

The illustration depicts a romantic scene between a young man and woman. The man, with short blonde hair and blue eyes, is dressed in a formal purple and white military-style uniform with gold epaulettes and a blue sash. He is leaning in, holding the woman's hand. The woman has long, flowing red hair and blue eyes, wearing a vibrant green gown with a large white bow at the waist and a blue sash. She is looking up at him with a gentle smile. In the background, a smaller blonde girl in a blue and yellow dress stands near a large, ornate stone archway. The setting is a magical garden at night, with a castle visible in the distance under a starry sky. A white lace wreath is positioned in the upper right corner.

# Formerly, the Fallen Daughter of the Duke

Ichibu Saki

Illustrated by Nemusuke

Character Designs by Ushio Shirotori

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The book cover features a romantic illustration of a young man and woman in formal evening wear. The man, with blonde hair and blue eyes, is dressed in a dark blue and purple tuxedo with gold embroidery. He is gently holding the hand of the woman, who has long, flowing red hair and blue eyes. She is wearing a vibrant green gown with a large white bow at the waist and a blue sash. In the background, a smaller blonde girl in a blue and yellow dress stands near a large, ornate doorway. The scene is set at night with a starry sky and a white spiderweb in the upper right corner.

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# Prologue

While the kingdom of Noston could hardly be called a great power, it still boasted a rich, prosperous history. However, if one were to look back through the pages of said history, one would find that its rulers did not always act with wisdom and prudence. At such times, great houses led the kingdom in the right direction—in a sense supporting Noston at its roots. The house of Marquis Alcott was one such obvious example.

“Salomon, will you be returning to the Academy tomorrow?” asked the Marquis.

“Yes,” said Salomon, “for I hear that is when His Highness will be returning.”

“Is that so? Well now, remember that it is your duty to be our crown prince’s aide. Sincerity and honesty is the Alcott family creed, and I must remind you not to sully our name.”

“You have my word, father.”

Salomon Alcott gave his father a slight nod of acknowledgment. Marquis Alcott, the chancellor of Noston, nodded back in satisfaction before departing.

Salomon knew he would one day follow in his father’s footsteps. He sighed as he watched the Marquis leave before sitting down in a creaking armchair.

“Now what am I to do?” he asked himself.

Salomon was the future Marquis Alcott and a retainer of Crown Prince Asbert of Noston. He accompanied the prince in all affairs of state and yielded his place at the prince’s side to none, even at the Academy. And yet for all that, he did not have the slightest idea what to do about Duke Martino’s daughter Charlotte.

Shortly after Charlotte’s recent fifteenth birthday, Salomon had accompanied her and her fiancé, Asbert, to a small rural hamlet in a nearby kingdom to

witness her baptism. There, Charlotte received white magic, just as everyone had expected, which made for wonderful news. After all, the Martino family bloodline produced many young women with great magical talent, and the presence of a Martino girl, or lack thereof, was an important factor in determining Noston's future prosperity. No larger kingdom could push Noston about with Charlotte's strength on their side. The king and government officials heaved a collective sigh of relief, as this assured Noston's safety.

Alas, Charlotte's character left much to be desired. For example, there was the matter of the grand ball held to celebrate her baptism. She showed no interest in acting the part of the future queen consort, instead becoming utterly absorbed in flaunting her brand-new ball gown to her friends. People of all stations whispered to one another their opinions on Charlotte, but Charlotte did not straighten up and fly right. On the contrary, she only sulked more and more as the evening went on. Ultimately, even Asbert told her off in frank terms, but she did not amend her behavior. How in the world could Charlotte become queen and stand before her subjects like this? The thought of it alone made Salomon despair.

Incidentally, prior to Charlotte's engagement to Prince Asbert, her older sister, Claire, had occupied the position of his fiancée. However, Claire had failed to receive a high enough magical color as befit a Martino girl and therefore withdrew her engagement and moved abroad to finish her schooling. If only Claire were the one with Asbert now! Asbert could be insensitive to the subtleties of human feelings and therefore sometimes lamented this very circumstance, much to Salomon's dismay. Yet if he could speak freely, he would admit that he, too, shared the same sentiment.

*Has Duke Martino gone mad? Salomon wondered. Why doesn't he do something about Charlotte?*

"Granted, we do need the young Lady Martino's power for Noston's future, but as she currently stands, Miss Charlotte will be nothing but a pestilence upon our kingdom."

As Salomon came out of his reverie, his eyes fell upon the small strongbox in the corner of the room. This box had been a present from the late Duchess

Florence Martino, Claire's grandmother. It had a primitive locking mechanism, relying on a number combination as opposed to magic, and only Salomon knew its code. Contrary to appearances, Salomon had been a curious child, and he'd checked the contents of the box the very same day he received it. Yet much to his confusion, he found that the safe contained nothing but a single thin booklet with a message—a request—written for the young future Marquis Alcott.

At first, Salomon had thought it an odd way to send an ordinary book. Yet once he'd placed the strongbox in his room, he found that it refused to move from its spot. There was nothing else he could do but let it sit where it lay until the day when he began attending the Noston Royal Aristocratic Academy and a rattling sound began to emanate from the box. When Salomon entered the combination and looked inside, he found the book's pages flapping and rustling. Just then, he realized that it was not the safe that had a spell cast over it—it was the book.

"But at any rate," he told himself, "it doesn't seem that the former Duchess Martino's prophecies are coming to pass."

The book concerned him, yes, but his immediate problem was how to rapidly teach Charlotte to act like a queen consort. Glancing at the strongbox with its request from Claire and Charlotte's grandmother Florence, Salomon began to make preparations for his return to the Academy.

## Chapter 9

“Is it true that Lady Nicola is moving to Noston already?” Claire asked.

“Yes,” said Vik. “I hear she’ll be going on the same day that we will, for the portal’s grand opening.”

The two sat in Vik’s office on a day without lessons. Flakes of snow drifted past the window outside, and spring was still a long way off.

Claire, who was assisting Vik with his routine tasks for the day, sighed. “I’d heard previously that she would be starting school in the spring. This is all rather sudden.”

“Yes, but she was the one eager to go. I don’t think you have any cause for concern.”

Claire wanted to protest further, but Vik’s calm expression stopped her. This must have been his decision as heir to the throne. *I know I don’t have the right to comment*, Claire thought, *but I’ve heard that Nicola’s never been apart from her parents before. I’m sure it must be upsetting for her to have to go abroad so suddenly.*

The court mages’ efforts culminated in the completion of the portal right around the beginning of winter. This portal facilitated easier travel between Paffuto and Noston via teleportation. Claire had expected both kingdoms, particularly Noston, to balk at the idea, but thanks to both crown princes supporting the project, the groundwork had been laid and the project completed faster than she’d expected. Incidentally, the portal resembled a mundane portal in name only, as each trip required a great amount of magical power, and therefore it could not be used for trivial concerns. Portals were a simple improvement on the nigh on impossible art of teleportation, making it feasible with enough effort.

*I’ve heard that any aristocrat with particularly high magic can use the portal by themselves*, Claire thought. *And if they can’t, they may petition to borrow the*

*requisite magic from one of the mages in the palace's employ.*

In her first life, Claire had teleported herself, Vik, Denis, and an injured Lui back to Paffuto so that Lui could receive medical attention from a holy woman. Claire hadn't fainted, but being unaccustomed to teleporting such long distances left her feeling noticeably drained.

Magic spells were special powers lent by the spirits. Teleportation was not so much traveling at fast speeds, but rather leaping through the air, and the spirits required just as much of the caster's magical power in exchange. This made teleportation a high-level magic, with only a select few—those chosen by the spirits—capable of executing it.

Presently, the portal was completed, and Nicola would leave the royal family behind to study abroad at the Royal Aristocratic Academy of Noston.

Nicola's transfer was a highly anticipated and significant event for both kingdoms, and yet Claire, who had also moved abroad when she was fifteen, did not find it as exciting. *To begin with, she thought, I wasn't actually fifteen on the inside when I moved abroad. At any rate, I know Nicola has a good head on her shoulders, but I do wish they'd have given her more time to prepare all the same.*

She, Vik, and Vik's retainers were, as usual, drowning in their mountains of paperwork. As Claire sorted through the never-ending stack of proposals for Vik to approve, she turned over the Nicola problem in her mind.

"It turns out Lui, Dion, and I can all use the portal on our own," Denis piped up. "But I guess with my magical power, I'd only manage a one-way trip to Noston."

"Doesn't that work out better for you?" asked Lui. "You can claim your magic hasn't recovered as an excuse to go out partying all night."

"Oh, true!"

Claire tilted her head in bewilderment as her two friends bantered back and forth while simultaneously racing through the paperwork at an impressive clip.

“Right now,” she said, “only those authorized by both kings are allowed to use the portal. But I suppose that someday we’ll all be allowed to use it for entertainment purposes.”

“I’m sure we will,” said Dion. “I’d love to go back to Noston again. The last time when we went to talk to Lady Anne, I didn’t get to see anything outside of the palace. I’d like to take a walk around town too.”

“Oh, yeah,” Denis said. “You were in Tillard, the capital of Noston, when you went with Claire that one time, right? Tillard’s a fun, spiffy place, don’t you think? The girls are real lookers too.”

“Well, with so many powerful magic users on our side,” Lui remarked, “we’ll be able to let Vik drop in on Noston any time he likes.”

Vik rested his chin on his hand sulkily. “I mean, yes. I know you all *could* just teleport. But now that we have a portal, I can use it too.” Lui and Denis suppressed snorts at the childish tone in his voice, the latter somewhat unsuccessfully.

Claire spoke up as the thought occurred to her. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you use magic yourself, Vik. Even at school, we take most of our practical lessons separately.”

“It isn’t appropriate for the royal family to use magic in front of others. It has to do with dignity and all,” Vik explained.

“Oh, it’s quite different in Noston. Not that Noston has many people who can use high-level magic to begin with, really.”

“Since we have a bigger population, we have more aristocracy. Naturally, that also gives us more high-level magic users,” Vik added.

Noston only had the powerful Martino family whereas Paffuto boasted many families with strong magical connections, although none among them could match the Martinos. Two such examples were the Clarks and the Carreres. *If Noston didn’t have just the one strong magical family, Claire thought, the Martinos wouldn’t receive such special privileges. Then perhaps we could have avoided Charlotte going down such a dangerous path.*

She pictured her half-sister, Charlotte. Prior to going back in time, Charlotte

had fired a burst of white magic at Vik. She was barely trained, so it had been less a magical attack and more a half-wild burst of feelings born from Charlotte's desire to cause harm to him. *This portal is only a temporary consolation, nothing more*, Claire reminded herself. *If I want to save the future, I must do something about Charlotte*. Even in the midst of her daily happiness, this dire thought was deeply rooted and never far from the forefront of her mind.

"Claire," Vik said suddenly, startling her from her reverie.

"Hm?" she asked. "What is it?"

He hesitated momentarily before cutting to the chase. "It's been almost a year since you moved here, hasn't it? The king has suggested you might join us when we go to Noston for the upcoming ceremony, so that you could visit your family."

"Visit my family?" she repeated.

"Well, I won't force you, and I'm sure the idea must give you many concerns. I believe the king intended it as a way to be nice to you. Even though I already turned him down once, he still offered it again."

"Well, but I suppose it is odd that I've not gone home once, isn't it?" Claire mused. "I wouldn't expect any student treated as an honored guest not to go home over the school holidays."

"Also, just for your information, there aren't any hidden motives involved. You can choose to do whatever works best for you."

Claire still hadn't had an audience with the king in this life, and even if she was an honored guest, it would've been odd indeed for the king to be concerned with a mere schoolgirl.

Now even Lui and Denis, bantering only moments before, fell silent and returned to their paperwork. They all must've known about the king's proposal beforehand, Claire realized. Vik would have discussed it with them from every angle before deciding to talk to her about it. That left Claire with only one way to respond.

"In that case," she said, "I will gladly accept."

“Are you sure?” Vik asked.

“Yes. My family hasn’t rejected me in this life, you know. I’d love to see many of them again, especially my aunt and my brothers.”

“But are you sure we’re not forcing you?” Vik urged. Despite her efforts to reassure him, he still looked deeply concerned.

Claire giggled at the familiarity of it. “I’m concerned about Charlotte as well,” she said. “Besides, I must be grateful to His Majesty for the honor of using the portal.”

Claire truly did feel worried. In the past year since moving to Paffuto, her only contact with the future impetus of broken relations between Paffuto and Noston had been the letters she and Charlotte exchanged. However, Charlotte’s replies had been few and far between. Furthermore, Claire had also received rather distressing tidings from Lady Anne, Oscar, and Noston’s crown prince, Asbert. They informed her of several deeply unfortunate incidents, such as when Charlotte attempted to force a girl she didn’t like to be expelled from the Academy, or made another wear wet clothing for the crime of rebuking her. Once again, Claire recognized that the enmity she’d felt on the night Charlotte drove her from the Royal Aristocratic Academy had been genuine.

“Don’t worry,” Vik said, as confidently as if it were already assured. “I swear we won’t let the relationship between our two kingdoms be destroyed.”

“Thank you.” It reassured Claire that Vik did not disregard this highly unfeasible prospect.



Several days passed until it was the day before the ceremony that would mark the official opening of the portal, as well as Nicola’s departure for Noston. A portal open to another kingdom! A member of the royal family studying abroad! The palace buzzed with excitement at these unprecedented events.

That evening after dinner, Sophie poked her head around the doorframe. Claire greeted her with a smile.

“Miss Claire, Lady Nicola is here to see you,” Sophie announced.

“Thank you, Sophie,” Claire said. She’d wanted to speak to Nicola about Charlotte before the move, so she’d sent Nicola an invitation to come to her rooms as a thank-you for the tea party at the ball.

Nicola appeared behind Sophie, pouting slightly. “Th-Thank you for having me,” she muttered.

“And thank you for coming. I’m so glad that I can take tea with you again. I was afraid I’d miss my opportunity.”

“W-Were you really?” Nicola thrust a box at Claire. “Here. It’s dessert.”

It was still warm. Considering the time, the pastries must have been fresh out of the oven. This party was held so late at night, incidentally, because Nicola had been extraordinarily busy in the lead-up to her move. Yet the fact that she’d taken the time to bring a gift in spite of all that warmed Claire’s heart.

Nicola feigned indifference, yet her cheeks turned red all the same as she seated herself on the sofa. Shortly afterwards, Sophie bustled in with a tea tray. Claire poured golden-brown tea into a pristine white cup, its rich scent of fruit and southern flowers filling the room.



“Th-That smells nice,” Nicola remarked.

Claire chuckled. “Good. I do hope you enjoy.”

Claire knew Nicola enjoyed sweeter teas, so she’d had Sophie add honey to the pot. From the way Nicola kept sneaking covert glances at her, Claire knew she’d made the right choice.

“Would you like for us to switch cups?” Claire asked.

Nicola took a moment to respond. “There’s no need.”

She brought the cup to her lips, ignoring the implied offer to check for poison. “Wow! This is delicious!” she cried. Her eyes grew wide.

Claire beamed at the sight. “I’m glad you like it. I’d heard you like citrus scents, you see, and I’ve also added a flower fragrance and just a dab of honey.”

“It’s really sweet.”

“If you don’t like it, I have other options.”

“N-No!” Nicola protested. “I like it. I was just a bit surprised since I don’t usually drink my tea like this, that’s all.”

“I hear people take their tea differently in the various regions of Paffuto,” Claire said. “And there are different varieties of tea leaves, of course.”

“That’s right. We have to learn about that in school constantly. I’m at the point where I’m almost getting sick of hearing about it.”

Claire fell silent, taking this as a strong hint as to why Nicola was moving abroad early.

“Oh!” Nicola cried. “Th-That’s not what I meant! I told you already that I’m only leaving Paffuto because I want to, remember? Please don’t misunderstand.”

After a moment, Claire said, “Right. Of course.”

“Y-You don’t think I’m acting too meek or downtrodden today, do you? Like I’m scared because I suddenly have to go abroad or something.”

“Nonsense, I certainly wouldn’t go that far.”

“Meaning the thought did cross your mind, huh?”

*Nicola is behaving quite strangely*, Claire mused. She was vaguely aware that Nicola was not the most socially adept, and while Claire couldn’t help but find this charming, if concerning, she felt all the same that Nicola was acting particularly bizarre today.

Claire was about to ask if Nicola really was scared about something when the girl muttered in a whisper, “But it’s not that. It’s that...I feel bad for Vicky. I just want to apologize to him.”

“Why’s that?” Claire asked.

“I kept bothering him at lunch at the Royal Academy, and then I pulled you away during the middle of his birthday ball.”

“Oh!” Now Claire understood. “So that was on purpose? Prince Vik certainly seemed quite put out about it on the day of.” She giggled.

Nicola looked away, embarrassed. “That’s what I mean,” she said.

“Hmm?”

“I heard recently about why you came to Paffuto. I badgered Keith, and he ended up telling me everything. He said you didn’t get the magical color everyone wanted from you, so you came to study here. And then, because you’re so kind and you put up with that, your half-sister took your place.”

“Lady Nicola, I’ve been fortunate to come to Paffuto. I’m having such a good time here. So...” Claire trailed off.

“I’m glad it worked out that way, but still!”

Claire smiled at the frustration in Nicola’s voice. “You’re very kind too, Lady Nicola,” she said.

“Wha— No, you’re kidding! But at any rate, when I heard that story, I felt so frustrated. I don’t even know why. But see, once I’m enrolled at the Noston Royal Aristocratic Academy, your sister will be my classmate. She’ll be taking up the spot where I know you ought to be. I don’t think I can forgive her for that, at least for now.”

This, Claire realized, was likely why Nicola seemed so unusually wound up

right now. Finally understanding the true cause of the girl's discomfort, Claire felt relieved. She assumed a dignified pose and said, "My younger sister, Charlotte Martino, possesses the best magic in all of Noston and is the crown prince's fiancée."

"But I don't think you're in any way inferior to her," Nicola insisted.

"I'm merely following what my father thinks is best, as a member of the Martino family. However, I need to make an effort to not let his decision become a mistake."

"What do you mean?"

"I hear that my sister's conduct at the Academy..." Claire paused momentarily. "Well, it is, perhaps, not exactly praiseworthy. That is why I need to keep an eye on her, so that she does not cause harm to anyone."

"Wow," Nicola said. "It's rare to hear you speak negatively of anyone. And a member of your family, no less."

Claire had gathered from Oscar and Asbert that Charlotte, oddly, was isolated from the rest of her peers. Ostensibly, she seemed to be having a grand old time, but a good portion of the other young women avoided Charlotte on account of lack of education and good manners, in addition to her boasting about being the prince's fiancée. When Oscar had learned by way of Asbert that Charlotte had tried to have a girl expelled in the previous month, he'd given her a good scolding.

It would have been so much better, Claire thought, if she could have stuck up for her sister as opposed to insulting her like Nicola had mentioned. She chewed her lip and continued. "Lady Nicola, please do be careful around my sister."

"So things really are bad enough that you need to warn me, huh?" Nicola asked.

"Please write to me if you can," Claire said. "And please make sure not to forget your wards whenever you're at school."

As Claire stressed the importance of her warning, Nicola lifted her chin nonchalantly and took on a dauntless pose. "Of course I will," she said. "Who do

you think I am?" That sheer level of confidence combined with residual cuteness was a very familiar sight to Claire. Nicola was definitely Vik's cousin, all right.

"By the way," Nicola continued, "I've received a number of letters from the Crown Prince of Noston. He says that I can come to him if I ever have any concerns while I'm abroad. I hear he's an old friend of yours too. So because of you I don't feel scared about going." She paused for a moment and then, stumbling over the words, added, "Thank you."

"Not at all," said Claire. "And if anything does come up, know that you can always ask me for advice too. I'll do anything I can to help you out. Not just for things related to Noston either. I'm happy to help with friend problems and such too."

"D-Do you really mean that? Well, I'll keep that in mind."

Moonlight glinted off the snow outside the window. Nicola gave Claire a little wave and then set off back through the snow, looking rather happy. She didn't need to wait for spring to go abroad.



The portal's grand opening was to take place the following afternoon. It would be an enormous event to commemorate this exciting day for both kingdoms. Surprisingly, although choosing which kingdom to hold the ceremony in seemed like a contentious issue, the matter had been resolved quite easily.

Claire, Lui, and Dion waited in front of the church where the portal had been built for their turn to teleport to Noston. Paffuto was sending a delegation of a few dozen people this time around, yet they could not all possibly pass through the portal in one trip.

"Everyone's saying that we have the crown princes to thank for their hard work on the portal, but it wouldn't have gone this smoothly without Miss Nicola's help," Dion remarked.

"Oh, absolutely," said Lui. "So many people said that they wanted to see Lady Nicola off, and I haven't heard a word of anyone complaining about holding the ceremony in Noston."

“Wow. I always thought Lady Nicola was a bit of a selfish brat, but maybe I need to rethink that. I guess people really can change on a moment’s notice, huh?”

“Well, maybe not to your level,” Lui commented matter-of-factly.

Dion grinned good-naturedly. “I suppose.”

They were to stay in Noston for two days. Claire was to reside in the palace guest rooms, but she understood that her father the duke was prepared to receive her as well. She would indeed have enjoyed the opportunity to stay a bit longer and go home to her family’s mansion in the capital, but the Paffuto Royal Academy’s school holidays were not long enough. Given that, she’d chosen to stay the same number of days as Vik.

“Lui,” Claire asked, “do you think Vik and his guard have arrived already?”

“Yes,” Lui answered. “Like teleportation, there’s no time delay. I don’t believe he was the first to go through, but he, Keith, and Denis should’ve been relatively early in the queue.”

“Either way, being able to travel instantaneously between two kingdoms simply by using a portal is incredible.”

Claire glanced at a flat, dull aquamarine stone before her. It had been enshrined here in the center of the chapel for the sake of the new portal and was large enough for three people to stand on it. “That stone is filled with magical power, correct?” Claire asked.

“It is,” said Lui. “Magical power can’t normally be stored, but that stone is special. It’s been made to store magic for a temporary period. The portal never closes because someone is always on hand to keep magical power flowing through it. This allows for us to cut down on the magical power expended on the teleportation spell.”

“Which is why the portal was constructed in the chapel?”

“Yes. That keeps it close to the spirits, but it also means that there’s always a magic user close by as well.”

“I see! That makes sense.”

“Wow,” Dion said. Both he and Claire found Lui’s explanation impressive.

Incidentally, Dion was not Claire’s only escort today, as Lui likewise accompanied her due to Vik’s concerns about Charlotte.

“There’s going to be a ball tonight, right?” Dion continued. “Claire, I was hoping I’d get to see you walk together with Prince Vik, but I suppose that’s not happening. What a shame.”

“We’re still not ready for all that,” Claire reminded him. “And besides, he and I received separate invitations. About all I can do is hope we’ll be able to make it formal soon.”

In Claire’s first life, Charlotte’s rampage had unmistakably begun the moment she saw Claire and Vik arm in arm. Even now, Claire still dreamed about how enraptured Charlotte was when she tried to talk to Vik and how sternly Asbert had rebuked her. *I must check on Charlotte myself while I am here*, she thought.

She and Vik had indeed shared their feelings with one another and were now sweethearts. However, Claire had yet to be formally introduced to the king, as would be necessary in order to marry into the royal family. This meant that Vik—now the guest of honor on this outing to Noston—could not escort her to tonight’s ball, and the two were to conduct their business separately the entire trip. *I wish I could have shown him around Noston*, Claire thought, *but I suppose that will have to wait for a different trip*. She sighed.

Lui smiled gently, guessing what had provoked said sigh. “It may not work out this time,” she said, “but the next time you come back, you’ll be able to show Vik around the land you grew up in. I’ll be glad to help in any way I can. I’ll even make an alibi if you or he needs one.”

“Thank you, Lui,” Claire said.

As Lui had mentioned earlier, both crown princes had been involved in building the portal. Although Vik hadn’t missed any school for it, he spent every spare moment rushing about, busy with one thing or another. Thus it felt to Claire as if they hadn’t talked in quite some time. She somewhat missed those tender moments with him. Even then, she knew that couching it in modesty by adding the “somewhat” was merely her attempt to act stronger than she felt.

Before long, it was time for Claire's group to use the portal. As the three stepped onto the flat stone, it glowed faintly under their feet.

"Wow," said Dion. "This is my first time teleporting with a portal."

"It's mine as well," Claire said. "I've heard of ones in Paffuto that link to different regions of the kingdom, but I've never used them."

"Let's go," Lui said. Her palm began to glow.

Truthfully, as Claire had the strongest magic of the bunch, she'd wanted to be the one to cast the spell. However, none but a select few in Paffuto knew how strong she really was, and she could not operate the portal herself for fear of those in Noston discovering her powers.

Lui chanted the incantation to the spirits in a low voice. The world went white for a moment, and then in the next instant, Claire found herself once again in a very familiar place.

A clear, pretty voice greeted her. "Welcome home, Claire!" it cried. "How have you been?"

Claire turned to the voice's owner. *Charlotte...* she thought. She said nothing but smiled. There, a short distance away, stood Charlotte with a tight grip on Asbert's arm. Yet Asbert looked to be completely ignoring his fiancée who was hanging off of his person.

Those around the portal seemed ever so slightly concerned and sympathetic. *What's going on?* Claire wondered. Noticing others regarding her with pity for her position while also casting eyes of ruthless scorn towards her sister, Claire stayed silent and gave a ladylike curtsy.

Vik and the King of Paffuto had arrived earlier, but Claire still knew she shouldn't attract attention. She was only being her normal self, but she inferred from other people's reactions that her appearance had still caused quite a stir.

She could hear several whispers behind her.

"See?" hissed one. "I told you he had the wrong idea. What in the world is Duke Martino thinking, making his younger daughter the prince's fiancée?"

"But I hear Miss Claire doesn't have very powerful magic," said another. "That

Paffish knight brought her here, but really, she should have been the one to use the portal.”

“What is even going on with the Martino family right now?”

The whispers made Claire stiffen.



Several hours later, Charlotte raged in a far fouler mood than she’d been in before. “This is BORING!” she exclaimed. “What am I even doing here?”

“Staying at home, I presume?”

Charlotte had only acted up since she thought she was alone, so she rushed to smooth things over when she heard the voice behind her.

“Lord Salomon!” she said. “Were you there all along?”

“Yes,” he informed her. “I understand you didn’t receive an invitation to tonight’s ball. Prince Asbert asked me to watch you to make sure you wouldn’t slip out and try to go anyway.”

“Oh! Did he really?”

“He did. It seems you’re a bit behind on your studies.”

With much rustling of pages, he unloaded an armful of records about etiquette and peerage onto the desk. Charlotte clicked her tongue mentally, understanding Salomon’s implication that she was too much of a disgrace to be brought out in polite company. *What a pain in the butt!* she thought. *I know they call it a ball, but who cares? It’s just an excuse to show off and get attention, same as any other party, right? And I already had a new dress made and everything! Hmmmph!*

“But I hear Claire’s going to be there,” she whined. “If she shows up, why can’t I?”

“Because you and Miss Claire are two different people,” Salomon explained.

Charlotte jolted. “But Claire doesn’t even have powerful magic like I do.”

“Well, what else do *you* have apart from powerful magic?”

Charlotte jolted again. Her face reddened at the casual delivery of the insult.

She glared at him in open hostility, but Salomon remained utterly unperturbed. *What's his problem?! she thought. This is why I hate him! That and he never gives me what I want!*

"This is not a dressing room for you to prepare for the ball," Salomon told her. "It is a place for you to be locked in as I keep an eye on you."

"Impossible," Charlotte gasped. "Prince Asbert would never have said that. If you're going to speak so cruelly to me, then I want out of here now!"

"I'm sure he didn't think to mention it, as you wouldn't have understood even if he had. At any rate, you are forbidden from leaving this room before the ball is over."

Charlotte switched tactics to combat Salomon's absurd obstinacy. She bridled her anger and partially closed her eyes as if she felt tired. "Okay," she finally said after a moment. "But Lord Salomon, could you please step out for a minute?"

"I cannot. His Highness ordered that I do not take my eyes off of you for even one second."

"But," Charlotte insisted, "I think I'm getting sleepy. I'd really like to change into something I can relax in. Can't you step out? Pretty please? It's just for a moment."

Salomon's expression changed at this sudden display of meekness. After all, he couldn't very well stay in the same room around a changing young lady. He thought it over for a moment before relenting. "Very well. But I will be back in ten minutes."

"Okay. I'll be done in a jiffy!"

Charlotte beguiled him with her best smile and then shut the door to the parlor. The moment he was gone, she screamed internally, *Claire, Claire, Claire, Claire, Claire, Claire, Claire, Claire!!!*

"I'm tired of hearing about her!" she yelled. "What is wrong with everybody? I know that I can't be exactly like little miss perfect Claire Martino, okay? Big whoop!"

She chucked a cushion across the room. “Everything’s been all weird lately. To begin with, why’s there another daughter of a duke coming to study here?”

Charlotte was the only daughter of a duke her age in Noston, which, with Claire gone, entitled her to the best treatment out of all the young ladies in the Academy. In fact, she’d felt high on almighty when she’d started school in the spring. Ever since she was small, Claire had been one step ahead of her at every tea party or social function they’d been invited to. Claire was the one who received all the attention and compliments, and yet Claire never let it go to her head. What else was Charlotte supposed to do but detest her? *Charlotte* was the one who deserved everyone’s love.

Hence, when she’d realized at age thirteen that the world existed solely for her benefit, she did not hesitate before choosing Asbert as her future beau. Selecting this route, Charlotte realized, was an easy way to outrank Claire. But now things were happening that she, even as the main character, hadn’t predicted. It was completely baffling.

“First of all, it was weird enough when Claire went abroad! In Asbert’s good ending, isn’t she supposed to set off for the monastery in the north and go missing along the way? Why is this happening? Ugh, I’m sick of it!”

Charlotte kept a list of the routes available to her as the main character tucked away in her mind. This world existed purely for her, so when Claire left home to go abroad, Charlotte had at first assumed she’d won the life she’d yearned for. However, it turned out to be a far cry from the life of her dreams. As her fiancé, Asbert was certainly polite to her, yet she clearly registered low on his list of priorities. Asbert, it was all too plain to see, was not Charlotte’s prince charming. But wasn’t this world supposed to be just for her? How many times now had she repeated this very same phrase to herself?

Things were no different at the Academy either. On the one hand, many of the students, including Claire’s old friend Caroline and others on the student council, fawned over Charlotte. However, plenty of students harbored other opinions about her.

One girl had finally told her off: “You’re already engaged! You shouldn’t be so familiar with other people’s fiancés.” That had sent Charlotte into a frenzy, and

she'd used her father's name to have the girl expelled from the school—unsuccessfully, that is, as Charlotte's older brother Oscar found out in the end and put a stop to it.

Yet what hurt above all else was that Asbert treated her like nothing more than a fiancée. He was handsome, possessed a stoic bearing, and had the most promising future of any young man in the country as its crown prince. That should've been enough to satisfy Charlotte's vanity, but she sensed no affection from him. He saw her as nothing but a bride to marry for political reasons. It was exactly the same way he should have felt for Claire in the Asbert route.

"And on top of all that," Charlotte grouched, "it's awful that now he wants me to help this Nicola girl. Doesn't that basically make me a member of her retinue? Ugh, they're nuts if they think I'll do that."

She glared at the door through which Salomon had only just departed. Many things upset Charlotte about Nicola's arrival in Noston. It wasn't only the request to keep her company.

"What's all this about giving up my rooms at the Academy dorms to her?" Charlotte muttered. "And now when I have no choice but to vacate them, they go and give her all new things! I'm so jealous. Back when I moved in, they made me use all of Claire's things that she'd had the year before."

Charlotte had failed to obtain the privileges and affection she so coveted. And now a new character, one considered more important than her, had stepped onto the scene and taken the place she should've occupied. This was completely unexpected.

*Aren't I the main character?* Charlotte thought again. *But everything keeps working out against me.*

She chewed her lip, peeved with the way things were going, and cast a teleportation spell. "Spirits, in exchange for my white magical power, I beseech you to transport me to wherever I wish to go."



Meanwhile, the post-ceremony ball was in full swing in the palace's main hall.

"How are you enjoying your time living in Paffuto, Claire?" asked Oscar,

Claire's escort for the evening. "You seem to be doing rather well for yourself."

"All thanks to you," she said, beaming. "I've had a lovely time. I'm learning so much, and it's really quite enjoyable."



A deep crimson carpet covered the floor of the wide hall, and a grand chandelier adorned the ceiling overhead. Servants in formal uniform waited on guests dressed in all their finery. Scents of perfumes and colognes mingled with the fragrances of delicious food and beverages, and an orchestra's music filled the resplendent hall.

Such extravaganzas were familiar to Claire, but a ball held in this very castle reminded her of the night in which the good relations between Noston and Paffuto had been sundered. *It will be fine*, she reminded herself. *I was told that Charlotte wasn't invited, after all. If anything happens, it will be at the ball in half a year's time when Vik and I announce our engagement.* She understood all this rationally, yet she could not shake her sense of unease no matter how she tried.

Oscar looked at her in concern. "You look a bit pale," he said. "Do you want to step out for a breath of fresh air?"

"I'm fine, thank you," she said. "I think I'm just so happy to be home after such a long time that I have a little case of the nerves."

"That's right," he said. "It's not so easy for you to come back to Noston, now is it? By the way, have you been helping your classmate, Prince Vik, at school?"

Claire stumbled over her words before saying, "Why, of course."

When Claire had left for Paffuto a year ago, Oscar had harbored the hope that she could develop a special relationship with Vik. As the eldest son of Duke Martino, Oscar was shrewd indeed.

"I've heard the prince did much of the work in setting up this portal," Oscar continued. "He's a great man in spite of being so young. And I hear he isn't engaged yet either."

"You've heard correctly, but I'm afraid I don't know anything more than you do."

Oscar looked like he wanted to hear more, but Claire cut the conversation short with a smile. She was not particularly gifted at lying. *And speaking of lying*, she added to herself, *I'm hiding something enormous from both of my brothers.*

Out of all of her siblings, Claire had been the sole recipient of a letter from their mother that designated her baptism spot. Her mother had delayed in telling anyone as long as possible, Claire reasoned, with the understanding that it would clearly reveal her lineage, all while keeping in mind that Noston would suffer if Claire failed to be baptized. However, this also meant that Claire's two brothers had received no more than middling magic colors unbecoming of their high rank. *Now isn't the right time*, Claire thought, *but I must tell them in the near future*. Her heart darkened with the weight of her deceit.

Just then, a sudden voice made her raise her head. "Oh, is that Miss Claire?" It was a whisper, so low she could barely hear it. She assumed it hadn't been meant for her ears, and Oscar's failure to notice confirmed her suspicion. Claire pretended not to hear and let the whispers pass her by.

"I hear she was sent abroad because she wasn't fit to be the pride and joy of the Martinos," the whispers went on.

"Indeed. But now I wonder if that was the right decision."

"I do as well. Just between you and me, I've heard that Miss Charlotte's behavior at the Academy is not exactly commendable, no matter how good her magic may be."

"It's a pity, isn't it? If only Miss Claire had stronger magic. She'd have made for a perfect queen."

Claire jolted in surprise. These were unmistakably charitable sentiments, just as she'd noticed when standing before the portal. Her heart further darkened with unease and the weight of responsibility for the kingdom she'd left behind.



As Claire was off with Oscar, Vik spent the ball in Asbert's company.

"Prince Vik," Asbert said, "would you mind being introduced to another guest?"

"Not at all," said Vik. "But aren't you tired, Prince Asbert?"

"As are you, I'm sure."

"You could say that again." Vik grinned, his stern expression vanishing.

Both princes had been run ragged in setting up the portal, and neither could relax until the end of the ball tonight.

A few seconds later, a beefy middle-aged nobleman bustled up to Vik and politely greeted him. “Your Highness, it’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I am Earl Terrance Aaron, at your service.”

“A pleasure,” Vik said. “Earl Aaron, I do believe your family governs one of Noston’s trade centers, does it not?”

“Why, you are quite well informed. Paffuto is lucky to have you as its crown prince.”

“I’ve visited once before,” Vik said. “It’s a lovely town.”

“Why, thank you!” the earl cried. “By the way, I happened to overhear that Claire Martino, the girl who should have been the pride of our kingdom, went abroad to study in Paffuto. We’re ever so grateful you were generous enough to take her in, but I do apologize for this shameful incident.”

Vik knew that he must remain calm, but nevertheless, his voice dropped an interval as he said, “I beg your pardon?”

However, Earl Aaron failed to notice and carried on. “Oh yes, there is no place for Miss Claire in Noston any longer. She was raised and educated to be our future queen, but she failed to earn the magic color that we required of her. Some, even in high society, are sympathetic towards her, but at any rate, I’m sure that Paffuto remains such a fine nation because it takes on these sorts of charity cases.”

Vik started. All the emotion drained from his face at the sheer level of insult directed towards Claire. His fists clenched, and he was unable to contain their quivering. Yet he knew he could not express his rage here. He had decided to follow Claire’s words and act in line with creating a peaceful future. No one in Noston could learn of their relationship yet. All the same, Vik shot the man a harsh glare, but the obsequious little smile remained plastered to the earl’s face.

Vik attempted to calm down, but his neighbor, on the other hand, freely displayed his rage. “Terrance Aaron,” Asbert snapped. “Claire is a young lady

who occupies the special position of being my former fiancée. She is also the dear friend and classmate of Prince Vik. Such insult to her is strictly forbidden.”

His voice was so loud it carried beyond just the three of them. The area suddenly fell as silent as if it had been doused with water, save for the orchestra’s almost unnaturally elegant tune.

“M-My apologies,” the earl stuttered, finally realizing his mistake. “If you’ll excuse me, I’ll be on my way.”

After a very white-faced Earl Aaron scurried away, Asbert turned to Vik. “Prince Vik,” he said, “do you mind if we go somewhere else to talk?”

The ballroom opened up onto an enormous balcony. Beyond the curtains fluttering in the night breeze and protecting them from view of the other guests, Vik and Asbert stood together with glasses in hand.

“Thank you for standing up for Claire,” Vik said.

“Not at all,” said Asbert. “I truly meant that, and I’m familiar with the circumstances surrounding you two. Just the other day—well, month, rather—Miss Claire came to visit.”

“I don’t mind if you call her Claire.” Vik smiled wryly at Asbert’s consideration for his feelings.

Asbert hesitated before continuing. “Claire, then, seems to be having a wonderful time in Paffuto. She’d been sent abroad against her will, so thank you for letting her have such happiness in spite of that.”

“There’s no need to thank me,” Vik said. He faltered for a few moments before adding, “I’m also grateful. She saved someone very dear to me.”

The man Vik spoke of was his older half brother, Oswald, from whom he received periodic letters. Oswald was reluctant to share his whereabouts, but he reported that he was living his new life quite happily.

“Really?” Asbert hesitated again. “To be frank with you, I used to hope that Claire would come back to Noston once all the fuss died down. She may not have strong magic, but that can’t change the fact that she’s such a talented and

charming individual.”

Now it was Vik’s turn to pause. “But I thought the Martinos’ magical power was important to you?”

“It is,” Asbert insisted. “It’s enormously important for the kingdom. Hence, I’m pleased her sister, Miss Charlotte, has received white magic. Yet Claire’s virtues are in a whole different sense. Few people have noticed it yet, but I think more will come around as time goes on. There may come a time when the calls for her to return home grow loud indeed. Unless, of course, I have good reason to deny the people’s wishes.”

“And what reason might that be?” Vik asked.

He understood that Asbert had made his feelings for Claire known to her several months prior. Claire hadn’t said as much herself, but he knew she and Asbert must have discussed this in private. The thought made him slightly jealous, and he raised his glass to his lips for a sip.

“That I cannot reveal right now, but I intend to do everything in my power to keep Claire in Paffuto,” said Asbert.

“I’m glad to hear that.”

Asbert sighed in relief and then raised his glass in a toast with Vik.

“Claire already looks perfect on the outside,” Vik said, “but she’s also incredibly daring and wonderfully amusing on the inside. I’d love to hear more about what she was like when she lived in Noston.”

“She’s been that way ever since her lady mother died. At least, that was how I saw her.”

“I’m sure she must have had a lot on her plate at the time.”

The festivities went on uninterrupted behind the curtain at their backs as the two crown princes, little by little, began to form a true friendship.

Later as Vik strode out of the ballroom, he announced to his retainer, “Denis, I’m going out for a bit.”

Denis looked back at him in confusion but, reading Vik’s mood, did not follow

his master. "You got it," he said. *Good thing I just sent Keith off on an errand,* Denis thought.

Claire was nowhere to be seen in the ballroom. Vik assumed she was spending the evening elsewhere. *She must be tired of being scrutinized by all those curious gossips, like that Terrance Aaron man,* he thought.

He set off down the deserted marble corridors to the main palace.

Just then, a sugary sweet voice filled the hall. "Ohhh, Priiince?" it called.

He turned, and there stood a girl with blonde hair and blue eyes staring at him. Although she wore a beautifully made dress, it was no formal ball gown. This young lady, Vik realized, had most likely not been invited. Additionally, for some reason he could not fathom, her dress was all muddied around the knees, and bits of leaves were stuck to her disheveled hair. She looked almost as if she had leapt out of somewhere and fallen into a hedge.

When Vik didn't answer her, the girl dashed after him. "You're the prince I saw at the portal!" she exclaimed. "I don't recognize you as one of the characters, but you sure are handsome. Prince Asbert's all gloomy and blah, but you're as bright as the sun!"

"Who are you?" Vik finally asked.

"We met before the ceremony, remember? I didn't get a chance to actually introduce myself to you, though. My name's Charlotte Martino. Nice to meet you!"



*Is this Claire's half-sister?* Vik thought.

The girl—Charlotte—cocked her head to one side and looked up at him with glittering eyes. Vik glanced at her briefly before turning on his heel to make his way back to the ballroom.

As a sign of respect for Noston, Vik had neglected to wear a ward today. It was, in short, a diplomatic courtesy.

From what he'd gathered from Claire's stories, spending too much time around Charlotte could only spell trouble. *It would be easy enough to shoo her away*, he reasoned, *but that would present me with a whole new host of issues.*

Charlotte ran after him, her footsteps a rapid patter across the floor. "Oh, what luck!" she said. "I messed up my teleportation spell and landed in a bush in the courtyard. But then to run into a prince! It's like a dream come true."

Vik said nothing, ignoring Charlotte as she kept up an excited stream of commentary. However, Charlotte was not discouraged. "Wait, Prince!" she called. "I'm afraid I wasn't invited to the ball tonight. I'm ever so lonely all by myself, so won't you come keep me company?"

"No," Vik snapped. "Besides, aren't you engaged to Asbert Lucia Nottingham? I can only imagine that he or Duke Martino would turn pale if they'd heard what you just suggested."

"S-So you know about that, huh? Um, but I mean, it's only an arranged marriage! Also, wait, how *did* you know?"

Vik hesitated before admitting, "Your sister is a friend of mine."

Charlotte screeched, "Huh?" The sound of her footsteps stopped. Simultaneously, Vik could faintly feel magical power behind him.

"Right," Charlotte muttered. "Because Claire lives in Paffuto. So of course this happens." She paused before calling out to Vik again. "Hey! Do you want to be friends with me too? Yeah, and I'll go to school in Paffuto just like she does. Then you and I can spend our glamorous, glitzy days in school together!"

Only those with the most powerful magic could use spells that controlled their opponent's mind. Presently, Vik realized, Charlotte was attempting to cast

one such spell on him. Although he wore no ward for diplomacy's sake, he was perfectly capable of throwing one up in an instant or taking a non-magical approach to deter her prior to that. Vik had learned about brainwashing together with Claire at the Royal Academy, and from that experience, he could safely declare that he was in no hurry to be brainwashed by Charlotte. *Not to mention*, he added to himself, *I'd rather she doesn't cast this spell to begin with*. If trouble brewed here, all of Claire's efforts would have been for naught.

Vik sighed and came to a halt.

"I'm interested in taking you up on your suggestion," he said.

"Huh? The one about us being friends, you mean? Then yes, let's!"

Charlotte retracted her magic once she registered that Vik was willing to talk.

"No," he said. "I mean moving abroad to Paffuto."

"Oh, that? Well, I've always wanted to go abroad. And if I did, I'm sure Prince Asbert would be lonely without me, and I'd have to miss the rest of my queenly finishing lessons." She paused for a moment before chirping, "Yup, that all sounds good to me!"

Vik couldn't help but snicker at her all-too-quick decision. "Incredible. Are you sure you're actually related to Claire?"

"What do you mean?" Charlotte tilted her head again.

But just then, Vik called for his retainer once more. "Denis!"

"You rang?" Denis stepped out from behind a pillar.

"Would you be willing to escort this young lady to the ball?"

Denis sighed.

"Oh, no, it's okay!" Charlotte said, her expression rapidly changing. "Really, I wanted to go to the ball just for fun, but now that I've met the prince? Ball, schmall!" Just then, she broke off before course-correcting. "Oh, no, I mean that I've just remembered I've got something to do! See, I flubbed a teleportation spell and ran into a hedge, and now my hair and clothes are all a big mess. Excuse me, bye!"

She scuttled away.

Vik assumed she would now demand to be sent to Paffuto, but she hadn't even been allowed to attend a ball. She couldn't possibly be sent away. Failing to hide his disgust, he asked Denis, "Where's Claire?"

"Seems like she dipped out early," Denis said. "She said she'd just drag things down if she hung around, so she's out on the upper terrace now. She'll be fine; she has Lui and Dion with her."

"Very well."

"If you want to go see her, now's your window of opportunity. She's supposed to meet with her family for tea later tonight in her parlor, and it'll last until midnight."

"I see."

Vik strode away in the opposite direction of the main hall with a pair of images flashing through his mind: the aristocrat who had insulted Claire, and her old friend who'd challenged Earl Aaron in her favor.

Presently, Claire looked out over the evening gardens from the terrace that was on the upper floor of the wing adjoining the main hall. When she looked down and to the side, she had a perfect view of the ballroom balcony.

"Did you notice Vik and Prince Asbert down there earlier, Claire?" Lui asked.

Claire blinked in surprise. "They were there? I've been looking at the garden this whole time, so I missed them."

Now that she was freed from all her tension, Claire felt dazed and spacey. Social gatherings like balls and tea parties were all old hat to her, but it had been a while since she'd felt anything like the way she did tonight. Oscar noticed the many pitying, scornful, or simply curious looks aimed at her, so he'd had the terrace cleared for Claire to spend some time in the fresh air.

"This is our first time attending a ball with you in Noston," Lui remarked, "but it must be your second, hmm?"

She was referring to the ball in Claire's first life, when they'd gone off to

Noston in order to deliver the invitation to Vik's investiture. That evening had ended in disaster.

"Yes," said Claire. "I was actually just thinking about that. I remember plenty of people staring at me back then too. I was so preoccupied with myself that I didn't have the presence of mind to worry over my sister. All day long, I've been wondering about what I might do differently when I have the chance to do it all over again."

"Have you come up with a solution?"

"Not yet. But I absolutely must have one in half a year's time."

For in half a year Claire would be the same age as when she'd attended that ball in her first life. However, everything was different in this life. Thinking about her circumstances, Claire considered it impossible for her and Vik to be engaged by then, and thus she had no reason to accompany Vik to Noston for the ball. *But before that, she thought, there will be the magic tornado. I hope I'll be able to hide my magic this time, but I don't think that'll be so easy.*

As Claire was lost in thought, she became aware of Lui smiling gently next to her.

"You can take your time, Claire," she said. "Aren't you tired? If you'd like, I'll go stand guard and turn away anyone who comes to see you."

"Thank you, Lui."

The terrace connected to an airy salon on the top floor of the palace. Claire watched Lui retreat inside and then sat down on a bench.

"You're a good person, Claire, you know that?" Dion suddenly spoke up. "I'm glad you Mesmerized me."

"Where did that come from, Dion?" she asked.

Dion had been standing behind her and, judging by the flecks of pastry crumbs on his lips, had been silently consuming a dessert. "And thanks for bringing me these desserts from the ball," he added. "They were quite good."

"Well, I'm glad to hear that, but again, where did this come from?" She tilted her head quizzically, not understanding what Dion was driving at.

“Had I been my old self, I think I would have sympathized with someone like Miss Charlotte. She reminds me of myself before you Mesmerized me, but there are some fundamental places where we differ. Namely, I was evil. Yes, my lord grandfather might have been to blame, but I was fully aware that what I was doing was wrong. So that’s why I think I would have related to Miss Charlotte, as she’s not doing the right thing either. Now, of course, there’s none of that. The only thing I’m thinking of is how I can cause her downfall.”

“Dion, that doesn’t sound much like a joke to me.” Claire frowned as he handled such a troubling topic with a cheerful, innocent grin. Dion was normally rather carefree, but he seemed especially chatty tonight. Still, Claire could guess what he was hinting at.

“Sorry,” Dion said. “I went overboard there. But Claire, you seem down tonight. I guess you must have heard everyone talking about you at the ball, huh?”

Claire gave herself a moment before speaking. “I don’t care either way if they pity me. I just think with all the things they’re saying about my family, I might be the only one who can live free. Live for myself, even.”

Claire’s father had been the one who decided to send her to Paffuto, and even though Claire had been in no position to refuse, it suited her all too well to be left alone. Peace between these two kingdoms was more important than anything else, yet Claire did not wish to obtain her own personal happiness at the expense of causing someone else’s misfortune. Once more, she felt uncertain. Did she truly deserve this happiness?

“Claire, you remember that you were the one who gave me my freedom, don’t you?” Dion asked.

Claire started.

“And you’re surely aware that you’ve saved other people, aren’t you? Perhaps even Lady Nicola feels the same way. I know you probably feel guilty and worried about her, but you know, she never got to have her dreams come true and move abroad in our first life.”

Claire hesitated. “I suppose that’s a good thing, yes.” Dion’s naive smile made her heart ache.

Just then, Lui, who had only minutes ago gone to turn away Claire's visitors, stepped in with a curious expression on her face. "Claire, there's someone here to see you."

Claire glimpsed a flash of blond hair behind Lui, floating in the night breeze. "Dion," she said, "could you please give us some space?"

"Oh, it'd be my pleasure," Dion said cheerfully.

As Dion rose, Vik stepped into view. It was all too apparent that he'd sneaked away from the ball, and his forehead shone with beads of sweat like he'd been running.

Claire tilted her head, wondering if he'd come to her with urgent business. "Vik, are you sure you can leave the ball like this?" she asked. "Won't the king mind?"

"No, I've finished the majority of my greetings. I'll return in a bit anyway, but I think Prince Asbert would prefer a bit of space from me."

"Oh, nonsense. Why would you say that? Lui said she saw you two talking on the balcony earlier."

As Claire indicated the garden below, Vik fell silent, making her blink. The wind on the terrace was chilly but felt pleasant on her skin which was still warm from the tension of the ball earlier.

"Did I say something wrong?" she asked.

"No, not at all. If anything, I think Prince Asbert is an incredible man. I can't imagine why anyone would suggest anything to the contrary."

Claire stumbled over her words. "Well, I mean." She hadn't exactly insulted him, but when she'd talked about their relationship earlier, she'd said it was hard to believe how little Asbert understood people's feelings in a way that'd made Lui and Denis pull faces.

Claire didn't exactly have grounds for argument with Vik either. *I agree*, she thought. *Asbert is a good man in this life*. She made a mental note to restore his reputation with Lui and Denis later.

"From what I've heard," Vik said, "you've been in Prince Asbert's thoughts as

well, Claire. When I saw him protecting you in his own particular way earlier, it made me want to see you. That's why I'm here."

Claire's eyes opened wide at Vik's characteristically straightforward delivery. It made her so happy she couldn't help but smile.

"To tell you the truth," she admitted, "I didn't think I'd have the chance to speak with you alone tonight. Not to say that I don't enjoy spending time with the whole group, of course."

"Really?" said Vik. "Well, for what it's worth, I prefer being alone with you."

Alas, they were of two different minds! Yet when their eyes met, they shared a secret smile.

"How was the ball tonight?" Vik asked. "Tiring, I assume?"

"It made me a little tense, but I'm all better now."

"Guess I didn't make it in time, huh?"

Claire's heart warmed as she felt the consideration for her in his words.

Below her, she saw the garden, filled with light for the evening's ball. Behind them as well, everything was a sea of light—the life force of the capital Tillard. Although her words were accompanied by a puff of white air every time she breathed, Claire strangely didn't feel cold.

"I'm very glad you're so concerned for me," she said. "But for the most part, I can always get back on my feet on my own. You're so busy right now, so I don't want to be a bother to you."

"That's not what I meant."

Claire was about to ask, "So what did you mean?" when Vik took her hand and pulled it to him. He pressed a kiss to her fingertips. It was no greeting; it spoke of tenderness and love. The gentle touch turned Claire's cheeks red.

"Is something wrong?" she asked.

"No," Vik said. "I'm just upset about my own inadequacy."

Vik was normally the image of confidence, so to see the expression currently on his face made for a rare occasion indeed. Just as Claire began to wonder

what could have happened, the many rumors swirling around the ball earlier came to mind. *He must have heard plenty of people saying nasty things about me*, she thought.

“Yes, today was a little bit exhausting for me,” she admitted, “but I enjoyed it all the same. I don’t have many good memories of balls in Noston, you see. But with Oscar as my escort, this was the first time in so long that I’ve even thought about my first life. Thank you. I’m glad I had the opportunity to attend tonight.”

Claire had meant it to show that she was fine, but Vik bit his lip. “I still wish we could announce you as my fiancée sooner.”

“But with my current situation, I have no power in Paffuto to wield, so all that would do is earn me contempt. We should go through the proper channels, earn the support of the king, and let me become someone who is fit to wed you.”

“Claire, you really are something.” Now Vik finally smiled.

Claire giggled as he took her into his arms. “You smell like alcohol,” she said.

“I was drinking with Prince Asbert. I’m not that tipsy, I promise.”

“So really now, what were you talking about?”

Vik paused. “Nuh-uh, not telling.”

His formal dress uniform only highlighted the childishness of that statement, and Claire found a grin growing on her face despite herself.

“You know,” she said, “I wish I could show you around Noston someday. It may not be so grand as Paffuto, but it’s a lovely kingdom all the same. I know that you’re always doing your best to make this dream of mine come true, and that’s what I love and respect about you.”

“And the same to you,” said Vik. “I realized once again today just how much you have to deal with. It saddens me, and I’m frustrated that I wasn’t around to protect you back when you were forced to deal with all of this alone.”

“But we didn’t know each other back then,” Claire pointed out with a giggle.

She looked into his eyes and realized with a start that although she’d thought it was a joke, he was perfectly serious.

“Even so,” he said. “I know that talking about it won’t change the past, but still. It infuriates me to see someone I love be hurt so badly.”

*Oh, Vik,* she thought. She hid her face in his chest, perfectly contented, and he stroked her hair affectionately.

Music began to drift in from the hall, reminding Claire that Vik would need to return any minute now. She closed her eyes, reluctant to part from him just yet.

“I met Charlotte just now,” Vik told her.

Claire gasped at the completely unexpected news, but Vik went on like nothing had happened. “Like you said, she’s definitely a white mage, and she tried to brainwash me. But she’s rather shallow, wouldn’t you say? The moment I gave her attention, she stopped trying to cast her spell on me.”

“What in the world?” Claire said. “Well, where is Charlotte now?”

Moments after arriving in Noston via the portal, Claire had requested to see Charlotte. However, the response from Oscar had not been positive. Benjamin seemed uncomfortable with the idea, Oscar reported, and insisted on being in attendance if Claire wished to speak to Charlotte. It made perfect sense to Claire, given the fact that Charlotte had usurped her position, but the fact that Duke Benjamin would not even trust Oscar to chaperone their meeting shocked her.

“We let her run away,” Vik said. “It was the middle of the ball, so the king was nearby. Were anything to go awry, the consequences would’ve been enormous. And well, since nobody else noticed her using magic, she won’t be charged with a crime, I’m sure. Yet I have a feeling she’ll be causing trouble before long.”

“I’m sorry,” Claire said. “I shouldn’t have been the only one sitting around while all this was happening.”

“Don’t worry. I actually didn’t plan to tell you, but I heard you’d be speaking with the Martinos later this evening. I’m sorry for all the fuss.”

“Well, then it’s certainly convenient that I’m meeting with father. I’ll see if he knows that Charlotte is up to no good with her magic.”

“Oh, Claire, there you go again,” Vik groaned. “Very well. I’ll let you handle

that.”

The two grinned at one another before parting.

Before long, night fell completely. During Claire’s current stay in Noston, she had been given rooms in the southern wing of the palace, next to the same suite of fine rooms for honored guests where she had stayed in her first life as a member of the Paffish delegation. Vik and Nicola were staying on another floor, coincidentally, and yet Claire was grateful for this too. *Now I don’t have to worry about Charlotte accidentally bumping into him again, she thought. We mustn’t be so lenient on her next time. Thank goodness it turned out okay in the end.*

Claire sighed over Charlotte’s all-too-dangerous behavior and then changed from her ball gown into a more casual outfit. When it was time, Claire’s family joined her in her parlor for the meeting: her father, Oscar, Leo, and Charlotte, the latter bringing up the rear and giving the room a calculating glance.

“C-Claire!” she cried. “Welcome back! How have you been?”

“Well, thank you. You look the same as ever, Charlotte. Will you be returning home to the dorms tomorrow?”

“Absolutely! Prince Asbert says we’ll be going together.”

“My, how wonderful.”

From her visit to see Lady Anne, Claire knew that Asbert did not have a clue what to do with Charlotte. The letters she’d received from him and Oscar reported much the same thing.

While Claire’s discomfort left her at a loss for further words, Oscar exasperatedly commented, “Charlotte, His Highness’s retainer Salomon was looking for you earlier. What kind of mess did you cause now?”

“Don’t say I caused a mess,” Charlotte sniffed. “That’s so mean, Oscar. I didn’t do anything! All I did was say I couldn’t get into the ball because I didn’t have an invitation, so he was looking for me to tell me somewhere else I could spend the evening.”

Benjamin's brow wrinkled, and he glared at Oscar to defend his downcast daughter. "Oscar, how could you say such a thing to your sister?" he asked. "All the same, yes, this ball was mostly a diplomatic affair, so we had no choice but to not invite you, Charlotte. Still, isn't it odd that Claire could go when Charlotte couldn't? I must speak to the king and ask what that was all about."

"Please, father, spare us the shame," said Oscar. "Couldn't you feel the tension in the air at the ball?"

"How would that be shameful? Charlotte is the pride and joy of our family with her white magic."

Oscar and Benjamin's conversation was quite heated. This was the first time in many months since Claire had sat together with all her family, but the tension in the room was palpable. *I don't even need to ask, Claire thought. Father has no idea Charlotte is up to no good with her magic. Or else...*

It would have been fine enough if this were a mere case of doting on his youngest daughter. However, Claire knew this situation was anything but normal. She had the unsettling suspicion that Charlotte was currently brainwashing Benjamin.

Even after inciting his father's wrath, Oscar did not back down. "Charlotte," he said, "in exchange for me not telling father about that incident, didn't you promise you'd buckle down and attend your lessons?"

"Hm? What incident, Charlotte?" Benjamin wanted to know.

Even Claire knew what Oscar was referring to. It must have been the time Charlotte had attempted to expel a fellow student who'd voiced complaint against her. Yet Oscar had decided not to report the matter to their father, leaving Claire with nothing she could do apart from monitor the situation.

"I-It's nothing, father!" Charlotte stammered. "Oh, and speaking of my lessons, I've just come up with a brilliant idea!"

"Most of your brilliant ideas turn out to be rather bad ones," Oscar opined.

"Oh, shut up, Oscar!" Charlotte snapped. "Listen, father. I'd like to go study abroad in Paffuto!"

Claire blinked in shock at the completely unexpected suggestion. *What?* she thought. However, it seemed that this proposition was just as unfamiliar to the rest of the family. An awkward hush fell over the room, for everyone apart from Benjamin was quite aware of Charlotte's misconduct.

After a slight pause, Oscar said, "What are you talking about, Charlotte? I hear the Royal Academy of Paffuto far outstrips Noston in academics. You'd be so behind you wouldn't even learn a thing. Isn't that right, Claire?"

Claire stiffened when Oscar turned to her. "Oh, yes, but pardon me," she said.

But her objection wasn't on account of academics. It was that, right now, Charlotte going abroad was much too dangerous. But Claire doubted her opinion would hold any weight here, and furthermore, Benjamin clearly trusted Charlotte more than Claire. Unable to say anything negative about Charlotte, she fell silent.

"Father, I'm begging you," Charlotte pleaded. "Claire went abroad, and Lady Nicola's originally from Paffuto. So why can't I do the same? Come on, father. Pretty please?"

"But Charlotte, you are the pride of our family and our kingdom," Benjamin insisted, unable to give her a simple answer. "You would need the king's permission to go abroad."

"So only Claire gets to go? I'm jealous!"

"I am sorry, my dear, that we must place these limits upon you. But you are my hope for the whole family."

Teary-eyed, Charlotte appealed to her father's sense of pity.

Leo, who had been quiet up until now, muttered, "Father's always a pushover for her."

Claire jolted and immediately went on guard when, suddenly, she felt a whiff of magic, only just strong enough for her to detect in a closed room like this. She looked at Charlotte's hands and saw a small bit of power flowing out of her palms. *I remember what Professor Cheinz taught me*, Claire thought.

*Brainwashing isn't only a matter of the spell caster's power. It has to do with their relationship to the victim as well.* Even if her father wore a ward, Claire

assumed Benjamin would still make an easy target for Charlotte's spells.

In fact, Charlotte was bending him to her will right at this very moment. Unable to stay still, Claire rose to her feet and grabbed Charlotte's hand.

"Charlotte," she said.

"C-Claire? What do you think you're doing?"

"I can tell just how much you want to go abroad. You see, you're so excited that you're leaking magic."

"Oh, huh? *Huh?*" Charlotte spluttered.

"And with that being said," Claire went on, "the Royal Academy of Paffuto does indeed offer a high level of education. I struggle to keep up with my studying too."

"Do you really?" Oscar asked. "Why, in last month's report card, you were at the very top of the class."

This unexpected support from Oscar startled Claire, but she nevertheless continued. "If you truly do wish to go abroad, then you should try to score higher than everyone else on your next exams. Right now, I think Lady Nicola must have the highest grades in Noston." Claire turned to her father. "If she can bring her grades up, would you allow her to go?"

"I would," said Benjamin. "If you show us that level of determination, Charlotte, I'm sure even the king would grant his permission."

Charlotte's smile faltered. "No way," she whined.

Charlotte's grades were less than satisfactory, yet if she actually did wish to go abroad, Claire knew she'd study like mad to get there. The Royal Aristocratic Academy graded on both academic knowledge and manners, so either way, this would not be a bad outcome for Charlotte or the other Martinos.

"And there we have it," Benjamin, ever lenient on his daughter, announced. "Remember that Lady Nicola is in your same grade. You must work hard not to let her outperform you."

With that, the tea party disbanded for the evening.

Dion was Claire's last recourse to stop Charlotte's rampage. He was the sole person in the world capable of using a special spell called Collective Magic. It'd become his wont to remind Claire, "You know, if you use my skill, we could shut down Miss Charlotte in an instant." Claire wanted to avoid this option, if at all possible, but after witnessing Charlotte's behavior today, she had a feeling it would not be long before she had to resort to such drastic measures.

*But only as a last resort, I swear,* she told herself. *I must think of another method. More than just Charlotte, I don't want to hurt Dion any more than I already have.* She thought back to a few hours ago, hiding on the terrace from the ball, and how he'd offered her words of encouragement alongside his carefree grin.



Life at the Noston Royal Aristocratic Academy once revolved around Charlotte Martino, Prince Asbert's fiancée, but it had taken only a few days after Nicola's arrival for the winds of change to stir.

"If you have any questions, Miss Nicola, do not hesitate to ask," Asbert said to her one day after class in the student council room.

"Oh, I'm quite fine right now, thank you," Nicola responded. She looked up from the papers in her hands and gave him a sweet, girlish smile. "But I do appreciate the thought."

The results of the exams she'd taken shortly after enrollment placed Nicola at the top of the class. She'd even been chosen as the vice president of the student council, regardless of the fact that she was only a first-year student. That, coupled with the respect others felt for her as a member of the Paffish royal family, had set Nicola well on her way to becoming queen bee of the school. Back in Paffuto, Nicola had acted up on multiple occasions in order to gain attention or shoo other young ladies away from Vik, but thankfully, her beloved cousin was safely back home in Paffuto at present. Here in Noston, Nicola acted as a perfect young lady, thanks to the ideal role model that was Claire. *Lady Claire Martino transferred abroad too,* Nicola thought to herself. *Like her, I must maintain my grades and behave appropriately to be a good representative of my kingdom.*

As Nicola dutifully returned her attention to her papers, she heard a sugary sweet voice trill out in insolence, “Oh, Prince Asbert! We don’t have school tomorrow, so you will be going home to the palace, won’t you? And I’ll stop by your office to visit you before I have my lessons to learn to be the queen. We can chat over tea just like we always do.” Charlotte, sensing something amiss in the pleasant conversation between Asbert and Nicola, had butted in with her non sequitur.

Yet she’d failed to notice Asbert raising his eyebrows in displeasure. “What do you mean, like we always do?” he asked.

The commentary about the palace, the queen lessons, Asbert’s office, and the private tea party had all been clear jabs aimed at Nicola, but Nicola, a member of a royal family herself, didn’t so much as blink. “Oh, that’s right,” she said. “You’re taking lessons to learn to become the queen consort, aren’t you?”

“Correct!” Charlotte affirmed. “Because I’m going to marry Prince Asbert someday.”

“My, I have to wonder,” Nicola said. “In Noston, do they teach you that the queen consort sits around twittering all day and making a mess of my nice, sorted paperwork?”

“Lady Nicola, what are you insinuating?” Charlotte gasped. “Prince Asbert!”

Charlotte glared at him, but Asbert pretended to be so occupied with his paperwork that he hadn’t noticed a thing.

*Charlotte gets so carried away because Prince Asbert doesn’t do anything to stop her,* Nicola thought. It hadn’t been long since she’d arrived at the Academy, but Nicola had already witnessed plenty of occasions where Charlotte had tried to use her position to get her way. Claire would never have acted this way, Nicola knew. At first, Charlotte’s actions had given her so much whiplash she’d almost laughed. However, once she noticed the magic trailing around Charlotte, Nicola quickly realized that this was no laughing matter. Her own magic, naturally, could not compare to Charlotte’s, but it made little difference, provided that Nicola had a strong ward. Fortunately, in Noston, it was commonplace for the royal family to use magic themselves.

“All you do is go around demanding other people pay attention to you,”

Nicola went on. "You'll never fulfill your duties as a member of the student council that way."

"Hey!" Charlotte cried. "That's mean."

With a rustle, Nicola thumped down a pile of paperwork directly in front of her that Charlotte had foisted off onto someone else the day before. Caroline, the recipient of said paperwork, blinked but said nothing as she kept a watchful eye over the goings-on.

*Sorry*, Nicola thought, *but I'm not as nice as Claire*. She stood, arms folded, and glared down at Charlotte with all the self-confidence of a girl who'd been showered with attention since childhood. After all, Nicola's uncle was the monarch of a grand kingdom. Raised to do as she pleased in such an environment, the strength of will she had developed was second to none. Most young ladies would elegantly gloss over the issue when faced with Charlotte's disagreeable temper or rude words, but Nicola couldn't rest without giving Charlotte a complete piece of her mind.

"You think I'm mean?" she asked. "If you're already struggling from an itty-bitty bit of paperwork, then maybe it's time someone else took your place on the student council."

"But I'm the prince's fiancée," Charlotte protested. "P-Prince Asbert, say something!"

After a pause, Asbert admitted, "I suppose it really wouldn't hurt you to do your own work every so often, Charlotte. You've been here for almost a year now."

At first, Nicola thought he was siding with her, but in the end, he'd chosen to treat this problem as if it didn't affect him at all. Charlotte and Nicola simultaneously glared at Asbert, but with opposite connotations: Charlotte on the verge of tears and Nicola seething in rage.

"Fine!" Charlotte yelled. "I'm leaving!"

She rose with an enormous clatter, banged open the doors, and ran out of the room. Lady Caroline, a member of Charlotte's entourage, dashed after her calling, "Lady Charlotte, please wait!"

Nicola side-eyed her and then turned to face Asbert. “Your Highness,” she said, “is everything really all right with Lady Charlotte? I heard from a friend today she’s starting a club whose sole purpose is to drive me out of Noston.”

“What?” Asbert finally lifted his eyes from the page.

“That in and of itself doesn’t really bother me,” Nicola said. “I just think the whole thing’s kind of ridiculous.”

“My sincerest apologies, my lady,” Asbert said. “I’ll deal with this at once.”

“I’ll be fine. My family’s more powerful than anyone else’s, remember? I just thought I ought to let you know because Lady Charlotte doesn’t seem to have fully grasped that yet.”

“I wish to sincerely apologize for her behavior. Just between you and me, I don’t have the slightest idea about what to do with Charlotte anymore. She skips every one of her extra lessons, and she’s only grown more self-centered since her baptism. Quite recently, actually, she levied false accusations against a girl she didn’t like and tried to have her expelled from the Academy.”

*What in the world?* Nicola thought. *Why are they letting this imbecile run amok?*

The way Asbert had spoken of the situation like it was someone else’s problem to solve made Nicola so displeased that she could no longer hide it. She squeezed her hands into fists and glared at Asbert’s calm, complacent expression.

“Hey, you know what?” she said.

Asbert looked at her quizzically. Seeing the confusion in his gray eyes only further inflamed her anger.

“Vicky— Excuse me, the kingdom of Paffuto works extremely hard to build good relations with our neighbors, and among all of them, we value Noston the most. But do you really want to let that girl become queen? Do you seriously think she won’t upset the balance we’ve put in every effort to achieve?”

Asbert took Nicola’s anger calmly. “You make a very good point,” he said.

This did nothing to quell her rage. If anything, it only lit the fuse on her

powder keg. “Lady Charlotte’s not the only person I’m criticizing. Your Highness, I have a bone to pick with you too!”

“W-With me?” he asked.

“Yes, with you! It’s clearly your fault that Lady Charlotte’s become this stuck-up. You bear responsibility for the entire kingdom, and yet you can’t even correct your fiancée’s behavior. Lady Claire is a wonderful person, but not everyone’s like her, Your Highness!”

“You’re absolutely right,” said Asbert, “but I don’t want Charlotte to be like Claire. So—”

“So you’ll just let her do whatever she wants, is that it? Oh, that’s rich. Don’t lay the blame at someone else’s feet for something so important!”

Asbert fell silent, gaping at Nicola’s threatening demeanor. His reaction was only natural, as he’d never before encountered a girl in Noston of high enough rank to deliver a dissenting opinion.

“Claire’s told me about how much Lady Charlotte’s actions hurt her,” Nicola went on. “I tried looking into her, and it turns out she’s not even reading Claire’s letters, to say nothing of skipping her lessons.”

Asbert remained silent for a few seconds longer before finally opening his mouth. “Claire once told me that you were much like Charlotte.”

Nicola grinned at the irrelevancy of this comment. “Sure. You peel off the outer layer, and we’re like two peas in a pod, huh?”

“But if I had to compare you,” Asbert went on, “you remind me much more of Claire.”

Now it was Nicola’s turn to pause. Finally, she said, “Hey, are you sure you’ve really been listening to me?”

She looked back at Asbert, but when she saw his cheeks turn slightly pink, that only made her all the more annoyed.

## Chapter 10

The first signs of spring steadily drew nearer. Claire made a wide stretch as the fresh air and sunlight wafted in through her window. This morning's weather was lovely.

"Good morning, Miss Claire," Sophie said.

"Oh, hello, Sophie," said Claire. "Lui will be coming by later. I would like to make an early start today, so would you mind bringing me something light for breakfast? I've already informed Dion."

"Very well, miss." Sophie gave Claire a curious look. "But do you really mean to leave so early?"

Claire smiled. "Yes. I'm told that one's first-ever meeting with a holy woman of Paffuto must be conducted early in the morning."

"You've never been to see the holy women before?" Lui asked as she and Claire made their way to the church.

The question left Claire at a slight loss for words. "I haven't," she admitted. "Not in this life, at any rate."

"I see."

With that, Lui asked no further questions. Commoners were not typically permitted to meet with holy women, but considering the services they offered, Claire assumed that Lui could easily guess the purpose of the visit during her first life. *I visited a Paffish holy woman when Lui was injured*, Claire recalled. The kingdom of Noston kept only one such holy woman, but Claire had heard rumor of several residing in Paffuto. Only those born into houses with strong magical connections could become holy women. They used magic to make mundane medicine more effective and healed injuries that had been incurred through magical means.

The phenomenon understood as magic was anything performed by the spirits. This meant that the holy women played an important role in currying favor with

said spirits. The purpose of Claire's present meeting with one such holy woman was to ask more about a certain kind of magic, namely that which related to wards and divine protection.

"At any rate, I'm surprised you came up with this," Lui said. "You're the only one, Claire, who would ever think to put a ward on the entire ballroom to prevent Charlotte from hurting anyone on her rampage. Without an incredible amount of magic power and a strong spell, it'd be nigh on impossible."

"I was trying to think of ways to resolve this situation without anyone getting hurt, and then inspiration struck."

Ever since the gala to celebrate the portal's grand opening, Claire had redoubled her efforts to find a way to prevent this terrible future without resorting to using Dion's Collective Magic. Then she'd come up with the idea to ward the ballroom itself as opposed to the individual guests. If she could aim her magic at the air and somehow purify a whole tornado, then surely, Claire reasoned, she could prevent Charlotte from setting off spells in a similar fashion.

"It'd be lovely if our countries were on such good terms that we didn't have to worry about diplomatic etiquette," Lui remarked. "But that'd be a challenge in itself, even if our princes are on good terms."

"That it would be."

Delegates from two kingdoms on friendly terms with one another removed their wards on official visits, one of several rules of diplomatic etiquette shared the world over. That gesture was meant to be a sign of trust, but it had done little to curb Charlotte's outburst in Claire's first life. *If only Vik had worn a ward*, Claire thought, *things wouldn't have ended up such a disaster*. Yet no matter how much she resented the etiquette, Claire could do nothing about it. Thus, she'd decided to ward the whole ballroom instead.

At the same time, she'd quite reasonably given up on reforming Charlotte.

Presently, Claire and Lui were shown to a sick bay near the back of the church. Claire recalled seeing Lui in this very same place during her first life, Lui's face deathly pale. The memory alone, with the atmosphere of hopelessness which had pervaded the room back then, cast a shadow over Claire's heart. She

wanted to avoid expressing it as much as she could, but she had a feeling that Lui, standing next to Claire as calmly as ever, saw right through her.

“My name is Claire Martino, my lady,” Claire introduced herself. “Thank you very much for giving me your time this morning.”

The holy woman, a redheaded lady, smiled at her. She was not the same dignified woman Claire had met in her first life.

“I must say, we rarely have people come all the way to our church just to ask about wards,” she said.

“I’ve learned about them at school,” Claire said, “but I was told that I should come ask you for more information.”

“But of course! Yes, that holds true for wards and anything related to healing magic. I’m happy to answer whatever I can.”

Her cheerfulness reminded Claire of Lady Anne. The holy woman ushered Lui and Claire to some seats in front of her, simple chairs looking out over a sea of hospital beds.

Claire sat down and then delivered a summary of what she wanted to know. Could wards intended for people be cast on spaces and objects instead? And if so, could they be maintained for any length of time?

The holy woman smiled away as she listened to Claire’s questions and then tilted her head. “Let me make sure I understand this,” she said. “You’d like to ask the spirits to extend their protection to an entire room or area, correct?”

“Yes,” said Claire. “A rather large area, at that.”

“Would it not be easier to nullify all magic instead? It would take time and a pretty penny, but if you asked the palace mages and architects, they could certainly build a large room impervious to magical attack.”

“My concern extends to non-magical attacks,” Claire said. “Above all, I’d like to use this spell in a place where it’d be rather difficult to do much preparation beforehand.”

“I see. Well, it certainly is possible on a theoretical level to ward an area. It would take an enormous amount of magic, though, so I don’t suppose anyone’s

ever tried. There's also a large issue with your plan. Are you aware that wards, even very good ones, are gone the instant they're broken?"

"Yes," said Claire. "I understand that the wearer will be undefended for a few seconds before they can cast another ward."

"And there's the issue. It's impossible to keep a ward up forever without any lapses, not even if the spell caster had the strongest magical color and enormous amounts of power."

That certainly made sense to Claire. When she'd tried to oppose Dion's Collective Magic in her first life, her plan had been to cast a new ward the very second it was broken. Still, her efforts had resulted in her eating into Dion's magical power.

*I thought I'd come up with a good idea,* Claire reflected, *but I suppose it won't work out after all.* She was discouraged, but she stood up smoothly all the same. "Thank you for giving me your time today," she said.

The holy woman bowed, but as she lifted her head, she noticed something on Claire's left wrist which made her blink and remark, "Oh?"

Claire noticed the holy woman's stare and tilted her head, puzzled. "What's the matter?" she asked.

"You said your name was Claire Martino, didn't you? I apologize, but may I ask where you were born?"

"In Noston."

"Really, now? Then could I ask how you came by that bracelet?"

The bracelet on Claire's left wrist, the object of the holy lady's attention, sparkled. Claire had inherited it as a young child from her mother. It was a dear keepsake for her, the first thing she'd grabbed upon her flight from the Noston Royal Aristocratic Academy during her first life.

"It's an heirloom from my mother," Claire said.

"Your lady mother? I do apologize; it might've been rude of me, but I was examining your ward and flow of magical power just a bit earlier. You must come from quite a noble family, and one with strong magical or clerical

connections.”

“I am from the Martino family in Noston.”

The holy woman looked surprised but seemed to guess immediately that Claire did not want anyone else to know about her magic. “Why, no wonder. Don’t worry. We holy women keep our information confidential. I swear by the spirits, we don’t speak a word of what we learn in our duties to anyone else.”

“Thank you for being so considerate,” Claire said.

“Do you mind if I examine your bracelet for a moment?” the holy woman asked. “You don’t need to take it off; I can see it from here.”

“By all means.”

Claire extended her arm, and the holy woman scrutinized the bracelet. She turned Claire’s hand over and stared deeply at the bracelet’s underside too. “My suspicions were correct,” she finally said.

“How so?” Claire asked.

“This is an icon of blessing.”

“An icon of blessing?” Claire repeated. She blinked at the unfamiliar phrase. “Have you heard of this before, Lui?”

“No, I don’t know what that is either,” Lui said.

As Claire and Lui exchanged glances, the holy woman looked down with a hint of sadness in her eyes. “I’m sure you’d never have heard of them unless you were looking for one in particular. That’s the way these things are designed, you see. There used to be many bracelets like this, but I thought every last one of them would be gone by now.”

“Are you saying this is a magic tool?” Lui asked.

The holy woman shook her head. “No.”

Magic tools assisted mages in the casting of spells. Though they were not often used in Noston, the Paffish aristocracy traded such tools among themselves with regularity. These objects existed for every imaginable function, with some offering such vague benefits as balancing magical power, even as

others had such extremely specific uses as lighting the stove.

However, Claire had kept this bracelet on her person for years now without knowing it could produce any sort of magical effect. It bewildered her to think she'd had no idea what this keepsake even was.

"Properly speaking," the holy woman said, "it isn't a magic tool right at this point in time. Its function is being sealed. Yes, it is a real icon of blessing, but we can't feel any of its power now. At any rate, how did this one come into your possession?"

"It belonged to my mother," Claire said. "She passed away in an unfortunate accident when I was very young. It was given to me as part of my inheritance, nothing more."

Claire hadn't seen her mother wear the bracelet often, as it was a treasure that usually stayed in her jewelry box. However, she'd been in her mother's room any number of times and remembered seeing it lying there, a simple yet eye-catching bracelet in the midst of other dazzling jewelry. Those memories of looking at it with her mother so long ago had by now grown dim in her mind's eye. *After my mother passed, the bracelet was given to me because I had shown such an interest in it,* she recalled.

"Was your mother perhaps related to the kingdom of Lindel?" the holy woman asked.

Claire gasped at the unexpected question. But the holy woman did not press her for an answer and instead continued to speak. "You see, while I do live in Paffuto now, I actually grew up in Old Lindel until I was a child of ten. Coincidentally, I happened to be away visiting my grandfather on my mother's side just before that dreadful attack, and thus I was safe. But before that, my family was in charge of the church of Lindel, so I've seen the kingdom's treasury of magical tools many times."

"You're from Old Lindel?" Claire asked.

Ostensibly, Claire's mother descended from a family of Nostonian barons, but she was actually the vanished princess of the kingdom of Lindel, which had been destroyed several decades prior. For her own safety, not even her husband, Claire's father, had ever learned of this. Later, she'd perished in a

tragic accident, leaving three young children behind—or so the story went.

Startled by the sudden confession, Claire lifted her head and met the eyes of the holy woman. The woman stared back at Claire with her hand over her mouth in disbelief.

“I am,” the holy woman said. “And I wonder how I didn’t notice this earlier. From appearances alone, you look just like a member of the royal family of Lindel, which was always renowned for its gorgeous young ladies. In fact, you’re the spitting image of the princess I knew.”

“Oh,” Claire said. *She must be referring to one of my mother’s sisters, she thought. My mother was too young to even know what was happening when she was spirited away to safety.*

Furthermore, no member of the royal family apart from Claire’s mother had survived the attack. But now the ones behind the invasion, the Mead family, had been eradicated, so Claire no longer had any need to hide her mother’s origins.

“I’ve been told that my mother was a princess of Lindel who escaped the attack when she was young,” Claire said.

“Oh, I’m sure of that,” said the holy woman. Overwhelmed with emotion, she wiped away a tear rolling down her cheek and then continued. “That bracelet is an icon of everlasting blessing. Sealed as it is currently, it’s only a simple accessory, but if you were to lift the seal, you would be able to eliminate what’s known as the point of connection.”

“Whatever do you mean?” Claire asked.

“It’s what would allow you to cast the ward you described. But this would require you to break the seal on your bracelet, and I’m afraid ordinary unsealing spells wouldn’t work. I was only a child back then, so I unfortunately don’t have so much as a hint of how to break it. And I’m sure only a few people have seen the royal family’s magical tools. That’s why I said you wouldn’t have known about this unless you’d gone looking for it.”

*I had no idea this bracelet was so valuable,* Claire thought. *Oh, mother...* She gazed at her wrist and sighed. Her mother always occupied a place in her

thoughts, but the idea of her sad fate was taxing. Thus, ever since she'd learned the truth, Claire had done her best to put her mother out of mind.

Lui spoke up for Claire in her silence, asking, "You're telling us that, if we lifted the seal on this bracelet, we could indeed cast a ward over a large area, correct?"

"Yes, indeed. At least, theoretically, that is. It would be challenging, even for a woman of the church like me or someone like you. We would need a more powerful color of magic."

Lui signaled Claire with her eyes, and Claire nodded. "Thank you," Claire said.

"Of course, it was my pleasure. Oh, and Lady Claire, please do feel free to come back anytime. It was so lovely to meet you. Anyone who shares my same roots is always welcome here."



That evening, Claire called in on Vik and was met with the usual spread: several varieties of alcoholic beverages, tea, and goodies for Dion. Having all her friends together made her breathe an inward sigh of relief.

"I was honestly shocked when I learned that the bracelet Claire always wears is actually a magic tool," Lui said. "And one belonging to the royal family of Lindel, no less."

"I hadn't the faintest idea either," Claire admitted. "My mother might not even have known. I was told she was only three years old when she left Lindel."

Denis's eyes flashed. "Vik and the descendant of a lost kingdom. What a pair! I mean, the kingdom of Lindel is gone and all, but still."

"But no one in Noston is aware yet that my mother was actually the princess of Lindel," Claire went on. "I also don't want them to know that I received my true magic when I was baptized on Lindel Island."

"Makes sense to me," Denis remarked lightly, cracking a nut. "Things were complicated enough at that ball the other day as is."

Vik threw him a stern look. "Still, now that the portal is complete, I think it's a good time to take action."

“I’d prefer if we stayed cautious,” Keith advised. “Didn’t the relationship between Paffuto and Noston fall apart when they discovered Claire’s true magical powers in her first life?”

A shadow fell over Claire’s face. “Yes,” she admitted. “It turned out that my sister really was using her white magic to control other people to do whatever she pleased. However, it also seemed like there were plenty of people she couldn’t control, either because their wards were too strong or they distrusted her too much.”

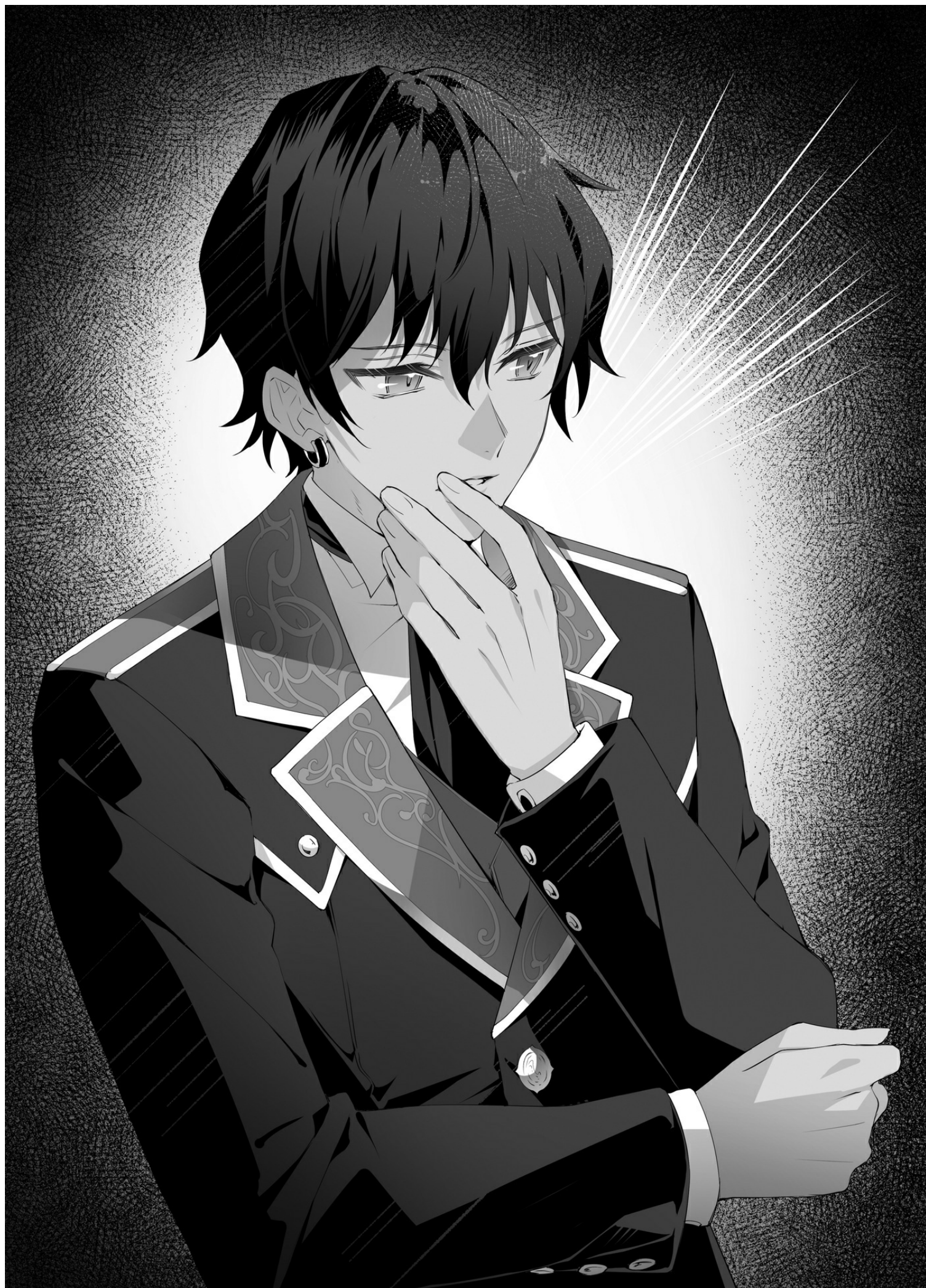
“Mind-controlling magic depends upon many factors. Yes, the magic color of the spell caster is important, but the relationship between caster and victim also comes into play. Additionally, some people are so strong-minded that they can’t be controlled at all,” Lui explained.

Vik remained deep in thought for a few moments before saying, “No matter what happens, it certainly would be nice if you could cast a ward over the entire ballroom. However, unless we can break the seal on Claire’s mother’s bracelet, that idea is going nowhere. Lui, are you positive you don’t know how we could?”

“This is one of Lindel’s royal treasures,” Lui pointed out. “It’s miraculous enough that Lindel lasted for as long as it did, considering its level of power. There’s much and more we don’t know about Lindel.”

“You’re telling me,” Denis said. “It’s a real head-scratcher that they never ran into any trouble until the margrave attacked it a few decades ago.”

The group could always count on Dion and Denis to bring some levity to these serious conversations. Denis was in fine form today, intent on fulfilling his role as usual, but Dion not so much.



Dion listened to the conversation with due consideration and then remarked solemnly, "Claire, I think I might just have an idea."

"You do?" she asked.

"You all appear to have forgotten, but I do come from the now-ruined Mead family, you know. I was the heir to the earldom, no less, so I know quite a lot."

Claire was silent, unsure how to respond, but Vik asked, "Like what?"

"Things about Old Lindel or the plot to overthrow the royal family and such. Well, I've already told you everything I know about the latter, so there isn't anything else of use there, really."

"Dion, if you know how to break the seal on the bracelet, then tell us," Vik said. "We're not interested in anything else."

"Are you sure, Your Highness? You know that Claire and I both share a first life. Back then, even if I'd known my family had been involved with the Princess of Lindel's assassination and was plotting to take over the throne, I wouldn't have thought anything of it. I didn't even have a second thought when Prince Oswald died for a crime he didn't commit in order to protect you, Your Highness."

"Dion," Vik snapped, his voice measured but strict.

Dion tensed, realizing his mistake, and then smiled blithely. "Sorry," he said. "I went too far. But you do get my point, don't you, Your Highness? There are valuable documents stored away in my family's old villa."

"Right," Vik admitted after a moment. "I know which one you're talking about. Your family used to have a villa in Caltina that now belongs to the royal family."

"We could very well look around Lindel Island too, but I have a hunch that we'd be more likely to turn something up at the old villa."

"That certainly makes sense. Lindel Island has been completely rebuilt for tourism, and the only thing left of the old kingdom is the spring of holy water. Before we go there, we'd be better off looking for clues closer to home."

"No time like the present," Keith said. "Let's go to Caltina. Lui, see to the

preparations.”

“Will do,” she promised, exchanging a nod with Keith.

Dion stood up next to them. “I’m also going to step out for a bit,” he said.

Any one of them could have called out to him, but nobody made any move to stop Dion, instead opting to watch him leave silently. *I think it’s best to give him some time alone*, Claire thought.

Once Dion had left, Claire’s shoulders slumped. She recalled the other night at the ball when she’d sat outside on the terrace while Dion cheered her up. Now she felt terrible that she’d accepted what he told her just to make things easier for herself.

“You know,” she said, “I also told all of you about my mother in my first life. It infuriated me that I’d lived my whole life up to that point without knowing any of the truth. To make matters worse, Dion is such a completely different person now as opposed to before I Mesmerized him. I know he claims that he’s returned to his true self, but I’m sure he must still feel like he’s lost his place in the world.”

“Dion’s worried for you, Claire,” Vik said.

“Yes, I think so too. But no matter how much I tell him I’m all right, I think he keeps blaming himself. If only there was a better way to make Dion feel more confident.”

Several cookies were left behind at the seat Dion had just vacated. Claire felt hideously guilty that they’d poked Dion’s wounds, when he was always so cheerful and kind.



Several days later on a day off from school, Claire and her friends visited the nearby town of Caltina. Fields ringed Caltina as far as the eye could see. The scent of fresh earth after a rain carried on the breeze, and dew droplets glittered in the grass at their feet.

Caltina was located in a largely rural area, but it was not known for its

agriculture. It was a vacation town in the highlands, a cluster of mansions and shops dotting the shores of a lake.

The party gathered before the old Mead villa directly on the lakeshore. Claire looked down at the wheat fields spreading far off into the distance and sighed. "My goodness," she said. "I can hardly believe such a pretty little place exists not half a day's journey from Wurtz."

"If only we were coming here for leisure," Vik sighed.

"Yes. We'll have to come back another time for that."

With that being said, this was the first journey Claire had made with her friends in her current life. Although she had whole heaps of worries, such as those pertaining to Charlotte and Dion, she would have been lying if she'd said she wasn't excited about it. Additionally, although she'd said it was half a day's journey, she and the others had teleported, partially to save as much time as possible and partially to give Claire more practice.

"Are you feeling all right, Claire?" Lui asked, concerned.

Claire smiled back. "Yes. I'm perfectly fine."

Including herself, Claire had teleported six people, which was far more than any of the many blue mages in Paffuto could handle.

"The more you practice magic, the less magical power you need to exchange with the spirits," Lui explained. "If you keep this up, you'll be less likely to faint from using up too much magic."

"Wait, you mean even Claire's overexerted herself and fainted? Seriously?" Denis asked as he carried their bags into the mansion.

The group planned to stay at the mansion overnight and into the next day. While it had once belonged to the Meads, it was now property of the royal family and kept its own staff of servants year-round. Vik's group had dropped in on them rather suddenly, but the servants received them gladly enough, much to Claire's relief. *Thank goodness, she thought. I'd love to break the bracelet's seal as soon as possible.*

As she looked down at her mother's heirloom, Dion asked her, "Claire, can I

bring your things inside?”

“Yes, thank you. You’re a big help,” she said.

“I mean, I do work for you, after all. It’s no issue.” He grinned and heaved her bags into his arms.

Even though Dion had walked out on the conversation the other night, sleeping on it seemed to have restored him to his usual good spirits. Claire had never expected him to be able to shrug off his family entirely, but it surprised her to see so much self-blame behind that warm, gentle smile. *I certainly understand why he wouldn’t want to talk to me about it, though, she thought. I wonder if there is anything I can do.*

“The library’s on the second floor,” Dion told Vik. “Do you want to hurry and get started looking for clues?”

“Sure,” Vik said. “Would you show me the way?”

“As you wish, Your Highness.”

As she watched Dion act as lighthearted as ever, Denis whispered into Claire’s ear, “Hey, don’t you think this place must hold a lot of memories for Dion? You sure it was a wise idea to bring him along?”

“I recommended he stay behind,” Claire admitted. “But he would hear none of it. He insisted on joining us.”

“Huh, okay. Well, I figure Dion’s a pretty strong guy. I bet he’ll be all right.”

As the two stood and talked, Dion called from inside. “Claire, Denis!” he yelled. “Are you going to meet us at the library or what?”

“Coming!” Claire called back.

She still felt some trepidation, but she stepped inside the old Mead mansion anyway.

Claire’s eyes widened when she recognized a familiar window on the second-story landing.

“This mansion looks almost like a twin of the one in Wurtz,” she said.

“Yeah, it is,” said Dion. “They were both built a long time ago, so I can’t say for sure, but I’m guessing the idea was that you’d feel right at home no matter where you were.”

The party walked down the long corridor to the library. Dion, who’d claimed to have visited the villa any number of times, did indeed know much about it.

As Claire passed over the deep viridian carpeting, she looked outside at the garden and the fields that were nearly ready to be planted just beyond it. *This really is such a lovely town*, she thought. Was this, she wondered, where Dion had spent his holidays when he was small? The thought was too painful for her to pursue any further.

“This is the library,” Dion announced as he opened the doors wide. The room was home to many shelves packed tight with books as well as boxes overflowing with documents.

“I’ve been told that everything in the boxes is related to family business,” Dion said.

“For lack of any other option, I guess our only choice is to go through them one by one,” said Vik.

Keith rolled up his sleeves.

The group spent several hours combing through the pages. Although they’d arrived in Caltina quite early in the morning, the sun was high in the sky, signaling afternoon, by the time they paused for a break. Naturally, the paper they were looking for had yet to turn up.

Already tired even as he kept working, Denis whined, “Hey, it was only pretty recently that we learned about the Meads being involved in destroying Lindel, right?”

“Yup,” said Dion. “It happened at the same time we—I mean, the old Mead family had its public downfall.”

“Gotcha. So that’s why we don’t have records on that in the royal library, right? And that must be why the investigations never got too far either. So as odd as it sounds, there really might be information here about Lindel’s magical

treasures.”

“That was my thinking too,” Dion said. “Hence why I suggested this villa.”

Vik silently watched Denis and Dion, not wanting to add anything to the conversation.

Just then, a knock sounded at the door, and the steward stepped in. “Your Highness,” he said, “lunch is ready for you in the garden.”

“Wow, we’re taking lunch in the garden?” Vik said. “That’s a rare treat.”

“Yes, Your Highness. For the weather is so fine today you would hardly know it’s winter.”

The party followed the steward to the edge of the garden, where tables and chairs able to seat several people awaited them. Claire realized they’d been shunted off to this odd corner of the estate due to the ongoing maintenance of the lawn and flower beds.

“My apologies for placing Your Highness in such an unsightly area,” the steward said.

“No, it’s my fault for barging in on you with such short notice. Please, let everyone in the household carry on according to your usual plans. I don’t mind.”

“Thank you, Your Highness. We’re most grateful.”

As Vik and the steward talked behind her, Claire turned to survey the garden. The lawn was freshly transplanted in, just waiting for the weather to grow warmer. She could only imagine what the planter beds surrounding it would look like once all the flowers were in bloom.

“It’s lovely to enjoy something like this every once in a while,” Lui remarked. “Would you take a seat, Claire?”

“With pleasure.”

Just as Claire sat down at Lui’s urging, a faraway shout of, “You upstarts!” made her jump. She looked around but could not find the source of the noise. *What was that?* she wondered.

The estate was enormous, with gardens large enough to house a whole outdoor party. With today's lunch being held on the edge of the grounds as it was, hearing a voice meant that the speaker must have shouted very loudly indeed.

Denis went to check the border of the neighboring property and returned promptly. "Vik," he said, "that was from the neighbors' place. It looks like they're having a tea party."

"A rather loud one," Vik said.

"Yes, but don't worry. It's just a bunch of kids who're too young to join the Royal Academy, even. Cute, huh?"

"Well, that was hardly what I'd call genteel behavior, then."

"It's complicated," Denis said. "I know this isn't exactly your area of expertise, Vik, but a girl's first tea party is a whole ordeal from start to finish."

As Claire listened to their conversation, she was suddenly hit with a memory. *That reminds me, she thought, the Baron Reine and his family were also called something along those lines. They were such a lovely family, but I suppose you'll find factions of those who despise the newly rich everywhere you go.*

In her first life, Claire had been employed as the Reines' live-in governess. Two months from now, she knew, they would seek out someone for that role from an employment agency. Claire cherished the family dearly, for they'd given her a home and a sense of place when all of her confidence had been shattered. Regardless of her role as a servant, they'd let her go to school and treated her as a member of the family.

Claire felt an additional slight pang of sadness when she remembered her pupil, Isabella, the very one who'd brought her together with Vik. Isabella had adored her like a sister. Claire wondered how the girl would fare without her help now. *Isabella, Lord and Lady Reine... I do hope they're all well. They mentioned that they hadn't had much luck with finding a governess, so I'm concerned for them. I do hope someone lovely comes along.*

Just then, her eyes happened to alight on the hedge separating this estate from the neighbors'. As it was still winter, the leaves on the roses planted

within the hedge were all bleak and withered. She hadn't noticed it when she was first seated, but now the view beyond the hedge caught her eye.

"Huh?" Claire cried. The napkin she'd been just about to lay on her lap fluttered to the ground. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a maid rushing to pick it up, but Claire didn't move. Her eyes were trained on the five or six young noble children having their party, all a bit too young, as Denis had mentioned, to attend the Royal Academy. Yet one girl in their midst looked familiar. She wore a braid and a simple dress, as was her wont, and carried herself with a noticeable decorum uncharacteristic of one so young.

This girl was, without a doubt, Claire's former pupil.

"Lady Isabella..." Claire breathed.

"Claire, do you know that girl?" Lui asked.

Claire's lips trembled, but she somehow managed to answer, "Yes. That is Lady Isabella, my pupil from my time as a governess in my first life."

*Now that I look back on it, she thought, I recall that Isabella was away on holiday when I first began to live with the Reines. She came home when she heard her parents had found a governess for her, so I suppose she must have been staying here in Caltina.*

Claire pricked up her ears, awash in the warm memories spurred on by the sight of her old pupil who looked exactly as remembered. There seemed to be some sort of argument taking place in the neighboring garden. Considering what someone had yelled at Isabella earlier, this was certainly not a peaceful tea party.

"It's preposterous!" one voice said. "How dare an upstart own a mansion on such a fine piece of real estate? This land has a time-honored tradition of belonging to only the most ancient of noble houses."

"As an upstart's daughter, your manners are deplorable," said another. "If only you'd learn to act like a lady. Ah, but I suppose your mother was born in town, so no one will agree to be your governess. You'll never learn a thing at

this rate.”

Overhearing this made Claire want to plug her ears. Listening carefully, she could make out that several young noble boys seemingly thought little of Baron Reine’s title and were bullying Isabella. However, Isabella did not so much as react, continuing to sit with dignity. She stared straight ahead, never once breaking eye contact with the boys who shouted insults at her.

“They’re right,” Vik said. “The Reines are new money. I’ve spoken to the baron, and he gave me a marvelous first impression. He’s close to the common folk, and I do mean that in a good way. He’s passionate about making donations and providing social welfare. If anything, he represents such a good example of how to act that the older houses are not amused.” He sighed.

Keith picked up the story and added, “Upper society can truly be a nuisance. However, we’re nobility as well, so we really can’t talk. I’m sure all those boys and girls over at the tea party are only copying their parents. It’s unfortunate that the adults’ relationships affect children so young.”

“Well, I can’t listen to it any longer,” Claire snapped.

Isabella understood full well her family’s social standing, yet she never once allowed it to mar her kindness, honesty, or sharp wit. Claire couldn’t sit by any longer, so she rose, thinking that there must be something she could do for Isabella’s sake. However, she couldn’t simply storm into the neighbor’s garden and tell them off. Her anger seethed within her, lacking an outlet.

Vik put his hand on Claire to stop her. “It’s okay,” he said. “Let me handle it.”

*Vik?* she thought.

As she tilted her head in confusion, Vik called the name of the steward who’d welcomed them to the villa earlier. “Howard!”

“Y-Yes, Your Highness?” said the steward.

“I told you that I wanted our presence to be kept a secret from the neighbors, did I not?” asked Vik.

“Yes, Your Highness. You did indeed give us that order.”

“Well, there’s been a change of plans,” Vik said. “Let the neighboring estate

know immediately.”

“A-As you command.” Once he understood the order, Howard hurried back inside.

As Denis watched the steward go, he muttered, amused, “Someone’s not being very mature.”

“Well, someone isn’t an adult yet,” said Vik. “So there.”

“Sounds to me,” Lui pointed out, “like someone’s being pedantic for argument’s sake.”

“Shut up,” Vik grumbled with a childish pout.

In situations where multiple members of the aristocracy went on holiday at the same time, it was customary in Paffuto and Noston alike for the lower-ranked nobles to seek out and pay greetings to the higher-ranked ones. It was an older custom, and some well-acquainted families ignored the tradition. Yet one could not simply ignore the royal family.

“It’s rare to see you throw your weight around like this,” Lui remarked.

“But there’s no harm in doing so now,” Vik said. “And besides, they were using their ranks and histories as an excuse to torment that poor girl.”

“These are children, Vik. Do make sure to act like a prince.”

As Claire listened to the conversation, she grimaced, imagining the outcome of this meeting.

Within a few minutes, there was a knocking at the villa’s gates. Just moments before, the neighboring garden had fallen strangely silent. All the tea party guests must have realized what was going on the instant they’d received the notice and rushed over to the old Mead mansion.

“We’ve come to pay our respects, Your Highness Prince Vik, the Crown Prince of Paffuto,” one of the visitors said. He was one of several noble children, all younger than Claire and her friends.

A boy dressed in a classic two-piece suit and bow tie stepped forward first. “I am Anthony Barker, eldest son of Viscount Barker. I plan to attend the Wurtz

Royal Academy the year after next. It's a pity I'll miss attending school at the same time as Your Highness, but having the honor of seeing you today more than makes up for it."

Anthony spoke well, but there was no mistaking the fact that he'd been the ringleader in tormenting Isabella earlier.

Vik said nothing but an unconcerned, "Shame, that," making Anthony blanch.

The next one, a freckled boy with shaggy black hair stuttered, "M-My name is Patrick Moran, if it pleases Your Highness. It's an honor to meet you." He, too, had only minutes ago lambasted Isabella in the garden with Anthony. Yet now his confidence had withered, and he spoke in a weak, trembling voice.

*But of course he's nervous, Claire thought. He's been granted a chance to meet the prince entirely out of the blue.*

Paffuto was a great power, and even in Noston, which was only a fraction of Paffuto's size, one did not simply encounter the royal family every day. Clearly, then, this was a precious opportunity. Claire herself, the daughter of one of Noston's most prominent dukes, and Asbert's companion since childhood, had never been afforded the opportunity to speak to the king at any formal occasion. Thus she did not find it particularly difficult to imagine the pressure these children must have been facing.

Furthermore, Vik was in a poor mood, the smile he usually donned in public completely absent. Claire suspected he was doing it on purpose, but that made it no less alarming.

After the other children had introduced themselves in turn, Isabella stepped forward last. "My name is Isabella Reine, if it pleases Your Highness," she said. "I-I'm very grateful to have the honor of making your acquaintance today."

Her cheeks flushed below her pretty almond-shaped eyes. As she timorously introduced herself to Vik, Claire confirmed that, yes, this was indeed Isabella. *Oh, Lady Isabella*, she thought. She knew full well how reserved the younger girl was; receiving an invitation to Vik's ball in Claire's first life had made Isabella turn white as a sheet. *Her mother forced her to attend*, Claire recalled, *but she rallied well and did a remarkable job*. Claire felt a rush of admiration for how much effort Isabella was putting into behaving with such aplomb.

“Are you all holidaying here in Caltina?” Vik asked.

“Yes, Your Highness,” said Anthony. “Spring is almost here, so our tutors have gone off to the countryside to visit their families and hometowns. I believe Your Highness should be familiar with the practice.”

“But not Miss Isabella,” another of the boys pointed out. “Her parents can’t find her a governess, so she goes to public school like a commoner.”

Claire jolted and turned to look at the boy making these jeering comments. She’d never expected them to make such remarks in front of the crown prince, of all people. Was insulting Isabella such an everyday thing for them?

Vik glared at them and said, “Hey, now.”

Noticing his displeasure, the children turned rigid at once. However, confusion lingered in their expressions. Perhaps, Claire supposed, looking down on others was ingrained in them to the point where they didn’t even recognize this social faux pas.

Isabella was the one to lighten the mood. “Your Highness,” she said, “m-my father sent me to Caltina in order to watch the planting season. He said it would provide me with a valuable learning opportunity.” Her cheeks were bright red as she balled her hands into fists. It was clearly taking all her effort to stand still and not run away.

Vik hesitated a moment before saying, “Why, that makes perfect sense. You’re here to learn a part of the agricultural process, in other words? I’m sure that would be splendid for teaching the importance of food production.”

“Y-Yes, of course, there is that aspect as well. But I believe my father wanted me to learn more about a good work ethic,” Isabella said. “During the winter, farmers till the fallow fields and fertilize them with manure to wait for the planting season. All the spring labor is like the dawn, and seeing them work sends me a message of fortitude and omnipresent hope.”

“I love that,” Vik said.

Isabella’s face glowed at his approval, but several others at the back of the group whispered to one another quietly so that Vik couldn’t hear. “She’s all talk,” one muttered. “Upstart!”

However, Vik could hear them perfectly well. He jolted and barked, “Excuse me, my lords Barker and Moran. Aren’t the majority of your families’ lands agricultural? Are you really telling me that you’re thirteen already, and yet you don’t know a thing about farming? By your age, I had a tutor, but I suppose we can’t say the same for everyone.”

The boy in the classic suit and the boy with the shaggy black hair both turned pale.

*That’s enough*, Claire thought, unable to stand watching this any longer.

“Vik,” she said. “I think we’re done here.”

Claire’s voice returned Vik to his usual demeanor. His stern look vanished, and he lowered his eyebrows and sighed. “Anyway,” he said, “do you understand what you’ve done to this fine young lady here?”

Anthony and Patrick started.

“Scowl all you like now while your fathers’ authority protects you, but you won’t be able to hide behind them once you reach adulthood.”

“He’s got a point,” Denis said, throwing the children a lifeline. “But all of us here only learned that same lesson when we were around your age too.”

The boys looked relieved.

“I’m here to visit the royal villa on a special occasion,” Vik told them. “You’re free to go off and play if you’d like, but remember that I want you to grow up and be a part of giving our kingdom a better future. Can I expect that from all of you?”

“Yes, Your Highness!” the children chorused. The situation was now, more or less, peacefully resolved.

As Claire watched the children be escorted to the table, she beckoned to a baffled-looking Isabella and said, “You’re Miss Isabella Reine, is that right? Would you like to come visit the library with me? We have quite a number of books here.”

“Really?” Isabella gasped, perplexed by Claire’s offer. “But I need to get my parents’ permission before I go over to anyone else’s house.”

Eyes twinkling, Vik smiled at her. “Don’t worry,” he said. “I’m inviting you. Your parents surely wouldn’t refuse a prince’s invitation, now would they?”

“Y-Yes, Your Highness!”

Oh, how Claire had dearly missed these modest and well-mannered responses of Isabella’s.

“Lady Claire, are you sure I can take home any books I like from this library?”

“Yes,” Claire said. “That’s what Prince Vik said.”

Isabella’s eyes glowed with delight.

The library in the royal family’s villa contained more than just important documents related to the old Mead family. Thanks to its abundant poetry anthologies and works of prose, the moment Claire set foot in it, she had immediately thought, *I believe Isabella would love this place.*

After finishing a simple lunch in the garden, Claire, Dion, Isabella, and Lui retired to the library. Vik, Denis, and Keith stayed outside to talk to the other children and give them supportive advice after the earlier fright. Claire watched Vik from the window and giggled. Yes, he really was every inch the prince.

Meanwhile, Isabella could not conceal her joy as she stepped into the library. Her normally calm demeanor was long gone, as Isabella now looked just like the young girl she was.

“Look how many rare books there are!” she gushed. “And they’re all the kinds of books that the royal library doesn’t let ordinary patrons check out! I really love reading stories and poems, you know. And just look! First editions of famous old works, full collections of series that are now out of print—I’m in heaven!”

“Are you a big reader?” Claire asked.

“Yes, a huge one!”

“Then make yourself at home,” Claire said. “I have some research to do, so I’ll be right here if you need anything.”

“Thank you so much, Lady Claire!”

*Lady Claire*, Claire thought ruefully as she smiled back at Isabella. It was only common sense that Isabella wouldn't call her anything more familiar like she had in her first life, but it made Claire feel a little bit sad all the same.

Dion asked, "Miss Isabella, do you come to Caltina every year?"

Isabella looked confused. "Yes, I do. The first time I can remember coming here is when I was around four years old, I think. Normally we come in the summer, but my father bade me go in the winter this year. It's my first time being here alone."

"Mm, I see," said Dion. "We're up in the highlands here, so it's a lovely place to spend time."

"It is! I've been down to the nearby lake too. It's nice that it's so close."

"Oh, I know that lake." Dion paused for a minute before he admitted, "I used to go there long ago too. I would swim and play in the water."

As he and Isabella talked, Claire wondered what Dion's experiences at the villa must have been like. Perhaps he and Isabella had passed each other here before without either being any the wiser.

"You're quite bright, Miss Isabella," Dion went on. "Out there in the garden earlier, I saw that you didn't fight back even when the boys were saying those horrible things to you. But you know, it's not wrong to get angry either. If you keep locking your real feelings away, then sooner or later, you'll lose who you truly are."

He must have been talking about the time he was the heir to the house of Mead, Claire realized. She looked out into the garden, where she saw Vik and Denis merrily sparring in swordplay with the children.

"This mansion must be full of terrible memories for you, Dion," she murmured.

"Oh, no, I wouldn't say that," he replied. "I spent my summers here, yes, but now that I'm back with a much different outlook, the only real difficulty is forcing myself to act like a proper gentleman."

Dion snickered gleefully at his own dry humor and then continued. "Claire, I'm

fine, really. I know you're worried about me for a lot of reasons, but the fact alone that there's anyone who cares for me that much makes me very happy."

He paused for a moment. "Yes, I suppose I did have that outburst just the other day. But I promise I'll be fine soon. Just wish me the best of luck, okay?"

"Oh, Dion," Claire said. He must have been referring to the incident the other day in Vik's room, when he'd mocked himself for his self-appointed responsibilities and then stormed out.

Nonetheless, Isabella flushed and responded in agitation. "I know exactly what you mean! Everyone calls me a daughter of upstarts, but I'm certain it hurts my parents that people think about me that way. The two of them are absolutely wonderful people, and I was so lucky to be born as their daughter."

Apart from Lui almost silently turning a page from over by the door, the library was dead quiet. The conviction in Isabella's speech resonated throughout the room.

"So I'm happy regardless of what people say about me," she insisted. "But I'll never ever let anyone make my wonderful father and mother look unhappy. And I know it'll only make them sad if they see me down, so that's why I try to never appear upset."

Isabella normally chose her words carefully, but just now the words had practically gushed out of her in a rare display of passion. Claire's eyes widened.

She dropped to her knees to match Isabella at eye level. "Your parents are absolutely lovely people, aren't they?" she said. "Would you be willing to introduce me to them someday?"

"Oh, yes, of course!" said Isabella.

The sun set several hours after Claire had taken Isabella to the library, and the faint light of evening streamed in through the window. She, Dion, and Lui had divided up the work to comb the library for documents while Isabella occupied herself going back and forth between hunting for books and reading with her back up against a bookcase. Periodically, Claire had gone over to check on her and engage her in light conversation. At several points, Claire had asked if

Isabella wasn't thirsty and wouldn't she like to take a break in another room for tea? But Isabella was too preoccupied with her books and refused to budge. Her sincerity fondly reminded Claire of the times they'd spent studying together at the Reine family mansion in her first life.

"I haven't found a single clue," Dion groaned. "You'd think we would've scrounged up something by now."

"I assume the seal was put in place with the express purpose of being broken," Lui said. "So while the Meads may never have intended to break it, the information on how to do so might've gotten mixed up somewhere in the rest of the house."

Claire tilted her head, puzzled. "What do you mean, 'with the express purpose of being broken'?"

"Regardless of whether or not the Meads wanted to break it, it's possible that the royal family of Lindel passed the bracelet down in secret to be used in a time of great need. I'm sure there must be some other method to break it, even if it's not written down in a book or document."

Truly, Claire found it hard to imagine that any kingdom would want to leave information on the use of its treasures simply lying around on a paper in plain sight. *It's as I feared, she thought. It seems like it'll be challenging to find a clue on how to break the seal. Maybe we should continue our search on Lindel Island.*

Yet just as she thought that while reaching out to pick up a new piece of paper, she heard someone shout, "Ooh!" from the back of the library. That was where Isabella was, Claire knew. She went to go look.

"What happened, Lady Isabella?" she asked.

"This is the very first edition of a fairy tale!" Isabella said. "They're for kids who've just barely learned to read, but still! It's such a rare find."

"Oh my," Claire said. "It looks like this library has all fifty volumes, doesn't it? I wonder if these were kept here for some high-ranking young noble lady."

Isabella paled, remembering her own humble origins. She hurried to bow her head. "My apologies, Lady Claire," she said. "I was so caught up in the books that I didn't stop to think."

“It’s quite all right,” Claire reassured her. “I remember reading this when I was small too. Anyway, please do keep going.”

Isabella hesitated but eventually continued. “Um, well, I know that you can read from books one through fifty, but there’s actually a better reading order for them. On their own, they’re all separate stories, but there’s secretly a numbering that follows a chronological order. It only applies to a third of the volumes, but doing that lets you enjoy them in a different way.”

“I had no idea,” Claire said.

She pulled one of the volumes off of the shelf in front of Isabella. The cover was a deep bordeaux, one that signified to Claire the book’s sheer age. However, it was in beautiful condition and showed next to no signs of wear and tear from having been read.

“If this is the first edition, I wonder how long ago this was made,” Claire mused.

“There’s no date in the colophon,” Isabella said. “But it has to be over a hundred years old at least.”

As Isabella lectured her, Claire turned the pages of the book. They felt as cold and heavy as if no one had ever opened the book before, an uncanny feeling at odds with the adorable illustrations.

The Martino family boasted a copy of this very same series—although, naturally, not the first edition. As Claire turned the familiar pages, she began to feel peculiar. *It’s faint*, she thought, *but I can feel magic in these pages*.

She hesitated for a moment and then called, “Lui!”

Lui left off hunting through the papers and came over. She asked, “What is it, Claire?”

“It’s only an old book of fairy tales, but I can feel magic in the paper.”

“Oh, you’re right. It’s a spell to prevent the paper from aging. It only leaves a very little bit of magical power on the pages, so I don’t expect many people would notice it.”

“You don’t think people would notice it, huh?”

Claire and Lui exchanged glances.

Just then, Dion looked over Claire's shoulder and said, "You know, I don't recognize this book. I thought most of the children's books here were for Diana and me, but this definitely isn't mine. And I know for a fact it isn't Diana's—my twin sister's—either."

"What makes you say that with such conviction?" Lui asked.

Dion answered her with a grin. "I think I'd know my books if I saw them, and can you really picture my sister being happy to have someone buy so many books for her?"

After a moment, Lui admitted, "Not exactly."

Claire added, "I must say, I've also gathered the same impression of her."

She couldn't have agreed more with Lui had she tried. Diana had been exiled from Paffuto for her role in the attempted coup d'état, and said role had led to Claire spending a day in Diana's company. Based on what she'd learned then, Claire could safely say that Diana wasn't the type to enjoy collecting a famous series of fairy tales.

"So with that being said," Claire finally added, "how could this book have ended up here?"

The library became dead quiet. If not for the Mead children, what reason did this book of fairy tales even have to be here? *It sounds unnatural*, Claire thought, *and it is*.

She asked Isabella, who looked confused as to why everyone was suddenly clustering around her, "Lady Isabella, would you mind telling us what order this series is supposed to be read in?"

"Oh, yes! As far as I've been told..." Isabella paused for a few moments to think. "Of all the fifty books, fifteen of them can be read in a different order. The first one is volume two. That's where the chronological events begin and the foreshadowing starts."

"Volume two," Claire said. "That's the story about the fairy and the ballerina, correct?"

“Uh-huh. Then, next is volume three.”

“Volume three, the beginning of the world and the witch’s forest.”

“And after that is volume five. Then it goes to volume seven before skipping to volume eleven.”

“Ah, so there’s a rule to it?” Claire asked.

“I’ve heard that the author was a teacher who loved numbers,” Isabella explained. “I think this secret trick must have been a part of his playful side.”

As Lui listened to their conversation, she lined up the books in order, flipped to a certain page, and then showed it to Claire. “Look,” she said, “can you read this?”

“Yes,” Claire said. “It says, ‘When the vernal moon shines once more.’”

It was clear as day to Claire, but Isabella and Dion looked puzzled.

“I can’t see anything,” Isabella admitted.

“Nor can I,” added Dion.

After seeing their reactions, Lui nodded as if they had confirmed her suspicions. “This is invisible writing that only those above a certain magic level can read,” she said. “I wouldn’t have expected Miss Isabella to read them, as she hasn’t been baptized, but Dion also can’t read them, whereas Claire and I can.”

Claire and Lui both came from families with a deep affinity for magic. Paffuto and Noston each had their respective families known for extraordinary magical qualities, and Dion came from a house with its own unique magic spell, Collective Magic. If Dion couldn’t read the magical writing, then that meant precious few people the world over could. This narrowed the target audience of the words considerably.

*This can’t be*, Claire thought, even as she picked up the third volume and opened it.

“I wonder what’s written in volume three,” she said. “‘And the tides run high and kiss the shore.’”

“Volume five says, ‘Look to a land,’” Lui reported.

Both girls fell silent, turning a possibility over in their minds.

But then Dion blurted out, “What, is this some sort of secret code?”

Isabella’s eyes lit up, although she hadn’t the slightest idea what was going on. “Incredible!” she exclaimed. “This is so exciting!”

*When the vernal moon shines once more*

*And the tides run high and kiss the shore,*

*Look to a land sheltered in bloom,*

*Resting ’neath the light of the full moon.*

*There in the silence, o son or daughter,*

*Let magic strong as white enter the water.*

*Into which submerge the icon of blessing.*

*Then let us know the Lady of the holy spring.*

According to Isabella’s reading guide for true fans of the series, the books were to be read in order of volumes 2, 3, 5, 7, 11, 13, 17, 19, 23, 29, 31, 37, 41, 43, and 47. When lined up accordingly, the special magical writing on the first page, which only those with the highest magical power could read, combined together to make a poem.

“Oh my,” Claire said as she read the secret message.

Lui nodded. “This is what we’ve been looking for, isn’t it? I’ve always thought it odd that Lindel existed so close by and yet remained independent for so many years. So it makes sense to assume that their descendants who would want to break the bracelet’s seal would have strong magical powers.”

“But to hide the secret to undo the seal in a series of fairy tales feels rather like a game for children, don’t you think?” Claire said.

“Perhaps that was all it was to begin with. Then the kingdom was destroyed, and the books managed to end up here. At the time, perhaps someone in the

Mead family noticed the magic in the paper and thus held onto them. Very fortunate for us, no?”

“And this will break the seal,” Claire said.

Using the bracelet, Claire would be able to cast a ward on the entire ball. With the spirits’ protection, she could take control of the situation and face that night when it at last arrived. Claire breathed an internal sigh of relief at the thought.

“I’ll go to the garden and tell Vik the news,” Lui said. “Those three seem intent on spending all day playing with the children, but the least they could do is help us clean up.”

Claire giggled. “Well, you know what Vik said earlier. The children are the future of Paffuto.”

After Lui left, Claire turned back to Isabella. “Lady Isabella,” she said, “We came to Caltina to look for this code, but if not for your hint, we would never have found it this quickly. Thank you very much.”

“Oh, no, not at all!” Isabella said. “I’m just happy I could help. But, Lady Claire, if you only came to Caltina to find this...” Isabella paused. “Does that mean you’re going home already?”

Claire blinked, surprised by the look of upset on the girl’s face. “Lady Isabella?”

“You may have heard from the conversation in the garden earlier,” Isabella went on, “but my family is having a hard time finding me a governess. My friends tell me stories about their governesses, and I’ve been longing to have one who could be like a sister to me. So—” And here Isabella stumbled over her words. “I just wanted to say thank you for today. I had so much fun.”

*Oh, Claire thought, so the Reines really don’t have a governess.* Truthfully, she wished she could offer her own services, but Claire occupied a very different role in this life as opposed to the last. Back then, she had been the disgraced daughter of a duke with no place to go, but here she was an official noblewoman from abroad with quarters in the palace. Working as a governess was out of the question.

“Lady Isabella,” she said, “I would love nothing more than to send a wonderful governess your way. Alas, I am a student right now myself, and I come from Noston. So I am in no position where I am able to offer that.”

“Oh, you don’t need to go that far!” Isabella said. “Not for my sake.”

“But would you mind if I could be your slightly older friend?” Claire asked. “I could also help you from time to time with your schoolwork or etiquette and such. Please, let us be friends.”

Isabella blushed, and her eyes widened. “Oh my,” she said. “Do you really think we could?”

“Would you let me write a letter to your parents? If they grant their permission, I’d love to have you come visit me in my rooms at the palace in Wurtz.”

*The Reines were always so warm and kind to me, and I’m sure they’d be the same no matter which life I’m living, Claire thought. I would love to repay my debt to them, especially as I couldn’t in my first life.*

“Yes!” Isabella cried. “Oh, that’d make me so happy!”

Claire bent down slightly to be at Isabella’s eye level and nodded. That was, she remembered, the way she and Isabella had talked long ago on that fateful day.

That very evening, Claire wrote a letter to the baron and baroness which she gave to Isabella. As Claire watched Isabella walk back home to the mansion next door, cradling the letter like it was a precious possession, she felt curiously warm and bashful. *What a lovely day this turned out to be,* Claire thought.

The party had decided to spend the night in Caltina before returning to Wurtz the following day. Although they’d discovered the key to breaking the bracelet’s seal easily enough, Vik opined that, since they’d gone all this way, he was one for making it a real holiday. The retainers agreed, much to Claire’s relief. Thank goodness her hardworking prince, he who constantly devoted himself to a multitude of projects, could earn a bit of a break as a reward.

After a pleasant conversation with the group over dinner, each person retired

to their own room for several hours. For some reason, Claire could not sleep, so she went to the kitchens and requested a cup of hot milk. She knew she could have asked Dion to bring her some to her room, but she refused to treat Dion like a servant in this house which held so many memories for him. Besides, she rather fancied a walk around the mansion.

*The library was grand and lovely, she thought. But this whole mansion is so large I can hardly fathom it belonged to just one family.* It illustrated to Claire all the more clearly just what position the Meads had held in Paffish society.

With these thoughts running through her mind as she walked along, Claire drew near the study door and noticed a light seeping out from under it. *At this time of night?* she thought. *Perhaps it's one of the mansion's servants.* She carefully pushed open the door.

"Vik, you're still up?" she asked.

Before several leather couches stood an enormous writing desk ringed by bookshelves. Vik hunched over the desk, writing something. "Yes," he said. "As are you, apparently."

"I was a bit too excited," Claire admitted, "so I couldn't fall asleep."

"I'm glad we found the key to break the seal."

"As am I." Claire paused for a moment and then asked, "May I come over and keep you company?"

Vik hesitated for a few seconds before saying, "Yes, of course."

Claire wondered what was wrong, but then she realized it was her appearance. *Come to think of it, she mused, I was on my way back from the kitchens for hot milk. This is much more informal than I normally present myself.* Currently, she was dressed in a large nightgown designed for wear in her personal chambers. As they were traveling, she'd opted for a simpler chemise as opposed to a negligee, but the loose-hanging cotton fabric obscuring her form made it apparent enough that this was her nightwear. *It was a normal enough thing to do in my first life that I didn't even stop to consider it,* she thought. She regretted her decision, but Vik had already said yes, so she stepped into the study.

Setting the milk down on a low table in front of one of the sofas, she walked over to Vik. He stood up and let Claire take a seat in the chair he had just been occupying.

“You’ve been concerned about Dion, haven’t you?” he said. “How is he holding up?”

“I have,” she admitted. “I was worried that he might have been pushing himself too hard, but in the end, I think I’m glad he came with us. He seems to be getting better little by little over time, so he asked me to wish him all the best. I think this trip might actually have helped him.”

“Really, now? Well, at any rate, it’s good that Dion’s enjoying himself.”

Claire went silent for a brief moment before falteringly saying, “You understood all along, didn’t you? But I didn’t think he should come with us. I thought perhaps I should have kept my distance a bit more.”

A hint of weakness crept into her voice, one that she never verbalized. Hearing it, Vik placed a hand on Claire’s armrest and crouched to the ground. His face was so close to hers she could smell his cologne, and she drew ever so slightly back.

“You’ve been worried over Nicola too, and I know both she and Dion love you dearly for that. So it’s okay. Trust in yourself.”

It took Claire a minute to find her words before she replied, “Thank you, Vik.”

“Of course.”

He smiled at her, and she smiled back before the paper on the writing desk caught her eye. The ink was not yet dry, so Vik must not have finished writing his letter quite yet when she came in.

“What are you writing?” she asked.

“A letter,” he said. “To Prince Asbert of Noston.”

“Why Prince Asbert?” Claire blinked, startled by the unexpected response. If he was penning a reply during vacation, it must have been a personal matter. When had they grown so close that they kept up personal correspondence?

“We got to be rather friendly when we were working together on the grand

opening of the portal,” Vik said. “He and I had quite the heavy talk at the ball, actually. I was thinking it’d be rather nice if I could be friends with him on a personal basis as well.”

“Oh, that’d be lovely. Imagine if you became such good friends that by the time you both become kings someday, there’d be no need for any of that silly diplomatic etiquette.”

“Well, I suppose,” Vik said. “Frankly, I think it’d be best if we were close enough to talk about the situation and deal with it together. Still, something like that doesn’t happen overnight.”

“Of course not,” she agreed. “But all the same, I’m sure Prince Asbert would benefit from your company too.”

As Claire had grown up alongside him, she knew that handling the finer points of human emotions was Asbert’s weakness. Thus, having a connection with Vik would probably help him undergo great personal growth.

Vik looked away from her, visibly displeased. “You sound awfully familiar with him,” he said.

“Well, yes,” Claire said. “I mean, I’ve known him for as long as I can remember.”

She deliberately avoided mentioning the fact that he’d once been her fiancé, but it seemed to make little difference.

“He said much the same about you.”

“Don’t be like this, Vik,” Claire protested. “You have people like this too. I’m sure you must have others who were chosen to be with you and help support you as you grew up. Don’t you have relationships like those of the cute children we met this afternoon? The ones you said would be the future of our country?”

“I do not.”

Claire’s heart skipped a beat at the quick refusal. This conversation itself was nothing exceptional, but in the dark of the study, with the scent of ink, the steam rising from the cup, and her unusually relaxed appearance in sleepwear, it did indeed feel different. She felt guilty for making Vik scowl like that, but it

reminded Claire of a memory of long ago, which naturally made her feel happy.

“I’ve chosen every one of these people myself,” Vik said. “And you’re the only one I’ve ever thought about making my future spouse, Claire.”

Claire was about to respond that she felt the same, but Vik embraced her a split second before the words came out of her mouth. His eyes were directly before her. Then, after a brief moment, his hand caressed her chin. She knew she must respond, yet when she made to open her mouth, no words came from her lips.

The Caltina night grew late over the scene: a half-written letter, a mug of cooling milk, and a tender, tender kiss.



Several days later, Claire teleported to Lindel Island with Lui in tow. They’d learned in Caltina how to break the bracelet’s seal: namely, that they had to fill the holy spring on Lindel Island with strong magic on the night of a full moon and then dip the bracelet in the water.

The girls stood before the spring. They’d come after Claire had finished her lessons and dinner, and now the full moon hung high in the sky. Its light was so bright Claire practically couldn’t see the stars. All the elements in the poem were readily assembled.

The friends had visited Caltina as a group just recently, but that did not mean each of them could be present today.

Apologetic, Lui said, “It would’ve been lovely if Vik had been able to come, wouldn’t it? I’m sorry it’s so hard to make things work with his schedule.”

“I enjoy your company, Lui,” said Claire. “Besides, we’ll be going right back to the palace as soon as the seal is broken.”

“At any rate, thank goodness it’s already spring. What perfect timing.”

“I know,” said Claire. “And it was another stroke of luck that we were so close to the full moon when we found the poem.”



Lui submerged her hands in the spring and channeled magic into it. Standing next to her, Claire pulled off her bracelet and slowly dipped it into the water. At that very instant, a soft, faint light shone from the bracelet. The quietly rippling surface of the water likewise immediately flashed with larger ripples and beams of light.

Claire jolted. Unlike when she'd been baptized, the sky did not undergo a radical transformation, but the bracelet she pulled from the water looked recognizably different from the one of a few seconds prior.

"It seems the seal's broken," Lui said.

"Yes," said Claire.

She held it up to the moonlight to see. Gems the same color as her mother's eyes were inlaid in the bracelet's silver base. Claire did not know how many icons of blessing existed around the world, but one among that unknown number glittered on her arm—the arm of the descendant of Lindel's royal family. Just as the poem had promised, the icon of blessing was once again restored.

"And with this," Claire said, "we are ready. Now even if Charlotte fires her white magic at us during the ball in half a year's time, no one will be hurt, and the relationship between our kingdoms won't suffer."

With this, Claire was sure she could rest easy for a time. In the interim, she'd think of other ways to deal with Charlotte, but for the moment, she felt nothing but earnest relief.

# Chapter 11

At the Royal Aristocratic Academy of Noston, the whole student council room was on tenterhooks thanks to the graduation gala approaching next month.

“A selection of guests, both national and international, will be at the upcoming gala,” Asbert explained with a serious look. “Let’s discuss our security measures.”

Charlotte’s eyes glowed. “We’re getting special guests?” she asked. “Ooh, will the Prince of Paffuto be among them?”

“Yes,” said Asbert. “Normally, we wouldn’t need to send an invitation for a mere graduation, but as this is my graduation, I plan to extend him an invite.”

“Oh boy!” Charlotte said. “I can’t wait.”

The gala was a grand party held once a year for all the Academy’s graduates. As the Academy boasted exclusive enrollment for young nobles only, relationships forged at the school played a pivotal role in shaping Noston’s future. In ordinary years, the gala was a magnificent event which even the king attended, but with Asbert graduating, this year’s party was planned to be like no other.

“We’ll hold the event in the palace’s main hall,” Asbert said. “With a crowd of this size, we certainly can’t hold it in the Academy auditorium.” He paused and then asked, “Yes, Charlotte? What is it?”

As Asbert put a hand to his temple, Charlotte sprang to her feet and pirouetted. “I need to go buy a new dress!” she said. “Excuse me, but I must take my leave!”

The whole council was at a loss for words since, naturally, Asbert was not alone in this meeting. Ignoring the others’ stares, Charlotte glided out the door, practically dancing as she went.

Nicola saw her off with the briefest of glances and then smiled elegantly. She snidely quipped, “Well, she’s certainly excited, but one has to wonder if she

truly knows how to dance.”

“I doubt that’ll be a concern,” Salomon remarked, his expression not changing a whit even as the others looked on, aghast.

“Oh? I was under the impression she was skipping all of her finishing lessons,” Nicola said.

“She appears to relish the idea of dancing with His Highness Prince Asbert at the ball. Her dance lessons are the one thing she *does* attend studiously.”

“Oh my. How interesting.”

If Charlotte were to attend the ball, she would do so as Asbert’s fiancée. However, the fact that she’d gone skipping out of the room in order to procure a new dress when she’d heard that the Prince of Paffuto was attending was the height of ludicrousness. Still, no one wanted to involve themselves in this matter; Charlotte Martino was that much of a pariah. She’d engage Asbert in chatter for the most part, but she couldn’t be trusted not to brush off any serious conversation. Even without any comparisons to her sister, Claire, Charlotte displayed her lack of talent freely and went out of her way to do mischief.

Naturally, with her white magic, Charlotte had quite the army of cronies. She controlled any individual without sufficiently strong wards and compelled them to fawn over her. However, half of the people in the student council room—Asbert, Nicola, and Salomon—could not be swayed by her charms.

After Charlotte left the room, the conversation about the gala continued without her.

“Would you be opposed to allowing me to handle the security and venue operations for the day of the event?” Nicola asked.

Asbert looked alarmed. “Miss Nicola, I couldn’t possibly! It would not be right to force this responsibility upon you as our guest from Paffuto. Besides, this would be your first time attending such a gala, wouldn’t it?”

“But I’m not participating, as such. You and Lord Salomon are both graduating, and Lady Charlotte will be attending as your fiancée. Most of the other council members are involved in some manner as well, meaning that I’m

largely the only one left with nothing on my plate.”

“But—” Asbert protested.

“Then could I at least be your assistant, Your Highness?” Nicola asked. “That way, you’ll be able to enjoy your graduation.”

Asbert blinked. “I-I suppose,” he said.

Nicola paid his surprise no mind and stood up.

“I hear that Miss Charlotte Martino is interested in studying abroad?” Salomon asked.

“Yes, and it’s a dreadful thing,” Asbert said.

*A dreadful thing? How so?* Nicola thought.

It was lunchtime on the day after the conversation in the council room, and Nicola sat on a bench under a tree in the castle courtyard, partaking in her midday meal. She could not conceal her annoyance, caused by none other than the man on the other side of the tree, venting his many complaints about Charlotte Martino as if he had zero responsibility in the matter.

“Your Highness, do not fear,” said Salomon. “Her lord father the duke has told us he’s strongly opposed to the idea.”

“And for good reason,” Asbert said. “We’d have trouble on our hands if she left the kingdom. Not to mention that she’s my fiancée...” Asbert trailed off.

“No, no,” Salomon clarified. “He’s opposed because he adores Charlotte too much, you see.”

“But why? Even the king is sweet on her, and I can’t wrap my head around the mystery.”

Nicola brought her teacup to her lips as she silently listened to their conversation. *This is what you get for spoiling her rotten and always letting her have her own way growing up. I know my parents spoiled me too, but at least they told me off whenever I did anything wrong,* she thought.

Nicola always took lunch in the cafeteria with her friends, but today she had

many things on her mind regarding the upcoming gala. She had the choice of working in the student council room while eating out of her lunch box, but she didn't relish the idea of bumping heads with the two boys behind her. Thus, she'd opted to eat lunch out here in the courtyard, only to wind up in the blind spot of this pair of grumblers behind her. Nicola wanted to curse her own bad luck.

"I hear the curriculum is much more challenging at the Royal Academy of Paffuto as opposed to here," Salomon said. "Miss Charlotte would surely have a difficult time enrolling there."

"That, she would," Asbert agreed. "From what Claire writes, the exams required to move to the next grade in school are quite difficult. Even if the king could be wheedled into allowing her to go, pragmatically speaking, she doesn't have a chance."

*He's right, Nicola thought. Besides, if they let her move abroad at the drop of a hat, she'll ruin Claire's time at school. That means I can't possibly let her leave Noston, even if she begs the king for permission. With that being said—and here she set her teacup down and sighed—above all else, I can't possibly let that stupid prince complain all day without him ever growing up and getting involved!*

Her patience worn thin, Nicola sprang to her feet and turned around. Asbert and Salomon were so preoccupied with their grouching they even failed to notice her.

"Hey," she snapped. "You there."



Asbert and Salomon spun around with matching expressions of alarm.

“M-Miss Nicola,” Salomon stuttered.

“Having fun, are we?” she asked.

“Not exactly, uh, I mean,” Asbert protested.

Objectively speaking, Asbert and Salomon had done nothing wrong, yet Nicola’s scowl made them both grimace. People like Nicola, who had no reservations about speaking their minds to Asbert, were few and far between. Prior to her, the only person who would ever reprimand him had been his former fiancée, Claire. Once she’d obtained the wrong magical color, was distanced from the royal family, and departed from Noston to study abroad, that left Asbert with no female companion willing to challenge him. Charlotte should have been able to fulfill that role, but she was horribly ill-equipped to do so, her head filled solely with concerns about dreamy boys and fancy dresses.

“I refuse to allow Lady Charlotte to go abroad,” Nicola said. “If she makes a mess of things, it could escalate into a full diplomatic crisis.”

“Th-That’s certainly true,” Asbert admitted.

“What are you even doing keeping her as a fiancée to begin with?”

Asbert flinched, and Nicola, catching that, went on. “At any rate, what you need to be concerned about here is her white magic.”

“That’s also true,” Asbert said. “Charlotte is the most accomplished mage in the country.”

“No, no,” said Nicola. “That’s not what I mean.”

“Then what is?”

“What, you haven’t noticed? It’s a mystery she hasn’t brainwashed you!”

As Nicola berated Asbert, Salomon stepped in and said, “I take it, Miss Nicola, that you’re aware of Miss Charlotte’s sinister plans?”

“We’d be lucky if all she was doing was planning. There’s nothing worse than a fool with a thirst for power and the willingness to go get it! The whole Academy is drowning in her magic. Lord Salomon, you know exactly what I’m

talking about, don't you?"

"Well, yes, I must admit."

"I knew it. That must be why Lady Charlotte isn't controlling you, Your Highness. I mean, she thinks that since you're her fiancé already, it's just a waste of magic to try casting a spell on you."

Charlotte not only neglected her queenly finishing lessons but her regular lessons as well. After her baptism, she should have had a tutor to train her in the ways of magic, and the dormitories even offered extra rooms for the tutors provided by the respective noble families. However, Charlotte had only ever poked her head into her tutor's room a mere handful of times. Many students visited their tutors every day, but even Nicola, who wasn't used to Noston's ways, found it odd that the pride and joy of Noston should refuse to learn magic.

*I bet she only knows fancy magic that's easy to abuse, like brainwashing and teleportation, Nicola thought. She's never studied properly, so the debris from her magic is falling all over the place!*

"Anyway," Nicola went on, "it'll turn into a debacle if she manages to do something to you, Your Highness. Please, Lord Salomon, make sure he has a good ward at all times. If you need help, just let me know."

After a moment, Salomon bowed and said, "Very well, my lady."

Asbert stared at him in silence. It didn't surprise Nicola much that he knew exactly what she and Salomon were talking about—namely, that Charlotte was controlling everyone around her to bend them to her every whim.

Nicola had now said her fill, but Asbert suddenly called her name. "What?" she asked.

"I was thinking about the documents. The ones for the graduation gala, that is. The guest list and such, you know... Might I help you with that?"

Her face reddened again. "W-Were you listening to me?!" Nicola exclaimed.



Meanwhile, Charlotte was presently taking a coach to her family's home in

the same city as the Royal Aristocratic Academy.

“Hey, can’t you hurry it up a little?!” she barked.

Once the coachman responded, the coach sped up, causing the rocking to grow violent. Charlotte braced herself with a hand against her seat and grumbled to herself, “I’m in a hurry here, people! The tailor I’ve called to come and make my dress might get there before I do!”

Charlotte frequently returned home to the Martino mansion for just such a purpose. This was partially necessitated by the fact that the businesses which made dresses and jewelry would not perform house calls to the Academy dormitory; however, the chief reason was that her family doted on her so.

Her fiancé, Asbert, was cold and distant from her these days. He had once regularly invited her to his office for tea, even if it was only for formality’s sake. However, he’d undergone a recent change. High society, which should have fawned over her after her baptism, had likewise transformed. Why, she hadn’t even received an invitation to the portal’s grand opening ball just the other day!

“All this stuff and nonsense about being too embarrassed to show me in public just because I don’t go to my lessons,” Charlotte huffed. “It’s the height of rudeness! Well, I suppose that going *could* get even more people to fall all over themselves trying to please me. But still!”

Today, she’d decided to return home to order a new dress and pair of shoes. As Asbert’s fiancée, she would be present at his graduation and thus, she assumed, could afford to go all out for this special occasion. Besides, she wanted to roll around in her own bed eating candy, send the servants off on minor errands, and dump her overdue school assignments on her brother Leo for him to take care of. Oh, and why not visit her closet while she was there and pick out the perfect set of jewelry for her new dress? She needed to act the part of a lady in front of her school friends, but there was no point in forcing herself to be such a bore at home.

*If only being the main character meant I had to do nothing but enjoy the fun bits,* Charlotte thought. *After all, this whole world exists only for me!*

Oscar would probably be mad at her, she knew, for eschewing obtaining the Academy’s permission before going home. But no matter. Her father was on her

side, so she had no reason to fear.

Incidentally, Charlotte could just as easily have teleported home, considering her white magic. However, she hadn't ever received the appropriate training. The royal palace had contacted her father many, many times about securing her a tutor, but she successfully wheedled him into sending them all away, claiming she wanted to focus on her other studies. It wasn't simply that she found magic practice bothersome; rather, she knew that after she'd learned some of the basics, the only teacher left to her—and the only person who had the same magic color as her—was none other than Lady Anne, the holy woman. The thought displeased her. *I might take my queen consort lessons more seriously, Charlotte thought, if only she weren't the one training me. Why, yes, I'd rather like...say...Duchess Tanner or some such. She's known for being awfully lenient. If she were my tutor, we'd have a little tea party and check that my manners are up to snuff, and that would be the end of it. She might even compliment me on my dancing skills.*

As Charlotte enjoyed her own convenient interpretation of things, the coach pulled up in front of the Martino mansion.

Charlotte ran into her father first thing upon her unauthorized return home. "Father!" she exclaimed. "Oh, I missed you!"

"Why, Charlotte! You're back so soon. Is everything all right at the Academy?" Benjamin asked.

*Oh, great, Charlotte thought. Well, we can't have that.*

She looked around. Good—Oscar was nowhere to be seen. *It'd be kind of a pain if Oscar caught me casting a spell on father, she thought. Come to think of it, Oscar's magic level is awfully low, so how come I can't brainwash him? What a mystery.*

"Yes, it's all fine!" she said. "Say, father, would you write me a letter telling the school that you had to summon me home all of a sudden due to some issue with my lessons for preparing to be the queen?"

She dumped a sloppy pile of magic on him, but the person who responded to her was not her sweet, doting father.

“What are you talking about, Charlotte?”

She turned, and there stood her brother Oscar glaring at her sternly.

“What was that just now?” he asked. “Is that magic I sense?”

“Huh?” she said. “What do you mean, magic?”

Using white magic in front of someone who hadn’t been brainwashed, Charlotte knew, would immediately reveal all she had been trying to do. She’d come to this realization recently and had begun paying more attention to when she cast her spells. Thus, she feigned innocence and frantically retracted her magic.

She wasn’t sure if Oscar had noticed, but he lifted his eyebrows. “Charlotte,” he said. “We all know you have white magic, which can be used for incredibly dirty spells such as those which control other people’s minds. Be careful that you don’t give someone the wrong idea about what you’re doing.”

“Yeah, yeah,” she said. “Oscar, I’m tired. Can I go now?”

“I’m not finished talking to you. What are you even doing here in the first place? Don’t tell me you’ve made up your mind to buy another dress and have Prince Asbert foot the bill again?”

*You’re such a butt!* Charlotte thought. *Why can’t I brainwash you too?*

Charlotte pursed her lips, clearly pouting. “Faaather,” she whined. “Oscar’s being mean to me! He’s not letting me go to my room.”

“That’s enough for now, Oscar,” said Benjamin. “Let me remind you that Charlotte is the pride and joy of our family. The only reason you have your post in the royal palace is due to Charlotte and the other women in our family like her.”

“But father—” Oscar protested.

Benjamin’s words had made Oscar flinch, a fact that did not escape Charlotte.

“Father,” she said, “could you please reconsider the conditions for me moving to Paffuto? I know you said you’d change your mind if I got the best grades in the Academy, but just think what a great learning experience it would be for your darling little daughter!”

“That is true, but even so, it’s not so simple as all that,” Benjamin said. “Even if the king himself gave permission, I simply don’t think you could keep pace with their academics.”

The last time she’d asked, he had given her a firm refusal, but this one was decidedly less so. Moreover, Oscar lost interest once Benjamin had deprived him of his opportunity to nag her.

Charlotte loaded her words with magic and said, “But how about letting me have a quick trip for fun? Just a few days, even, would be lovely.”

“For fun?” her father repeated.

“Yes! And I’d get to see Claire too. Please get me permission to use the portal!”

“You want to see Claire? But Charlotte, you insisted that you were afraid to be alone with her.”

“Hmmpf! Just let me go to Paffuto, okay? All I need is your approval!”

As Charlotte began to throw a fit, Oscar interjected again, “Charlotte, watch your tongue. You’re speaking to a duke.”

“Oh, but I don’t mind,” said Benjamin, with a calm, hollow-sounding voice. “I’ll dispatch a letter to the palace at once and see to it that you have permission.”

Charlotte had only used a bit of magic so that Oscar wouldn’t notice, but it appeared that this small amount was sufficient for her purposes.

“Father, why the sudden change of heart?” Oscar asked.

“Thank you, father!” Charlotte cheered. “I can’t wait to go!” She clapped her hands in excitement.

Shocked, Oscar stood stock-still as he watched Benjamin, vacant-eyed, retreat to his study to write the letter. Then he galloped up the lobby’s spiral staircase.



After breaking the seal on her bracelet, the icon of blessing, Claire and Vik met in her suite of rooms in the palace to brainstorm their strategy from here

on out.

“Even with wards up,” Claire said, “some people aren’t acting themselves thanks to Charlotte’s brainwashing.”

“Right,” Vik said. “In spells that control other people’s minds, doesn’t the relationship between caster and castee come into play?”

“Yes,” Claire said. “Professor Cheinz told us both that. Also taking into account what Lui said earlier, we can assume that Charlotte has brainwashed anyone who isn’t suspicious of her and also has negative feelings about someone else.”

On the night in her first life when Claire had fled the Royal Aristocratic Academy, every one of her close classmates had fallen victim to Charlotte’s brainwashing. Now, Asbert and Oscar stood on her side, yet they hadn’t had any sympathy for her during her first life. When Claire had learned that was all due to Charlotte, she’d felt both shocked and outraged.

“I’m not concerned about anyone on our end,” Vik said, “but the Noston group is another story.”

“I agree,” said Claire. “Who knows if even the people who support me now will still feel the same way when we next meet? In particular, I’m concerned about Asbert, as he’s Charlotte’s fiancé.”

“No,” Vik said. “I’m positive Asbert will be fine.”

“Are you sure?”

She looked up at Vik, and he gave her an emphatic nod in return. “He’s a thorn in my side, but we can trust him.”

“You have quite a lot of faith in him, don’t you?” Claire asked.

“Well, I suppose.”

He ran his fingertips through Claire’s hair. She realized with surprise that the distance between the two of them on the couch had shrunk considerably.

“There’s going to be a ball in Noston in half a year,” Vik said. “You’ve told me that Charlotte will attack us with white magic there. You’ve also said that if you can ward the entire ballroom so that no one gets hurt, the relationship between Noston and Paffuto won’t fall apart.”

“Yes,” Claire said. “But that still won’t solve the underlying issue.”

“Even so,” Vik went on, “I think we should rely on Dion’s power sooner rather than later. Fundamentally speaking, magic doesn’t change a person. I mean, regardless of situations like Dion’s, where his whole personality changed.”

“I understand that full well, Vik,” Claire said.

Vik’s reasoning made sense, but he still showed her a kindness in honoring her opinions all the same. He lowered his eyes apologetically.

“I must admit, I have news that touches on this,” he said, handing her an envelope.

Inside the envelope was a familiar card of matte white with embossed gold. Vik’s name was written on the address. Claire blinked in surprise as she comprehended what this was.

“Is this an invitation to the Royal Aristocratic Academy’s graduation gala?” she asked.

“Yes,” Vik said. “From Prince Asbert.”

Claire started. *Vik shouldn’t have received an invitation*, she thought. *He didn’t, at any rate, in the past as I know it.* She hadn’t attended the gala either in her first life, as only the day before, she’d had her engagement with Asbert broken and subsequently fled the dorms.

*If I recall correctly*, she thought, *I remember advising Asbert to send out invitations to the royalty of neighboring kingdoms. But he didn’t agree with my opinion.* Claire had once been on the student council, but the others were too busy fussing over Charlotte to pay Claire any mind. About the only one who could keep up a proper conversation with her was Asbert’s retainer Salomon.

“According to the king, I don’t have an option to refuse,” Vik said.

Claire hesitated before saying, “If you go to the gala, I fear Charlotte will also be there.”

“Exactly. That’s why Prince Asbert’s written that he’d like you to attend as well.”

“Me?!” Claire exclaimed.

“Yes. Prince Asbert is rather considerate in his own way, don’t you think?”

Being able to attend the gala with Vik sounded like a dream come true. Every young noble lady in Noston idolized the Royal Aristocratic Academy’s graduation. Even Claire had her own special emotional attachment to it, and in her first year of school, she’d thought, “Next year, that will be me attending on Asbert’s arm.” Yet she’d already begun to lose her status in Noston, and ultimately, she was forbidden from attending his graduation. However, no matter how fond she was of the event, Claire couldn’t accept if it meant that Charlotte might lose her temper.

“That’s a very kind offer,” she said. “But I’m afraid I can’t.”

“Are you that concerned about Charlotte?” Vik asked. “With your magic and icon of blessing, you could cast a ward on the entire gala. We also have Dion and his Collective Magic to fall back on in a pinch. If anything, I almost wish Charlotte would hurry and blow up already so we can get this resolved that much sooner. I mean, we can’t have Dion curse her for no reason at all.”

As Vik made his logical speech, never once appealing to her emotions, he looked every inch the prince. Claire realized she’d passed the point of being able to make the correct judgment. *I suppose he’s right*, she thought.

No matter how many letters she sent to Charlotte, she received only a handful in return. Previously, at the meeting with her family after the portal’s grand opening ball, she’d also picked up on the fact that her father wanted to protect Charlotte from her. And not just her, Claire knew. She recalled Charlotte’s blunt refusal to go anywhere near Aunt Anne and the finishing lessons.

Claire sighed. “Very well,” she said. “You’re right. We don’t need to wait another half a year to do what must be done.”

“Don’t give me that face, please,” Vik said. He squeezed her hand. “Besides, Claire, I...” He trailed off before continuing. “I’d like to escort you to the ball. I’d like to take your arm and walk proud in full view of everyone else. I want to tell you how beautiful you look all dressed up in the clothes of my own choosing, and if anyone dares say anything about you, I’ll give them a piece of my mind.”

“Thank you.” She squeezed his hand back and then brought it to her cheek

before continuing. “I, too, am so very proud that I can trust you to handle this. If you let me stand next to you, why, I’ll boast of you to anyone who’ll listen.”

“Boast away,” Vik said. “I’ll do whatever it takes if it means you’ll tell others all about me.”

Claire giggled. “Is that the goal now? My, then I’ll also have to work all the harder.”

The two smiled and touched their foreheads together, whereupon Vik took Claire into his arms. The faint scent of his perfume, his strong arms around her, and his fingertips gently stroking her hair all worked together to fill Claire with contentment.



Several days later, Claire passed the morning in her usual routine. After a simple breakfast of tea and bread, she dressed herself and made her toilette. The Academy in Paffuto was just about to begin spring break, and the night on which Claire had fled the Noston Royal Aristocratic Academy in her first life was imminent.

*It’s only half a year until the ball, Claire thought. Apart from the magical tornado, there shouldn’t be any other large events. Now that the seal on my icon of blessing is broken, there isn’t anything else I can do in the meantime.*

She finished writing a letter to send to Charlotte, as she was accustomed to doing every three days, and was just setting the pen down on the desk when there was a knock on the door.

“Miss Claire,” Sophie called, “there are letters to you from the church of Paffuto, your family, and Prince Asbert.”

“Whatever could they be about?” Claire wondered.

Normally, she would have ranked going to school as more important than checking her mail, but she felt a peculiar sense of unease. Thus, she opened the top envelope on the stack first, the one from her household, and produced from it two sheets of stationery in her father’s handwriting. Oscar sent Claire letters, it was true, but her father rarely ever did.

Once Claire briefly scanned the letter, she was aghast.

“‘Charlotte is coming to Paffuto’?” she read. “What in the world does he mean?”

Clutching the letter, she grabbed Dion and teleported the two of them into the royal family’s apartments inside the palace proper.

Vik needed a moment before he could say, “Uh, Claire?”

Claire started. “Oh, I’m so sorry! I was panicking.”

Judging from the light, springy sensation of the place where she’d landed and Vik’s voice right next to her ear, Claire realized all too well where she’d teleported to—directly into Vik’s canopied bed and on top of the room’s occupant. Ever a slow riser, Vik had apparently been sitting on the bed to change his clothes when Claire had landed directly on top of him.

“Sorry,” Vik said. “Let me get some clothes on right now.”

Claire jumped again, as his words alerted her to the fact that he was naked from the waist up! She blushed scarlet to her ears.

“I am so, so sorry,” she said.

“No, don’t worry about it,” said Vik.

*Thank goodness, Claire thought, that he doesn’t have a chamberlain waiting on him today.*

However, Dion, somehow the only one to succeed in landing on the floor, completely misread Claire’s mind.

“Sorry,” he said. “I’ll just wait outside, then, shall I?”

“N-No, stay here, please!” Claire squeaked.

At the same moment, Vik smirked and went, “Stay here, would you?”

Just then, there was a knock on the door, and Keith walked in. “Vik,” he said, “the school coach is wai—”

Keith froze midsentence. Claire spoke up, not wanting to cause a

misunderstanding even with Dion there. “Pardon me,” she said. “I apologize, but I’m having an emergency!”

“I figured,” said Vik. “You don’t usually make this kind of mistake when you’re casting your spells. Something must have happened.”

Vik finished dressing in a matter of moments and then extended a hand to help Claire up. It was only then that she felt the trembling in her own hands begin to stop. *Right*, she thought. *I’ve already made my decision regarding what to do. I mustn’t falter here.*

Both Paffuto and Noston alike collected applications from those interested in using the portal. It was a useful device, making border crossings a simple affair, but it likewise presented a large security risk. As a result, access was only granted if the purpose of the applicant’s usage was quite clear.

Two of the letters sent to Claire this morning had informed her that Charlotte was coming to Paffuto. The problem, then, became the remaining letter.

“Charlotte Martino is to use the portal tonight,” Lui said, reading aloud from the church’s letter. Her voice carried through Vik’s room. “Well, it would have been nice to have a little forewarning.”

Church letters only ever announced final decisions related to the portal’s usage, so it meant, Claire reasoned, that Charlotte had already received permissions from both kingdoms. All that remained was for her to come through.

Claire sighed and said, “According to my letter from Prince Asbert, the king is opposed to her studying in Paffuto, so he has only granted her leave to come on holiday. On the Paffish side, she’s claimed to want to come visit me, so they will have no choice but to grant her access.”

“I agree,” said Vik. “But this does put us in a bind. Based on what we saw at the grand opening the other day, I have a feeling it’d be very easy for her to do quite a lot of damage here.”

“Well, for lack of a better idea,” Claire said, “I’ll wait by the portal this evening to intercept Charlotte and then stick to her side the whole time she’s here. She

won't be staying long, according to Prince Asbert, and we don't have school tomorrow either. I'll make sure she doesn't cause a fuss."

"Good idea," said Vik. "Dion, would you stay with Claire as well?"

At Vik's request, Dion's laid-back demeanor immediately turned serious. "As you command, Your Highness."

"I don't think anything will happen," Vik said, "but you should not hesitate to act if anything goes wrong, understand?"

*I'm the only one who's still worried about that, Claire thought. I need to overcome my anxieties to stop the worst from happening.*

She knew what that meant for them both. She looked at Dion and hardened her resolve.

Later, after coming home from school, she and Dion set off for the church, where they met the holy woman who had taught her about the icon of blessing.

"Good afternoon, Lady Claire," said the holy woman.

"Good afternoon," said Claire. "Has Charlotte Martino arrived yet?"

"No, but I'm sure she'll be here any minute now."

After the holy woman had learned that Claire was a member of the royal family of Old Lindel, the two had gotten along famously. In addition to helping Claire work out how to cast a ward over a large area, she'd given Claire plenty of instruction on simple healing magic and other magical arts related to being a holy woman. However, this was Claire's first time seeing her since breaking the bracelet's seal.

Before long, the flat aquamarine stone in the center of the church began to glow. A brilliant white light flashed above it, and a familiar figure materialized there.

"Hello, Claire!" Charlotte exclaimed with her usual sweet voice and adorable grin. "How have you been?"

Claire likewise returned Charlotte's greeting with her usual gentle smile, reminding herself that this was her dear little sister who'd always looked up to her, not a threat to both their kingdoms.

“I’m glad you could make it, Charlotte,” she said. “But you gave me quite a shock when I learned you were coming so suddenly.”

“Good, that was my plan!” Jumping to another topic with a grin, Charlotte said, “Hey, so this is the Paffish palace, right? I’ve never been here before! I was so, so excited for this trip, so I packed all my bags!”

She lifted her trunk to show Claire, but it was rather large for a three-day stay.

With some trepidation, Claire said, “Charlotte, I believe I heard you were only staying here for three days.”

Charlotte giggled and did not respond. Claire’s smile grew strained, as she felt this boded ill. Charlotte had only just arrived, but already Claire felt exhausted. *Based on what I recall from my first life, she thought, I simply can’t imagine Charlotte listened to whatever father or Prince Asbert told her.*

“Let me take you to my rooms,” Claire said. “Come, this way.”

Yet just as she made to lead Charlotte away, the holy woman said, “Oh, Lady Claire, I just saw your bracelet! I heard the story from Sir Lui, but I must say, it sparkles all the brighter now.”

“Thank you for saying so,” said Claire.

“Both the design and the metals are of very good quality. Please do take good care of it.”

“Thank you, I will.”

Just then, Charlotte, silky hair swaying, thrust herself into the conversation. “Ooh! I’ve always thought your bracelet was really pretty, Claire, but I had no idea it was so special.”

Claire hesitated before saying, “It was a keepsake my mother left me.”

In order to not make Charlotte feel left out, the Martino family did not talk about the heirlooms left by Claire’s mother. As far as Claire could recall, this was the first time she’d ever broached the subject. However, Charlotte didn’t even appear to be listening.

Promptly afterwards, Claire escorted Charlotte to her rooms in the detached

palace. These apartments had been specially made, with the area past the entranceway broken up into several rooms. Claire occupied the two main adjoining rooms, but Dion and Sophie lived in the other guest rooms. One of these guest bedrooms had been made up for Charlotte during her stay.

“Wow!” Charlotte repeated for the umpteenth time. “With a place like this, I could come live here any time I wanted!”

Claire only smiled, neither confirming nor denying Charlotte’s remark. She took Charlotte into her living room, poured her some tea, and urged her to make herself at home.

Charlotte cocked her head and said, “Hey, since you live in the palace, does that mean you know Prince Vik? I bumped into him the other day at the ball, and he said you guys were friends. You’ll introduce me to him, won’t you? Pretty please?”

“Prince Vik is one of my classmates, yes,” Claire admitted, “but he and I aren’t especially acquainted.”

“Aww! No way.”

She and Vik had arranged this lie beforehand. They had decided to make it seem as if Claire was detached from her Paffish friends in an attempt to avoid provoking Charlotte.

“But if all you’d like is to meet him and introduce yourself,” Claire said, “I suppose I could possibly arrange that.”

“Ooh, could you really?” Charlotte squealed.

Claire figured that giving Charlotte the cold shoulder too many times might only set her off. According to Vik, it was crucial to let Charlotte have her way just enough that she didn’t feel like her goals were being stymied.

Charlotte perked up accordingly, pleased that things were going her way.

“I’ll speak to one of his retainers tomorrow,” Claire said, “and see if I can’t arrange a meeting.”

“Thank you so much, Claire! Oh, and I want to go into Wurtz and look around too. Oscar says it’s ever so different from Tillard.”

Charlotte's words reminded Claire of her happy childhood when, on holidays, the whole family would set out into town to enjoy the theater or patronize the local shops. Those had made for such lovely times, without any worries about the colors of their magic or the current sad state of their sisterhood. It wouldn't hurt, Claire supposed, to allow just a bit of that same fun for the moment.

"It is," she said. "Since you've come all this way, I'd be glad to show you around. Very well. Now let's have a lesson in etiquette before we go to bed tonight."

"Aww, what a pain," Charlotte whined. "I mean, um— I'm so tired I think I'd better turn in now!"

"Didn't you want to come study here in Paffuto someday?"

"I do, but..." Charlotte paused before concluding, "You're no fair, Claire!"

Claire knelt before her pouting sister and met her eyes. "Charlotte," she said, "your magic is leaking again. You need to control yourself, do you understand? This isn't Noston, and your behavior here could have great consequences."

"Huh?" Charlotte said.

"I saw you leaking magic once before too," Claire said. "It must have been quite a lot if I could notice. I understand that you're very excited to be here in Paffuto, but please be careful."

Claire gave Charlotte a gentle smile and saw her sister, on the verge of casting a brainwashing spell, immediately retract her magic. Claire wore a ward; besides, her magic was far stronger than Charlotte's, so the spell would not have had any effect. However, she'd given Charlotte a warning all the same, for the relationship between Noston and Paffuto was at stake.

*Charlotte doesn't know what color my magic is, Claire thought. But now that she knows that I'm onto her tricks, I bet she'll think twice before using it so carelessly around someone unfamiliar.*

Thus, a very displeased Charlotte finished the lesson with Claire and then went off to the guest room. Claire bade her good night and closed the door just as Dion brought in a blanket for the sofa in the entranceway.

“It wouldn’t hurt to be cautious, right?” he said.

“Thank you, Dion,” said Claire.

She wrote a letter to Vik asking if they could meet tomorrow and then went to bed.



The next day, a coach was arranged to take the sisters into town, just as Charlotte had asked. However, Claire grew flustered at the entrance to the detached palace when she found Vik, for some unfathomable reason, waiting next to the coach.

“Wh-Whatever are you doing here?” she asked.

“Since I’m here to say my hellos anyway, I thought I’d accompany you into town,” Vik replied smoothly.

Claire blinked in shock as, behind Vik, Lui sighed. The sound made her realize what had happened, and she felt mortified. *Yes, Claire thought, I did tell Vik yesterday that Charlotte wanted to greet him, and that I would show her around town. But I didn’t mean for those two things to happen at the same time!*

“Why, how lovely to see you again!” Charlotte cried. “My name is Charlotte Martino, if it pleases Your Highness.”

“And you may call me Vik,” he said. “I’ve heard so much about you.”

Eyes glittering, Charlotte turned to Claire. “I want to ride in the same coach as Prince Vik, Claire! I have ever so much to talk to him about.”

But before Claire could answer, Denis interceded. “A pretty lady like you alone in a coach with a prince? I don’t know about that. Your coach is over there.”

“Wha— Excuse me,” Charlotte spluttered.

“And just so you’re aware,” Denis continued, “that coach has an anti-magic spell on it. You’ll be riding with Claire and Dion, okay?”

After pushing Dion and Charlotte into the coach, he covertly informed Claire, “Lui’s cast a good ward on Vik, so you don’t need to worry.”

“Thank you,” she said with a nod. Then she joined Charlotte in the coach and set off for a shopping trip in town.

“Ooh!” Charlotte squealed. “Look at all those dresses. I’ve never even *seen* designs like these before! And look, they aren’t even custom-made, but they’re so fancy. Which one should I get?”

“Charlotte, did father give you permission to go shopping?” Claire asked. “I’m afraid you can’t bill things to the palace under Prince Asbert’s name here.”

Charlotte jumped. “How did you know I was billing them to the palace?”

“Thanks to Prince Asbert. I know he won’t say anything to you, but it isn’t right to burden the royal family so. You must remember that they rely on the goodwill of the people to stay in power.”

Charlotte hesitated before finally grumbling, “Fine,” and falling into a sullen silence. She stomped off to the back of the store and shouted for a clerk to help her try on clothes.

*I suppose I’m telling her off rather more than I should,* Claire thought, sincerely rueful. *Given the current situation, I should be maintaining a certain degree of propriety with Charlotte...but I can’t exactly do that when we’re in person like this.*

“I have to say,” Vik remarked, pulling a face, “it takes an awful long time to buy new clothes.”

Claire giggled, a bit sarcastically. “Yes, particularly if you’re a lady, Vik.”

On a related note, Vik wore a modest outfit today, as befit a prince traveling incognito. However, Claire feared he could not hide his good birth, so he looked no less regal than any other young nobleman.

“It’s been quite some time since you and I have gone shopping together,” Vik told Claire.

“That it has. It’s a rare occurrence for us.”

“Then I guess we owe Charlotte thanks for her selfish whims, huh?”

Claire had been entertaining that very same thought in the back of her mind,

so her cheeks reddened. “Goodness, Vik,” she said. “You’re impossible.”

Dion and Lui were accompanying them on their outing today but, sensing the mood between Vik and Claire, kept a watchful eye from a slight distance. Yet Claire felt even that was slightly embarrassing.

“Lord Vik!” Charlotte called from the changing rooms at the back of the store. “Hey, come tell me how I look!”

Alarmed, Lui rushed forward. Although she’d not called him a prince, she’d nonetheless ruined Vik’s disguise.

“Look, look!” Charlotte went on. “This dress is the latest fashion. There’s nothing so cute as this in all of Noston! Tell me how I look. Isn’t it pretty on me?”

Vik didn’t so much as glance at her. He responded in a monotone, saying, “Yeah, that’s pretty nice.”

“Then I think I’ll have to decide on this,” Charlotte said. “The dress I had made for the graduation gala is lovely too, but it’s not as perfect for the occasion as this one. Plus, Paffish dresses are all the rage, so I’ll be able to brag about it to everyone else. Yup, I’m going with this one!”

It had already been three hours of Charlotte dragging the group around to assorted boutiques. At this point, Claire wasn’t the only one amicably nodding along to everything Charlotte said, yet Charlotte carried on without paying the rest of them any mind.

“Hey, Claire,” she said. “Would you lend me your bracelet? It matches the dress.”

“I beg your pardon?” Claire asked.

The bracelet Charlotte had indicated was Claire’s keepsake from her mother that she wore on her person, the icon of blessing. Naturally, Claire could not lend it out, so she shook her head.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “That’s the one thing I must refuse, but I don’t mind lending you anything else of mine. Once we go home, why don’t we go through my closet and choose something nice for you together?”

“Aww, no way!” Charlotte pouted. “Besides, I already turned all the closets at home upside down, and I couldn’t find any jewelry I liked. There’s no time to have anything custom made, so what am I to do? You heard what that lady at the church said! That bracelet is super, super lovely. How did I never notice it before? Please, Claire; I promise I’ll send it back by magic the minute the gala is over!”

“But this bracelet is very precious to me,” Claire insisted. She folded her arms in front of her chest, trying to hide her left wrist.

However, Charlotte would not be deterred. “Why won’t you let me borrow one piece of jewelry? I guess you must really hate me, don’t you, Claire? I was starting to wonder if you did, but I guess it’s only natural. If it weren’t for me, you’d never have been sent away. So I understand.”

At a loss for words, Claire looked at Vik to see if he had any idea what had just transpired. He, in turn, stared at Charlotte like she was some sort of peculiar creature. Certainly, people like her didn’t come along every day.

Claire whispered, “Pardon me, Vik?”

Vik looked apologetic. “Oh, excuse me. I’m simply flabbergasted. I can’t believe this girl is your sister.”

“The sentiment is shared, believe me,” she replied.

Then, Dion took Charlotte by the hand. “Miss Charlotte,” he said, “it won’t do to be so demanding.”

“I’m not being demanding!” Charlotte insisted.

“Oh, but this behavior doesn’t behoove such a nice young lady. Come, do give us a smile instead.”

Today, Dion was acting uncharacteristically aristocratic. He must have been awaiting the proper moment to carry out the mission Vik had tasked him with, Claire assumed. A chill ran up her spine.

However, Charlotte looked surprisingly delighted. “Your name is Lord Dion, correct?” she asked. “Hey, you should come choose a dress for me! I’d love to go try on loads more.”

“Gladly,” Dion said with a beaming smile. “If your ladyship would have me.”

Charlotte blushed, and the matter of Claire’s bracelet was promptly forgotten.

Once the shopping expedition was complete, Charlotte came back to Claire’s apartments in the detached palace and waited for the right opportunity to strike.

“I really, really, really want that bracelet,” she told herself. “And once I’ve made up my mind about something, I can’t stop thinking about it.”

After taking dinner together with Charlotte, Claire retired to her rooms. At this time of night, she would likely be bathing, Charlotte presumed. That meant that from now until morning, the bracelet would be off Claire’s wrist and stored in her jewelry box.

Incidentally, Charlotte thought, this young man her family employed as her older sister’s guard was rather good-looking. She’d enjoyed their shopping expedition together when he’d taken her by the hand.

After Dion had escorted Claire to her rooms, Charlotte watched him leave with Vik. *My plan to snag the prince completely slipped my mind!* she thought. *She brushed me off when we talked about the gala, but... Well, I can bring it up again when the day actually comes. I am, after all, the main character.*

So thinking, she crept to the door leading out to the entranceway.

But just then, Claire’s maid appeared and asked, “Miss Charlotte, do you need something?” The maid had worked with the Martinos for years and had accompanied Claire to Paffuto. Naturally, this made her familiar with Charlotte as another one of her mistresses.

*Good,* Charlotte thought. *She’s too easy to trick.* She smiled, playing up the adorable little sister act.

“I forgot something in Claire’s bedroom,” she said. “Could you let me nip in and grab it?”



The next morning, Claire ransacked her room in search of a lost object, her

face as white as a sheet. "It's gone," she breathed.

She hunted all through the jewelry box in front of the mirror, her entire closet, the bedside table, and all atop the low table in the living room. She searched everywhere she could think to look, but alas, her mother's heirloom bracelet did not turn up.

"But how could it have gone missing?" Claire asked.

Last night, after returning back from her trip into town and having dinner, she'd promptly bade good night to Charlotte and taken a shower. She recalled taking off her bracelet and stowing it in the jewelry box by the mirror, just as she always did. By rights, it should have been in the same place the next morning, and yet it was gone.

Sophie peeped in as Claire dithered, much too upset to even dress herself.

"Good morning, Miss Claire," she said.

"Sophie!" Claire cried. "Do you by any chance know where my bracelet went?"

"No, miss," said Sophie. "I've never seen it anywhere apart from on your wrist."

Just then, Claire noticed that Sophie was carrying a cleaned set of dishes, piquing her curiosity. "Whose dishes are those?" she asked.

"Miss Charlotte's," Sophie explained. "She returned home first thing this morning."

"She went home already? Whatever do you mean?"

"Oh, goodness, I thought she'd already told you, Miss. I assumed she'd said something when she visited you last night before bed."

Claire gasped with a sudden burst of intuition. *She did this*, Claire thought. Charlotte had stolen into Claire's room in the dead of night and filched the bracelet.

*Now that I think about it, it makes sense*, Claire rationalized. *It was extremely odd that she backed down so quickly earlier. But why, oh why, was I not more careful?* She deeply regretted her negligence in leaving the bracelet

unattended, thinking it'd be perfectly safe in her own room.

Apart from simply being her mother's keepsake, the bracelet was also an icon of blessing. Surely Claire would have it back once the graduation gala was over, but that wouldn't be soon enough for her purposes. *I'd wanted to lay a ward over the entire gala, just as I'd planned to do at the ball in half a year's time*, Claire thought.

Ashamed at her own blunder, Claire heaved a huge sigh. Charlotte's habit of doing whatever she could think of to get her hands on what she wanted infuriated Claire.



The trio of a stumped Asbert, a cursing Nicola, and a coolly observing Salomon occupied the Noston Royal Aristocratic Academy's student council room.

"Charlotte showed me a bracelet she said Claire had given her," Asbert groaned. "But it's obvious that it's no mere accessory. It's an heirloom from Claire's mother, one of great importance to her."

"That's why I told you not to let her use the portal, even if it was just for going on holiday!" Nicola spat. "You're next in line for the throne, but we can't even trust that the king will listen to your opinion, can we? Vikky would never stand for this happening on his watch."

"I'm so ashamed," said Asbert. He dropped his head to the desk with a thud.

Salomon looked as unperturbed as ever, but Nicola snarled, trembling in rage. She marched over to the desk where Asbert lay crestfallen and roared, "Hey, are you really going to escort *her* to the gala as your fiancée? Through all my prep work, I've picked up that this gala isn't just some silly game for the aristocracy, now is it? Are you sure this'll be a good time for you to make your big announcement?"

"Just so you're aware," Asbert said, "it's well past time to make this announcement. Everyone is saying that her future finishing lessons are our only hope."

"That doesn't mean things are completely hopeless!"

“Well... What am I supposed to do about it?”

He looked up at Nicola with puppy dog eyes, which immediately caught her off guard and took all the wind out of her sails.

“H-How am I supposed to know?” she spluttered. “This is your problem to figure out, isn’t it?”

Nicola had already spent two months in Noston. At first, because she was a member of the royal family of a distinguished kingdom, Asbert had treated Nicola with considerable reserve, but recently the two of them had grown quite animated in swapping their opinions. Asbert’s talents and combined lack of ability to make good use of said talents annoyed Nicola to no end on a daily basis. As students passed by the clubrooms, rumors spread that the handsome, apparently flawless prince constantly received quite an earful from her. The two were becoming quite famous indeed as a good pair.

Incidentally, Charlotte never came to the student council room these days. She detested the work involved in the council’s operations to begin with, and absent any work for her to do, she clearly reasoned that there was no need for her to come.

Asbert rose with an “Oh!” as if a thought had suddenly just occurred to him. “Miss Nicola,” he said, “might I ask whom you will be attending the gala with?”

“I’m not graduating,” she said, “and I’m not engaged to anyone who is either. Why would I go?”

“But you must,” Asbert insisted. “We’ve invited royalty from all over the world, so how could you miss it? Miss Nicola, I’d love to see you in your dress comporting yourself so grandly before all the other guests.”

“What?” Nicola said. “What’re you blathering on about?!”



Salomon remained single-mindedly focused on his paperwork even as Nicola and Asbert carried on squabbling like a pair of sweethearts behind him. He muttered, “Without Miss Claire here, this means I can’t make good on what was written in the letter.”

For when Salomon was a child, he had received a message from Claire’s grandmother, the late Duchess Martino.

“If no one escorts my granddaughter Claire to the Royal Aristocratic Academy’s graduation gala,” it read, “I beg you to take on the responsibility. You must propose to act in her fiancé’s stead by the day before the event.”

When Salomon had read this, he’d thought, *As if that would ever happen.* After all, everyone knew Claire would someday become the best magic user in all of Noston, and she was engaged to Prince Asbert, no less. Even if some unforeseen incident occurred, any girl from such a prestigious house as the Martinos would not attend a party without a chaperone. Thus, he’d thought, the responsibility would never fall to him.

However, fate worked in mysterious ways. When Claire turned fifteen, she did not receive the appropriate magical powers to serve her country and thus was sent abroad. As Claire was no longer Prince Asbert’s fiancée, her half-sister, Charlotte, took on Claire’s role.

Salomon watched these events play out and came to a conclusion. *I’ve heard it said the duchess could see the future. Perhaps all she saw was a different one than has occurred.*

## Chapter 12

Several weeks passed, and the Royal Academy of Paffuto entered its spring vacation. With the graduation gala just days away and Claire and Vik invited to attend as distinguished guests, they and their retainers grew busier by the moment.

One night, Sophie approached Claire with a curious book. “Miss Claire,” she said. “May I please have a moment of your time before you retire for the night? You’ve been sent this from Lord Salomon Alcott in Noston.”

“What is it?” Claire asked.

It was an odd light-green book. When Claire touched the cover, she felt a slight hint of magic. *Perhaps it’s a spell to prevent the book from aging*, she thought.

She decided to read the accompanying letter from Salomon first.

*It is presently not long before the Noston Royal Aristocratic Academy’s graduation gala. I am writing to you because your grandmother, once the protector of our country, tasked me, my father’s eldest son and heir, with a secret duty. Once you were sent abroad to Paffuto, I should have deemed my mission complete and sent you the book. However, just to be on the safe side, I have been keeping a close eye on it until now. You will find the contents of my duty inside the enclosed book.*

“My grandmother gave him a secret mission?” Claire said. She recalled her grandmother’s face prior to her passing away from illness a few years back. Florence had handsome features that made Claire think she must have been quite a beauty in her youth. Above all others, she kept a particularly close eye on Claire and truly favored her over her siblings. And yet, in spite of that, Claire hadn’t had the slightest idea that she’d entrusted this book to Marquis Alcott’s eldest son.

“I haven’t even heard of this,” Claire mused.

Curious, she flipped past the light-green cover that had no writing on it. There on the inside were the words, “If no one escorts Claire to the graduation gala, I must ask you to take her in her fiancé’s stead by the day before the event.”

“What in the world could this be about?” she asked. It didn’t make a bit of sense to her.

To put her thoughts in order, Claire carried the book over to the bed and sat down. She’d chosen to redo her life in order to fix the kingdoms’ diplomatic relationships and her friends’ futures. There was no option for her, in the life she currently led, to attend the gala as Asbert’s fiancée.

*Aunt Anne once told me that Grandma could see visions. Presuming that what she saw was my first life, why would she ask him to stand in as my escort?* She recalled now that Asbert had informed her of the broken engagement the evening before the gala as they stood in the empty student council room. He’d also said that Salomon was to be her escort. Once he’d left her there, she’d seen the crowd of people following Charlotte on the walk back to the dorm, which was the exact moment when Claire realized there was no longer any place for her in Noston.

After several moments of thought, the realization dawned on her. “In my first life,” she said, “had Salomon not asked to escort me in Asbert’s place, I wouldn’t have been informed about the broken engagement beforehand. I would have attended the gala as if nothing was wrong.”

Had she not realized it, she would never have fled the dorms, nor met Vik in Iias, nor learned the secret of her mother’s past, nor obtained her true power. It all came down to having learned of her broken engagement before the gala.

“It can’t be,” Claire said. “That’s what caused it all?” She couldn’t believe it.

With trembling hands, she hugged Salomon’s letter and the book with its message from her grandmother. Once again, she recalled the early childhood memory of the sun on her as her grandmother’s gentle voice read a story from a picture book.

*Grandma is the reason I have this future*, Claire thought.

Now somewhat calmer, Claire climbed into bed and closed her eyes. Though her head was awirl with thoughts, she had curiously little trouble falling asleep.

An indescribable sense of unease woke Claire, and when she opened her eyes, she found herself in a familiar place. She shook her head, clearing away the rush of memories brought on by the room and its fluorescent lamp.

There was no one in Minami's bedroom, and it was quiet, with the game off. The tabletop was cluttered with its usual mess of coffee and goodies, but it now also held a single book as well. *The fan book*, Claire recalled. She didn't even need to check the cover to know what it was.

She rose from the uncomfortable little bed and flipped through the pages of the book like it was second nature to her.

"This is the story," she said to herself, "of that world."

There were bright, colorful drawings of all the landscapes and people she knew well: the adorable main character, Asbert the Crown Prince of Noston, and the other young noblemen at the Royal Aristocratic Academy. Vik, another target of Charlotte's interest. And then Claire herself.

*Right*, she thought. *I'm originally from this other world.*

While Claire lived in the game world, she completely forgot that she lived in a so-called dating sim. In a flash, she conveniently recalled that these two worlds existed. Normally, these memories were locked away, but now it was like opening the drawers of her memory.

Dazed, she flipped through page after page. She didn't find any particularly new information; by and large, the people in this book were all ones she knew, but she had little to do with them now that she'd chosen to embark on a different path.

"All thanks to my grandmother," she murmured, "I've ended up making a different future for myself."

Just as she said that, she reached the last page and saw the words, “A new entry in the series coming soon!”

The illustrations of the eligible boys in this new game were all of people Claire did not know. The one in the direct center, a young man with silver hair and turquoise eyes, caught her attention. Judging from his manner of dress, she suspected he was a prince from some other kingdom.

Her eyes stopped on the words over his head. She read aloud, “Featuring a new main character: a certain talented, fan-favorite young lady from the previous game.”

The instant the words passed her lips, her body grew heavy. Her eyelids fluttered shut as sleep overtook her. *What is this all supposed to mean?* she thought.

In the back of her mind, a drawer slammed shut.

Claire’s rooms were situated in the Paffish detached palace, and when she awoke from her dream, she gazed blearily about her blue room. It was just before dawn, too early to be called proper morning and yet not quite night either. Light from the waning moon seeped in through her curtain.

“Did I just have the same dream as my grandmother?” Claire whispered to herself. Even as she wondered, the memories of the dream already began to fade.

Just then, Claire jolted as she heard a sudden knock on the door. It was not from the door to her bedchambers, she realized, but the door leading out from the living room to the entranceway.

*At this time of day?* she thought. *Who could it be?*

“Miss Claire, are you awake?” Sophie asked from the other side of the door.

*Maybe it’s an emergency,* Claire thought.

She rushed to wrap herself in a shawl and then hurried to open the living room door, whereupon she found a very sleepy-looking Sophie. As Sophie was still dressed in her nightclothes, Claire gathered that this interruption had not

been planned. Then she saw the two springy pigtails behind Sophie.

“Lady Nicola!” Claire exclaimed.

Nicola was supposed to be at school in Noston, for the Royal Aristocratic Academy had yet to begin their spring holidays. Claire wondered why in the world Nicola was here, and at such a time in the morning.

Red-faced, Nicola stammered out, “H-Hello, Lady Claire.” She paused and then asked, “Is your offer still valid?”

“What offer?” Claire asked.

“You said I could come talk to you about anything.”

*Oh, yes,* Claire recalled. Shortly before Nicola had moved abroad, Claire had told her she could come ask for help with anything, regardless of the topic.

*Something must be going wrong,* Claire thought. *Hence, she’s come to ask me for help.*

“Oh, but of course,” Claire said. “Do come in. We’ll have tea for you shortly.”

Nicola had used the portal at dawn which, Claire reasoned, meant that the situation must have been dire indeed. She readily ushered Nicola inside.

After offering her a relaxing herbal tea, Claire sat down facing Nicola.

“Now, is there anything I can do to help?” Claire asked.

Nicola was silent.

“Lady Nicola?” Claire prompted again.

Nicola remained silent, her cheeks reddening. Claire was just beginning to wonder if this was a health matter when Nicola began to mumble, “Lady Claire, you really like floral-scented teas, don’t you?”

“Yes, I do. Why, the tea you served on the night of Prince Vik’s ball was delightful.”

“Prince Asbert’s fully aware too,” Nicola said. “He still keeps around some of your favorite tea leaves in the Academy’s student council room.”

“Does he really?”

Come to think of it, Claire did recall leaving some of her favorite tea leaves in the room. As she no longer attended said school, she realized with a pang of remorse that she should have thrown them out. Yet just as she began to think that, Nicola shocked her.

“I just...” Nicola trailed off. “I just can’t make heads or tails of this. Lady Claire, Prince Asbert clearly adores you.”

“Pardon? Oh no, he would never.”

“No, I mean it,” Nicola insisted. “It’s as obvious as the nose on the end of his face. Lady Claire, is all this white magic business really that important to Noston? I just can’t wrap my head around the fact that this absolute nitwi—excuse me, I mean Lady Charlotte, is engaged to him just because she has strong magic. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve thought *you* should be the one marrying him instead. But that wouldn’t work out, because you have Vikky.”

“Lady Nicola?”

Claire didn’t understand what Nicola was driving at. The girl sitting in front of her was not the fearless, confident Nicola Claire knew so well.

After several seconds of silence, Nicola confessed, “Prince Asbert says he wants to escort me to the graduation gala.”

Claire started.

“He said he wants me to be there at the party with him,” Nicola went on. “But isn’t he engaged to Lady Charlotte? And yet all the same, since they’re inviting royalty from other kingdoms to the gala, I can’t just not go. I mean, I’m already *in* Noston and everything. So then it becomes a question of who will escort me.” Nicola paused. “And I guess he’s the most qualified man for the job.”

Nicola talked in circles to evade her main point, blushing all the while. Her behavior was so very different from normal that Claire, now understanding the issue, smiled.

“The graduation gala is a very special event,” she told Nicola. “Regardless of

how qualified he may be, he wouldn't ask anyone unless he wanted to show that they hold quite a special position in his heart. The school's tradition dictates as much."

"W-We're not like that, though," Nicola stuttered. "Besides, he could never like me to begin with! I'm constantly blowing up at him."

"No," Claire said. "You must mean a lot to him, if he's inviting you to the gala."

Although Nicola turned even redder at Claire's "a lot," Claire knew this all too well herself. Asbert would never, under normal circumstances, think to escort any but his own fiancée. *So for him to choose Lady Nicola, she told herself, must mean that he plans to break off his engagement with Charlotte.*

It had long since become public knowledge that Charlotte was ill suited to be queen, but she certainly did not need to marry into the royal family to offer Noston assistance. There were many options available for her to be of use to the kingdom, such as becoming a holy woman like Aunt Anne. It would do no favors for the ties between the Martinos and the royal family, but that mattered little in terms of the royal family's self-interests.

"L-Look, all I'm doing is going to some stupid party with him!" protested the still-red Nicola. "Make sure you tell that to Vikky so he won't get the wrong idea!"

"Gladly," Claire said.

"And Prince Asbert, well..." Nicola faltered. "He's a little odd. I thought he was just kind of tactless, but then he keeps acting all considerate too. And at any rate, I think he's got some weird values. But whenever I start thinking about him at night, for some reason, I just can't fall asleep. That's, uh...why I'm up at this hour. I'm sorry."

"Not at all," Claire said. "I'm very glad you told me this. I hope to see you both at the gala."

Claire had never seen such a look on Nicola's face before as she forced out her feelings about Asbert. *I felt guilty, Claire thought, that Nicola had moved abroad so quickly. But she's so happy now thanks to that decision. I shouldn't*

*interfere more than is strictly necessary, then. I suppose that would apply to Dion's case as well.*

The sight of Nicola's joyful expression, equal parts pleased and perplexed, warmed Claire's heart.

Several days later, Vik and Claire stood before the Paffish side of the portal on their way to the gala. She and Vik had previously discussed the possibility of touring Noston during this holiday, but as they had to attend the gala, they decided to defer it to another opportunity.

"This will only be a day trip," Vik reminded her.

"Yes," Claire said. "How apt, then, that we call it a portal. It's as simple as walking through a doorway."

"Uh-huh," said Vik. "Tonight, the gala will be held in the palace at Tillard. We get ourselves ready over here, and then, it's a hop, skip, and a jump through the portal to Tillard."

Claire and Vik shared a quick chuckle.

Keith frowned as he watched them. "Glad to see someone's lighthearted," he said, "because I'm a bundle of nerves."

"We'll be fine," Vik said. "There's no danger, and I've got everything handled beforehand. You can relax too, Claire."

Claire nodded. Her icon of blessing was still missing, courtesy of Charlotte, so several days prior, she'd gone to Vik to ask for help in getting it back. Vik had told her, "It'd be nice to have it back sooner rather than later, but why not wait and take it back at the party?" Thus, she hadn't warded the whole ballroom and as a result had no idea what Vik had planned. Still, Vik looked plenty confident. He must have come up with an alternate plan, so she decided to say nothing and follow his lead.

"Anyway," Vik said, "you look enchanting today, Claire. Out of all the precious gems in the world, not a one could match your inherent splendor."

"Why, thank you," Claire said.

Today she wore a midnight blue ball gown with a lace neckline and torso and a traditional wide, fluttering bouffant skirt. She'd had it made to match the dress Isabella had ordered for her in her first life, and the fact that Vik liked it pleased her. It was etiquette in both Paffuto and Noston for one to compliment their partner's appearance on formal occasions, which Claire was well acquainted with, having been on the receiving end of it many a time. But Vik's words sounded so sincere that her cheeks grew warm.

Casting her eyes downwards, she put her hand in the crook of Vik's elbow.

Denis wolf-whistled. "Hot damn, what a pair you two make! So, Vik, what're my orders for the day? Should I follow the plan we talked about?"

"Please do," said Vik. "Make sure Dion doesn't get distracted by either Claire or myself. He's not to take his eyes off of Charlotte."

"As you command. She seemed to like him well enough at our last meeting, so I'm not anticipating he'll run into any trouble."

Charlotte's recent visit had caught everyone by surprise, but the fact that she'd taken a liking to Dion presented them with an unexpected advantage. Now, Charlotte wouldn't mind one bit if Dion followed her around.

"Claire," said Vik, "let's get your mother's bracelet back the right way."

"Yes, let's," Claire agreed. She wreathed herself in magic to teleport everyone through the portal.

At the gala, it was customary for each graduate to enter the ballroom in turn, together with their betrothed. Once they'd finished, the other important guests would follow. Vik, as the guest of honor from a great power, was to enter last.

While Claire and Vik awaited their turn in an antechamber next to the great hall, they heard a sickly sweet voice making a racket in the marble corridors outside. The cause of this commotion was none other than Charlotte, bedecked in the gown she'd picked up in Wurtz and accompanied by Salomon.

"Oh, Lord Dion, you're here too!" she exclaimed. "So where is Prince Vik?"

"Miss Charlotte," Salomon reprimanded her, "must I remind you that ladies

do not speak to other young men apart from their escort? It simply isn't done."

"Lay off me, will you?" she snapped back.

She turned back to Dion and wriggled in delight when he made light conversation with her as Salomon watched, blank-faced. Given that Asbert was escorting Nicola tonight, one could easily imagine how Salomon had come to be Charlotte's companion for the evening.

Featuring a violently pink dress bedecked with row upon row of frills about the shoulders, Charlotte's garb matched her sweet facial features well, save for the glittering bracelet on her wrist—Claire's mother's memento.

Vik noticed it as he followed the scene with his eyes, and he whispered in Claire's ear to comfort her. "Don't worry. I promise we'll get your mother's bracelet back, and no one will be hurt here tonight."

"All right," Claire said. *If Vik says so, she thought, then I'm sure it will work out. All I'll have to do is attend the party as his escort.*

Presently, all the graduates finished making their entrances, and thus Claire and Vik's time had come. The double doors in front of them were to close momentarily and then open once more on cue. First, a sliver of light escaped through the crack, and then Claire and Vik were washed in a dazzling brightness as the doors yawned wide seconds later.

A murmur swept across the room. Someone asked, "Who is that girl with the prince of Paffuto? Is that Lady Claire?" The muttering rapidly grew into a crescendo as more and more people noticed. The whispers began closest to the door but circulated throughout the whole ballroom as all attention turned to Claire and Vik.

"Are you all right?" Vik asked.

"Yes," Claire said, answering him with a smile. She laid her hand on his arm, and then together they walked into the ballroom.

Charlotte screeched, "What's Claire doing with Prince Vik?!"

Many other voices joined in, speculating as to what their relationship might be. Even though Claire was only here as a classmate showing Vik around her

homeland, her cheeks grew hot.

Balls were old hat to her, but this was only the second time she'd accompanied Vik to one, and the first had ended in tragedy. She felt tense remembering that unhappy occasion, even as Vik's strong hand on her soothed her. It was a curious sensation.

She drew before Asbert and watched as the two princes smiled and exchanged greetings.

"Congratulations on your graduation," Vik said.

"Thank you, Your Highness," said Asbert.

Standing next to Asbert was Nicola, dressed in her finest clothes. She wore a bright lemon yellow gown which suited her marvelously, but today was the one day wherein Claire saw no anger in those round, pretty eyes. She was the very picture of the noblest young lady in all of Paffuto.

"Lady Nicola, you look lovely today," Claire told her.

"Thank you," Nicola said, sheepish. "You know, I heard that Lady Charlotte has your bracelet. I thought I'd try and get it back for you, but I must confess that she wasn't eager to hand it over."

"That's all right," Vik said. "Prince Asbert and I already have a plan."

Both Claire and Nicola tilted their heads in bewilderment. At almost the exact same moment, the partygoers deemed the entrances to be finished. The merrily playing orchestra ceased, and in the resulting moment of silence, Asbert stepped forward.

"Welcome to the Royal Aristocratic Academy's graduation gala," he said. "Before we begin, there is something I'd like everyone to witness. Charlotte, would you please step forward?"

"Absolutely! What is it, Your Highness?" Charlotte looked confused as to why she was being addressed in front of such a crowd but came forward all the same. She delivered a boastful smirk in the direction of Claire and her group, which made Claire think Charlotte was less upset than she appeared.

*Given the current circumstances, Claire thought, Asbert is escorting Lady*

*Nicola tonight. But as of now, he is indeed still engaged to Charlotte. Perhaps he's currently addressing her out of consideration for her feelings.*

However, Claire's lighthearted hypothesis was overturned mere seconds later.

"Charlotte Martino," Asbert announced, "I am hereby breaking off our engagement."

When those unbelievable words left Asbert's mouth, the whole assembly, Claire included, was aghast. *What in the world?* she thought. She looked up at Vik, and he nodded back at her as if telling her not to worry. However, she still tensed; she hadn't heard anything about this development.

Nicola gaped, apparently just as unaware as Claire had been. As for Charlotte, she looked as if she hadn't quite registered what had happened. "H-Hold on!" she said. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Your conduct, my lady, does not befit one who would marry the next heir to the throne. Indeed, we have evidence that you've gone so far as to tyrannize your fellow pupils, and I cannot condone this any longer."

"You have to be kidding!" she wailed. "I don't have a clue what you're talking about."

First a broken engagement, and now a condemnation of Charlotte's crimes! The ball descended into pandemonium at the drama.

The king occupied the ball's seat of honor, and Claire saw her Aunt Anne sitting at his right. Neither appeared flustered, but on the king's left, Duke Martino's lips quivered.

Seeing this, Asbert loudly proclaimed, "Let me relate, Miss Charlotte, all that you have done this past year: You used your father's power to attempt to expel several young ladies you took umbrage to. You threatened another young lady who claimed you were being overly familiar with her fiancé, and you charged her with the crime of a theft occurring on school grounds. Additionally, you have done nothing but harass the Lady Nicola Windsor since her arrival in

Noston. You started an association for the express purpose of driving her back to Paffuto and have sought to tank her reputation.”

“N-No, I haven’t!” Charlotte protested as Asbert rattled off the list of her crimes. She grimaced. “Who would ever dare such a thing? I swear I haven’t. I know nothing about any of this!”

However, no one stood up to defend her. Even her passel of usual sycophants looked away, merely observing the proceedings from afar without stepping in.

And Asbert hadn’t even finished. “The issue,” he continued, “is your white magic that you’ve used to commit these many misdeeds. As a member of the illustrious Martino family, you hold a rare power vital for the well-being of our country. However, you use your power for nothing but forcibly changing people’s minds to further your own agendas. This is irrefutable proof that you are in a dire shortage of the qualities necessary in a future queen.”

“Oh, stop it already, Prince Asbert,” Charlotte said. “I have no idea what you’re talking about. I can’t believe you’d say these lies about me! Some nasty individual must have planted these thoughts in your head.”

As Charlotte spoke, white magic welled out of her and coated the people around her.

“But I suppose,” Charlotte went on, “breaking off our engagement’s not such a bad idea after all! All those finishing lessons were a royal pain, and besides, I hate it here in this poky old dump. You only keep me around because you need my power, isn’t that right? Bah! All I want is to live the high life surrounded by hot boys who flatter me and tell me how cute I am all day!”

“Charlotte,” Claire whispered. *Goodness gracious*, she added to herself. To Claire’s eye, Charlotte had always been her innocent, darling little sister. When had she changed so? It was one thing to know her true character, but it was another to hear it straight from Charlotte’s own mouth.

Charlotte heard Claire and blatantly wrinkled her face before turning—not to Claire!—but to Vik. “I wasn’t sure when to tell you this or when would be the best time to have you go on your knees before me,” she said. “But why not now? After all, you’ve shown up to this lovely gala with my sister, Claire, looking as pretty as a princess on your arm. I think you’d better shake her off and take

my hand instead. It's only fitting. I am, after all, the main character!"

A wave of white magic stronger than before washed over Claire and Vik. Claire knew full well what the end result would be, but hearing a voice whispering, "Why don't you let Charlotte Martino marry into the Paffish royal family?" still sent a chill down her spine.

Vik hesitated and then, ignoring Charlotte standing directly before him, turned to the king in his seat of honor. Vik said, "Your Highness, might I ask you to comment on this disgraceful spectacle?" His gaze was stern, as one head of state speaking to another. "Your subject has just attempted to cast a brainwashing spell upon a member of the royalty from another kingdom. How could I take this as anything but an extremely dangerous act of aggression?"

The king hesitated before saying, "You would be right in doing so."

At once, the murmuring ballroom fell into a dead silence.

Claire's father, who had backed away from the scene, whispered, "Y-Your Highness, do please wait. My daughter must have some explanation, surely."

"Duke Martino, you are the only person here who has failed to notice what is going on," Lady Anne said. The tone of her voice cut like a knife. "Should we ask Charlotte's peers what they think? Consider all that she has done. Even a cursory glance at the situation will tell you that she does not intend to ever reform her behavior."

Charlotte touched a finger to her lips and cocked her head to one side. "Huh? Is my white magic not working?"

Vik pushed Charlotte away. "My apologies," he said, "but I am in no mood to listen to your foolish nonsense."

"Huh?" Charlotte said again. "No way. How come my magic's not working on you? What's going on?"

Charlotte had believed that Aunt Anne and Oscar were the only two people she could not bend to her will, and yet neither Vik, Claire, Asbert, nor Nicola were affected here.

At the sound of Charlotte's protest, Anne arose from her seat of honor.

“Brainwashing magic is a matter of the caster and victim’s relationship, along with the caster’s objective. In Noston, you and I alone are the only two with such special magical powers, but no matter how strong our magic, we cannot freely use it as we please.”

“I-I never!” Charlotte screamed. “Leave me alone!”

At that very moment, Claire saw magic pool in the palm of Charlotte’s hand. *That’s white magic*, Claire thought. Charlotte turned to her, and Claire saw a furious hatred mounting in her sister’s eyes unlike any she had seen before.

“I wish you weren’t here!” Charlotte spat. “I’m the main character, so why does everyone always compare me to you? You couldn’t even get strong magic! I’m the only one whose magic is strong enough to make me a proper Martino daughter. You hear that? *Me!*”

An arrow of blinding white light shot from her palm and sped straight at the group. *This is just like in my first life*, Claire thought. *Vik was right next to me, exactly as he is now, and Lui was behind us. But there’s one thing different this time.*

Screams rang out across the ballroom as the assembled company realized what the future benefactor of Noston was doing. Vik rushed to put himself in front of Claire, blocking her from the magic—

But the impact never came. The light vanished immediately, and the ballroom returned to its former calm.

“Wha—? Huh?” Charlotte asked. She staggered and almost fell before Dion, who’d been watching at the sidelines, stepped in and helped her stand upright.

Never once changing his expression, he asked Vik, “Your Highness, what should I do with her?”

“Let her be for now,” Vik said. “I can’t believe she actually went this far.”

Charlotte had indeed fired a bolt of white magic at Claire, but as she had barely any training, her attack was weak and imprecise. Still, her magic was of such strength that none but a Martino girl could have matched it. Had the defending party not been of the same magic level, it would have proven challenging to shield against indeed.

Leaning half her weight on Dion, Charlotte looked at Claire, flabbergasted. “Claire,” she said. “How could you have taken a hit from my magic and not be hurt?”

Neither Vik nor Claire had so much as a scratch to their names. Apart from the scorch marks in the rug at their feet and a fallen chandelier behind them, knocked down in the magical wind breezing past, the spell had caused no harm.

Claire addressed her gaping sister. “Charlotte, do you know of the rules of diplomatic etiquette?”

“B-But of course I do,” Charlotte said. “In order to show friendship, guests of honor are never to wear wards. That’s the very reason I attacked!”

Behind her, Claire heard her father gasp, “Good heavens!” at Charlotte’s admission of attacking the unprotected.

“Fortunately,” Claire said, “Prince Asbert and Prince Vik discussed beforehand and decided that the diplomatic etiquette need not apply for this visit to Noston.”

“What?” Charlotte said.

After Charlotte had pilfered Claire’s bracelet, Claire’s chief concern had been how to prevent the same outcome as the ball in her first life. However, Vik had said nothing except, “We need to get the keepsake from your mother back.” When asked what he meant, Vik merely responded with a meaningful smile. Claire only learned the reason why not long ago. Prior to setting out for Noston, he’d told her that, thanks to his discussions with Asbert, the usual diplomatic courtesies would no longer apply on this visit.

From the outset, Vik and Asbert had both treated the nature of a relationship lacking diplomatic formalities as a major concern. If one could come and go between kingdoms via a portal, then what good was a relationship so distant that one must constantly broadcast their lack of enmity via no wards? They’d only just managed to finalize these discussions, resulting in them being late telling Claire about it. However, as a result, Claire’s group had been able to watch Charlotte run around doing whatever she pleased with relatively little anxiety. Still, they hadn’t heard that Asbert had planned to break his engagement right there on the spot.

“Everyone apart from you,” Claire told Charlotte, “is wearing a ward tonight.”

“You’re awful, Claire,” Charlotte whimpered. “I knew it. You hate me, don’t you?”

“Charlotte, this isn’t a simple matter of liking or hating any longer. Think about everything you’ve done.”

“But, but, but!” Charlotte trembled in place. “But your wards should have broken when I attacked you with white magic. What’s going on?”

Claire took her sister’s trembling hands and felt only remnants of power left in them. Steeling herself, Claire said, “Well, Charlotte, that would only be the case if I had nothing stronger than light pink magic.”

“What do you mean? What, do the other people with you have as strong of magic as I do? There’s no other explanation for what’s happening.”

Just a few seconds ago, Claire’s and Vik’s wards had activated when Charlotte had fired off her white magic. As Claire had cast them, they were of a superior strength to Charlotte’s white magic. Her ward had canceled out that flash of light and turned it into a mere gust of wind.

“Watch, Charlotte,” Claire said. “Vik, if you would?”

“Right,” said Vik.

Claire placed a hand on Vik’s back and reapplied his ward. She purposefully let a large amount of magical power flow out of her so that others could see what she was doing.

The Academy’s magical instructor raised a cry. “Heavens! Could it be? Does Claire Martino have a different color of magic than what was originally said?”

“I do,” said Claire. “For you see, my mother was not born in Noston.”

This proclamation caused quite a stir. Claire’s father seemed especially shaken.

“Nonsense,” he said. “Your lady mother, my wife, was born and raised here in Noston as the daughter of a baron. Her parents passed away at almost exactly the same time she did, but I’ve heard nothing about them being from anywhere else.”

“Father,” Claire said, “mother was a descendant of the royal family from the kingdom of Old Lindel. When I visited Lindel Island’s holy spring, I rather unexpectedly became baptized again and learned of the whole truth.”

“What?” Benjamin cried. “Does that mean you’ve inherited the powers of the Martino family too?”

“I have.”

Charlotte shrieked. “Lies! How could this be? These are lies, all of them!”

The king rose to his feet and solemnly commanded, “Guards, seize Miss Charlotte Martino. Take her to a magic-proof chamber, and we shall get to the bottom of this.”

Immediately, a bevy of guards surrounded Charlotte.

Now Vik interceded. “Hold on, please,” he said.

“Prince Vik!” Charlotte cried, a desperate look on her face. “Did the magic work after all? Was it just delayed? Oh, Your Highness, I—”

Vik grabbed her left wrist and yanked the bracelet off. “There,” he said. “You stole the heirloom of one of my loved ones, so I am taking this back in recompense for the theft you committed in Paffuto.”

“No way!” Charlotte wailed.

At that moment, Claire sensed another wave of magic drifting from Charlotte’s direction. *But she exhausted all her magic on that attack of hers just moments before*, Claire thought. She suddenly felt like they were on the verge of disaster, as Charlotte clearly did not want to give up, even with the full knowledge that her magic would not suffice and that her crimes had already been exposed before the whole crowd.

And then Claire recalled the method she’d been hesitant to employ all this time. She glanced at Dion as he stood there watching the guards restrain Charlotte. He nodded at her confidently. *Now’s the moment*, Claire thought. *This is the only chance we’ll ever have for the king to see what a threat Charlotte poses with his own eyes. If we let this opportunity slip away now, he’ll be swayed by those who want to use her magic power, and we’ll lose the chance*

*to stop her once and for all.*

Reaching herself, Claire turned to the throne. "Your Majesty," she said, "pray forgive me, but might I make a suggestion?"

"Miss Claire?" the king asked.

"Is my sister truly as essential as all that for Noston's future, Your Majesty?"

"I believe you should be well aware what service your family provides our kingdom," said the king.

"Yes, Your Majesty, and perhaps we have done so in history. But I'm afraid it'd be atrocious to assign someone so unsuitable to fill the role. Presently, my sister stands accused of committing heinous crimes. As a member of her family, I find her position of power alarming."

"And yet, if we were to lose her white magic..."

The king did not speak further, but Claire understood well what he meant. Strong magic users were to be employed as often as possible and kept at one's side so as to prevent them from raising the banner of rebellion and launching a coup d'état. Surely he'd be extraordinarily lenient on Charlotte even for this outburst.

*The unfortunate thing, Claire thought, is that Charlotte will almost certainly continue her wily ways. And yet...* She knew it rationally, but no matter how much she made up her mind, the words wouldn't come out. She simply couldn't bring herself to command Dion to limit her sister's magic.

As she bit her lip, Vik gently ruffled her hair as if to say that it would all be all right.

"Your Majesty," he said, breaking the heavy silence, "I'll take over from here. One of our notable houses in Paffuto has a special spell called Collective Magic."

The king looked perplexed. "I've heard of this spell before," he said. "It belongs to a house that was once a branch of the royal family, or so I've heard. It limits another person's ability to use magic."

"Yes," said Vik. "And we have a person here who is capable of using it."

The king hesitated for a moment, a curious expression on his face, before

saying, "I see."

Benjamin grew even more flustered. "D-Do you mean to rob my daughter of her magical powers? But she's the hope of our kingdom!"

"You dare to call her the hope of the kingdom? After this disgraceful spectacle?" Vik snapped.

Benjamin tensed. His eyes swept over the fallen chandelier behind Claire's group, the gala's guests standing frozen in the corners of the room, and the grim expressions locked on the faces of the honored attendees.

Asbert's eyes scanned them all before he turned to the throne. "Your Majesty," he said, "if I may. White magic that is not used properly poses nothing but a threat for Noston. As opposed to being so lenient on Charlotte that we placate her with an official post, I think we'd be better suited seizing her power here and now."

The king said nothing for a moment before finally agreeing. "It is as you say."

Charlotte turned as white as a sheet. "What do you mean?" she exclaimed. "I don't understand what's happening!"

"Are you quite all right, Miss Charlotte?" Dion asked.

"Lord Dion! Oh, Lord Dion, you must understand me, don't you?" Her eyes filled with tears.

Dion grabbed Charlotte's hand.

"My apologies," he said. "Say, did you know that my family has fallen into ruin?"

"Huh?" she said.

"And do you know why that is? Because we did not use the power and privileges we'd been given to do the right thing. When someone is in a position of power, I believe they should also have a responsibility to use it for good."

Charlotte stared at him, agape. "Huh?" she repeated.

Dion looked back at her, and his eyes flashed red. He had mentioned to Claire before that his eyes changed color to be as red as blood whenever he cast the

curse. This was due to the special magical power, inherited from his bloodline as the eldest son of the house of Mead. However, now that he'd had a change of heart after being Mesmerized by Claire, that color signified, to Dion's mind, the blood on his hands from the Meads' scheming.

*I've seen that same color before*, Claire thought. She recalled the time during her first life when Dion had begun school at the Royal Academy. He'd attempted to cast the curse on her that same day, but she'd reflected it and ended up accidentally ruining Dion's ability to do magic. That, too, had been reset when she'd chosen to go back in time, but she still remembered the flash of light from his hands as he'd cast the spell.

It was the same intense burst of light she saw now.

Once Charlotte's magic was taken from her, she was removed from the ballroom, shrieking all the while. The other guests likewise had no choice but to momentarily vacate the premises while the fallen chandelier was cleaned up and the ballroom checked once more for the guests' safety before restarting the party. Nicola took it upon herself to direct the proceedings. She turned on Asbert in a rage.

"I don't care if they had wards!" she spat. "Think of your guests, Your Highness! This was no place to announce the end of your engagement."

Eyes wide, Asbert meekly apologized.

"Ah," Lui remarked as she watched them. "So he does have his flaws, after all."

"He and Lady Nicola were made for each other," Denis said.

Claire smirked as she overheard them.

Now the main hall had been restored to rights, the chandeliers in the three-story vaulted ceiling adorning the room with dazzling light and the orchestra providing a magnificent performance.

Claire, from the vantage point of her seat of honor, watched the graduates enjoy themselves. "I suppose it's for the best that it turned out this way, isn't

it?" she finally asked.

"You wanted Charlotte to still have a future, didn't you?" said Vik. "But magic isn't everything. In her case, I think it only held her back."

"Yes, that's true."

What he said was quite reasonable. It was what Claire had wanted to hear and thus came as a relief, but at the same time, she also felt a striking sense of her own personal failure.

*I suppose I should have stayed in Noston and been there for Charlotte, Claire thought. Even if she hadn't taken anything to heart, I still should have tried to keep getting through to her. Shouldn't I have?*

Lui stepped up to Claire's chair and locked eyes with her as she sat there looking forlorn. "Don't blame yourself," Lui said. "There's nothing you could have done for her." Then, amending herself, she added, "At least, I can't think how she could have turned out any other way."

"Thank you, Lui," Claire said.

The seats of honor were partitioned off by a curtain. The rest of Vik's retainers stood behind Claire and Vik, and had it been any other occasion, they all would have had a delightful time chatting and laughing. However, a slightly morose feeling now lingered over the group.

Just then, an unfamiliar voice asked, "Say, care to let me join in on the fun?"

Claire raised her head and saw a young man standing before her. He looked to be about her age or just a little older, with a refined appearance and demeanor that immediately identified him as a prince from another kingdom. His hair was silver, a color rare in both Paffuto and Noston, and his eyes were the same clear azure as the ocean in summer. His young face and handsome attitude lent him an attractiveness unlike Vik's.

*I feel like I've seen this man somewhere before, Claire thought, but she could not for the life of her recall where. However, now was the time for introductions, not worrying about old memories. Vik stood up, and she followed*

suit.

“Why, it’s been too long!” Vik said. “I’m glad to see you’re in good health.”

“Yes, it has been. I haven’t seen you since, what? The summer holidays?”

From their conversation, Claire gleaned that the two were friends of close enough rank to address one another as equals.

“Claire,” said Vik, “may I introduce you to the second eldest prince of Lupty, His Highness Prince Gilbert?”

“Gilbert Héctor Lagrange, at your service,” the prince said.

“And Claire Martino at yours,” she replied. “It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

Gilbert took Claire’s hand politely and pressed his lips to it in a perfect display of manners. The gesture was so smooth that the ladies watching the show from afar squealed in admiration.

Claire dipped him a light curtsy in response. Yet even though the introductions had finished, Gilbert made no move to let go of her hand.

Claire blinked. “Is something the matter?” she asked.

His attention was fixated on her mother’s bracelet at her wrist, the icon of blessing Claire had only just retrieved from Charlotte.

“Oh, not at all,” said Gilbert. “I was only admiring your wonderful bracelet.”

“Why, thank you,” she said.

And yet he still refused to let go of her hand. *What’s going on?* Claire thought, bewildered.

A hint of annoyance apparent in his voice, Vik barked, “Prince Gilbert, I think it’s about time you let the lady go, don’t you? Miss Claire is a young expat in the care of Paffuto and a very dear person to me.”

“Oh, is she really? My apologies,” said Gilbert. “I’m afraid she’s just so gorgeous that I simply couldn’t bear to let go of her hand. But my, what a shock! I wasn’t aware you had a fiancée.”

Vik struggled to speak for a moment before saying, “We haven’t made the

formal announcement yet.”

“Oh? Well, then I look forward to you doing so.”

Gilbert chuckled handsomely, and the awkward tension receded. After an “Until we meet again,” he departed with a meaningful smile in Claire’s direction.

After watching him go, Vik turned to Claire apologetically. “Sorry about that,” he said. “What with everything that’s happened today, I just couldn’t take it any longer.”

“No, it’s fine,” she said. “To be honest, I was at a bit of a loss myself, so thank you.”

“But of course.” Vik paused. “Up until now, our relationship has been a rather open secret. I know you’ve never had an audience with the king, but Keith has told him all about you.”

Claire jumped. “Did Keith really?”

“He did. But Claire, this is you we’re talking about. There’s nothing bad we could say even if we wanted to. It’s only hearsay, but I believe His Majesty has taken quite a shine to you as well.”

“Is that a good thing or a bad thing?”

Claire and Vik were not formally betrothed. In order to court a member of the royal family, one needed to make a formal audience with the king for his approval of their relationship. Prior to this, Claire simply had too many worries on her plate to consider the matter, but such was no longer the case.

The retainers behind her, sensing that they weren’t wanted, made themselves scarce.

“But now you don’t have anything to worry about, do you?” Vik said. “We have the portal, so you can go back to Noston any time you’re needed. Plus, now that Charlotte’s lost her special magic, she can no longer run wild and hurt anyone.”

Claire made no response save to nod.

“Once we return home,” Vik continued, “I think I’d like to petition for you to

have an audience with the king; although, I'm afraid we'll still have to wait to make this a formal engagement." Vik hesitated before pressing on. "I would just like to be sure. Claire, would you do me the honor of accompanying me through life?"

"Of course, Prince Vik."

Claire had never been able to attend the graduation gala in her first life, but now here she sat, in the seat of honor. She watched Asbert and Nicola dance together at the center of the hall. Tucked away in the corner of the beautiful, brilliantly lit and musically suffused ballroom, Claire felt that she couldn't be any happier if she tried.



Meanwhile, Charlotte exploded with rage in the magic-proof chamber. "Hmmp!" she screamed. "Of all the things! Aren't I the main character? How could this happen to me? Everything went wrong the minute that letter that was supposed to be in the study's safe went missing."

Charlotte pictured the letter from Claire's mother which should have resided in the Martino family safe. She knew that if she coerced her brother Leo into disposing of it, Claire could not be baptized properly and would fall from grace. "But forget falling from grace," Charlotte spat. "She ended up on the arm of the prince! And now she's got all the Martino magic and is a princess of a lost kingdom to boot. How could this even happen? That should have been me. Me, I tell you!"

She punctuated her shrieking with a kick to the door. The guard opened it a crack and peered at her in surprise.

"What's the matter, Lady Charlotte?" he asked.

"Nothing," she said. "Nothing at all. I just tripped, that's all!"

As it so happened, the guard turned out to be someone Charlotte knew. She recalled a time when Asbert had been too preoccupied with his work to see her, so she'd used her white magic to brainwash this very same guard and force her entry into Asbert's office.

*Drat!* she thought. *Compared to this guard, Lord Salomon was far easier to*

*trick. I can't believe I can't teleport or brainwash him!*

Suddenly, she saw something that looked like a pair of manacles in the guard's pocket. "Oh?" she said. "What are those for?"

"I've been ordered to use them on your ladyship if you act up," the guard informed her. "However, I certainly can't imagine you doing anything that would warrant that, Lady Charlotte."

Charlotte realized the guard had somehow managed to miss her outburst at the gala today. *So he still thinks I'm the same old bubbly, ladylike, adorable Charlotte*, she thought.

"Excuse me," she said, "but I've never seen manacles up close before. Would you let me take a peek?"

She brought her face closer to his, tilting her head to the side and giving him a pleading look.

The guard blushed. "Y-Yes, of course," he said.

"Ooh! Is this how you put them on? That's so cool. And I hear you can sometimes cuff just the one hand, right?" she asked.

"Wh-Why, yes you can. See, if you do it like this and lock it to something, you make it so that the person in the manacles can't move."

"Oh, wow," she said. "Like this?"

"Yeah, exactly."

"And now for the other side!"

"Yes, great job."

And then, with a dull clang that echoed down the empty corridor, the guard snapped back to his senses. Charlotte grinned at him. She'd locked one of his hands in a cuff and affixed the other end to the handrail in the magic-proof chamber.

"Thanks bunches!" Charlotte chirped. "You taught me an awful lot. Now that the door's open, you won't be able to use any magic in the corridor outside either. Boy, I sure hope someone comes along to rescue you soon."

Then, with a titter, Charlotte skipped away.

The party was still in full swing in the main hall as Charlotte arrived in the courtyard after her easy escape.

“I’ll just be caught again if I stick around,” she muttered to herself as she hid. “But I can’t go back to the mansion. Father’s easy enough to wrap around my little finger even without brainwashing, but Oscar’s the real problem there.”

Just as she passed in front of the fountain, she spotted someone. *Aha!* she thought.

“Hello, prince!” she said to the silver-haired, blue-eyed man.

He gave her a gentle, disarming grin. “Ah yes, the maiden I saw at the ball earlier. What a marvelous display of naughtiness. What brings you here, I wonder?”

“Well, since you asked,” she said, “I’m on the hunt for hot boys! I want to find a Mr. Right who looks divine, does everything I say, and is so high up in the world he’d make anyone jealous.”

“My, my.” The prince looked down at her with great interest.

“My name’s Charlotte Martino,” she said. “I come from one of the most prestigious ducal families in the kingdom, and up until just a bit ago, everyone treated me like I was the most important person in the whole world.”

The prince paused before murmuring to himself, “So you were once the main character?”

“Pardon?”

“Oh, nothing. Never mind me; I was talking to myself,” said the prince. “In that case, my lady, would you do me the honor of accompanying me? My name is Gilbert Héctor Lagrange, at your service. I’m the second eldest prince of Lupty.”

“I knew it!” Charlotte said. “I just knew you’d be a prince, even though I’ve never seen you before. Yes, of course I’ll go with you. This kingdom is a dump anyway.”

“I’m ever so glad you agree,” he said. “Let’s be off at once. Yes, as Claire’s younger sister, I think you’ll serve me just fine.”

“Huh?” Charlotte asked. “Did you just say something?”

“Oh, no, not at all. I was merely talking to myself again.”

She’d failed to hear the latter half of Gilbert’s words. Next to her, a fallen leaf landed in the fountain and sent ripples running across the surface of the water.

# Epilogue

Several weeks after the Royal Aristocratic Academy's graduation gala, Claire and her two brothers paid a visit to the island of Lindel. The goal of their mission was for Oscar and Leo to be rebaptized on the beach known as the spring of holy water.

"What a gorgeous island," Leo remarked.

"Yes," Claire said. She lowered her eyes. "This is where our mother was born."

The reminder of her mother saddened her, but Claire also felt horribly guilty that she was the only one of her siblings to have been properly baptized.

The sweet scents of baby blue eyes, windflowers, and geraniums mixed with the salty sea air. Spring had come to the island since her last visit here to break the seal on her icon of blessing. Yet the sun's warm rays and the light glittering on the waves were the same every time she came, regardless of whether it was that first time she'd visited with Vik in her first life, the time in her second life when she'd reunited with all her friends, or now.

She heard Keith and Denis horsing around together near the water's edge.

"Good lord, it's cold," Keith said.

"Wow, what a shock! I never expected Claire's brother to be this good on the offensive," said Denis.

"Knock it off, Denis!"

The shocking part in question was that Oscar had decided to join in on the fun, judging that there'd be no harm in making better relations with the retainers of Paffuto's next heir to the throne. Claire felt rather sentimental watching them, but Oscar's apparent ambition immediately brought her back to reality. *Oh, Oscar*, she thought. *You're just so...so...Oscar.*

As Benjamin took responsibility for the entire Charlotte debacle, Oscar was now to assume the title of Duke Martino. Soon, Benjamin would grant his lands

and titles over to Oscar before vanishing from the public eye.

As Leo watched too, he asked, “Claire, did you know that Charlotte’s gone missing?”

“Yes, so I’ve heard. They told me that she tricked her guard on the night of the gala and escaped. No one knows where she could have gone.”

“I’m sorry,” Leo said. “I had no idea Charlotte was manipulating me.”

“You have nothing to apologize for,” Claire said. “I don’t recall you ever doing anything to make me feel upset.”

“Really?”

No sign had been found of Charlotte yet. She hadn’t returned to the Martino mansion, and Oscar had only recently ordered the search party to investigate the other towns and villages near Tillard.

The two siblings felt a slight sense of reserve between them. Claire harbored a heavy guilt over knowing the truth about their mother’s heritage without ever voicing it, and Leo seemed aware that Charlotte had manipulated him into treating Claire poorly. His deep shame also, or so it seemed to Claire, stemmed from the fact that Oscar hadn’t been brainwashed either. Only Leo had fallen under Charlotte’s spell. Anne had comforted him, saying there was nothing he could have done differently, but that only made him feel all the worse when he realized that his jealousy for his perfect little sister, Claire, had caused him to fall for Charlotte’s machinations.

“Well,” he said, “it’s time for me to be baptized as well. Maybe I’ll end up with even stronger magic than yours, hmm?”

He removed his shoes and padded in bare feet down to the water’s edge. The sight of him there reminded Claire of how they used to compete over school grades as children, bringing a smile to her face.

*I’m sure there are still many trials ahead of our family, she thought. But everything will turn out much, much better than in my first life.*

“Claire,” Vik said.



He stepped up to her side in the place where Leo had just vacated. "I had quite a good time at the graduation gala," Vik said. "The Royal Academy of Paffuto doesn't have such events, so it was a new experience for me."

"I agree," Claire said. "There was that whole upheaval, but all the same, I'm glad we went."

Just before she'd left for the portal after the gala's conclusion, Claire had found the opportunity to talk with Salomon Alcott. She couldn't tell him the reason why, but the fact that he'd been so loyal to her grandmother's wishes filled her with gratitude. Of course, this gratitude was directed at the Salomon in her first life, as he had given her a chance to avoid that terrible future, but Claire knew the Salomon in her second life would have upheld his promise just the same.

*When I thanked him, he protested that he hadn't done a thing, Claire recalled. Yet he and my grandmother saved me.*

As she thought back on her conversation with Salomon, she realized that Vik must be under the mistaken impression that she was lost in thought over all her years at the Royal Aristocratic Academy in both her first and second life. He looked at her with concern.

"You and I will graduate in another year, remember?" he said.

"Yes, that we will," said Claire.

"Have you given any thought to what you'll do afterwards?"

Claire started.

In truth, the day after she'd returned from Noston, she'd received a summons to see the king. She put on her best clothes and set out for the audience hall, whereupon she was led to the royal family's dining room. Much to her horror, she found waiting for her the king, the queen, and Vik himself. Before she'd so much as made a formal introduction to them, Claire was to have dinner with Their Royal Majesties! The meal had passed peacefully enough, and yet the minute it was over, Claire's sole thought was gratitude that growing up in a ducal household had drilled proper etiquette into her.

After a moment, Vik asked, “Are you upset that I didn’t tell you we’d be having dinner with my parents?”

“Yes,” Claire sniffed. “I’m a bit peeved.”

“I’m very sorry. I genuinely thought it was going to be an audience too.”

Vik looked so very apologetic that Claire giggled. “Don’t be. I was teasing you. I suppose you can’t exactly refuse the king, can you?”

She rested her head against his shoulder, and her eyes landed on the icon of blessing on her wrist. Had her mother, she wondered, known of its importance? Had Claire’s grandmother, the one who’d given her this happy future, possessed such foresight that she’d seen even this?

*My grandmother has passed on, Claire thought, but she gave me comfort by letting me know I had a happy future awaiting me somewhere.*

Denis and Keith’s horseplay continued along the water’s edge, accompanied by a highly enthusiastic Oscar and a visibly appalled Leo. Dion and Lui stood off to the side at ease, watching the fun.

“I’ll stay in Paffuto,” Claire said. “Of course, I’ll gladly do what I can for Noston if my services are ever needed. But Noston is no longer my home.”

Vik took a moment to collect himself before replying, “It’s a relief to hear you say that. The queen, my royal mother, has been beside herself with joy trying to come up with who would be best to teach you everything you’d need to know as queen. She’s being awfully finicky over when we’ll formalize our engagement too.”

Claire’s cheeks reddened at the words “formalize our engagement,” and she needed a moment before saying, “Oh my.”

During her meal with the king and queen, the king had expressed anxiety over the Martinos’ social status; however, this was not to suggest that she lacked the appropriate political and financial distinction to become the queen of a great nation. Rather, his concern was that since her great skill had been recognized, she’d be best off helping the land of her birth before coming home to a marriage in Paffuto. *He meant that he’ll always accept me as Vik’s fiancée, so I shouldn’t rush into this decision, Claire thought. I have the leeway to do what I’d*

*like*. The king's kindness reminded her so much of Vik's that she felt moved, but the sight of it only seemed to make Vik impatient.

The spring breeze was heavy with humidity from the holy water, indicating that a storm was not far off. Yet right now, the flowers danced in the gusts of wind before the sparkling waves and the glittering sands of the holy spring. Claire imagined the lives of the many people who'd built this land's history and woven its long tale. As she closed her eyes, the sweet fragrance of spring smelled all the richer to her. She thought of her mother, who had perhaps once stood and smiled in this exact same spot, and of the future which lay ahead of her.

The End

## Extra Story 1: A Compliment That Transcends Time

Vik and Claire set off into Wurtz one beautiful, sunny afternoon.

“Say, Vik,” Claire remarked, “what is the special occasion? We hardly ever go shopping together, you know.”

“What, isn’t it nice to get out every once in a while?” he asked.

“Well, yes, I suppose. But that doesn’t answer my question.”

Claire’s confusion stemmed from their intended destination. Provided that Vik wasn’t especially busy with his duties, heading out in disguise together was not such a rare occurrence as all that; however, they chiefly walked around in the city market, mixing with the crowd and eating, or else found a place from which to enjoy the natural scenery. Vik knew that Claire wasn’t fond of especially tawdry trifles and preferred to spend her time in more mature pursuits, as befit a girl her age. Therefore, whenever the two spent time out on the town, Vik chose activities Claire would enjoy.

And yet...

“May I ask why you took me here, of all places?” Claire asked, baffled.

She blinked as she looked up at the very same boutique that Charlotte had visited on her recent holiday in Paffuto. She’d spent several hours here choosing her dress for the graduation gala before purloining Claire’s bracelet and scurrying home. The nerve of her!

Vik responded nonchalantly, “Well, you don’t often buy new dresses and accessories, do you, Claire?”

“That’s because I have plenty already,” she explained.

Unlike in her first life, she’d come to Paffuto in an official capacity, accompanied with a lavish closet adequately befitting the dignity of an honored guest. Additionally, whenever anything was lacking, she had a tailor come visit her in the detached palace to help her choose this and that. Even when she

racked her brains, she couldn't think of anything else she might need.

*What is going on with Vik today?* Claire wondered. She stepped into the shop upon his urging, and her astonishment grew even further.

"What is all this?" she cried.

The shop had been reserved for their exclusive use today, and in the lack of other customers, a row of dresses were on display, having been clearly chosen with Claire in mind. The sheer assortment of colorful gowns rivaled a young noblewoman's closet, and the shelves were filled with shoes and jewelry galore. Every accessory matched the color of the amethyst earrings Claire wore.

*Vik must have arranged all this beforehand!* she thought, growing more puzzled by the minute.

"You didn't buy anything on our last visit here, now did you?" Vik said.

"Yes, but that doesn't change anything," Claire protested.

"Go on," Vik said with an easy grin. "Choose whatever you like."

His nonchalance put Claire in mind of a rich tycoon. Granted, she reminded herself, the crown prince could buy whatever he liked in Paffuto, but Vik normally didn't indulge himself in such extravagance. It flummoxed her.

Lui, their guard for the day, gave her a nudge of encouragement. "The changing rooms are over here, Claire. I'll help you dress since you don't have a maidservant."

"V-Very well," Claire said.

She stepped into the dressing room and, with Lui's assistance, changed into a lilac gown. Claire still did not fully grasp what was going on, but Lui paid that no mind as she laced up the silk ribbons on Claire's back.

Her eyes widened when she saw herself in the changing room's floor-length mirror. The fluttering pieces of fabric draped across the bodice and shoulders highlighted Claire's slender frame beautifully. Just below the bust, the gown transitioned into a more mature style that hugged her waist and hips. Claire had hardly worn anything like this before, and she found herself spellbound by it.

Lui chuckled at her. "You look lovely, Claire. This dress was made for you."

“Thank you, Lui.” Claire fell silent for a moment. “But I’m afraid I just can’t accept this.”

She was about to add that she refused to let Vik buy it for her, but just then, there was a knock on the dressing room door. The shop attendant peeked in. “My lady, you look stunning,” she said. “That is from our newest lineup. We hadn’t planned on displaying it as of yet, but the minute we saw you arrive, we hurried to bring it out just for you.”

“Do you mean this dress wasn’t here when Miss Charlotte visited?” Lui asked.

“Charlotte would be furious if she knew,” Claire said.

“You can say that again,” Lui quipped.

Claire turned back to the mirror. “I’m so glad Vik took me here, and this dress is certainly lovely. However, I really don’t have an excuse to buy a new gown.”

Lui chuckled at her continued rebuttal. “I think Vik’s elated that he could introduce you to the king and queen.”

“Oh, do you mean when I had dinner with the royal family just recently?”

“Yes, but that’s not the only thing making him so excited. Vik’s been waiting for this day for quite some time, you know.”

Claire had been summoned for dinner with the royal couple a few days prior, catching her completely off guard, but she felt relieved all the same that she’d now had her audience before the king. Claire could have sworn that Vik had been waiting for the audience in particular, not this shopping expedition, so Lui’s comment made her blink.

“Why?” she asked.

“Why, gifting a young lady clothing or accessories is proof of a gentleman’s special relationship to her, now isn’t it?”

Claire jumped as the realization hit her. *Lui’s right*, she thought. *Vik once told me that he wanted me to come to him when I next had need of a new dress. But that was all before he’d opened his heart to me about his feelings.*

Now with that explanation, Claire understood the purpose of this outing.

“You may have clothes aplenty in your wardrobe,” Lui said, “but please do accept his offer anyway. When you invite the tailor to your rooms, Vik can’t sit in on your appointment, so it doesn’t much feel like he’s actually gifting you anything.”

Lui snickered, her younger friend’s feelings on the subject all too apparent to her, and Claire nodded back with a teasing grin of her own. “I see now,” she said. “In that case, I would be more than happy to accept.”

*In Noston too, she recalled, only one’s fiancé could play this role. What an implication!* Finally fully understanding Vik’s feelings, Claire decided to bask in the warmth of his affection. She strove to maintain her modesty as a schoolgirl in a foreign kingdom, but she certainly didn’t mind fancy gowns and jewels. However, she naturally only ever purchased for herself a reasonable amount in respect to the Martinos’ coffers.

Claire chose a pair of shoes and a set of gorgeous jewelry to match this dress that Charlotte had never so much as touched. Then, after the attendant reminded her that it’d be lovely to splurge on such a special occasion, she let the shop attendant do up her hair and pin in it a hair ornament with amethysts and tiny pearls. Even with no makeup, Claire looked as radiant as if she were about to set out for a ball.

“Perfect,” Lui said. “Claire, you look magnificent. Let’s hurry and show Vik.”

“Yes, let’s,” said Claire. “Thank you, Lui.”

Relieved by Lui’s praise, she stepped out of the dressing room and called for Vik.

“Vik, might I ask if I look all right...?”

He had been sitting on a couch and drinking a cup of tea as he waited for her, but now his eyes grew wide. He stared at her, enraptured.

“You’re resplendent,” Vik said. “You look like a princess.”

Claire blinked and froze up at those familiar words. *That’s what he said last*

*time too*, she thought, recalling her first life. He'd told her that very thing on the night she came to the ball in Noston as his betrothed. Everything about that day, from the situation to the ordeals she had faced, was different, but hearing the same praise warmed her heart.

*I mustn't tell him he's given me this compliment once already*, she thought. *All the same, this is such a lovely, curious happening.*

As Claire broke out into a sudden grin, recognition dawned on Vik's face. He looked rather peeved. "What?" he asked. "What happy memory is making you smile?"

"No, it's not that," she said. "Well, it is a happy memory, but I don't mean it in a bad way."

After a few moments, Vik said, "I see. Well, rather than them making you sad like they used to, I'm glad to see those memories have brought a smile to your face."

She realized that he must have known what she recalled. The thought made her feel guilty, so she switched the topic and playfully said, "Well, here I am, all dressed up. Would you do me the honor of accompanying me today, my good prince?"

"But of course."

He extended his arm in a natural gesture, and as she took it, she met his eyes. *Nothing could make me happier than the fact that I've been able to end up here*, she thought.

"Your lessons to learn to be the queen consort will begin soon, won't they?" Vik asked. "Before that, I would like to send you as many Paffish-style gowns as you'll need. I fear your teacher's rather strict, you see."

"What's far more important than dresses," Claire said, "is that I study well so I can become one fit to be your fiancée."

Vik paused and then said, "I have full faith in your ability to do just that."

He fixed a stray strand of hair hanging down across her cheek. She felt perfectly, wonderfully happy.

Then Vik turned to the shop attendant, bringing Claire back to reality. “We’ll take the full set of what the lady is presently wearing. Could you send that and all the gowns you’ve prepared to the royal palace?”

*What?* Claire thought in alarm.

“Vik!” she exclaimed. “That’s far too much.”

Her protest rang out across the boutique as it suddenly burst into a flurry of activity, and Lui gave an exasperated sigh before grinning. However, no one made any move to stop Vik.

It was a most irregular date, but Claire had learned just how much Vik had been looking forward to it. Naturally, she had to stop him before he purchased the store’s entire stock of clothing, but his never-wavering display of affection for her made her feel well and truly blessed.

## Extra Story 2: The Beginning of a Clumsy Romance

Asbert Lucia Nottingham was to graduate from the Noston Royal Aristocratic Academy in due time, and yet in the midst of all the hubbub, a doubt plagued his mind.

In the rear garden during lunch, he turned to his retainer. “Salomon,” he said, “I see that Miss Nicola is taking lunch alone again. What has happened, pray tell?”

“I believe she’s perfectly content to be on her own without a flock of young ladies for company,” Salomon said. “From my understanding, she’s quite preoccupied with all the preparations for the gala, so surely we could be allowed to grant her some respite, my liege.”

“The gala can’t be prepared for by one single person,” Asbert said. “What do the other members of the student council think they’re doing?”

“My understanding is that they’re far too busy being Miss Charlotte’s cronies.”

“Preposterous! Is this true?”

“Do please keep your voice down,” Salomon advised. “Miss Nicola can hear you.”

His cheeks red with anger, Asbert peeked through the bushes at where Nicola, the student from the neighboring kingdom of Paffuto, sat on a bench eating a sandwich and reading a document with great interest. Asbert assumed it must have something to do with the gala, which would be held in one month’s time.

“She’s only just started school here,” he said, “but she’s already thrown herself into her student council work and earned the top grades in her class. I’ve never seen a girl like her!”

“She reminds me of a certain someone,” Salomon remarked.

“Yes, you could say that again. Nothing seems to slow Miss Nicola down. She’s incredible.”

Salomon and Asbert nodded in agreement with one another but then looked up as a shadow fell across them. There stood a very irascible-looking Nicola. Her round eyes normally made her look adorable, but now they glared with all her might.

She yelled at them, “Hey, I have ears, you know! What are you two gossips whispering about now?”

“M-Miss Nicola,” Asbert stuttered. “Why, how lovely to see you today! I hope you’re well?” He smiled regally, hoping to smooth over the situation.

“Oh, great! Now you’ve gone from bad to worse!” she thundered.



Nicola Windsor was the niece of the King of Paffuto, blessed with an abundance of fairness and wit that she herself was fully aware of. However, she likewise had no choice but to acknowledge that she struggled to build good relationships with others, as in the following case.

“You seem quite busy lately, Lady Nicola,” said one of her classmates, as Nicola and their other friends were on the way to the cafeteria for lunch. “I’ve heard reports that people can see light under your dorm room door until all hours of the evening. Is there anything I could do to help?”

“I’m fine,” Nicola said, responding to her friend’s concern with her typical assertiveness. “You really don’t need to concern yourself about me!”

Her friend’s face fell ever so slightly, and Nicola regretted turning her down. *Drat, she thought. I’ve done it again. That’s not even what I wanted to say!*

After a moment, Nicola collected herself and said, “I believe I have some of my student council work left to finish. Please excuse me. I hope the rest of you enjoy your lunch.”

“Oh, Lady Nicola!” her friend called. Nicola ignored her and walked away.

Nicola was more or less aware that she had been a flamboyant character at her old school. However, none of her friends left her for the sole reason that

her uncle was the king himself. Now that she'd gone out of her way to move to a whole different kingdom, she didn't want to force her new classmates into the same predicament. Yet on the other hand, she also didn't know how to treat her friends without being too domineering.

Whenever she didn't know what to do, she always made her escape in a similar fashion. Fortunately, she was fully in charge of the graduation gala just around the corner, which gave her ample excuses for spending time alone without raising eyebrows.

However, for some reason she couldn't wrap her head around, Asbert had recently begun approaching her in the garden.

"You look much too busy, Miss Nicola," he would say. "Do let me assist you."

"I don't need your help!" she insisted each time. "Besides, where's the sense in planning your own graduation?"

She'd chosen the rear garden over the student council room for the express purpose of finishing her work without running into anyone, and yet he kept seeking her out there. To make matters worse, no matter how coldly she treated him, he never tired of popping up again later. Asbert's behavior puzzled her to no end.

Today, for some reason, he'd sat down next to her, eating a sandwich. Periodically, he offered advice and commentary on what she was doing.

"I'll look over the invitations to our distinguished guests," he said. "My royal father has given me instructions for that."

Nicola hesitated. "All right," she said. "Here's a sample envelope. The actual invitations are all done and put away in the student council room."

Asbert looked startled as she passed him the sky blue envelope. "You finished all of them?" he asked. "You mean, you handwrote them all yourself?"

"But of course," she answered. "This is no ordinary graduation gala, is it? Believe me, I've picked up plenty about that since I came here!"

The words "You're incredible" tumbled from Asbert's mouth.

Nicola's eyes grew wide at the honest praise. "Excuse me?" she demanded. Then she immediately changed her mind and continued, "Well, that wouldn't have been too hard for your precious Claire, now would it? What do you think you're doing, hmm?"

"Wh-Why are you bringing up Claire?" Asbert asked.

"Because I know all about you and Claire," Nicola snapped back. "It's as plain as the nose on your face! You're heartbroken because you loved her, and now Vicky's gone and taken her from you."

"Miss Nicola," Asbert said.

Nicola understood that Asbert was trying to get to know her, but she had the strong feeling it was only because Claire had asked him to. She'd made that statement as a means to tell him to relax, that she wouldn't misunderstand his concern for her as any sort of special affection on his part, but Asbert turned noticeably downcast at her outburst. He looked so upset that Nicola could easily picture him as a disconsolate dog with its ears drooping.

*Oh no, she thought. Now I've gone and done it again!*

Hesitantly, she made to apologize. "I-I'm s-sor—"

But Asbert spoke over her as if to stop her. He looked at her with a determined, powerful expression. "Miss Nicola," he said. "There is something I must tell you soon."

"What?" she asked. "Why not say it right now? You're already here."

"No," he said, "I still need to make ready first. I'm afraid I can't say it now." He paused. "I think I should be ready by graduation. May I ask for you to hear me out then?"

Nicola waffled. "Sure...?"

She couldn't help but look at him and think that, despite all his skill in academics, he was completely lacking in every other aspect. Yet he looked so unusually serious that she found herself reluctantly agreeing to his request.

Once she did, Asbert let out a slow, emotional sigh. He relaxed. "Oh," he said. "I think I understand what she means now."

“Huh?”

“I’d been wondering what it was that made Claire seem so much more happy and animated in Paffuto.”

“You? When *you’re* the one responsible for letting Charlotte do whatever she pleases and cause Claire such a headache? I doubt you’ll ever get it through your thick skull for as long as you live!”

Asbert stiffened for a moment, but he burst out moments later into a bold grin.

“Perhaps not,” he said. “But I certainly would like to as soon as I can, my lady.”

One month later, Asbert asked Nicola if he might escort her to the graduation gala and announced the end of his engagement to Charlotte.

## Afterword

Hello, my name is Saki Ichibu. Thank you very much for picking up *Formerly, the Fallen Daughter of the Duke* volume three. I'm so glad we've finally reached the third volume. A huge thank you to everyone who has accompanied me on this journey!

In this third volume, we have several episodes deeply related to Claire's mother and grandmother that weren't touched on very much in the web serialization. I think this also marks the end of the relationship between Claire and Charlotte.

Charlotte is the protagonist of the dating sim in which our story is set. When I began writing this series two years ago online, I had meant her to be nothing more than an awfully unpleasant sort of person, but as I kept writing, I started getting attached to her. Charlotte is resilient no matter how far she goes, and I hope that readers will be interested in what will happen to her now that she's lost her special magical powers.

With that being said, we are now planning on releasing a fourth volume, thanks to all the support of readers like you. Truly, truly, thank you all so much! I hope you will continue to wish our once-disgraced heroine the best as she undergoes personal growth and sets off for her happy ending.

Additionally, this series has a manga serialized in Monthly Comic Garden and MAG Garden COMIC ONLINE (MAGCOMI). In honor of this third volume going on sale, MAGCOMI created a special dating sim adaptation of the series. (Of course, it's playable for free!) It has four endings and an original story that's a spin-off of the main story. Normally, when I sit down to write, I puzzle over which of two directions the plot should take, so I had so much fun being able to write both options here!

By the way, I should let you know that, while I did specify the conditions and story branches, I still got a bad ending twice in a row when I played it. I hope you'll all look forward to trying it too!

Lastly, I'd like to thank everyone involved in the publication of this book. A big thank-you to Nemusuke for this gorgeous cover, Ushio Shirotori for illustrating the manga, my editor, and everyone else who supported me along the way.

Nothing could make me happier than knowing that this story has brought you even a small bit of happiness. I hope we'll see each other again soon in the next volume.


Saki Ichibu



After the other children had introduced themselves in turn, Isabella stepped forward last. "My name is Isabella Reine, if it pleases Your Highness," she said. "I-I'm very grateful to have the honor of making your acquaintance today."

Her cheeks flushed below her pretty almond-shaped eyes. As she timorously introduced herself to Vik, Claire confirmed that, yes, this was indeed Isabella.

*Formerly,  
the Fallen Daughter  
of the Duke*



A murmur swept across the room. Someone asked, "Who is that girl with the prince of Paffuto? Is that Lady Claire?" The muttering rapidly grew into a crescendo as more and more people noticed. The whispers began closest to the door but circulated throughout the whole ballroom as all attention turned to Claire and Vik.

"Are you all right?" Vik asked.

"Yes," Claire said, answering him with a smile. She laid her hand on his arm, and then together they walked into the ballroom. Charlotte screeched, "What's Claire doing with Prince Vik?!"

Many other voices joined in, speculating as to what their relationship might be. Even though Claire was only here as a classmate showing Vik around her homeland, her cheeks grew hot.



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Formerly, the Fallen Daughter of the Duke: Volume 3

by Ichibu Saki

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