must carry out my brother's orders to the letter, she thought. *I simply must. And to do that, I need to ace these exams and win Prince Vik's hand in marriage!*

Without warning, a chill ran through her. She grabbed her arms and shuddered, and the awful sensation ebbed away as quickly as it had come on. Her unease grew, for she did not know when it would strike again.

She pulled her two letters close, armed with a fresh determination. And yet, for all her renewed purpose, she could not hide the slight tremor in her hands.

Chapter 23

Three days later, the post-thesis retreat ball was in full swing. All the pupils dressed in their finest clothes, and many a student relished the opportunity to cut loose for a while before diving back into the fray. The dulcet tones of a live orchestra accompanied the handful of engaged couples waltzing through the center of the grand hall. The rest of the student body lingered on the edges of the room, chatting and laughing with their fellow exam takers. Smiles lit up every face. The stress that had ignited the student body for days on end had vanished, almost as if it had never been there in the first place.

Claire looked out over the happy room from the vantage point of the terrace where she, Dion, and Lydia had stepped out to catch their breaths. If only Claire could have shared in the communal joy.

"We have three days of break," she said, "and then the written exams. I can't fathom how the others can put the exams out of mind so quickly... Oh, what am I saying? I'm a silly fool for worrying when I should be celebrating."

The true source of her worries was Beatrice, but with Lydia present, she couldn't make any obvious moves to spy on the princess. That was Claire's trouble. She was diligent to a fault, and that meant she struggled to relax. Vik, however, had the opposite problem.

"The exams won't be for another few days no matter how much you fuss over them," he reminded her. "And you've studied so much your head is fit to burst. Let yourself relax for a change."

"I suppose I should," she said. "But that's easier said than done." She could tell herself to relax as much as she wanted, but that made it no easier to get through the evening.

Denis and Dion caught each other's eyes and grinned. "Boy, is it good to be back!" Denis crowed. "You know, I partied so hard in my

year that I had the mother of all hangovers the next morning. And then there was Lui, who went back to cramming the moment the ball was over. She spent the next two days with her nose in a book too."

"If Claire's stressed about these written exams, then what hope do I have?" said Dion, not unhappily. "I didn't try half as hard as she did on my report and studying both. I might as well give up now."

"Oh, Dion, don't say that," Claire hurried to interject.

Lydia smiled. "Your concerns are understandable, Lady Claire. But do let's forget about the exams for one evening. We should enjoy ourselves." She paused. "Although if you're willing to talk shop, I'd love to know more about that enormous curio you researched."

"Tut, tut," Denis tsked. "Don't mention the you-know-what around Vik."

Vik, not pleased at having been drawn into the conversation, scowled at the wine glass in his hand. "I'm not that prickly. It's just a wardrobe. An enormous, magical wardrobe, but still." He paused, then muttered in an undertone, "An enormous, magical wardrobe that belongs to Claire's onetime fiancé, but *still.*"

"Vik, it really isn't like that," Claire said. Oh, she *knew* that was still eating at him!

Vik grinned; he had meant it as a joke. "I'm curious about your oversized wardrobe too, actually. It's an heirloom of the Nostonian royal family, isn't it? How does it work?"

"I ran a few experiments on it for my thesis," Claire said. "As it turns out, it has quite a few more features apart from its pocket dimension's infinite carrying capacity. A special magic key lets it function like a normal wardrobe, but items in *this* wardrobe cannot come to harm."

Vik paused with his glass halfway to his lips. "So it's rather like a shelter, then."

Claire nodded. "Yes. I wonder if perhaps that was its original intent when it was built all those years ago."

"That would explain why Prince Asbert has it, then. Say it was originally passed down from king to prince, and as the wars ended and this era of peace began, it wound up as little more than a

glorified box. Some might say it's a shame it's going unused, but honestly, I rather prefer it that way. Better to have one and never need it."

"I agree," Claire said. "It's a shame I don't have the time to look into it further."

Vik grinned, a bit ruefully. "That's where your head is? Sounds like I need to give you a wardrobe of my own."

"Vik?" Claire didn't follow.

Vik's cheeks turned a delicate pink. "The thesis is done and dusted. No more talking of Prince Asbert."

Ah, Claire thought. Although his comment about the wardrobe was half spoken in jest, there lay buried in it a kernel of jealousy. He was not fond of her assiduous focus aimed at a possession of the man she once might have married.

A brisk autumn breeze swept across the terrace, but Claire, basking in the warmth from the hall, didn't feel the chill. She noticed, then, that it was just her and Vik out here. Their companions must have slipped away—remaining close, to be sure, but just far enough to give the two lovebirds their privacy.

Claire gazed out over the laughing, dancing crowd of familiar faces. For the ball, her classmates had forgone their regular uniforms and the special retreat uniforms alike. It made her wonder what all her fellow pupils might get up to after graduation, when they were adults in high society, and that thought brought a smile to her face.

"These two years flew by," she said.

"You're telling me."

The Royal Academy served future lords and ladies, many of whom would spend the rest of their lives bumping into one another at court—particularly those in such central positions as Claire and Vik. Claire would have many opportunities to see her old friends again. Watching them now, she imagined what it might be like.

Vik joined her in contemplating their shared future and, at length, remarked, "If we count your first life, hasn't it been more like two and a half?"

"Yes, I suppose so. Goodness, but that was a rough patch," she

recalled. “Half the time, I was too stressed to have a moment to think. Most of that was spent working for the Reines as Lady Isabella’s governess. I’d never experienced anything quite like life with the Reines. They made every day an adventure.”

Vik smiled at her. “Tell me about you and me. You didn’t live in the palace back then, I assume.”

“No, I lived with the baron’s family. As unbelievable as it sounds, you came by every day just to see me.”

“Every single day?” Vik repeated, impressed. “That must have caused a stir.”

Yes, if one assumed the prince paid formal visits to the baron’s estate. But Prince Vik hadn’t bothered with such trivial matters as coming in through the front door.

“Nothing quite so formal as you’re imagining,” Claire assured him. “You came to my window through the garden.”

Vik fell silent.

“Just to share a cup of tea,” Claire hastened to add.

“Ah,” Vik eventually managed. He studiously made a point of avoiding her eyes. “I do recall you saying I came to your window, but...every day? Really?”

“Really.”

“With no warning? I simply tromped through the baron’s garden and rapped on your windowpane?”

“You most certainly did.” She cocked her head to the side. “Why, did I never tell you?”

Vik snorted. “No! I didn’t realize I visited you that frequently or...problematically. I’m sorry to say it sounds just like me.”

“Well, it *was* you, Vik.”

“I wish I could’ve been there to see it. I’m more than a bit jealous of my other self, I must admit.”

Going back in time was impossible, but she knew this wish was his way of expressing interest in what had first brought them together. She found the gesture sweet.

“I am fond of those older days,” she admitted. “I wish I could go back and relive them with you too.”

Vik’s expression morphed into a cocky grin. “Too bad you never

graduated in your first life. Then you'd know what's on the exams."

"Oh, Vik, you're silly."

A red-faced Lydia chose that opportunity to return to the terrace with two wine glasses in hand. "May I offer you a drink, Lady Claire?" she said. "The cocktails they're serving are ever so sweet. I can't get enough!"

"You're most kind," said Claire.

Oh goodness, she added privately. *Not alcohol.* She accepted the offered glass but hesitated to take a sip. In her first life, the night she'd discovered her dear departed mother was the princess of a fallen kingdom, Claire had drunk a tad more than she ought to have and blurted out the entire story of her hidden origins. It was not her finest moment. She'd scarce touched the stuff since. *I make it a habit not to imbibe*, she thought, *but I suppose having a glass* is *the done thing at balls.*

Denis noticed her hesitation and chimed in. "It doesn't hurt to have a glass once in a blue moon, Claire. Your exams are over! It's a ball! If that's not reason to let loose, what is?"

She wrestled with herself before admitting, "You're not wrong. Very well, I will have a glass. Goodness, but it smells delightful!"

She took a quick sip and marveled at the sweet peach and tangy citrus flavor. Lydia was right. It was wonderfully sweet.

Lydia giggled at Claire's wide-eyed joy. "Isn't it just lovely? Oh, I've been so looking forward to going to this ball with you, Lady Claire. We don't get such nice things often, do we?"

"We really don't." She recalled just how excited Lydia had been when the retreat was first announced. *Now I see why*, Claire thought. *We never get to do more than exchange minor pleasantries at palace balls.* Lydia descended from a noble line and as such was frequently at court. But she was nothing if not the picture of proper manners. She never allowed herself to cavort with her school friends like she might've wanted to; it simply wasn't done. Now it was perfectly acceptable to bend the rules, and Lydia couldn't have been happier, if the radiant smile on her face was any indication.

"Oh, how I've loved being with you from sunup to sundown! Granted, we did have our own rooms—but we still shared the same

dorm and mealtimes. It's such a shame we'll never have an opportunity like this again."

"It *is* a pity," Claire agreed. "You've no idea how much I've enjoyed your company too. Now, let's make the most of this evening, shall we?"

In her preoccupation with academics, Claire had quite forgotten that this was it—upon returning from the retreat, there would be the commencement, and then everyone would go their separate ways. She clinked glasses with Lydia. *How silly of me to focus only on my grades*, she chided herself. *My remaining days at the Academy are too few and too precious not to cherish.*

This was in its own way a sobering thought, even if the ball was such a festive occasion. Vik and Dion were likewise subdued. Only Denis—and then again, he had already graduated—had a soft smile for the whole somber assembly. "Aww, you're all cute," he said. "It's not like you won't see each other after graduation. Still, there's something special about school friendships. You kids make the most of the time you have together, you hear?"

"Why, if I didn't know any better," said Vik, "I would have thought that sounded mature—for once."

"Speaking of mature—for once," said Denis, "since when have you acted like a prince? You've been downright *posh* this entire retreat. I almost didn't believe it was you."

"Har dee har."

Claire giggled at their antics. She downed her drink—who cared if she was a lightweight?—and joined in this last night of revelry.

When Claire finally stumbled back to her dorm room at the end of the evening, she went straight to preparing for bed. She bathed, toweled her hair dry, changed into a nightgown, and put her bracelet back on her left wrist. It had once been stolen when she was asleep, and ever since, she had kept it on her at all times. (Of course, she took it off in the bath and such—she wasn't absurd.)

The only time she really removed it was for cleaning. She often wiped the bracelet down with a cloth. *And I'd love to do so now*, she thought, *but I'm much too tired.* The cocktail had gone to her head,

which now felt stuffed full of clouds. Her footsteps were a little unsteady to boot. No, she couldn't clean the bracelet tonight. It would have to be done first thing tomorrow.

She picked up the incense burner on her bedside table. Best to drop off before it got too much later—

Her thoughts were interrupted by a knock at the door. *At this hour?* she wondered. *Who could it possibly be?* A quick glance at the clock confirmed it was indeed the wee hours of the morning; the ball had dragged on quite late.

Claire rose from bed, crossed to the door, and peered out the peephole. It was— *Lady Beatrice*, she realized with a start. Yes, Beatrice was standing right outside her door, still dressed in her ball gown. She evidently had not retired to her own room to change.

Claire had been certain Beatrice would try something at the ball. She had been on the lookout for it, in fact. Yet, apart from trading brief greetings near the start of the ball, Beatrice had made herself scarce. She and Claire had spent the evening at opposite ends of the great hall, and whenever Claire had looked over, all she saw was Beatrice chatting with her friends. The lack of sinister happenings had come as some relief to Claire—but it seemed she had been too soon to celebrate.

"Lady Claire?" Beatrice said. "Lady Claire Martino? I was hoping I could talk to you."

Her voice sounded unnaturally loud in the silent corridor. Its usual melodious tones came across as downright eerie.

She could have come to talk to me tomorrow, Claire thought. *For we don't have lessons. Why choose tonight?*

Beatrice could see the light in Claire's room from the crack under the door. Claire couldn't pretend to be out or asleep, as much as she might have wanted to. Well, then there was nothing for it.

But she had no need to throw caution to the wind. Claire cast a fresh ward over herself. The magic wreathed her body, but for a moment, there was an odd *flickering* sensation. It was almost like the boundary between her magic and physical form had blurred. Curse that cocktail! It must have been the alcohol in Claire's system.

I've certainly never cast a ward when tipsy before, she thought

ruefully.

So be it. Claire opened the door and greeted her late-night visitor. "Lady Beatrice, might I ask what you need from me so late at night?"

No sooner were the words out of her mouth than she realized—*Her eyes are red.* And Claire was still holding the incense burner. This was just like in her dream!

With a cacophonous crash, the ceramic artifact shattered into hundreds of little pieces all over the floor. The camera craned up to show a girl standing just above the broken bits of crockery. Blonde hair, indigo eyes—it was Beatrice. Her face was pale, expressionless. A drop of blood oozed from one finger. Had she picked up a shard of the broken incense burner, perhaps?

"This wretched thing is better off gone," Beatrice hissed. "What good is a curio no one else can use? Is this not the very thing that is leading us to war? We're all better off without it. That's precisely why I smashed it."

Claire tightened her grip on the incense burner as the dream Beatrice's speech rang in her ears. *Yes*, Claire thought. *That was Princess Beatrice. She was the one who broke the incense burner in my dream.*

As if Beatrice had read Claire's thoughts, she grabbed Claire's wrist.



Beatrice's red eyes and fixed, unnatural smile unnerved Claire. A chill started at the crown of her head and ran down to the tips of her toes. She gasped. She sensed *something*—a crackling sensation, like a force had struck her ward and bounced off. And oh, was this sensation familiar.

She reflexively squeezed her eyes shut—and heard a loud crash of something falling over. She was almost too afraid to look, but she made herself crack an eye open. Beatrice, to her surprise, lay collapsed on the floor. The other girl was knocked out cold.

"Princess Beatrice?" Claire cried.

At the sound of Claire's scream, Beatrice's retainers materialized from around the corner—had they been watching the confrontation in hiding?—and rushed to their fallen mistress.

"Pray excuse me," one of the girls (Beatrice had called her Nery, if Claire's memory served) said as she scooped up Beatrice into her arms. "Your Highness? Your Highness!"

The princess had gone deathly pale. Sweat beaded her brow. Something had gone terribly wrong.

Nery said nothing to Claire; in fact, she said nothing save for her repeated attempts to engage Beatrice's attention. But Beatrice did not come around. The other girls helped Nery drag their unconscious lady to her feet and made to rush her away, presumably to fetch help.

"Wait!" Claire called after them. "I... I believe Princess Beatrice collapsed because something activated my ward. Won't you please tell me what's going on?"

"We—" Nery began, but she stopped herself. After a pause, she said, "I'm afraid we don't know anything, Lady Claire. Princess Beatrice simply asked us to accompany her in paying you a late-night visit."

"Please don't give me that," Claire said. "It's very clear your princess tried to cast a spell on me. You can't simply walk away now and leave me in the dark."

"You dare accuse the princess?" Nery demanded. Yet she could not meet Claire's eyes.

Claire would not be so easily misled. She saw the tiny vial in

Nery's hand and knew what it was for. She had seen one just like it before. She snatched it from Nery's hands. "I beg your pardon," she said, "but this is coming with me."

"Ah!" Nery yelped in dismay.

Claire did not hesitate. She opened the vial right before Nery's eyes. An acrid medicinal scent stung her nostrils, and Claire did not have to guess hard to know what it might be. *A sleeping draught! This proves Princess Beatrice wanted to curse me.*

Claire hadn't been able to catch Beatrice in the act during the private conversation with Professor Lesley, or her suspicious encounter with "Gilbert." But Beatrice couldn't talk her way out of this one.

The girls clutching Beatrice turned pale. Claire spared them only a glance as she held the vial in Nery's face.

"Would you be so kind as to drink this here and now?" she said.

Nery gulped. Her lips trembled. Perhaps she was only a coconspirator in this plot, Claire realized, and little more. She was not willing to take the fall in Beatrice's place. Claire sympathized, but she couldn't let this treachery go unpunished, and Nery's reluctance to drink was evidence enough to order the Ignicean assembly's arrest.

The curse bounced off my ward, Claire thought. *If Dion was any indication, Princess Beatrice will be out cold for quite some time. Now is our chance to act.*

"So when all's said and done, nothing happened to you, Claire?" Vik asked.

"Yes," she responded.

It was quite late, but she had come to Vik's chambers regardless. The two did not go unchaperoned, of course. Dion and Denis were there too.

It rather surprised Claire how obedient the Ignicean girls were once they had been caught red-handed. Perhaps it came from being Vik's fiancée, not to mention wearing a ward at such an irregular hour of the evening—almost as if she had suspected someone was after her. If these two facts suggested that Claire had greater

political backing in Paffuto than she really had, well, so much the better. It made the Igniceans compliant so as not to aggravate their crime any further.

Thus, when Nery had refused to drink the contents of her vial, Claire had summoned Dion and taken the whole assembly into their custody. After Claire and Dion had consulted with the professors, the guilty girls were sent to a room in the cellars used for detentions. Save Beatrice, that was—she was still out cold.

Once Claire had seen Beatrice safely to the infirmary, she and Dion reconvened in Vik's chambers.

When the whole story had come out, Vik took a moment to mull it over. "Why would Princess Beatrice want to put a curse on you? I mean, what's in it for her? I suppose we won't know until we ask. But there's got to be something. She swapped bodies with Prince Gilbert too. There must be something bigger behind all this."

"Did you ever talk to Prince Gilbert after he got his body back?" Claire asked. "I haven't seen him since."

"Nor have I," Vik said. "He's harder to pin down than you'd think. Seems like he's always jetting off somewhere to inspect a new part of the retreat."

Gilbert, attending to his duties? That *was* surprising.

Dion chuckled, albeit self-consciously. "Princess Beatrice passed out because her curse failed, or I'll eat my hat. Poor girl. I certainly remember being in her shoes. She'll be out like a light for days, and when she comes to, she'll have an angry emperor to face."

"I don't know about that," Claire said. "With all the magic professors here, surely one of them can examine her and fix her up."

Denis, the authority on everything Academy related, said, "Not with the exams starting in three days. Professors are forbidden from even talking to students until the last of the exams are over. No exceptions. Princess Beatrice will simply have to keep."

"Surely not if it's an international emergency?" Claire said.

"You tell her, Vik. The Academy operates independently of the Paffish government. It's got to, otherwise the crown could fiddle with our test scores. And that wouldn't be fair, now would it? Tell you what. I think we'll be fine to send word to the king, but it'll be a

good bit of time before we get his approval to do anything about it."

"If only Lui were here," Vik said. "Then we'd have an idea what's going on at court."

The others didn't respond. They were supposed to have Lui (and Keith) back by now, but as of yet, there was no sign of either of their friends. Vik sent repeated inquiries to the palace, but the office that had borrowed Keith refused to respond favorably. Lui, evidently, was having difficulty prying Vik's third knight away.

As worried as I am about this Princess Beatrice business, Claire thought, *Keith's situation is just as troubling.*

No sooner did that thought cross her mind than she heard the creak of a door echoing off the high ceilings of Vik's chamber.

"Lui *is* here, thank you very much," said a familiar voice.

All eyes turned to the door as it closed behind the owner of said voice, shedding her cloak—she had evidently just been outside in the cold.

Claire cried out, "Oh, Lui! Welcome back! We've been ever so worried for you."

"No less worried than I was for you," Lui said. "Yes, I heard about Princess Beatrice, and I'm glad to see you made it through in one piece. Shortly after I teleported back to court, a professor told me what happened and asked me to check in on her. I've just been to see her in the infirmary. She tried to swap bodies with one of you, I'd wager?"

"Sharp as ever, Lui," Denis said. "With your old grades and current career, it's no wonder the profs consult you on anything magic."

"Maybe so," Lui said. "Regardless, the situation looks grim."

"So you got to have a look at her?" Vik asked. "What did you make of it?"

"She's lost quite a bit of magic, but it's not *blocked*, per se. Her curse may have bounced off Claire's ward, but I doubt she'll have lost the spell entirely once she wakes up. There's just one problem—we can't find anything to wake her up."

And what is that supposed to mean? Claire thought.

Dion's curse warped the nature of a person's magic itself;

therefore, the reflection had caused a transformation of Dion's own magic. But Beatrice's curse did not function the same way. It made sense that she would still retain use of her powers upon waking, but it was that last sentence of Lui's that gave Claire pause. She had never heard anyone say anything about "finding" an unconscious person's mind.

"Is that because I repelled her curse?" Claire asked. "Is this different from going comatose after losing one's powers?"

In her first life, she had accidentally placed Dion in a coma when his curse rebounded off her ward and consumed his own magical powers. However, Beatrice's seemed to be a special case. Lui, if the look on her face was any indication, didn't know what to make of it either.

"Yes, all her powers are intact," Lui said. "Her body is perfectly sound. I simply don't see any reaction from her consciousness when I examine her magic. That just shouldn't be the case for any person." She paused, and added, "Any live person."

"Do you mean to imply Princess Beatrice is brain-dead? Please say it isn't so!"

"No, no. Nothing that extreme. However, I do think we ought to report this to the king posthaste. We're about to be up to our necks in trouble, if I'm any judge." Lui pushed her bangs out of her eyes and sighed.

Vik glanced at the door behind her. "...Why isn't Keith with you?" he asked, the tension audible in his voice.

"Not for lack of trying, my prince. The officers wouldn't budge, not even when I said I was acting on your orders. What's more, it's proving a struggle to stop Duke Windsor's visit to Ignice. It's all the Ignicean prime minister's doing. He's shown up to serve as your uncle's escort and is throwing a wrench in all our plans."

She proffered a letter to Vik. Claire saw the coat of arms, and her stomach dropped. *The king.*

"'Per the wishes of Ignicean prime minister Aleš Baránek, the royal visit to the Ignicean Empire cannot be postponed. The duke and his entourage will proceed to Ignice in due time, per the original schedule. Your retainer Keith is to be included in this detachment,'"

Vik read aloud. "Ah. And I'm to keep my head down and stay here until I've finished my exams, he says."

"Heavens!" exclaimed Claire.

"I can't blame him for choosing this. The Ignicean Empire rivals Paffuto in international political sway. We'd need a very good reason to go against their wishes—if we want to have any hope of remaining on friendly terms, that is."

Vik may have looked calm, but Claire could hear the dismay in his every word. Now, at least, she had a better picture of the situation. She turned to Lui. "So the head of the duke's guard has requested Keith's presence? I would imagine a royal delegation would need only the very best knights. I wasn't aware the Crown thought so highly of Keith."

"His father is a member of the same guard," Lui explained, "so there is that aspect." She paused. "But truth be told, I doubt they are evaluating him on performance alone. I would suspect they have other aims. This prime minister fellow seems to have an unshakable interest in Keith."

"Likely because of my upcoming investiture," said Vik. "I call it sabotage. Headhunt the crown prince's best retainers in preparation for, oh, I don't know—an invasion of Paffuto?"

"It's possible."

That only strengthened Claire's sense of dread. Gilbert had talked about invasions and war in his vision of their imminent future, and the thought made her too scared to move. *I doubt I could change His Majesty's mind, even if I were to tell him I saw the future in my incense burner*, she thought. *I've never explained that Prince Gilbert and I are characters in a video game, and if I did—oh, he would never believe me! He couldn't possibly base his decisions on such shaky claims when so much with Ignice is at stake.*

Their hands were tied. She looked to Vik, but he was just as lost as she felt. "We'll call it here for the night. I'll send a letter first thing to tell the king about Princess Beatrice. I'll see if he can't send Keith back or postpone my uncle's trip. Further discussion can wait until we have his response."

"Then let's meet up back here bright and early tomorrow

morning," Dion said.

A heavy silence followed the jaunty suggestion.

Oh, Keith, Claire thought. *Do please come back safe. Why, now I have you to worry about too!*

Upon returning to her bedchamber, Claire charged the incense burner with magic, placed it on her bedside table, and touched her mother's bracelet for luck. She slipped between the sheets and ruminated on the events of the day. *It's been one thing after another*, she thought. Just moments ago, she had felt clearheaded and cool, but the instant she touched the bedclothes, her body grew as heavy as lead. Ah. It was that cocktail she'd drunk at the ball, she remembered too late. Between the constant stress of her exams and being a lightweight on her one night of letting loose, it was small wonder she felt so worn out.

Speaking of cocktails, Claire realized, *I felt something odd earlier when I recast my ward. Should I chalk that up to being a bit tipsy? It was like I couldn't sense the boundary line between my body and my magic. What* was *that all about?*

She had never felt anything like it before. Asking Lui tomorrow morning would've been the simplest solution—but Claire was so very tired that sleep claimed her before she could reach it.

She awoke to total darkness. She had little time to do more than register her surroundings before her vision turned blindingly white. *Oh*, Claire thought. *The same old dream.* Her grandmother's incense burner was working its magic. She must have activated it before bed.

Force of habit, she thought—and then jolted in surprise. No, this was not the same old dream. There was no screen, and the scene before her was something different altogether.

"Is this what I think it is?" she said.

It was. It was the island of Lindel, but a more realistic version of Lindel than belonged in a dream. She could smell the profusion of aromatic blossoms and the salt on the gentle sea breeze that caressed her cheeks. The moon was a faint glow overhead in an

otherwise unbroken curtain of deepest indigo.

Claire couldn't explain how, but she was very much on Lindel Island atop a small knoll behind the castle. If she followed the path sloping down the hill, she would find herself at the stretch of beach referred to as Lindel's holy spring.

"This island holds a lot of memories for me." It was a comforting thought. "In both my lives."

Suddenly, she realized there was a hard object in her arms—the incense burner, the curio that bridged the waking world and dreams of the future. Since it had come into her possession, it had offered her many glimpses of what could someday come true. But Claire always had a strange, inexplicable sense that she should never touch it within one of her dreams. What was it doing now, resting in her arms?

I came to within the vision itself, she recalled. *There was no reaching for the incense burner, as in my other dreams. Perhaps something strange is afoot.*

A loud shriek startled her out of her musings—no cry for help but an excited exclamation. Claire's curiosity was piqued. She cradled the incense burner with care and trotted down the hill in search of the scream.

Claire had merely been a passive observer in all her other dreams, but now her footfalls were on real ground. The fresh shoots of spring's flowers parted in the wake of her passage. Why did she feel an odd pang of nostalgia, she wondered. Was it perhaps the spring evening? *For I was accidentally baptized on a night much like this one in my first life*, she thought.

She reminded herself this was just a dream. The dreams the incense burner showed often indicated what might come to pass, but there was nothing that suggested she couldn't have a perfectly ordinary dream in which the incense burner happened to appear. She'd only *thought* she had charged the burner before bed. Chances were, she could've been too tired after the day's tumultuous events to activate it. *Yes*, she told herself, *this must be an ordinary dream. I might as well make the most of it!*

Her spirits rose, and she set off for the beach with a spring in her

step. It was delightful to be back on her beloved Lindel Island.

The meadow gave way to cobblestones and, eventually, sand. The voices grew louder as Claire stepped onto the dunes.

Without warning, the sky lit up with color.

Far off in the distance, she heard a voice—"Claire!"—calling her name. She spun in its direction and spotted several figures standing in the surf. But how odd. One of their group—a girl—lay collapsed in one of the others' arms. Her companions crowded around her in concern.

A stab of unease pierced Claire straight through. *Wait a minute*, she thought. Her eyes flicked between the group in the waves and the ribbons of ephemeral light streaming from the heavens. The deep indigo sky of moments ago was adorned with curtains of brilliant light, almost like an aurora.

This is my baptism! Claire realized with a start. *From my first life!*

She turned back to the party of young people. The person carrying the girl had just now reached the shore. If this dream was a vision of a dear old memory, then that meant only one thing. *The girl is me*, Claire thought, *and the boy carrying her is Vik.*

She knew it was just a dream, but that did little to stop her heartbeat from quickening. To Claire, it mattered little which Vik was hers. Each ate the same foods, made the same quips, and comforted her in the same ways. Each had the same heart she'd fallen in love with. Should some unfamiliar figure trap their world in a time loop, Claire had full faith she would fall in love with Vik all over again each and every time. They could have had a thousand enchanted meetings, and Claire could imagine not a one where she did not lose her heart to Vik.

Claire had always been content to hold her memories of her first life in the private confines of her heart. It moved her now to witness such cherished memories in real form once more.

Oh, what a beautiful dream, she thought. *It does bring me back. Why, Vik hasn't changed a bit. It's lovely to see this scene anew.*

On the night of that accidental baptism, the shock of the event had knocked Claire out cold. She hadn't come around until much later and had never learned of what transpired after she fainted.

Perhaps she really had been carried from the waves as tenderly as the dream depicted.

How fascinating, Claire thought. *This dream captures something I never saw for myself, and now I can watch it later. Oh, I wonder what else it'll show me?* She watched her first-life iterations of her loved ones struggle up the path to the castle until she noticed there was a person standing next to her.

"How intriguing." The voice was melodious and clear as crystal in Claire's ear. "Lady Claire, my dear, just who exactly are you?"

It was the last person Claire had expected to see here. She knew it was just a dream, but she felt rooted in place all the same.

"Y-You are—" she began.

"What an interesting place this is," the person—a girl—said. She paid Claire no heed. "It's the world I know, but something doesn't feel quite right. Is that simply because we're in your memories, do you think?"



It was Beatrice, but Beatrice wearing an unassuming chestnut brown traveler's cloak with the hood pulled low over her hair and face. This made no sense. Why would she wear an outfit Claire had never seen if this was Claire's dream? On the rare occasions she dreamed of those outside her circle of acquaintances, they typically showed up in the clothing she associated them with.

Before Claire could solve any of these riddles, Beatrice addressed her with a puzzle of her own. "I arrived here two days ago, you know. I woke up in a town called...I believe it was Iias? I thought I was simply unconscious and dreaming after you had repelled my curse, but dreams always end eventually. This one hasn't."

"Princess Beatrice..." Claire began.

Beatrice shushed her. "Let's do away with the titles for now. I don't have any of my guards with me. Best if no one knows I'm a princess."

Claire was astonished. To worry for one's own safety in a dream was a curious thing indeed. But then, was this a dream? Dreams deviated from reality in all sorts of ways, but this dream was the exact opposite. Its only curiosity was that it felt rather *too* real.

Claire was too startled for words, but that didn't bother Beatrice. She had words enough for the both of them.

"No, I never woke up, no matter how long I waited. Worse, night was falling. It may only have been a dream, but I was still terrified of spending the night in a foreign land all on my lonesome. So, I nicked the wallet off a passing traveler! He looked like some rich merchant. I took his money and bought clothes that would let me blend in, and then I rented a room at the finest inn in Iias." She noticed Claire's surprise. "Oh, did my little theft startle you? I was born a commoner. The lowest of the low rung in society. Theft is nothing."

Claire didn't know what to say. She could not wrap her head around the difference between Beatrice's charming smile and decidedly uncharming story.

Beatrice didn't need a response. She continued: "And when I went down to take my dinner in the inn's restaurant, who do you think I saw but you and Prince Vik? That's when I realized where I

was—in *your* memories."

Claire lacked Beatrice's sense of conviction. Was this really just a dream? Suddenly, she wasn't so sure, and the idea scared her.

Beatrice was by all rights no more than a figment of Claire's imagination, yet Claire asked her, "Why do you think so? I don't suppose I'd come to that conclusion, were I in your shoes."

"Oh, because it all made sense. My curse bounced off you, I passed out, and I woke up in Iias. And there you were! Introducing yourself to Prince Vik like you hardly knew him. Sound reasoning, no?"

Claire did not immediately respond. Her unease mounted with every word that came out of Beatrice's mouth. She wanted to say it wasn't so, but Beatrice's theory was just too credible.

"Maybe it was for the best that my curse didn't land," Beatrice went on. "My plan was to take over your body and ask Prince Vik to dissolve your engagement, you see. But now that isn't necessary. I've picked up on loads of things I can use to win over your prince."

"You tried to place a curse on me, and now you're using my dreams to spy on Vik," Claire said, gathering everything together. "Lady Beatrice, just what are you trying to do?"

"Oh, you don't know? It's my job to make Prince Vik fall head over heels for me. That's what Prince Maxim says, and if I can't do it right, I'll be in disgrace. They'll kick me out of the palace, and it'll be back to picking pockets for me—and then I'll never be able to give my mother the life she deserves. So you see, I can't possibly fail my mission!"

Claire's final doubts vanished. Beatrice was no mere dream phantom.

The incense burner trembled in Claire's hands. She could not stop herself from shaking, no matter how she tried. "So you tried to steal my body," she repeated. "To pretend to be me. And ask Vik to break off our engagement."

"That's the long and short of it. Too bad it didn't work!"

Claire's mind raced. Beatrice positively brimmed with confidence. If Claire could trick her into tipping her hand...

"Then might I ask why you tried to swap with Prince Gilbert?" she

asked.

Aha, Beatrice looked away. "I, I never," she stammered. "I never went near your laboratory that night! I don't know a thing."

"All I said was you cursed Prince Gilbert," Claire said. "I never mentioned the laboratory."

Beatrice started. Her reaction all but proved it *was* her—the real Beatrice, not this dream girl—demanding to see Claire's finished thesis. *What would compel her to do such a thing?* Claire thought. She was, frankly, baffled.

Beatrice giggled in a vain attempt to hide her earlier recoil. "Never mind about that! Say, if something were to happen to change your memories in this dream, then you and Prince Vik would lose these special moments. You'd forget everything—your conversations, your feelings for him. Just imagine—*he* remembers everything; *you* remember nothing. You'd never see eye to eye again. Oh, his feelings for you would sour in an instant!"

"He would—" Claire started to say. But before she got to the *never*, she stopped.

Suppose Beatrice was right. If this wasn't a dream—if this was Claire's memory—then she and Beatrice stood smack-dab in the middle of memories of Claire's first life. Beatrice was convinced she could alter the course of history and drive a wedge between Claire and Vik, but that wasn't likely to happen at all. Claire was the only one with a connection to these memories. She had traded the whole happy journey to Paffuto for the lives of her friends and loved ones.

Vik and I have made so many more memories in my second life, Claire thought. *Even should I forget my first life, why, I know I'll love Vik all the same. That's the only thing I care about.*

Beatrice mistook the wheels turning in Claire's head for the stupefaction of shock. She was practically singing when she crowed, "Or perhaps I'll contrive a way for you to hate Prince Vik! Yes, that may be easiest."

Beatrice wasn't in her right mind, Claire realized, as she eyed the princess's wild expression. A chill ran down her spine, and she clutched the incense burner tighter.

I don't know what to make of this version of the princess, she

thought. *In the visions, she was focused on my incense burner, but now she's much more preoccupied with stealing Vik's heart. Really, it's like she doesn't notice it at all—or that she doesn't know it exists.*

Oh, Claire hoped this was just a dream. She hoped and prayed this half-crazed princess before her was the product of exhaustion, alcohol, and a very trying day. She faced the apparition—may that be all it was—head-on. "Very well," she said. "Do it. I don't mind."

"Beg pardon?"

"Change my memories. I'll still love Vik all the same."

"H-How can you be so sure?" Beatrice stuttered. "What if I made Vik beat you black-and-blue? You may wake up just fine, but you'd surely think him an awful cur!"

"Even should that happen in my memories, I would still see the *real* Vik upon waking. And I would conclude that he would never do a thing to hurt me."

Beatrice shot Claire a wide-eyed, slack-jawed look of disbelief. Then the disbelief vanished, and she sighed at Claire's naivety. "Please. Your marriage to the prince is purely political—although I can't think why, and I've been racking my brain the whole last two days watching you, trying to figure it out. The way everyone's dressed, it's like you're all traveling incognito. I would presume it's to pick you up and escort you back to Paffuto, but then, why don't you have a guard of your own? I can only conclude you come from a family of dreadfully low standing. But that raises more questions! What are you doing marrying a prince?"

"That," Claire said, "is none of your business."

She hadn't meant to snap like that. It was only that Beatrice had *no right* trampling on Claire's precious memories.

Fortunately, Beatrice paid no attention to Claire's chilly tone. She chattered on, revealing her hand as she went. "How did you repel my curse anyway? I checked the strength of your ward when we shook hands that first day in the cafeteria, and it was impregnable! You couldn't possibly have cast it yourself. That's why I made sure to come round when you wouldn't have a ward on."

Claire didn't feel the need to correct her. *Why give her a hand when she's hell-bent on ruining my memories?* she thought, not

without rancor.

Beatrice looked triumphant. She mistook Claire's silence as an acknowledgment of defeat. "Let's strike a deal," she said. "If you don't want me to muck up your memories, then go to Prince Vik and ask him to end your engagement. You and Prince Gilbert are sweet on each other, aren't you? I'm sure you could be quite happy with him."

Well, *that* was so very ridiculous a wave of dizziness swept over Claire. Surely there was no point in continuing this conversation further.

Yet no sooner did that thought cross her mind than she heard a voice call, "Who goes there?" She recalled with a start that they were on Lindel Island. It must have been one of the guards on his nightly patrol.

She spared a glance back at the beach. Her friends were gone, back to the castle that served as the local inn. At that very same moment, she looked down and realized she was still in her nightgown. *Oh, I can't possibly turn around in this getup!* she thought with alarm. *And if he's already seen me unconscious, then there'll be a dreadful ruckus. Whatever will he think of two girls with the same face?*

Before Claire could do much more than panic, Beatrice beamed. "Sorry!" she shouted back at the guard. "We're just a couple of sightseers. We'll be heading back to the inn shortly."

"You girls be careful now," the guard warned. "We may maintain the island well, but you should watch your step in the dark."

"We will, thank you." Beatrice made to follow the concerned guard.

"Lady Beatrice?" Claire cried. "Where are you going?"

"To the inn, where I'm staying. I've been tailing you under the guise of a simple tourist. Why, maybe I'll even strike up a conversation with your group tomorrow."

Claire jolted. Beatrice snickered at her—a provocative move if there ever was one—and skipped off into the dark.

Claire watched her go and wished like anything this was all just a terrible dream. On top of the memory-altering scheme, she was still

ferociously worried about Keith. His failure to return and his addition to the duke's delegation had to be part of Prince Maxim's broader scheme. *Oh, when will this dream ever end?* she wondered. She was the sole person left on the beach now.

She looked down at the incense burner in her hands, her connection to home and the waking world. Perhaps adding more magic to it was the key to waking up. She decided to give it a try and channeled the cloud of magic surrounding her into the little porcelain curio. It glowed dimly, and a black haze of smoke curled out of the top of the device.

Hm? she thought. *How curious. The smoke is usually all the colors of the rainbow. Why is it black tonight?*

At that very moment, the thread of her consciousness snapped.

She came to with a start in a dark room. She had bolted upright and was halfway out of bed when she realized it was her own bedroom. *What time is it?* she thought. She turned on the bedside lamp and checked the clock. Hardly any time had passed since she'd fallen asleep.

"Oh, I feel ever so strange," she said. "Like I've been asleep for much, much longer."

Her dream of Beatrice lingered as an uncomfortably vivid presence in her mind. She wanted to forget this nightmare, and fast, she thought as she picked up the incense burner—whereupon it began to emit black smoke. Claire blanched. It was the very same smoke she had seen when she tried to use the incense burner to wake from her dream. Had that dream really occurred in her memory? *Have the memories of my first life changed?!*

She raced from her bed to her writing desk. She fell into her chair in her haste to grab her journal and begin writing down everything she could remember about her first life. Her sense of urgency was motivated by more than the simple desire to hold on to her memories. If Beatrice changed anything, she wanted to be the first to know.

Dawn found Claire the next morning slumped over her writing

desk. Her eyes fluttered open against the bright sunlight. She must have passed out while writing.

"Morning already?" she mumbled to herself. "Oh, that's right!"

As the events of last night came back to her, she lurched for the journal to see how far she'd gotten in it. It still lay open on the desktop before her with a good dozen or so pages filled with detailed accounts of her old, cherished memories. There was the encounter with Vik following her flight from the Royal Aristocratic Academy, the merry journey to Wurtz, and the start of her employment as the Reines' governess—all sorts of lovely memories. Finally, she had recorded her choice to reload the save file to deliver the world and her loved ones from peril. Claire had written every conversation she could remember with her old friends. The menu of every memorable meal, her daily schedule, any and every possible thing—she had recorded it all.

Reading it all back now, none of it felt out of place with Claire's current recollections of events. *Thank heavens*, she thought. *Princess Beatrice hasn't done anything yet!* She recalled neither hide nor hair of Beatrice in her first life, in fact. Beatrice's influence was evidently lacking; why, then, had she so confidently claimed she would devise a scheme to make Vik lose his affection for Claire?

I might've panicked because my incense burner put out the same black smoke I saw in the dream, Claire thought, *but perhaps that meant nothing. Perhaps it really was all just a dream.*

Dream or no dream, Claire knew she ought to report this curious incident to Vik at once. She lingered just long enough to throw on her uniform and swept from the room in search of her prince.

Maxim Bazelaire

The Ignicean Empire was known for its massive expanse of territory and warm desert sands. Its prosperous imperial capital sat on the banks of the sea, and it was in such a place that the Igniceans were putting the finishing touches on the reception for a delegation from the likewise powerful kingdom of Paffuto.

Once Crown Prince Maxim Bazelaire had finished checking over the documents relating to the upcoming function, he made his displeasure known by flinging them across his office desk. "These all comply with the *emperor's* wishes," he snapped. "Why haven't my preferences been reflected too?"

"I'm afraid you'd need to ask your lord father," his nearby retainer said, a placating smile plastered across his face. "My apologies. I mean, His Imperial Majesty. I wouldn't know myself."

Maxim scowled and clicked his tongue in irritation. "The emperor thinks I'm a fool. Why won't he let the prophet of Ignealism stand alongside the royal family in the ceremony? If Ignealism is to be our state religion, I say we start honoring it now!"

"That would be another question best suited for the emperor, Your Highness."

"Enough. Begone from my sight."

The retainer did not need to be told twice. He scuttled out of the office.

Maxim waited until the retainer was gone before knocking all the papers off his desk in one sweeping gesture. He waited for the thumps and rustles to subside. The once-neat stacks were now a glorious mess spreading across his office floor, but that did little to assuage his anger. He pounded the desk with his fist. *They all take me for a fool*, he thought.

Maxim was twenty-three and the crown prince of an empire powerful enough to rival Paffuto. There were two younger princes by different mothers, and while Maxim may have played the congenial older brother figure in public, he had no true affection for his siblings. Much scuffling and politicking had ensued between all three of them until he had reached adulthood and was invested as crown prince. He'd thought that would spell the end of it—but no. Not long after, word went out that a little *sister*, a commoner, existed, and she possessed special powers—the imperial family curse. Another member of the monarchy meant another headache for Maxim. His position for the crown was not in jeopardy, for women could not inherit the throne in Ignice. But that did not divest the girl of the imperial curse or—worse—ambition.

A shabby princess of commoner birth, Maxim sneered. *Useful for little more than improving the common folk's image of the monarchy, perhaps. Or as a spy to be used and abused.*

But the princess proved more tenacious than she had first appeared in Maxim's calculations. She looked like a shrinking violet, but she had a core of steel. How very troublesome.

Beatrice is oddly ambitious for a born and raised peasant, he mused. *She takes on whatever task I set her, no matter how audacious it may be. However, she's as feebleminded as her mother and bound to cause trouble wherever she goes. She serves best as one more disposable pawn in my arsenal.*

Thinking of Beatrice reminded him of his own childhood, and the steps he had taken to get this far. Maxim had grown up under challenging conditions. The right to rule in Ignice was determined by merit; being the oldest meant little, and Maxim could not afford to care for his younger siblings in such circumstances.

Everything had changed when Maxim was eight years old and received a new tutor. The elderly gentleman was said to be a particularly eminent scholar, and was he ever! He knew everything under the sun. He was brilliant. He had once served as chief court mage until he decided to step away from public service in favor of bolstering Ignice's future via the education of its monarchy. Thus, Maxim was designated to be synonymous with Ignice's future. Maxim was thrilled. He wanted to be crown prince more than anything else in the world.

His admiration for his tutor had grown by leaps and bounds until soon he was utterly devoted. Even now that Maxim was too old for lessons, he still called the old gentleman "lord prophet." Maxim vowed to spread the prophet's religion, Ignealism, far and wide across the empire, in honor of the person who made him the man he was today. *The lord prophet raised me up*, he told himself. *He put me on my future throne. If not for him, I could very well have been outshone by one of my siblings.*

Maxim's thoughts were interrupted by a familiar knocking at the door. His scowl evaporated. "Come in," he called.

The door opened, and in stepped a gentleman to whom Maxim

swept a deep bow. The elderly figure bade him no greeting but cast a critical eye upon the prince. At length, he said, "What news have we of the Paffish delegation?"

"My lord prophet, had I known you wanted word, I would've come to deliver the news myself."

"You, a crown prince? I think not. Now, what of the delegation?"

Maxim ushered the prophet further into the office and bade him sit on the couch. "As much as it pains me to admit, our efforts are not as fruitful as hoped. My lord father is blocking my attempts at every turn. But do not lose heart. I've sent the prime minister Aleš Baránek along in the delegation as a spy."

"Excellent work, my young apprentice. I see you are also contriving a way to win over Prince Vik's retainer as I asked. You must bring him to me once we have him."

"But of course, my lord. If he is to serve me in the Ignicean Empire, it is only right he converts to Ignealism."

Were Beatrice's mission to fail, Maxim still had another trick up his sleeve: win over one of Vik's most esteemed and trusted retainers. *And once my new retainer has the prince's ear, he might be persuaded to marry Beatrice*, he thought. *Yes, and why not take this retainer hostage in the bargain? Then Paffuto will be my ally—mine, not my lord father's—and I'll finally have a say in things around here. The rise of Ignealism is close at hand!* Why, Maxim saw no reason to believe events would not proceed just as he foresaw.

Presently, the retainer who had left minutes earlier reappeared with a letter in hand. "Your Highness, there's been a missive from the Royal Academy of Paffuto. One of Princess Beatrice's school friends, my prince. And it's urgent."

"What now? Not more trouble!" Maxim snarled. He snatched up the letter and scanned it. It was written in such a great hurry that it skipped all pleasantries to share the ill tidings. Ill indeed—they were ill enough to make Maxim furious.

"Beatrice's curse failed?" he read aloud. "She's unconscious? And to top it all off, she tried casting it on Prince Vik's fiancée—and was caught in the act! What is this devilry?"

Maxim trembled with rage, alarming the poor retainer so much

the latter fled the room. The prophet, however, remained perfectly placid. He plucked the letter from Maxim's grip and scrutinized it further. "An unsurprising occurrence, considering the girl was but a commoner not long ago. Oh dear, dear, dear. The target of her spell was one Claire Martino of Noston, recently presented as the future Princess of Paffuto. This will not do. No, this will not do one bit. You should have mentioned this sooner, my young apprentice."

"But why?" asked Maxim. "Is there some issue with the girl?"

The prophet gave Maxim a placid, unreadable smile. "Among the magical circles I run in, the women of the Martino family are well-known for their remarkable magical talents. It is small wonder Miss Beatrice's spell bounced off her wards. We should imagine her to be in possession of magical colors and curses far more powerful than any of your imperial family's."

"What? But that can't be!"

"Yet it is. A tragedy that could have been averted were I at the helm of the empire. Alas."

The prophet sighed, and Maxim's heart wrenched with guilt. *He's right, of course*, Maxim thought. *If the emperor only listened to me, then I'd have raised up my lord to a position suitable to his talents, and we'd all be better off.*

The letter bore a falcon crest next to the signature, indicating the writer's affiliation with the Ignealist faith. Ignealism had yet to permeate much of Ignicean society, but Beatrice, a highly influential figure among the commoners, had adopted it. It was only a matter of time before the falcon crest was known far and wide across the empire.

Maxim understood this dreadful mess was all Beatrice's doing—curse her ignorance and lack of foresight—but in his ire towards his father, he did not mind taking out his frustration on the wrong target.

"I will go to the emperor—my lord father, I mean—at once. He must be informed this is all because you haven't been given enough importance in government, lord prophet." Maxim rose, but his teacher stopped him.

"No. I have another task of greater importance for you.

This...*incident* has revealed a magical curio I am eager to acquire."

"What sort?"

"Such a one as your Miss Beatrice happened to find with the Martino girl. Tell your commoner sister there's been a change of plans. She is now to obtain an artifact once known to grant prophetic visions: an incense burner."

Maxim's eyes grew wide. His master gave him a knowing smile and added, "This miraculous device allows its users to catch glimpses of the future, provided one has silver magic with which to use it. A lucky thing that I do, hmm?"

Chapter 24

All theses had been submitted; the ball had come to an end. In just three days hence, the second half of the graduation exams would be upon the pupils of the Royal Academy. The mood in the lodge was relatively subdued. Many students slept in late after the previous evening's revelries; perhaps it was to be expected that the lodge rested in a comfortable lull between activities.

Claire, however, felt no such sense of rest. She hurried through her toilette and rushed to Vik's chambers in the manor proper. The rest of the company was already there—Lui, Denis, and Dion, each in their own uniforms—seated around Vik's table, staring at the two vials seized from Beatrice and Nery last night. They contained a sleeping draught and a potion meant to cloud the mind. Both vials were several times larger than the tiny ones Claire had spotted Beatrice carrying before. Perhaps these were the parent containers from which she refilled the smaller vials.

Claire shut the door behind her and hurried to join her friends. "Pray forgive me for being late. I see I'm the last one here," she said.

"I hope you got some good rest after everything that happened last night," Vik told her. "And no, you're not late. Lui and Denis are early. I received word from the king."

From the grim expression on Vik's face, Claire knew it contained nothing good.

"Yes, I slept all right," she said, and then rushing to pursue the point asked, "And what did His Majesty have to say?"

"For one, that he can't interfere with the Royal Academy's graduation, curse or no curse. It's not allowed in the rules. Should I skip my exams to bring Keith back myself, I'll fail."

"Oh no!"

"Oh yes. And he refuses to change his mind about Duke

Windsor's visit to Ignice. He must be anxious to persuade Ignice we're all on the best of terms. Never mind that they tried to put a curse on my future bride! No, we wouldn't want to make waves, would we? He refuses to believe it could lead to war—but then again, so would most people."

Claire also found the king's decision disappointing, but not surprising. *He isn't wrong*, she thought. *If framed like Beatrice was acting of her own accord, the whole matter could be smoothed over with as little as an apology. I can't go around telling the king I saw the future, really. We couldn't expect him to act any different considering what information we've given him.*

"I say mentioning the incense burner might work in our favor," Lui opined. "Given that it once belonged to Claire's grandmother, chances are there are records of it left in Noston. Or if not, His Majesty knows the extent of Claire's powers. He's like to believe her, I should think."

"Possibly," said Vik. "Let's give it one more try. We have until my uncle's departure. I wish I could appeal to the king personally, but you know what'll happen if I leave now: instant failure."

"Yes, and we don't want that. If the Academy won't grant us an exception, we'll simply have to do the pragmatic thing. I'll go back to court and see what I can do. Claire, do you think you could send an inquiry back home and ask about the items of your grandmother's estate?"

Claire gave her friend an emphatic nod. "It would be my pleasure. I'll write my brother at once."

"Excellent. I'll bring paper and pens for both of you."

"Thank you, Lui."

One thing at a time, Claire reminded herself. *First I'll send this letter out, and then I'll tell them about my strange dream.* She tightened her grip on the incense burner and the journal.

She and Vik worked side by side writing their respective letters, his to the king of Paffuto and hers to the Martinos of Noston. Just as they finished and Claire thought she might have a moment to speak, the door swung open.

She looked up, confused. Who could that be? Wasn't everyone

here already? Apparently not, as the new arrivals burst in with a flurry of noise.

"I'm here! I'm here! You told me to come first thing in the morning, and here I a— What are all you doing here? Weren't you at the ball last night? You should be sleeping in! It's too early to be awake on a day with no school, I say. But now that you *are* up—Sir Lui, would you be a dear and have breakfast with me?"

"Gil-bert is a late ris-er *and* a dun-der-head."

Yes, the two chatty customers were none other than Gilbert and Pooh, the latter wheeling above the former's head and stirring up a breeze with the flapping of his wings.

Claire and her friends stared blankly at the tension-destroying Prince of Lupty. "Permission to shush him, Vik?" Lui asked.

"Calm down, Lui," Vik said. "We *do* need to speak with him about the body-swapping incident. He's been so preoccupied with other things that this was our first chance to pin him down."

True, Claire thought. *It wouldn't hurt to hear his side of the story.* She hadn't yet asked if it was him who had tried to see her thesis a few days back, and they had to be sure. Just because they *thought* it was Beatrice in disguise, that alone wasn't airtight proof. Gilbert needed to be questioned.

Vik ushered the other prince to a seat before asking, "Can you tell me what you were up to four nights ago now?"

"I beg your pardon?" said Gilbert. "That's an awfully sudden question."

"Then let me rephrase it. Did you or did you not go to see Claire in her laboratory that night?"

"Who, me? When would I have found the time to do that? I've got too much to do if I'm to found a new institution of learning in Lupty! Please, Your Highness, don't misrepresent me so. Wouldn't want Sir Lui to think I've got intentions towards anyone else, eh?"

His wide-eyed, genuine confusion sealed it. *That wasn't Prince Gilbert at all*, Claire realized. *It was indeed Beatrice all along.*

Pooh piped up. "Oh yes! I'd al-most for-got-ten. Gil-bert went mis-sing that night. He slipped out when I was-n't look-ing. I nev-er thought to men-tion it be-cause I thought it was-n't per-ti-nent."

"Well, that confirms it nicely," Vik said. "Princess Beatrice is up to no good. She's swapping bodies with royals or those close in with the monarchy. Now that we have the testimony of two people, she won't be able to talk her way out of trouble. She's a spy, and we've caught her red-handed."

Claire seized the moment and lifted her own hand. "Since you mentioned the princess, I have something related I'd like to bring up. It happened after we parted last night."

"Seriously? What now?"

Claire paused and then plunged on. "I had another vision from my incense burner. In it, I met Princess Beatrice."

Vik stiffened. And small wonder, Claire thought. Were she in his position, she likewise would've struggled to accept such outlandish news. Besides, Vik himself had never used the incense burner before. He didn't understand the implication of meeting someone in a vision.

"What does that mean exactly?" he ventured. "Was Princess Beatrice a central figure in the vision, or...?"

"No, no. It wasn't seeing the future, Vik. I *met* her in my past."

"The past!"

Vik fell silent, and Lui took up the thread of the conversation. "I thought the incense burner only granted visions of the future. I wasn't aware you could control what it showed you."

"You can't. Normally, that's all it ever does." Claire funneled magic into the device as she spoke. A moment passed, and then a thread of twinkling rainbow smoke wafted out of the top of the burner. Denis oohed at the pretty sparkles.

"Do you see how it creates rainbow smoke?" Claire said. "In last night's dream, it put out black smoke. There was another puff of black smoke when I woke up this morning. Similarly, you must understand that the visions of the past it showed me were places where Princess Beatrice never should have been. This is the first time it's done anything like this."

"Curious."

Vik bent forward to take a closer look at it, but before he could inspect the curio, there was a very owlish squawk, a crash, and a cry

of alarm—"Pooh!"—from Gilbert. The entire assembly looked up just in time to see the owl fall from an unfortunate run-in with the chandelier—right onto the table that held Beatrice and Nery's sleeping draughts.

Oh no! Claire thought. Everything moved too fast. Before she could reach out a hand to catch them, the vials tumbled off the table and onto the floor. This was an old manor, and its floors were made of hard stone. The vials exploded into tiny shards of glass, and their contents dissipated into the air.

Claire's heart raced. *No!* she thought. *I was in such a hurry this morning, I neglected to cast a ward!* But it was too late. With such a large quantity of sleeping draught in the air, it permeated the chamber quickly. Claire felt drowsy; her limbs grew heavier with every passing moment. The paltry excuse of a ward on her uniform did little to negate the draughts' effects.

She hoped the others were all right. She couldn't sleep now. There was still so much to do!

And that was all she thought before she sank beneath the waves of total unconsciousness.

Claire's eyes fluttered open, only for her to be greeted by the darkness of night, a pleasant spring breeze, and the familiar perfume of roses. She looked around. She was standing on a terrace overlooking a sophisticated manor house. The terrace's table and chairs jogged her memory. *I know this rose garden!* It belonged to the one bright, glittering spot associated with a certain period of her past. For a moment, she was too shocked for words. Then, at last, she cried, "I'm at the Reines' mansion!"

Yes, this was the Baron and Baroness Reine's pride and joy of a rose garden. The table and chairs directly in front of her had once been hers to use when she had boarded in their mansion.

The sun had long since set, and stars twinkled in the sky overhead.

Claire had added magic to the incense burner to illustrate its use just minutes before. That, coupled with the sleeping draught, must have sent her into a dream. The black plume of smoke rising from

the curio in her arms served as proof.

The black smoke must signify going to or returning from the past, Claire thought. She tightened her grip on the burner and the journal containing records of her first life. "The life in which the Reines featured heavily..."

Claire had adored boarding with the Reines. Upon embarking on her second life, she had often lapsed into reminiscence and bemoaned the ill fate that she would, like as not, never see the dear estate again. Claire had come to Paffuto in her first life at the urging of Vik, and to find a means to support herself, paid a visit to an employment agency. The agency introduced her to the baron's family, whereupon Claire had taken up her position as the Reines' live-in governess.

The baron and his wife were such lovely people, Claire thought, *and Miss Isabella was just a gem. I may have spent only a very little time with them, but I loved it so. I'm sure I shall never forget their kindness.*

She had managed to reconnect with the Reines in her second life, but even so, Claire couldn't stop herself from taking a deep breath and filling her lungs with the fresh spring air. It was delightful to be back. The rose garden, the table on the terrace, and the lamplight visible even now through the mansion's curtains all had a special place in her heart. Claire knew she couldn't linger, but neither could she bear to let these things slip away from her once more.

But when someone else said, "What is this place?" Claire about jumped out of her skin.

She whirled around. *It can't be!* she thought. But it was.

"Vik? What are you doing here?"

The prince before her was not the Vik from her first life. No, he wore the uniform of all students bent on graduating from the Royal Academy of Paffuto. Claire was not alone in dreaming!

Her mouth popped open in shock, and she found herself rooted to the ground as, one by one, the rest of her friends poked their heads out from behind Vik.

"Isn't this Baron Reine's estate?" Lui said. "What are we doing here?"

"Hot dang!" Denis whistled. "What a garden. Why's it spring, though? Something's not right, or my name isn't Denis."

"I wonder how Lady Isabella has fared while I've been away," Dion, her tutor, said. "I hope she's keeping up with her studies."

Gilbert's comments were rather less eloquent. "Wha— Bwuh— Where? Why? What?!"

Claire looked from one to the other and blanched. Pooh was missing. As quick on the wing as he was on the uptake, he had sensed danger and fled, leaving his charge to fend for himself.

Now is not *the time to sit around and reminisce*, Claire chided herself. *If I'm not careful,* I'll *change my memories!* She may have talked a big talk in front of Beatrice, but she loathed the thought of having any of her precious memories altered. She gripped her journal tighter. How was she going to get herself out of this scrape now? She was asleep—curse her lack of foresight in forgetting a ward!—and none of the others, having followed her here, could be in any better of a state.

"Since we're all here," she said, "I assume we've all fallen prey to the sleeping draught. Vik, were you not wearing a ward?"

Lui put her head in her hands and groaned. "I must admit, no. We had planned to ask Pooh to cast Vik's ward once he and Gilbert showed up this morning. Since I'd be there to mop things up should anything go wrong... I'm very sorry."

"Oh no. Vik, whyever did you suggest such a thing?"

"Didn't you see Pooh cast a ward on Gilbert in the cafeteria that one time? I got a hankering to see what a spirit ward would be like for myself." Abashed, he added, "Sorry."

Claire was aghast, but even she could find the humor in the situation. She smiled in spite of herself. Vik tried to act every inch the prince at the Academy and court, but his true personality could bleed through at the oddest times. It rather reminded her of her first life; she had never guessed he was a prince by his initial conduct.

Even so, she reminded herself, *there are times and places for experimentation. Early morning emergency meetings are not one of them!*

At least she had Vik and the others here to calm her down before

she spiraled. Their relative composure soothed her agitated nerves.

Lui looked around the garden with interest. "Are we in your past?" she asked Claire.

"Yes," she said. "My first past, rather."

She had hoped to have discussed this all earlier, but there was nothing for it now—the group had been sucked into this dream mid-conversation. It was high time to explain the matter in full.

Claire went on: "This is the world of my memories. The dream I had last night took me to a scene from my first life too. That's when I saw Princess Beatrice. She was wearing a subdued set of traveling clothes and was renting a room at an inn."

"What was Princess Beatrice doing in your memories at all?" Vik asked.

Claire ventured her hypothesis. "I can't be sure, but I believe it has to do with my ward bending out of shape when it repelled Princess Beatrice's curse. It got rather, erm, *wobbly* after I drank at the ball. It was really a curious sensation. I felt like I couldn't tell where my body ended and where the magic began."

"You are a bit of a lightweight," Vik agreed. "It's not odd to suppose something went wrong when someone tried to cast a spell on you in that state. Princess Beatrice really only has herself to blame, though."

Lui nodded. "I would bet your bracelet has something to do with it too. Isn't it one of Old Lindel's ancient treasures? The icon of blessing—the item that removes points of connection. With so many overlapping factors, perhaps Beatrice's mind bled into yours."

"Oh, I had quite forgotten!" Claire said. "But you're right. I was wearing my bracelet. Then, this collection of coincidences shot Beatrice into my memories, and now we've wound up here as well. Is that what you think?"

"That's the long and short of it."

In that case, there was no time to waste. Claire needed to wake up as soon as possible and contrive a way to bring Beatrice out of her head. The princess couldn't possibly be allowed to stay in Claire's memories—and speaking of Beatrice, just where was she?

She was about to voice that question when Vik spoke up. "Say,

does time pass here as fast as it does in the waking world?”

“Oh no. Not in the slightest. I spent perhaps an hour in last night’s dream, but when I woke up, I saw that I had only been asleep for a few minutes. If ‘I’ve’ already made it to the Reines’ from Lindel Island, quite a lot of time has passed in the interim.”

“Interesting,” Vik said. “In that case, I don’t see why we can’t do a little looking around. We could spend up to a few months here and be back in time for our tests. It’s not like we can do much about Keith or Princess Beatrice until the exams are over anyway.”

“Vik?” Claire blinked. Staying would never have occurred to her.

Even more oddly, the rest of her friends welcomed the idea. “Capital!” Dion said. “We’re invisible to the residents of this world besides. See?”

Claire followed his pointing finger and looked just in time to catch a curtain swishing open, spilling light across the garden. Two figures stood silhouetted against the light of her bedroom window. *Oh goodness!* she thought. For the figures were Vik and Claire, he leaving for the evening and she seeing him off. She was not dressed for bed, but her garb was a sight more casual than the costume of a proper lady. Vik, too, was dressed in street wear that could have passed for princely if necessity pressed.

Claire’s heart hammered, and her eyes widened.

“Do be careful on your way home,” dream Claire told her princely suitor.

“That I will,” said dream Vik. “See you tomorrow at school?”



Claire turned bright red. She and her friends stood only a few paces away, but the two lovebirds didn't seem to notice. Behind them, Claire glimpsed a table made up with tea for two. She knew now was not the time, but oh, did her heart twinge with fondness.

Her eyes followed dream Vik's passage through the garden as he crossed in front of her and vanished into the darkness at the far end of the yard, where the wall was lowest—easiest to climb over, Claire realized. So too did dream Claire watch her prince go. Eventually, this latter retreated into her room and closed the window behind her. The light dimmed not long after; dream Claire's room was only kept so illuminated for her late-night visitor.

One thing puzzled her. "In my dream last night, Princess Beatrice and I were visible to those around us."

"Something must have changed," Vik said.

Yes, something must've. The guard had spotted and addressed the pair of girls; evidently, Claire and Beatrice had seemed like any other denizen of that dream realm. Now, Claire and her companions were effectively phantoms.

"I wonder if perhaps the sleeping draught is the culprit," Claire said. "Oh, but there are so many potential factors it's impossible to pin it down."

"Isn't it the uniform?" Denis said.

He had stated it so casually it took Claire aback. "I beg your pardon?"

"Just think about it. They have all sorts of special tricks for the exams. Lui would know better than me, I'd wager, but they don't make us wear those uniforms for the shoddy wards. No, the real reason's— Well, I can't say that, can I? Rules are rules."

Lui scowled, but she nodded too. "He's right. There are indeed metaphorical tricks up these literal sleeves. It's not surprising we're seeing them affect this dreamworld in all sorts of curious ways."

"Oh, I understand," Claire said. "Neither Beatrice nor I were wearing our uniforms when we fell asleep last night. Your theory makes sense."

If not for the uniforms, Claire's group would've been spotted and modified Claire's memories something wretched. *That aside*, she

thought, *I do wonder how hard the upcoming exams will be if they require such special protections!*

Lui knew Claire for the worrywart she was and smiled at her friend. "You needn't overthink the exams, Claire. I can't talk about them—the rules, you know—but I promise you and Vik will be just fine."

That was some comfort. *Perhaps*, she thought, *I should make the most of this. Perhaps this is a stroke of luck in disguise.*

The dear memories of her first life had oft bolstered her heart, and she'd had precious few persons with whom to share them. Now that she could bear witness to them once more—this time, with company—she almost felt swept away with delight. She lowered her eyes and took a moment to collect herself, letting her friends' conversation flow around her.

"Right. First things first, let's find some lodging for the evening," came Vik's voice.

"There's always a spare room or two at the palace," said Lui. "Let's be off."

"Oho! A secret trip to the palace, eh?"

Dion did not share Denis's excitement. "Oh no. My grandfather is sure to be at court. Running into him is the last thing I want..."

"A secret trip with Sir Lui!" (That was Gilbert.) "Oh, this is just like a cutscene! Except it's too lovely to be a part of any route. Where's the CG?!"

Claire trailed behind her more enthusiastic friends. There was too much on her mind—too many emotions to feel.

Vik stopped a few paces ahead and turned back. "Do you remember when I said I wanted to see your first life? I guess my wish came true." He extended his hand to her. "I can't wait to see what it has to offer. Can you?"

Claire hesitated. "No, I suppose not." She let her hand slip into his.

The old Claire would not have walked hand in hand through the spring night with her prince and his mischievous smile. No, not in her first life. It was almost like everything in her life had contrived to bring her and him together for this very moment.

Her heart swelled with emotion. She squeezed Vik's hand and, together, they departed from the garden.

Formerly, the Fallen Daughter of the Duke: Volume 5

The End.

Afterword

Hello. This is Ichibu Saki. Thank you for reading *Formerly, the Fallen Daughter of the Duke: Volume 5*.

This volume begins the eventful graduation exam arc. Ever since my completion of the web novel four years ago, I've been eager for an opportunity to revisit Claire's first life. I was so pleased to finally make it happen.

Volume 6 will pick up where we left off. There was a year and three months between volumes 4 and 5 in Japan (I'm so sorry!), but I hope to have volume 6 in your hands soon. I likewise hope you will enjoy following along on the next chapter of Claire's adventures.

It is my pleasure once again to thank Nemusuke for the charming illustrations. The graduation uniform designs turned out just darling. Please do take a look for yourself!

We are also blessed with an illustration of Claire and Vik from Claire's first life. Hasn't it been ages since we've seen them? I have a special place in my heart for short-haired Claire, and as such, I was moved when presented with a depiction of her once more.

As I write this (May 2024), volume 6 of Ushio Shirotori's manga adaptation has just come out. I wrote a short story about Vik and Oswald for its bonus content. If you're interested, I invite you to check it out!

Finally, I would like to thank everyone who assisted in bringing this book to life, and as always, extend a sincere thank-you to all my supportive readers. If you have any thoughts to share, I would love to hear them via fan mail to my publisher. Your words are what keep me going.

Dearest reader, I hope to see you once more in volume 6.

Ichibu Saki

Bonus Short Story

All Her Precious Things

Claire's graduation exams would take place in a lodge outside the capital, thereby depriving her of her rooms at court for several weeks. This left Claire with quite the conundrum: namely, what to pack?

"I simply must have all my exam essentials," she said. "But my trunk is full to bursting. Do please latch, you silly clasp! Oh, it's no use."

She heaved on the trunk in one last futile effort to convince it to close, but the latch refused to obey Claire's wishes. She gave up. She would only break the trunk if she kept fussing with it. Clearly, she would have to rethink her packing strategy.

"I suppose I could leave behind a few of the tools my brother left me," she conceded.

"Why not pop the trunk into that wardrobe of yours and be done with it?" Vik—who had watched Claire fret and fuss for the last several minutes before he finally came to her aid—suggested. "There's heaps of room in that old thing."

"Maybe so," said Claire, "but I hear the dorm rooms are quite small. I shouldn't know where to put all my things even if I found a way to bring them."

"You could always put them in my room."

Vik looked genuinely baffled by her conundrum. But of course the prince would have his own special lodgings—lodgings made to house royalty, not mounds of another pupil's luggage. Claire's own dorm rooms back in Noston had been rather lavish as well, but she was not so foolish as to think she would be given such special treatment here.

"No need," she said. "I'll simply have to find a way to pack more

conservatively."

There were no lessons today, and Vik had made his way unchaperoned to Claire's quarters in the detached palace to pay her a visit. Not to suggest that they were alone—Dion was there; presently, he was feasting on the cakes and tea Sophie had brought in for all three of them.

"You sure have a lot of things to bring," he remarked through a mouthful of cake. "I finished packing ages ago. I have loads of spare room in my trunk if you'd like."

"I rather worry you might be packing too little," Vik gently rebuked him. "What did you end up bringing?"

"Desserts, mainly. The kind you can only get at the palace."

"You never change."

"Can you blame me? The pastries they make here are top-notch."

Claire and Vik exchanged a glance over Dion's head—the implication that dessert was Dion's number one priority did not go unnoticed—and the pair nodded in unison. All students underwent the same trials in graduation, but evidently, some individuals took them more seriously than others.

Claire envied Dion's (too ample) grace under pressure as she turned back to her bulging trunk. "I need my elementary magic textbooks, my stationery, and the curios my brother gave me," she listed off. "And I can't possibly skimp on my personal effects any further. That only leaves..."

Dion eyed the thick elementary spell book in Claire's hand with confusion. "What's that for? I'm not taking mine with me."

"Nor am I," said Vik. "I'm sure some would do well to brush up on the basics, but not you, Claire. You've got them all down pat."

Claire giggled, turned the book over, and shoved it in her friends' quizzical faces. "See this?"

A name, familiar to all, was handwritten on the back cover.

"What's that now?" Dion said. "I don't recognize the penmanship."

Vik, however, grasped it immediately. He grimaced. "You can't be serious."

"Oh, but I am. This is Lui's signature." (That last part was for

Dion's benefit.) "She signed this book and gave it to me before my very first Academy exam. I certainly don't *need* it anymore, but I would hate to leave it behind. It's like a good luck charm to me."

"Ah," said Vik. "I've heard the rumors. Lui Clarke, the crown prince's retainer, is a more potent charm than any spell when it comes to the study of magic..."

"Yes. Lydia has a textbook signed by Lui as well. We both consider them to be very precious to us."

Vik's eyes took on an even more distant cast at the mention of Claire's best friend and Lui's biggest fan.

"I don't know how Lui does it," he said. "But can't you leave that behind? You'll have Lui herself with you."

Claire hesitated before admitting, "You might be right." She put the textbook back in its home on her desk.

Lui would be attending the retreat as Vik's guard. Claire couldn't have taken the textbook into the exams at any rate, and the knight herself was bound to be far luckier than a simple signature.

That only leaves this, she thought, and picked up an envelope at the very bottom of her trunk. Vik recognized it immediately and shot her a glance. "Is that your mother's letter?"

"Yes. I never got a chance to read it in my first life. It says that I should be baptized on Lindel Island once I turn fifteen."

It didn't sit right with her to be apart from it for too long. Whenever she went on any sort of lengthy trip, she made sure to take the letter with her. That was how precious it was to her.

Vik gently lifted the envelope from Claire's hand and placed it back in the trunk. "That can come along."

Claire needed a moment before she could say, "Yes, it can. You know, it's funny. I recall I had quite a lot of space left in my trunk when I fled home during my first life."

"Did you now?"

Vik leaned forward, curious. Claire giggled—in truth, she had only changed the topic to procrastinate on repacking—but now that she'd brought it up, she found she was in quite a sentimental mood. "Yes. I suppose I have too many things to choose from now."

"Too many precious things?"

“Yes. All too, too precious.”

She nodded, and Vik put his arm around her. She relished his warmth and comfort. Once upon a time, she never could’ve imagined a fiancé who always had her back—nor, admittedly, a steadfast retainer who was far more interested in stuffing his cheeks than watching his master and mistress snuggle up together on the sofa.

The graduation exams were just a few days away, but until then, she let herself simply exist, surrounded by all her precious things.



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Formerly, the Fallen Daughter of the Duke: Volume 5
by Ichibu Saki

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