

RESET!

THE
IMPRISONED PRINCESS
DREAMS OF
ANOTHER CHANCE!



Kei Misawa
Illustrated by poporucha

Table of Contents

[Copyright](#)

[Cover](#)

[Character Page](#)

[Prologue](#)

[1. A Life Reset](#)

[2. The First Day at School](#)

[3. Reunited With Ed](#)

[4. The First Outing in Town](#)

[5. Magical Practice](#)

[6. My Thirteenth Birthday](#)

[7. The Magic Stone's Protection](#)

[8. The Sword-Fighting Tournament](#)

[9. Magical Power Unleashed](#)

[10. Confined to My Room](#)

[11. Changing Feelings](#)

[12. The School Ball](#)

[Side Story: Ed's Perspective](#)

[Side Story: Go Riding With Me?](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Other Series Pt. 1](#)

[Other Series Pt. 2](#)

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Reset! The Imprisoned Princess Dreams of Another Chance!

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Prologue

WITH just a few words, my entire belief system seemed to crumble at my feet.

In front of me sat a man on a throne, legs crossed one over the other. Daniel Burleque of the Sunruta Kingdom. He looked down on me with his ice-blue or, more precisely, coldhearted eyes.

Once, he had sworn to make me happy, a carefree smile on his lips. But the expression on his face now...made him look like a completely different person.

“Forgive me, Your Majesty. But our marriage has been decided between our two countries and...”

“I told you this already. Your country is gone. Weren’t you *listening?*”

From his indifferent tone, it was clear he wasn’t kidding. My mouth dry, I tried to form words. But all that came from my throat was a parched, wheezing sound.

My country, my homeland, Najir...was gone?

I couldn’t understand it at first.

More precisely, my brain was refusing to process the implications.

If this *was* a joke, I wasn’t laughing. *At all.*

Just a few months ago, the citizens of my homeland had gathered to see me off, waving as I passed by. Everyone was so happy, so full of hope, celebrating the sure-to-be everlasting friendship between Sunruta and Najir.

“Hence, our marriage agreement is null and void. As the princess of a country defeated in wartime, I shall have you thrown in the dungeon.”

“You can’t—” I yelped, wide-eyed with shock.

The Sunruta Kingdom Imperial Knights moved forward in formation from their

position behind me, seizing me before I could protest.

“Your Majesty, tell me! Have you...have you invaded my homeland?!”

“Take her away.”

“Your Majesty, **please!**”

My heartbroken cries echoed pitifully around the vast reception hall.

Ever the fool, I still nursed a small flicker of hope in the deepest recesses of my heart.

The hope that this was all just a dream and that I would soon awaken to find myself back in my normal, everyday life.



PLINK... *Plink...* The sound of the dripping water seemed oddly magnified in the muffled dankness of my cell.

The steady, predictable plinking of the water droplets dripping down from the ceiling marked the passing of time like a metronome.

How many days—how many weeks—had I already spent locked up in this cold, dark place?

At some point, I’d lost track of time and now had no idea.

Sleeping in a queen-sized bed, wearing gorgeous gowns, being waited on hand and foot by an entourage of servants. That lifestyle had vanished into the ether.

I agonized over what I might have done wrong, but the answer was always just beyond my reach.

The air was so still. All I could hear, besides the plinking of dripping water, was my own hushed breathing.

Then heavy footsteps broke the quiet.

My head snapped up, and I swiftly pressed myself against the cell wall, peeking through the gaps in the barred window to the passageway outside. A pair of hulking, boorish-looking men, most likely guards, were coming down the passage, dragging a man between them by his armpits. The man had jet-black

hair and seemed to have been beaten within an inch of his life.

“Ed...”

I instantly recognized the man, bloody and bedraggled though he was. It was Edoile Licht La Boulacherie, my guardian knight.

On the day it happened, he fought valiantly to save me even as he was surrounded by dozens of Sunruta imperial knights. In the end, seeing that I was already captured, he yielded to prevent me from being harmed and was himself seized by the knights.

In the dank light, I could just make out his face, swollen black and blue. His mouth was smeared with dried blood. The black anti-magic collar they'd fastened around his neck glinted wetly in the light of the flaming sconces. *Fresh blood?*

“Oh, what have they done to you...?”

I pressed my hands over my mouth to stifle my sobs.

There was barely a hint remaining of his once-handsome features.

“You're a stubborn one, aren't you? Enough of the tough guy act. Just tell us what you know already.”

The guards threw Ed roughly into the cell, then slammed the cell door shut with an exaggerated flourish. I could hear Ed slump to the floor, clearly too weak to stand. Then came the echoing clank of the heavy padlock being used to lock him in.

Through the gaps in the bars, I could just make out the figures of the guards looking down at Ed, collapsed in his cell. Then one seemed to think of something and smirked.

“Ah yes, here's some news for you. The country you swore allegiance to, Najir, is no more. You know that. And now, its last little princess will soon be very dead. Oh, I should say **ex**-princess. Our brand-new future queen told us to stop feeding her unless she becomes more interesting. All your fault, you know. You can repent your actions at your leisure while you watch your beloved princess wasting away to nothing.”

“Haha, he’ll be dead long before that.”

“You’re right about that.”

As I watched the sniggering guards walk away, I tightly wrapped my arms around myself to keep from trembling.

I do not cry. I do not tremble. I am the princess of Najir and I am proud.

That’s right. The princess those horrible guards were sniggering about? That’s me.

My name is Annabel Nalia Gottenheim, the first princess of Najir, and, before all this happened, I was also the fiancée of Daniel Burleque, the young king of Sunruta.

Daniel was three years my senior, and we’d become engaged for political reasons when I was sixteen.

It seems unbelievable, looking back on it now, but Daniel was always sweet to me, right from the moment we met. And after we became engaged, he continued to be a perfect gentleman. Always smiling so tenderly, listening intently to everything I said. And when I was feeling anxious about leaving my home country, he pulled me into his arms and held me close. Upon our betrothal, he’d leaned in and whispered in my ear about how he was determined to make me a happy wife.

So naturally, I’d believed my future with him would be a happy one, and I came to this country with only a few attendants from home when I’d turned eighteen this year.

The royal families of two neighboring countries forming political marriages with their children... There’s nothing unusual about that.

The only unusual thing about this whole affair was that the Sunruta Kingdom had then gone on to invade Najir after the marriage had already been arranged. Relations between our two countries couldn’t have been friendlier.

I’d only been living in the Sunruta Kingdom for a few months, and wedding preparations were well underway when this happened.



AN unannounced visit had started it all.

“Bel, darling. Princess Karina of Nigren has arrived. I’ll just go and greet her.”

“Certainly. I’ll wait here.”

One day, the princess of a neighboring kingdom arrived for a visit a full two weeks earlier than scheduled, and Daniel went off to the throne room to formally receive her with a smile.

Everything had been normal up until that point. Before leaving, Daniel smiled gently, kissed my cheek, and looked at me with love in his eyes. He even stroked my face, seeming reluctant to leave my side.

But a few hours later, while I was having a final try-on session of the jewels I was to wear for my wedding, Daniel returned a different person. Face twisted, like a horrible demon.

“Bel. You bitch. How could you...?”

Daniel’s attitude was so alarming, everyone present exchanged anxious glances, including me.

“Your Majesty? What’s wrong?”

“How could you do this? Secretly conspiring with Najir, plotting to stab me in the back?!”

Daniel strode up to me, his face dark with rage. The next instant, I felt a dull pain blossom on my cheekbone. A metallic taste spurted over my tongue.

“Agh!”

Daniel’s actions sent my ladies-in-waiting into a panic and they began to scream. Someone must have dropped a teacup—I could hear it shatter on the hard floor.

“Princess!”

Ed sprang forward from his position in the corner of the room to help me sit up, as Daniel’s strike had sent me flying to the ground. Daniel’s eyes narrowed as he watched. My jewels had spilled all over the floor, and Daniel crunched them mindlessly under his boots as he advanced on us.

“Ah, it makes sense now. You’re sleeping with him, aren’t you?”

“What do you mean?!”

“You have a pretty face, but inside, you’re trash. I see it all now. You were conspiring with your home country through him, weren’t you? Acting all innocent with me, and all the while, you were spreading your legs for random men behind my back. You harlot!”

I gaped silently up at Daniel who loomed over me with a ferocious scowl.

Conspiring? Harlot?

As his words sank in, I felt the blood drain from my face.

“I’ve done no such thing!”

I had no idea what was going on.

Me, being unfaithful with Ed? Secretly plotting with my kinsfolk in Najir to have Daniel killed? I swear to all the gods, I would never do such a thing.

“Your Majesty, you are mistaken!”

“Silence! I was a fool to ever trust you. A princess who can’t even use magic... From that alone, it’s clear to me now that Najir was making a mockery of Sunruta all along. You thought I would easily capitulate, all because I’m still a young monarch? Someone lock this wench up in her chambers!”

“What...?”

At a loss for what else to say, I simply stared dumbfounded at Daniel.

My beloved Daniel, who always kissed my cheek so softly and smiled at me so tenderly. Now he was glaring down at me with a steel gaze, his lip curled in utter disgust and hatred.

Why? What was making him look at me this way?

My heart felt suddenly cold. Frozen like ice.

My homeland of Najir is filled with magic. Many citizens are born with intrinsic magical powers, and there are so many magicians there, not to mention the Magical Order of Knights. It’s also a pioneer in the discovery of new forms of magic. In fact, there’s no other country in the world as magically

rich as Najir.

And yet, Daniel was right. I *couldn't* use magic even though I was the princess. I had an immense amount of innate magical power, but I could never summon it.

I'd studied magical theory extensively and I had the aptitude. Despite that, since I couldn't actually summon magic, I was effectively considered non-magical.

My lacking practical magic ability was hardly a drawback, though. After all, I was the one and only princess of Najir. And Daniel knew that.

"But you said you didn't care that I can't use magic! You said you wanted me to come here either way!"

Hot tears fell down my cheeks.

After all, I'd heard him say those words with my own two ears.

He said that he loved me. He said that he would protect me. He said all that!

Liar! Liar, liar, liar!

Since that day, my memories had become hazy. It's like I was stuck somewhere between dreams and reality. When did I sleep? When did I eat? The usual rhythms of daily life were lost somewhere in an endless fog.

Then, after a few months had passed, I was brought before Daniel again. That's when he told me that Najir was no more and ordered me thrown into the dungeons.

And so, they'd locked me up in a cell like a bird in a cage. No...like a filthy rat in a trap.

At some point, I'd gotten used to the intermingling smells of mold and filth.

The smell of blood, though...that was new.

"Ed?"

I called out softly to the adjacent cell, so the guard stationed by the entrance wouldn't hear. After a short silence, I heard a hoarse voice answer: "Yes, Princess?"

Nobody ever told him to but, from the first time we met, Ed always addressed me as “Princess.” And he was still calling me that, although I was now nothing more than a common prisoner.

“It’s no good. You’ll die too if you stay here any longer. You should escape. Just...leave me.”

“I cannot leave you, Princess. I swore to protect you to the end, didn’t I?”

“But I don’t think anyone’s coming to save us.”

“They will come.”

Ed’s words silenced me.

We’d been over this, over and over again since being thrown into the dungeon.

Ed assured me daily that help from home was coming. Those words gave me so much hope. *Do you have any idea what a comfort you were to me in that dark place?*

Ed was originally one of my brother’s childhood friends, and he went on to become an elite member of Najir’s Magical Order of Knights. Once my wedding to Daniel was all arranged, he’d accompanied me from Najir as one of my attendants.

I was surprised when I first learned of the arrangement. Even an overprotected, pampered princess like me had heard tales of Ed’s abilities. He was one of Najir’s finest swordsmen. I felt that sending him along with me was a waste of his talents and surely against our national interests.

But it was my brother, the prince—one of Ed’s closest friends—who insisted. He said that since I was taking so few of my own people with me, I would be in need of a superior guardian.

“I’m so sorry. This all happened to you because you had to come here with me.”

“I pushed for the position. You have nothing to apologize for.”

He was lying. Clearly.

If Ed had stayed in Najir, he would have risen to a prominent position for sure. Instead, he was here with me, rotting in a dank dungeon cell.

Ed had more than enough power to evade ten knights by himself, but with me already taken hostage, he'd had no choice but to surrender.

"I caught a glimpse of the sky while I was being brought back here just now."

"The sky?"

"Yes. The same sky they see in Najir. I know that everyone you love back home is looking up at that very same sky."

The same sky...

I felt tears well up in my eyes and pressed my lips together.

From what I'd been able to piece together from fragments of the guards' conversation, Najir had been taken in a surprise attack and overthrown, the capital city falling. The only silver lining was that the royal family—my parents and brother—and our closest associates had been able to flee. Oddly, our army of magical knights had also disappeared without a trace.

I wondered if Father, Mother, and my brother were safe.

Please, please let them be safe.

Fearing a counterattack by the remnants of the Najir Imperial Armed Guard, the Sunruta invaders were trying desperately to track down those missing. The only reason they hadn't already executed me was to use me as a bargaining chip in the event of a counterattack.

Ed had been a central figure in the Magical Order of Knights up until a few months ago. He knew exactly what procedures they would follow in a situation like this. Knowing this, the Sunruta forces were torturing Ed day after day so that he'd eventually be forced to spill all the military secrets.

"Ed. Give me your hand."

Along the rear wall of my cell, there was a grimy drainage ditch. I reached my hand through it towards the back of Ed's cell.

The drainage ditch ran along each cell's back wall to allow for dirty water run-

off to drain away. Each cell's floor was slanted to facilitate this. The four-inch-wide drainage channel carved through the cell's thick stone wall was the only window Ed and I had to each other.

I threaded my arm through the narrow channel and felt Ed's hand. The warmth of it brought me so much comfort, but again, I felt flooded with self-loathing.

I'd told Ed to escape and leave me, but I needed him so badly. The mere touch of his big hand was so soothing to me, even in this dark and desolate place.

"Princess, do not give in to fear."

"I won't."

"I swear to protect you."

"Yes. I know. You always do."



Right after Daniel's betrayal, Edoile had placed a divine protection on me.

Anyone who tried to harm me would be unable to do so. The new would-be queen (*a fine turn of events, don't you think? A princess from a neighboring country, who came here to be a guest at MY wedding to the king...is now the new bride-to-be while I get thrown in the dungeon!*) gave the guards permission to beat me as they saw fit. But whenever they tried to harm or even touch me, lightning would crackle, emanating from my skin, scorching them and sending them into a dead faint.

Now the guards were saying that the new queen-to-be, Karina, had ordered them to starve me to death. I was sure she hadn't gotten permission from the Sunruta royals to give such an order. But the guards didn't know that. Even Ed, with all his powers, couldn't save me from starvation.

I knew the situation was hopeless. That I was done for. And yet, Ed's reassurances could strangely make me feel at ease.

"Ed. This time, they're going to starve me to death."

"..."

Ed didn't respond.

"Knowing that I'm going to die...makes me wish I'd chosen a completely different path. I wish I'd laughed out loud more...cried more tears whenever I was sad. Gone shopping in town, eaten the things I wanted to without care...even fallen in love! And then married my true soul mate..."

I sighed, realizing how foolish it was to dream of those things now.

I'd dedicated my entire life to my role as a princess. Suppressing my own dreams and desires had led me to this. How ironic life was! How absurd!

"You can still have all those things."

"Heh. Oh, I'm sure. And will you give them to me?"

"Yes. I will."

"I'd settle for a reset. A chance to make a different choice."

"Of course. Then I will give you another chance."

“Silly.”

I couldn't help laughing a little, even in this hopeless situation.

Ed was so sweet. He'd say anything to try to keep up my spirits.

Silence fell upon us again in our dreary cells.

The sound of the plinking water dripping from the ceiling seemed magnified in the silence. It hurt my ears.

“...Ed?”

Whenever I said “Ed?” he would always respond with “Yes, Princess?” but this time, he didn't respond at all. I felt a streak of panic rip through me.

“Ed? Please...say something.”

“Princess. Take this.”

His response brought with it a flood of relief.

It's all right. He's still with you. You can still be brave.

Ed let go of my hand for a moment, and then I felt him press something into my palm. I explored it with my fingertips, noticing it was round in shape. I withdrew my arm back into my own cell and raised my hand close to my face to inspect it.

“But...this is...”

It was a Magic Stone. A deep crimson Magic Stone, the same color as Ed's blazing red eyes. Even in the darkness of my cell, I could see it clearly.

Magic Stones contain the crystallized magical powers of the magician or conjurer who creates them. As such, they are extremely valued.

Only one can be created by a person at any one time, and as long as the magical power of the stone remains, it will provide divine protection to the bearer, even if the stone's original creator dies.

Usually, they're given as a sign of love and a symbol of marriage, or given to the family, lover, or friends left behind when a soldier goes off to war.

“Oh, Ed...why would you give me something like this?”

I felt a cold chill go down my spine, even as I spoke.

No, you can't. You swore you'd always be here to protect me, didn't you?

"Ed?"

"Princess, your wish will come true. Until it does...I'll...protect you. I...swear..."

"I know. I know you will..."

Then I felt Ed's hand go limp in mine.

In an instant, the blood seemed to drain from my cheeks.

No, no, no!

"Ed? Answer me please! Ed? Ed!"

But there was no reply. I tipped my head back, staring unseeingly up at the ceiling.

As a princess, I was taught never to cry or raise my voice in public. But alone in my cell now, I howled in agony, tears pouring down my cheeks.

Where did I go so wrong?

I'd given everything I had for my country, for its people, for everyone I ever loved.

If I'd only chosen a different path, would I have been able to evade Daniel's wrath? Would my homeland have remained unspoiled? Would my last faithful companion, my loyal guardian knight, have been saved?

I didn't know.

I didn't know what anything meant anymore.

"Ed? Please, Ed. Please say something. Ed. Ed!"

My wails echoed around the damp walls of my cell.

I could hear the curious footsteps of the prison guard, coming to see what I was crying about. A grizzled face with several days' unshaved stubble on it looked in at me before moving to the next cell to look in on Ed. Then I heard a voice mutter "What, dead already?" in a completely unconcerned tone.

The guard couldn't have cared less whether Ed was dead or alive.

I was struck with a sudden rage, which seemed to boil up from the bottom of my belly. At the same time, I felt a burning hot sensation in my chest so powerful, I clutched at myself, unable to bear it...

I'd never experienced it before myself, but I'd heard about it. A sudden outburst of magical power, prompted by extreme feelings of rage.

It felt like eighteen years of pent-up, repressed magical energy was swelling up inside me.

"No!!!"

As I screamed, a furious, roaring sound filled the air. In an instant, the walls and ceiling were blown away, obscuring everything in a cloud of white dust particles.

It was too late now for my latent magical powers to emerge.

It was too late for anything.

With the walls now mere rubble around me, I could see the palace terrace... and the grand courtyard in front.

I could see crowds of guests dressed in all their finery, which made me suspect that they were there for the new queen's coronation ceremony. Or perhaps a party to celebrate their victory over my homeland.

"Show me closer."

As I muttered the words, my field of vision zoomed in on the scene. Holding a folding fan made of feathers and smiling away, I saw *her*. She turned to me, standing in the ruins of my cell, and smiled smugly. Karina Niqvist...the new queen of Sunruta Kingdom.

My homeland, my family, my friends... She had taken all of them away from me.

I wasn't going to let her get away with this.

"Go to hell!"

As I half-screamed, half-wailed, I felt another swell of magical energy billowing up inside me. With a thunderous roar, the distant tower of the castle

began to crumble and topple. The guests below scattered, screaming in panic.

What good is magical energy if you can't use it?

Everything was blurry, either from the powdered dust of the destruction I'd wrought or from my brimming tears. I tipped my head back, looking up at the blue sky above—the same sky that hung over the remnants of my lost homeland. A lone falcon soared calmly overhead.

A hot droplet slid down my cheek.

If only I could turn back time...

Another flash of light thrummed and burst forth, turning everything around me into swelling plumes of dust.

I'd dedicate everything I have to changing things so that I wouldn't have to suffer this absurd fate...

Then, with a final earsplitting roar, the darkness rose up and swallowed me.

Part One: The Academy Days

1. A Life Reset

I was a prisoner. I sat on the bare stone floor. The prison room was without a scrap of furniture or carpet, and it was dark...so dark and cold.

Clank - Clank - Clank...

I could hear the sounds of clanking armor. The guards were coming.

I instinctively covered my ears as the sounds grew louder.

No, no, no...

“Come on out!”

The door to the next cell was yanked open with an angry growl, and the man inside was dragged out. I leaped to my feet and sprang toward the door of my cell, peering through the iron bars of the small window.

“Ed...”

I could see him in the gloom, being dragged under the armpits by two guards. He glanced at me and gave his head a small shake. He was warning me to stay quiet. I watched with wide eyes, hands pressed over my mouth to stifle my urge to sob out loud.

He was leaving. Everyone was leaving me.

Going far away, beyond my reach.

“No...!”

I couldn’t keep silent any longer.

“No, please! No, no!!!”

Please...don’t take anything else precious away from me...

“Hah! Hah...hah...”

I awoke drenched in sweat. My nightgown was soaked, and my blond hair was sticking to my forehead and neck in dripping tendrils. The sheets on the bed beneath me felt cold and damp.

“...Bed?”

I was taken aback by the soft plushness of the mattress underneath me.

Yes, I was lying on a bed. A real bed...not a sickbed or a cot made from rough-hewn stone or wood, but a gorgeous four-poster canopy bed.

What was going on? And what had happened to my dank jail cell?

As I sat there trying to process, I heard a knock at the door, followed by a voice calling out.

“Princess Annabel, are you quite all right?”

The door opened with a click, and a young woman poked her head around the door frame, concern etched on her face.

“Yes... Yes, I’m fine...”

I quickly smoothed down my hair and clothes, answering as nonchalantly as possible.

“I am glad to hear it.”

I stared with surprise at the young woman who was still peering around the door frame. She was a kind-looking, freckle-faced girl with her long brown hair neatly captured in a bun. It was Ellie, my maid from back in my homeland of Najir. She breathed a sigh of relief and then started to walk over to me.

Ellie seemed composed and cheerful, while I sat there in utter disbelief.



“Princess Annabel, you’ve overslept again! It’s well past time to be getting up.”

“Uh...what time is it?”

“Why, it is almost eight o’clock.”

“Er...then I guess I’ll get up...”

“Very good, Princess.”

Ellie gave me a twinkling smile, walking past the end of the bed to the window, where she drew back the curtains.

Morning sunlight flooded the bedchamber, brightening the entire room. I looked all around me, head turning this way and that.

The wooden bedside table that was nestled snugly against the wall had an intricately carved trim. The white, expensive-looking wardrobe had cute little cat feet. And there was also a matching dresser with a large mirror attached...

It was unmistakably my very own bedroom, in the castle of Najir. I’d never forget a single detail of it.

What is going on?!

Nothing made sense. I was supposed to be locked up in a smelly dungeon cell in the bowels of the Sunruta castle right now.

Ellie finished opening all of the curtains and then returned to my bedside. “Oh dear, you’re soaked with sweat!” she said, her face showing concern.

“Are you thirsty? I shall fetch you a glass of water.”

“Oh, thank you so much.”

“Your screams just before... Well, they were quite dreadful!”

“I’m sorry...I was having a frightful nightmare.”

Ellie gazed at me, wide-eyed, while I fought to hide my discomposure with a winning smile. As I stared back at Ellie’s expression, I began to worry. Had I said something wrong?

“...Er, is something wrong?”

“Ah... I was just thinking...you have become such a splendid young woman while losing none of your cuteness.”

“What? What do you mean, Ellie?”

“*Teehee*, please don’t misunderstand... I intend it as a compliment! Our princess is already as fine a lady as any and still as cute as they come!”

I blinked rapidly. Wasn’t it a bit weird to be referring to me, an eighteen-year-old, fully grown woman, as “cute”...? I narrowed my eyes at Ellie.

“...Really?”

As I looked suspiciously at her, she chuckled and nodded. “But of course! Now, we had better get you out of that sweaty nightgown. How about this for today’s outfit?”

Ellie walked over to the closet and pulled out a light-blue dress, which she then held up in front of me.

“Huh?”

I was hit by a wave of surprise and nostalgia as I stared at the dress.

The dress had pure-white bows on the breast and on the full skirt. It was one of the dresses Father had gifted to me so long ago.

That was on—what was it? Yes...my twelfth birthday. I was so enamored with the dress, I wore it until the sleeves began to unravel and those around me begged me to give it up.

“Where did you find that old thing?”

“Old...thing? But you’ve barely had it a month...”

Ellie tilted her head to one side, looking at me curiously.

“What?”

I looked at the dress again in surprise. It was definitely the dress I remembered receiving on my twelfth birthday. But the dress in Ellie’s hands was clearly brand-new. It looked nothing like the sun-faded dress of my memories with the trailing threads on the sleeves.

Without thinking, I lifted both hands, staring at them in the bright morning

sunlight.

They were the small, dainty hands of a child.

What's the meaning of this?!

A lot of crazy things had happened to me recently, but this was entirely outside the realms of anything I could have imagined. As I sat frozen, unable to process the situation, Ellie knitted her brows and peered closely at my face.

"Princess Annabel? Are you feeling unwell?"

"No, I...I wonder if I can still fit into it?"

"Hmm? But of course you can."

Ellie encouraged me to get out of bed, then helped me out of my sweat-drenched nightgown and into the dress. As I threaded my arms through the sleeves, I realized that it fitted me like a glove.

In the corner of the room sat my dresser, which I'd had for longer than I could remember. A large round vanity mirror was affixed to it. I walked over to the dresser and stared at my appearance.

There it was, the same face I'd looked at every day in the mirror: blond hair, light-green eyes, fair skin. But something was different. I was short and small, and my face was the face of a child.

...How?

This kind of thing shouldn't be possible. After being imprisoned by the Sunruta Kingdom's royal family, my magical powers had awakened far too late, and I had used the very last dregs of my strength...

Ellie frowned with concern again as I stood frozen in front of the mirror, gazing at my own stiff expression.

"Princess Annabel? Are you quite sure there's nothing amiss?"

I snapped out of my haze and quickly composed my features.

"I'm perfectly well. I simply had a most frightful dream. It disturbed a great deal. Um...how are Mother and Father, and my brother? Are they...quite well?"

"Are they well? Yes, of course, as ever. But if we don't get you dressed soon,

you'll be delaying them at the breakfast table. I shall fetch fresh water and a towel so you can wash your face."

Ellie left the bedchamber with a smile, carrying my soaked nightgown in her arms. As I watched her go, a giggle escaped my lips.

"Hehehe..."

It was a dream.

It was all just a dream!

Dreaming such an awful dream...what was wrong with me? Najir was preserved, and my parents and brother unharmed. Everything was just as it should be.

As I twirled this way and that in front of the mirror, my spirits soaring, I glimpsed a dark red spot on the bedsheets behind me.

"Oh, what a bother. Is it that time of the month? Or have I hurt myself somehow...?"

But when I thought about it, I remembered that I'd only just turned twelve and ought not to be having monthly bleeding yet. I walked over to the bed, wondering where I might have scratched myself, but then stiffened when I saw what the red spot really was.

It was a small, round stone. Blood-red and beautiful in the light. The magic gem Ed had given to me at the end of it all. To the eighteen-year-old me.

"It can't be..."

I picked it up and turned it over and over in my cupped palm, dumbfounded. It was a deep, blood-red color...clearly still brimming with magical energy.

Why was this here? *After all...*

"...Wasn't it all just a dream?"

But my words rang hollow in the empty bedchamber. There was no one there who could answer me.



A princess must always hold her tongue, smile, and dedicate herself to the

service of her country.

That's what I had always believed.

Wanting things for oneself, expressing one's desires...such things were scandalous for a princess. So I behaved like a perfect doll, doing what the people around me told me to do, with a smile and a sweet "Of course." I planned to have a successful political marriage and know my place. I truly believed that by doing so, I would bring happiness to the people of Najir.

I, Annabel Nalia Gottenheim, was born into this world as the first daughter and princess of Najir. My father was the eighteenth king of Najir, and I had one brother who was my senior by a year. And of course, there was Mother—the former daughter of a Marquess.

Najir is located on the northernmost end of a large continent, and where the land ends, there is a beautiful ocean. While it is not a large country, it has a rich, long history. To the east, west, and south lay the borders of three adjacent countries. On the continent itself, a dozen nations exist.

With so many countries existing so close together, it's no wonder that wars are a common occurrence. Each country has its own stratagems in place for self-preservation. Najir, too, placed a great deal of importance on diplomatic relations to preserve the peace and prosperity of the land. And one of the major ways this was achieved was through political marriages.

That's why the Najirians were all so happy when they waved me off on my journey to our neighbor to the west, the Sunruta Kingdom. With a strong, familial bond between the two nations, the Najirians were hoping for everlasting peace.

"Bel. No matter what happens, we'll always be on your side."

"Oh, there's no need to worry about me. I'm sure I'll be very happy."

When my marriage was decided, my brother, the crown prince, stroked my cheek with gentle concern, his brows furrowed. I smiled confidently in an effort to soothe his worries.

He smiled back, but then his gaze went over my shoulder to look at the man standing deferentially behind me.

“Ed. Please make sure to protect Bel.”

“I shall stake my life upon her safety.”

Behind me, Ed closed his eyes briefly, placing his hand over his heart and swearing on it.

Looking back on it now...it’s possible that both my brother and Ed sensed that something terrible was coming, a dark omen in the air.

But I was one of those who foolishly believed that my wedding would improve relations between Najir and Sunruta.

Thinking back on everything that happened...I swore that I would cease to be anyone’s doll from that moment forth.

Fighting back an urge to run through the dining room doors to my loved ones and embrace them, I took a deep, steadying breath. Then I closed my eyes for just a moment as I stood in the hallway outside.

I’ll open my eyes, and then I’ll be Annabel...twelve-year-old Annabel.

With a composed smile, I reached up and knocked on the ornate door.



WHEN I entered the dining room, my family was already seated. At the dining table, there was my father the king, my mother the queen, and my brother, Crown Prince Charles. The table was laden with platters of bread, jam, salad, and other delicacies. Just as Ellie had said, they were waiting for me.

“Good morning, Father, Mother, Charles.”

“Good morning, Bel.”

They all looked up, greeting me with smiles.

“Bel...you’re wearing it again today...”

Father looked at me in my light-blue dress and smiled with pleasure. This was the dress he had gifted me on my twelfth birthday, not more than a month ago.

I’d checked the date written in the diary tucked into my desk drawer before coming down to breakfast.

“Yes, yes, you look very cute in it again today.”

My brother gave me a twinkling smile as he spoke. Charles had always been very complimentary of me, his little sister.

“Yes, I’ve quite taken to it. I dare say I’ll wear it until the sleeves come all undone.”

I lifted my skirts and gave a little curtsy, giving everyone a glittering smile. Father’s expression softened into a look of warm adoration, and even Mother and Charles smiled. A maid pulled out my chair for me, and I took my seat, looking all around me.

The dining table was rather small and seated only six. It was a private dining table exclusively for family use.

On the wall, there was a family portrait painted by the court painter, depicting the whole family on my first birthday. Above the dining table, there was a simple yet functional chandelier.

Everything was just the way I remembered it.

“...And it went quite well.”

“Really? That’s splendid.”

“Today, it’s fire-based magic, and...”

As soon as my bottom made contact with the chair, Father and Charles resumed their conversation. It was clear they’d been discussing something excitedly while waiting for me.

“Charles, what are we talking about?”

“My magic class at the Academy.”

Charles beamed.

He must have been talking about the school he attended, Grail Academy. It was attended by the country’s aristocratic class and wealthy commoners alike.

“Yesterday, we had a class on practical magic. It was on ice magic, and I managed to conjure an ice blizzard ball THIS big!”

Charles held out his arms dramatically, pretending to cradle an invisible ball of

ice about eleven inches across. If I was currently twelve, that would make Charles only thirteen. A thirteen-year-old conjuring a blizzard and producing an ice ball of any kind, let alone one that size...that was impressive stuff.

“Wow, that’s amazing.”

“Right? But the other kid in my class who’s even better than me at magic—you should have seen his. I think it was about...THIS big. Even the teacher was shocked. And it only took him a moment to conjure it. The blizzard was crazy! We couldn’t see a foot in front of us.”

Charles held his arms open wide, about three feet apart.

“What...that big?”

My eyes grew round. I couldn’t believe a child could wield magic like that. Even an adult with advanced magic skills couldn’t do it. *Surely, this kid must have a special aptitude for magic.*

“Guess who it was?”

“I don’t know.”

Charles leaned forward, gazing at me. I tilted my head, curious.

I like to think I have a good memory, but I couldn’t remember the name of a single one of my brother’s childhood classmates. After all, I’d never really met them.

“It was Ed. Edoile Licht La Boulacherie. The second-eldest son of the Duke of Boulacherie. He came to the castle that one time and I introduced him to you. Don’t you remember?”

At the mention of that name, I gripped the table, suddenly startled.

Edoile Licht La Boulacherie.

How could I forget that name? The full name of my guardian knight who fought to the bitter end to protect eighteen-year-old me.

“...I don’t really remember.”

Absently, I stroked the magic gem in my pocket. It rolled against my fingertips, slightly warm. I composed my expression and shook my head.

“Oh, right. Well, you two only said hello, so it makes sense. Anyway, Ed’s the best magician in our class. By far.”

“He sounds very impressive.”

“Yes, it’s mind-blowing to watch him. Oh...I’m sure you’ll be able to use magic sometime soon, Bel. You’ve got so much magical power in you.”

Charles hurried to reassure me, sensing the odd look on my face as I listened to him. He must have thought I was bothered about my inability to use even the most basic magic.

I smiled blandly.

I felt terrible for Charles, who had tried to console me. After all, I knew for a fact that I would live and die without ever being able to use magic.

Ah, but perhaps that wasn’t strictly true anymore.

I might have used magic at the end there, with my last burst of strength. After all, it looked like I’d somehow managed to blow up part of the Sunruta castle.

It was too late, though.

I recalled the Sunruta king calling me “a princess who can’t even use magic,” with contempt in his voice. I clutched at the neck of my dress in a panic. Was I destined to face that same fate over again?

But then, I paused.

Last time it was too late, but right now, I was only twelve, with time on my side. If I could learn to produce magic earlier this time around, would I be able to change history?

Could I really do it? It’s not like I didn’t try in my past life. I did all kinds of things to attempt to awaken my latent magical powers. I had a private tutor, and I practiced a lot by myself. I just couldn’t do it.

If I did the same over again, the results would end up the same. Pointless.

As I mulled it over, I listened to my father and Charles’s conversation.

“Having a rival so close in age sparks the old competitive spirit, does it not?”

“It sure does. I’m surrounded by rivals at the Academy. I guess I’m lucky.”

As I watched Charles nod and smile, a light went on in my mind.

Being surrounded by rivals close in age...sparking competitive spirit... This could be it. At the Academy, one would be surrounded by so many students of one's own age. Some of them must be exceptionally gifted. Maybe there might even be someone there who would help me spark my own magic.

"Father, I have a request."

I had to strike while the iron was hot. I faced my father, leaning forward in excitement. Father responded by leisurely returning his cup of morning tea to its resting place on the saucer before turning to me with a curious look.

"Whatever is the matter now, Bel?"

"I want to go to school too. To Grail Academy, with Charles!"

Grail Academy was a coeducational school attended by both boys and girls. It had an excellent academic reputation, and aristocrats' children and gifted students came from all over the land to attend.

I'd always had a private tutor and had never gone to school. But perhaps by going, I could awaken my magical powers.

Plus...at school, I'd be able to see Ed without any awkward questions.

Then maybe we could decide together what to do about all of this.

"Bel, going to school...?"

My father, my mother, and my brother Charles all looked at me with wide eyes and matching, shocked faces.

2. The First Day at School

I put on my school uniform for the first time and looked at myself, feeling a twinge of nerves.

Grail Academy's girls' uniform consisted of a long dress down to the ankles, in a deep navy blue. It had white piping and a bright, light-blue ribbon, which tied at the neck.

"Ellie, do I look weird?"

I twisted around, looking at my back view in the round mirror. As I turned, the skirt hem flared out.

"You look absolutely adorable. His Majesty the King was quite concerned that you would distract all the male students from their studies!"

"Why would I be distracting them?"

I tilted my head in confusion, and Ellie responded by giggling.

"That's a secret, Princess Annabel."

"What, you won't tell me?"

"I do so love that side of you, Princess Annabel."

Her response to my question was that she liked "that side of me?" That was hardly an answer. But I was pleased by the compliment, so I zipped my lips. I even pretend-pouted a little, just for fun.

It had been one month since I told Father that I wanted to attend Grail Academy. It was in the middle of the school year, but I was finally due to be admitted today.

Most of the subjects at Grail Academy were the same ones I'd taken with my private tutor—English, Social Studies, Magic, and so on. So at first, Mother and Father turned up their noses at my request, saying there was no need for me to physically attend school.

“But *Charles* goes to school.”

Unable to accept the denial, I kept on doggedly pressing Father.

“Charles is a future king. A king must have many acquaintances.”

Father answered in a subdued tone. So my brother the prince had to make acquaintances. But what about me?

I knew the answer without even having to ask. One day, I would enter a political marriage with an aristocrat or a noble of a foreign land, or even within Najir. There was no need for me to go making personal acquaintances. That must have been what Father was thinking.

The old Annabel would have backed down at that point. Actually, the old Annabel would have never asked to go to school in the first place.

But there was no way I could back down now. If I did, I would be heading down the exact same path to eventual destruction.

“Well, I think it’s imperative for a princess to make acquaintances. A well-connected princess will hold greater clout on the marriage market when it comes time for her to be wed.”

Father and Mother exchanged glances as I sat there primly, my jaw set in determination. Charles was staring at me in surprise.

“Bel, you seem somehow different today. You’re talking like a proper young lady—even your vocabulary choices are more distinguished.”

“Uh...really?”

“Yes. Wherever did you learn a word like ‘clout’?”

“...”

Cripes. My eighteen-year-old self was showing. I hadn’t thought to temper my way of speaking to match the level of a child. *What twelve-year-old knows the word “clout”? And when exactly did I learn that word, I wonder?*

Ah, I can’t remember! Surely, it was around my early teens, though?

“I thought it was better that I behave more grown-up. I’m already twelve, after all. And I bet all of Charles’s friends would know a word like ‘clout.’”

“Yeah, but it’s kind of...weird, hearing you use it.”

“Weird how?!”

How annoying, to be called weird simply for being one’s self! As I glared accusingly at Charles, he let out a quick burst of laughter.

“Oh, Bel. You should see your face. You look like a frog.”

“*Hmph!* Well, it’s your fault if I do!”

Blushing with embarrassment, I became sulky. But Charles kept on chuckling.

“I’m sorry, forgive me. You’re very grown-up.”

“*Hmph!* Forget it! It’s too late!”

It was obvious he thought I was only playing at being a grown-up. As I tossed my head sulkily, my eye fell on the family portrait hanging on the wall.

The portrait showed Mother seated and holding a baby—in other words, me—in her arms. A young boy, Charles, was leaning on the chair’s armrest. Father was standing behind her, one hand on her shoulder.

My life in this castle was so full of happiness. Every day, a smile on my face.

I wasn’t about to let that happiness be destroyed again.

Suddenly feeling like I was about to cry, I closed my eyes to disguise my tears.



KNOCK, knock, knock...the sound of knuckles rapping on the door made me jump.

Whoops. I was getting a little too sentimental there. Despite my present reality, I regularly found my thoughts returning to the life I left behind.

I did one final check of my uniform before turning to look at the door behind me. Ellie sprang into action and opened the door, with Charles peeping his head through the gap as it opened.

Charles was dressed in the boys’ uniform, consisting of an all-black ensemble resembling a suit. On the collar, there was a metal pin depicting a daisy set on a red backing, the emblem of Grail Academy. The color of the pin backing was

different for each grade at school. As Charles walked into the room, his school cloak flapped in sync with his movements.

“Are you ready, Bel?”

“Yes. What do you think?”

I took hold of my skirt and lifted it as I made a cute little curtsy. Then I straightened up and gave Charles a twirl.

“Adorable! I’m proud you’re my little sister.”

Charles smiled widely as he spoke, but then his face fell as he seemed to realize something. After blinking a few times, he rubbed his chin, looking me up and down.

“Yes, you look good, but...”

“Hmm? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong, exactly...it’s just...hmm. Will this be all right...?”

“Charles? Just tell me what’s wrong.”

Charles looked at me, arms crossed and frowning. I’d checked my new uniform from every angle and it looked okay, so what was wrong with it? Did I tie the neck ribbon wrong? Was the skirt length off? Was my hairstyle not suitable? Or was it me? I’d been taking care recently not to use too many big words or come across older than my years.

“I’d better assign a few knights to guard you. Or there could be trouble.”

“A knight? There are guards at the school, surely? And is school really so dangerous, anyway?”

As I frowned, suddenly worried, the corners of Charles’s mouth began to lift in a satisfied smile as he kept gazing down at me.

“Oh, yes. Wild beasts prowl the hallways, searching for innocents to devour. It’s very dangerous. And you’d make juicy prey for them.”

“What?!”

I took an instinctive step back in fear. My butt bumped my vanity table’s chair, which fell over with a clatter. As I felt the blood drain from my face,

Charles's expression grew crafty.

"Bel. It's not too late. I think you'd really better not go to school. Because of... the ***danger.***"

I looked at Charles, dumbfounded.

Was the academy really such a dangerous place? It sounded frightful! How lucky I'd been to be able to take classes from the safety of the castle with a personal tutor! I'd never realized before just how blessed I was.

Maybe I really should forget about going to school...?

The words were on the tip of my tongue, but I bit them back. My gaze fell on the table, where a glass of water rested. I snatched it up and chugged it down. By the time I was done drinking, my resolve had returned.

"Nope. I'm going."

Charles's eyes widened at this display of stubbornness.

In all her life so far, sweet, innocent Princess Annabel had always repressed her own wishes. But not this time. I knew the ruin that would await everyone I loved, should I fail. Backing down now would be tantamount to throwing them to the lions myself. So, I would not. I could not.

"I'm going to school, and that's that!"

I repeated, raising my voice. Charles raised both hands, as if surrendering.

"All right, all right. You seem to have made up your mind. So, I'll support your wishes."

"Thank you, Charles!"

I threw myself at Charles, hugging him. Charles smiled and hugged me back. "Bel, where's your cloak?" he asked.

"It's right here."

I pointed to the sofa. My cloak was slung over the back of the sofa. Charles picked it up and placed it over my shoulders.

"Do we take the carriage to the academy?"

“Yes. Let’s take the carriage today. Why not?”

“...What do you mean, *today*?”

As I tilted my head, he laughed and held out his hand to escort me. Carefully, I placed my hand in his, and together we departed.

Father and Mother also came to see us off at the carriage yard.

“Charles. Keep a close eye on Bel.”

“Bel, listen carefully to what Charles tells you.”

Father was frowning with worry, while Mother was clutching a handkerchief.

“You can leave it to me. I’ll make sure Bel is well-guarded.”

Charles made a fist and rapped himself on the chest, nodding firmly.

Wasn’t this all a bit much? After all, I was only going to school to study. I’d be back that same evening.

Smiling wryly, I turned to my anxious parents and trilled out a confident “Tally ho!” before swinging up into the carriage.

It only took about fifteen minutes by horse and carriage to get from the castle to Grail Academy. I spent the ride with my face glued to the carriage window, palms sticking to the glass as we trundled through the town.

Actually, in my eighteen years of previous living, I’d rarely been to town. A princess such as myself needed to be accompanied by guards at all times, so it was always such a hassle. I didn’t want to bother the townspeople, so I stayed away. I’d never been able to admit how much I longed to go.

“Look over there, Charles. Look at those huge hams just hanging in that shop window!”

“Mm-hmm.”

“Oh, look! Is that a bakery? There are so many different kinds of loaves!”

“Indeed there are.”

“Oh, and Charles...”

Everything was fascinating to me. The big pink juicy blocks of ham on the

butcher's hook, the stacks of golden-brown loaves piled up in the baker's shop, and the florist's selling such beautiful and colorful cut flowers... At each new thrilling sight, I cried out my excitement to Charles.

"Bel, there's no need to get overexcited. The town will always be there, you know." Charles laughed, rolling his eyes a little.

"Whoops, sorry."

I quickly sat back against the padded coach seat. Yes, I looked twelve, but inside I was an eighteen-year-old woman. It made me blush to be chided by my thirteen-year-old brother.

"Ah, it's all right. You certainly seem to be enjoying yourself." Charles looked over at me again, a twinkle in his eye.

A short while later, the carriage came to a clattering halt. The coachman opened the door for me, and I carefully stepped down onto the ground. The cobbled stone of the street felt hard beneath my feet.

I could hear hushed whispering from the people nearby as I exited the carriage—no doubt they had noticed the royal crest of arms on the banners.

I lifted my head to see a magnificent set of double gates, like the kind that would guard a nobleman's mansion. Two gargoyle statues were perched high on each gatepost, looking down on the students as they walked through the gates. The black painted iron railings on each gate must have been almost ten feet high. They were propped open, allowing the academy's many students to freely enter.

"Come along, Bel. Let's go in."

Charles got down from the carriage after me and offered me his hand. I placed my hand in his, taking in the surroundings.

Many of the students glanced at me as they headed into the school, and I made eye contact with some of them. They seemed surprised and quickly looked away from me, hurrying inside the school and disappearing within its many halls.

"Charles. Everyone's looking at us."

“It’s always this way. And even more so today, with you here. It’s not every day you get to see a cloistered, protected princess out in broad daylight. And I just know everyone is taken aback by how lovely you are, Bel.”

Charles smiled with amusement as he walked, tugging me by the hand. His adoring big brother shtick was clearly in full force today. Spending all my time in the castle, I’d never experienced this before. I felt like a zoo animal on display.

I looked up at the large building in front of me.

The school building was a large, three-story structure of reddish-brown stone. Facing it head-on, there was a large entryway, with an east and west wing leading off on both sides. I couldn’t see from this position, but Charles told me there were many other buildings on the campus. Large square windows opened up on the high walls in regularly spaced intervals, and I saw people moving about behind the curtains—probably the students who had already arrived.

“You’re a fifth year, so you’re on the second floor. That room there.”

Charles noticed me staring up at the building, and he pointed out my classroom to me. It looked like there were people already in there as well.

“Where will you be, Charles?”

“I’m a sixth year, so I’m in the same building, on the third floor. That room up there.”

Charles pointed to a window diagonally above my own classroom. That window was open, and the curtains fluttered slightly.

Grail Academy was attended by the children of nobility from the age of eight to fifteen. Eight-year-olds were first years, nine-year-olds were second years, and so on. Charles, who was thirteen, was a sixth year. And since I was twelve, that would make me a fifth year.

I parted from Charles outside the door to my classroom, and when I opened the door to enter, there was a predictable change in the atmosphere. Charles was right, it seemed. Everyone was surprised to see the reclusive princess in the flesh at last. I hadn’t been expecting that at all.

As I hesitated, not sure where to sit, I heard a sweet, tinkling voice call out,

“Bel!” I turned to see a cute girl with golden-brown, fluttering hair come running up to me.

“Phia! It’s you!”

“You really did transfer to Grail Academy, didn’t you, Bel! What a shock! What a lovely, lovely shock!”

The girl in front of me—her name was Oliphia Yuli Anglate—beamed with pleasure, gripping my hands in hers.

Oliphia was the daughter of the Duke of Anglate, and she was also my first cousin. Oliphia’s father, a former prince, was my uncle. He had only been granted his dukedom some fifteen years ago, making it one of Najir’s youngest dukedoms. But in terms of blood, the Anglates were closer to the royal family than any other.

As a result, in my previous life, Oliphia had been one of my closest friends. I recalled how, upon my departure for the Sunruta Kingdom, she had hugged me close and wished me happiness with tears rolling down her cheeks.

That reminded me...when everything happened, Oliphia would have been at home in her mansion in the city. What had happened to her when Sunruta had made their sudden attack? I had no way of knowing, but just thinking about it plunged me into the most gloomy, despairing mood...

“Bel? What’s wrong?”

Oliphia’s voice dragged me out of my thoughts, and I focused on her face again to see her gazing at me with a worried expression.

“If there’s anything you’re not sure about, feel free to ask me any time! Father told me to give you as much support as you could possibly need.”

Oliphia earnestly pressed both hands together at her chest, clearly mistaking my stricken expression for new-school nerves. Her kindness touched me and warmed me inside.

“Oh, thank you. I’m so glad you’re here, Phia.”

As I thanked her with a smile, Oliphia lowered her emerald-green, beautiful eyes and blushed a little. Then she started looking around her, as if searching

for someone in particular.

“Hmm...I’m not sure Claude has arrived yet.”

“Claude’s here, too?”

“Oh, yes.”

Oliphia giggled.

Claude was Oliphia’s friend from childhood and I’d met him a few times. I’d already fact-checked that in my diary. Claude was the eldest son of the Marquess of Judeon, one of Najir’s most influential diplomats. His full name was Claude Florin Judeon.

As we chatted about this and that, suddenly Oliphia seemed to notice someone over my shoulder, her expression brightening in an instant.

“Claude! Over here!”

I turned to see a familiar boy. He had flaxen-yellow hair like a field of ripe corn and sky-blue eyes. The eyes were a little sleepy-looking, which lent him a gentle aura.

As I looked at him, I was hit by a wave of recognition.

The last time I’d seen Claude was the day I departed Najir to become Daniel’s bride. At the time, he had only just started working in the diplomatic service, and he’d been one of the diplomats sent to accompany me to the border for the official handoff.

Claude looked at Oliphia with mild surprise.

“Hmm? Was it today that Princess Annabel was due to start?”

“Yes! Today! I told you that yesterday!”

“Ah yes, now I recall.”

Oliphia puffed out her cheeks in annoyance as Claude shrugged. The two of them were always arguing back and forth like this—it showed just how close they really were.

Actually, in my old life, Oliphia and Claude had been engaged. Since I’d been engaged to Daniel, the king of a foreign land, I hadn’t been able to go to any of

the dinner parties or dances young engaged couples could go to. I'd been secretly envious of Oliphia and Claude, who could dine and dance together so intimately. *So, they'd been this close ever since their student days...*

"If there's anything you need, Princess Annabel, I am at your service."

"Thank you. But please, just call me Bel. We're classmates, after all."

Claude's eyes widened in surprise, and he glanced quickly at Oliphia. I couldn't read the conversation they were having with their eyes, but it seemed that Oliphia had given her permission.

"Very well, then, Bel."

Claude smiled twinklingly at me. When he smiled, his eyes crinkled, and he looked adorable.

Surrounded by such splendid friends, I felt blessed and confident that I would enjoy my days at school.



3. Reunited With Ed

JUST as Father and Mother had said, the subjects taught at Grail Academy weren't so different from the ones I'd studied with my private tutor.

I was neither a genius nor a particularly gifted student, but I still had my mind from my old life, so I had a fairly easy time with classes.

But can I really change my future like this?

It was only my first day, but that niggling doubt kept bothering me.

I had to, though. I *HAD* to change my future.

Charles was a sixth year, and their school day was longer than ours in fifth year by an hour. Since it was my first day, Oliphia and Claude helped me fill the extra hour by giving me a tour of the campus.

The gym, the grand hall, the library...all the facilities were so splendid, it was hard to believe they were designed for children's use. Of course, there was nothing here that could compare to the castle's splendor, but it was all still spectacular.

The last stop on the tour was the Magic Practice Room.

As the name suggested, the Magic Practice Room was a special room designed for practicing magical conjuring and conducting magical study. In order to protect against any magical accidents or mishaps, the room was reinforced with protective spells.

"We can use all of the facilities freely once classes are over. And you can even reserve the room, just by writing your name down on the sign-up sheet. I wonder if the room is available today," Oliphia said.

There was a black, magical board propped up beside the Magic Practice Room's entrance. Oliphia traced the board with her fingertip, and writing bloomed into existence upon the board's surface. The text showed today's date

and whether the room was in use or not.

“Oh, it’s already booked. I wanted to show you inside to finish up the tour...”

Phia sighed, frowning as she read the words “BOOKED OUT” on the board. Just then, I noticed someone approaching from behind us.

“What seems to be the matter?”

It was the husky voice of a boy who was currently in the process of becoming a man.

“Oh, nothing...”

As I turned around, flustered, I took in the black-haired boy standing there. The school cloak he was wrapped in had a red school badge, showing that he was a sixth-year like Charles.

“Ah, hello, Edoile.”

Claude took a step forward beside me.

Edoile? Did he just say Edoile?

At the mention of that name, my heart beat faster in my chest.

As I looked at the boy in front of me again, he looked back with eyes as red as fresh blood. His crow-black hair was so long, it obscured his forehead and most of his eyes. It was hard to see his face, but I could just make out his smooth, even features. And he had a kind of cool aura about him.

While his cheeks still retained some of the plumpness of childhood, there was no mistaking it. I was in the presence of my guardian knight, Edoile Licht La Boulacherie.

As I stood frozen, shocked to find myself suddenly reunited with Ed, Claude launched into an explanation.

“Princess Annabel has just started school today, so we’re giving her a guided tour. Are you the one who booked out the Magic Practice Room, Ed?”

Claude pointed to the schedule board and its BOOKED OUT text. Ed glanced at me, muttering, “Princess Annabel, going here?” under his breath. It was hard to see through his heavy bangs, but I thought I detected a hint of surprise in his

eyes.

The next moment, though, that look was gone.

But I couldn't take my eyes off of Ed.

His slightly catlike, blood-red eyes with that cool gaze...his straight nose, and his pale-white skin, unlike so many boys. He was so young compared to when I knew him as a knight, but this was definitely, unmistakably, Ed.

"Ed? It is you, isn't it?"

Finally, I'd found him again! I couldn't keep the excitement out of my voice.

Thinking back on it later, there was something odd about how Ed was acting then.

But I was so excited to finally be with someone who knew about what had happened to me. Going back in time, finding myself in my old life once more...I wasn't alone anymore, and I just couldn't hide my joy.

"Ed! I don't know what happened! It's all been such a shock! I mean, it's unbelievable..."

I started talking, garbling my words. Ed listened, a small frown on his face. Still, he nodded encouragingly as I spoke.

"I see. I understand it must be difficult. It's your first day at a proper school. You must be worried. But you'll soon adjust."

"I... What?"

I blinked in surprise.

"Welcome to Grail Academy, Princess Annabel. I believe your brother, Charles, once introduced us. I am pleased to see that you remember me. Allow me to introduce myself once again. I am Edoile Licht La Boulacherie of the La Boulacheries. If there's anything I can do to be of assistance, please let me know."

It was a textbook greeting.

I just stood there, face frozen. He was acting like we were almost perfect strangers. As if he was merely a subject, politely greeting the royal princess...

“Princess Annabel?”

Ed’s voice held a tinge of concern as I failed to respond to his introduction. I tried to speak, but nothing came out.

This was all just too...

“If you’re here, Ed, that must mean the sixth-years are done with class. I wonder if Prince Charles is still in the classroom.”

Oliphia, standing on my other side, spoke to Ed then.

“He said he was going to pick up Princess Annabel. He must have missed you.”

“What? That’s not good...”

Claude looked stressed. He was clearly worried about keeping my brother, the prince, waiting. Claude turned to go find my brother, but Ed stopped him.

“Wait, Claude. Didn’t you want to show Princess Annabel the Magic Practice Room? She should really see it. I’ll send a message to Prince Charles.”

While speaking, Ed drew a sheet of paper out of his breast pocket. Quickly, he scribbled something on it, muttering an incantation under his breath all the while.

The next moment, the sheet of paper in his hand disappeared. He must have magicked it to Charles.

“Princess Annabel. Won’t you take a look inside?”

Ed turned to me, one hand on the door. As always, his hair obscured his eyes, and I could barely make out his expression. But he was treating the other two like junior classmates, and me as...well, the princess.

I still couldn’t quite believe it and kept staring at Ed. I held a secret, faint hope that this was all part of some sort of prank.

Ed looked uncomfortable under my unwavering gaze. He frowned awkwardly, looking away from me before staring at the floor.

“Bel! I was looking for you. You weren’t in your classroom, and I was worried you’d wandered off alone somewhere.”

“Oh, Charles...”

I turned to see Charles striding down the hallway towards us. He'd apparently gotten Ed's message and come straight here. Ed lifted his head, looking relieved at Charles's arrival.

There was another boy with Charles and he looked somewhat familiar. Nut-brown hair, determined gold eyes. He was really tall, a full head taller than Charles, who was of average height. He still had the skinniness of a young boy, but it was clear to see how he'd fill out and become a fine, strapping man.

I think I remembered him...

I cast my memory back as Charles looked around at everyone.

"I see you've already met Ed. Good, good."

Charles slapped his hand down on Ed's shoulder.

"Did you greet her already? Bel, this is Edoile Licht La Boulacherie. The second eldest son of the La Boulacheries. You've heard me talk about him often at the dinner table."

Then Charles slapped his other hand down on the shoulder of the brown-haired boy.

"And this is Dohle Brino Veligarde. You know the Count Veligarde? From that family of knights that go back generations? He's the eldest son."



“Oh, yes. I know of the Veligardes.”

The Veligardes were a family of famous knights who'd held prominent positions in Najir's armed guard for generations. In fact, the current Count Veligarde was the Army General.

Yes, I thought I'd recognized him. Lord Dohle was a venerated knight in my other life and worked as one of Charles's personal guards. I'd seen him around many times.

“They're both among my greatest friends, so you can rely on them if you're in trouble. I've designated them both as your personal knights.”

“My *personal* knights?”

“Yep, appointed by princely decree. And when they can't be around, I appoint...what was your name again? Claude of Judeon, wasn't it? Yes, *you* shall be her third knight. You'll watch out for Bel whenever we three aren't around. *Ah*, but don't take advantage of being so close to my sister, got it?”

Chuckling, Charles reached out and clapped Claude on the back. Claude nodded, head bobbing up and down like a little, nodding doll.

Then a large hand was thrust under my nose.

“Princess Annabel. It's a pleasure.”

“Ah...likewise, um, Dohle.”

I placed my hand in his, and Dohle dropped to one knee, kissing the back of my hand. Charles jumped with alarm and quickly pushed my hand away.

“Hey! I turn my back for one second, and **that's** what you do?!”

“It was merely a greeting.”

“Don't greet my sister with your lips!”

“You appointed me her knight. It was a knightly gesture.”

“Drat! I can see I've underestimated you.”

Charles put his hands on his hips, pretending to scowl at Dohle. The next moment, though, he was smiling again as he turned to me.

“Bel. You must be tired from your first day at school. Why don’t you save the rest of your tour for tomorrow?”

Ignoring Dohle, Charles peered closely at my face in concern. I snuck a quick glance at Ed.

With his long hair falling into his eyes, I couldn’t read his expression.

I looked back into Charles’s amethyst-blue eyes and smiled weakly.

“Yes. Thank you, Charles.”

Then I turned to Claude, Oliphia, Dohle, and Ed and wished them good day.

Oliphia and Claude waved and smiled. Dohle raised one hand in parting. And Ed gave me a slight bow.

During the carriage ride home, I stared out of the window, not saying much. Charles kept asking me questions about my day, seeming worried.

“How was your first day at school?”

“It was tremendous fun.”

“That’s good. If anything happens that bothers you, you must say so immediately.”

“I will. Thank you, Charles.”

I finally turned to him and smiled, and Charles smiled right back, eyes twinkling.

“Don’t mention it. You’re not used to being out and about...I don’t want you to overdo it.”

“Okay. I won’t.”

Charles was clearly under the mistaken impression that I was tired out, due to not being used to the world outside the castle.

How sweet he is. What a lovely big brother. I didn’t want him to worry anymore, so I just nodded and smiled along.

I wasn’t tired, though. Instead, I was...shocked. And deep in thought. I kept replaying my meeting with Ed over and over in my mind.

The way he addressed me was exactly how an aristocrat's son ought to address a princess. In fact, of the four new friends I'd met today, Ed had been the most formal.

And he was so different, even though he was clearly the same person. My guardian knight Ed was such a brave, masculine man. But the young Ed I'd met today kept his face covered with his hair. It was like he was cloaked in shadow.

And the thing that bothered me most of all was...

Ed doesn't seem to have any memory of our old life at all.

That just didn't make any sense, no matter how many times I went over it in my mind.

I thought that if only I could find Ed again, we'd be able to figure out what to do about everything together. But it was looking like this was a battle I'd have to face all alone.

I put my hand into the pocket of my school uniform, where I felt the Magic Stone roll against my fingers, and I gripped it hard. Pulling my hand carefully out of my pocket, I peered at the blood-red stone glinting on my palm. It was clearly still brimming with magical power.

That wasn't a dream. I knew it wasn't. It was real.

I closed my fingers tight around the Magic Stone again.

Outside the carriage window, I saw small children playing a game of tag along the roadside. I was going to have to fight to save this peaceful land all by myself.

Please, watch over me, somehow...

I pressed my clenched fist to my forehead, thinking about my guardian knight, who had protected me right to the end.



ONE day, about a month later, I decided to practice conjuring magic by myself in the Magic Practice Room after school while waiting for Charles.

From studying the Magic Practice Room reservation board's names, I could

tell that many of Grail Academy's elite students used the room on a regular basis, Ed among them. Pretty much every single day, one of them would have the room reserved. And all of them were in the higher school years.

Right after my classes ended, I stayed there until Charles's last class finished up. That way, I wasn't taking room time away from any of them.

A special room isn't really needed to practice conjuring magic.

But the memory of me blasting away half of the Sunruta castle in my old life had me worried. So I decided to only practice in the Magic Practice Room, just in case. It would cause a lot of trouble if my magical powers suddenly burst out again, and I ended up damaging one of Grail Academy's buildings. Or even worse, injuring any of the other students.

Beakers, flasks, jars of dried medicinal herbs, oil lamps...

The vast room was fully equipped with everything needed for practicing magic. There was also a large, empty training space farther back in the room where Magic Sigils could be drawn. The space was cordoned off into separate areas for this purpose, each about ten feet squared.

I took a seat at a desk laden with magical equipment and concentrated hard on the palm of my hand. Closing my eyes, I tried to summon forth the magical energy inside me.

I don't know how long I sat there. All of a sudden, though, a clanking noise snapped me out of my concentration.

"Ah. You're here again today, I see."

A boy walked in through the open door, half his face obscured by thick black hair. It was strange how he still looked handsome, if only from the nose down. It was Ed, looking this way and smiling serenely.

"Edoile? Oh, is it that time already?"

I checked the clock on the wall to see that it was half-past three—time for Charles's class to end. I quickly got up from the desk.

"I'm so sorry, you had the room reserved, right? I intended to leave a lot earlier..."

“It’s no trouble. How is it going?”

I looked back at Ed, surprised by his polite question.

A month had passed since I’d started at the academy, and Ed was still keeping his distance, still treating me like “Princess Annabel, younger sister of my friend, Charles.” Over the course of the month, though, he’d started talking to me of his own accord more often.

Since our first meeting, I kept finding ways to bring up the Sunruta Kingdom to see if Ed showed any reaction. But his demeanor never changed. Eventually, I had to accept that this Ed had none of the memories of Ed, my guardian knight.

Ed’s question must have been referring to my attempts to conjure magic. The last time I’d encountered him in the Magic Practice Room and he’d asked what I was doing, I’d explained that I was practicing conjuring.

“It’s hopeless. I try to do it just like the textbook says, but...I wonder what I’m doing wrong.”

I shrugged. I really had no idea why it wasn’t working.

Ed rubbed his chin, apparently thinking it over.

“They do say that, basically, it becomes harder to release magical energy the older one gets.”

“Yes, I know.”

I pursed my lips.

Generally, half of the population was able to naturally conjure magic by their tenth birthday. And after that first time, it was just like riding a bicycle. You never forgot how to do it.

But they say that it gets harder the older you become without that first conjuring. I was still only twelve, but knowing that most people had it down by age ten made me feel really behind. And if things carried on this way, the likelihood that I’d never conjure magic got more and more scarily real.

“When a person who can’t conjure magic naturally eventually does release their latent magical energy, it’s generally due to certain types of situations which serve as a catalyst. Most often, it occurs as a self-defense reaction in

times of mortal peril.”

Ed spoke thoughtfully, putting his words together in an intricate way.

“There’s also strong anger, great sorrow, or overwhelming shock. Even great happiness can sometimes prompt it. It happens whenever extremely strong emotions surface suddenly.”

“Strong emotions...”

I thought hard.

Yes, back in that dungeon cell in the Sunruta Kingdom, I was overcome with overwhelming anger and sadness. Knowing that I’d lost Ed, my only ally, who protected me to the very end...I basically lost it.

If I could get another taste of that level of emotion, would I be able to call forth magic? Hmm. That kind of shock wasn’t something I was likely to come by in the course of everyday life.

“Thank you. I’ll have to think it over and see if there’s anything I can do.”

“Please feel free to discuss the matter with me, should you be in need.”

Ed smiled, swinging his bag off his shoulder and placing it on the nearby desk. It made a dull thud, and I could tell it was heavy.

“What is it you come here to do, Edoile?”

“Just magical study. I’m trying to see if I can’t make a new kind of magic.”

“Wow. You’re really passionate about studying...”

“This is nothing. When the famous conjurer Longile perfected Magic Sigils, he was only twenty-one years old.”

Longile was a renowned magician who lived a hundred years ago. He was an unmatched genius sorcerer, and in his seventy years of life, he’d pioneered countless new forms of magic.

What’s more, he’d been the first to ever create a Magic Sigil. In all disciplines, his magical powers were beyond compare, and he dedicated his life to sharing new forms of magic with the world, right up until his death.

In fact, you could credit Najir’s magical excellence to Longile’s achievements.

Despite Longile giving up his inherited title of Count in order to pursue a life as a magical scholar, he was so well-respected that he ended up being given the title of Magic Count. This placed him between a Count and a Marquess on the peerage scale, and he'd eventually gone on to marry the third-born royal princess.

To the best of my recollection, Longile remains the only person to ever attain the title of Magic Count.

And, since he had no children or even adopted heirs, the peerage of the Magic Count had died out, and no such family went by that title in Najir to this day.

"Well, you're only thirteen. There's still a chance, surely?"

"Which is why I'm studying."

Ed looked over at me, his expression softening. Then he pulled a magic text from his bag.

It was a big, fat book and looked extremely difficult. I spotted the author's name—Longile. Edoile was clearly reviewing his works.

"You're so impressive, Edoile. Not only are you a great swordsman, but you're also so proficient with magic as well."

"*Hmm?* A great swordsman?" Ed's voice had grown doubtful.

"Yes. You're a skilled conjuror, but your sword skills are also great too, aren't they?"

"No...my swordsmanship doesn't amount to much."

"Really? Well...I'm sure it will, soon. That's something to look forward to!"

Ed blinked his red eyes suspiciously from behind his thick black bangs.

"Why would you think that?"

"Well...I just know."

"You just know?"

"Yes. I do."

I chuckled mysteriously.

My guardian knight Ed was known as The Magic Knight, and his sword and sorcery skills were each on par with the other.

In fact, his sword work was so beautiful and graceful, he was often compared to a waterbird dancing on the surface of a lake.

In this timeline, I hadn't yet seen Ed practicing the sword. He said his skills didn't amount to much, but I was certain he would soon blossom into the great swordsman I knew.

That's when I realized that the clock on the wall was now suddenly reading four o'clock.

Oh no! Charles would be worrying about me.

"Look at the time! I have to go. Charles will be beside himself."

"Indeed. May I escort you to the carriage yard?"

"I'm fine, thank you."

"Then please take care on your way back to the castle."

Ed gave me another gentle smile.

It had been so long since I'd been able to have such a good conversation with Ed. I'd completely lost track of time.

I smiled back, waving as I hurried off to the carriage yard.

4. The First Outing in Town

I was just nodding off into a doze when the sound of my pencil rolling out of my hand and clattering onto the floor woke me up with a jump. I looked around in a fluster, but the other students remained focused on the blackboard, pencils flying across their notebooks.

I'd dreamed about that moment again.

Looking down, I reached into my pocket and sighed with relief at the familiar touch of the round object which rolled around beneath my fingertips.

"Miss Gottenheim. Do you recall what must be mixed with powdered root of Mandrake to form a magical catalyst?"

Suddenly finding myself called on by the teacher, I scrambled to my feet. My chair bumped against the desk behind me with a bang, sending it shaking. It seemed my little mid-class nap had not gone unnoticed.

"Yes. Sea salt and powdered frog eggs must be added to the mixture under a new moon to produce the reaction."

"Very good. That was correct."

After I reeled off that smooth response, the teacher pushed up her glasses with her right hand's forefinger and turned back to the blackboard. I could tell Oliphia was muffling a giggle behind her hand from the seat beside me as she looked over at me.

Hmm, I recall Oliphia saying that she didn't like that teacher very much. She'd described her as crabby. And yes, she often seemed to be quite crabby. There was no need to throw such a difficult question at me simply because I was sleepy during class.

But this was my second go at this life, and a question like that was child's play for me.

I raised an eyebrow and stuck my tongue out at Oliphia. Then we both had to bury our mouths in our sleeves to keep from laughing explosively. I pretended not to notice Claude, who was eyeing us both with mild exasperation from his desk across the room.



WHILE my classmates had kept a watchful distance from me at first, they began to warm to me after seeing me chatting with Oliphia and Claude.

Three months had passed since I'd started at Grail Academy, and by now, the other students had started approaching me and talking to me normally.

Weirdly, though, whenever any of the male students tried to talk to me, Claude would appear by my side and take me away to "discuss" something or other, so I hadn't really gotten to know any of the boys yet. Each time when it became clear Claude had nothing of substance to discuss, I would get annoyed. But Claude would only say, grave-faced: "I value my life and future as much as the next person, you know." It was odd.

Anyway, with my eighteen-year-old brain, the lessons at Grail Academy barely gave me pause.

Grail Academy's curriculum was the finest in Najir, but my private tutors in the old timeline had also been some of the finest around. As a result, the lessons at Grail were a cinch for me.

All except for one...

"Ugh! I just can't do it!"

Whoops. I lost my composure for a moment. I quickly held my tongue, remembering that a lady should never lose her temper.

But it was just so frustrating!

I glared at the empty container in front of me.

We were in the middle of a Practical Magic class. The teacher had tasked us with conjuring water in an empty container and trying to cause a wave to roll on its surface.

To repeat: conjure up some water and create a wave on its surface.

And yet, my container remained maddeningly bone dry and empty.

Even though I'd recited the incantation over and over!

As magical a country as Najir was, children weren't expected to study practical magic so much at the age of only twelve. But in order to be able to use magic well in the future, we were being taught the basics.

For example, conjuring light breezes, making feathers float in the air, and causing small waves—simple things like that.

But all of those fundamentals relied on first mastering the most basic element: using one's inner magical energy.

In terms of the world as a whole, there were a lot of people who couldn't use magic. But in Najir, non-magical folk were rare. By their fifth year at the school, every single student at Grail could conjure magic.

Magical ability was mostly hereditary, and as Najir royalty, I ought to have been brimming with it. Or so I was told. But what did I know?

I focused my energy again. Visualizing the magical power inside me, trying to bring it to my fingertips...*Hnnng*... No...I couldn't do it.

The class ended without me being able to conjure so much as a water droplet.

"Bel. Don't be disheartened. I'm sure you'll be able to do it next time."

Oliphia noticed my distress and quickly tried to comfort me. I looked at Oliphia's container—there was water in it. In fact, it was so full, it was about to overflow.

Ugh, I was so useless and pathetic.

I wondered if that hot, blazing feeling inside that I'd experienced in the dungeon cell was what it always felt like to conjure magic. I'd been trying to recreate that feeling, but I just couldn't get it.

I sighed to myself.

"A princess who can't even use magic..."

Daniel's cruel insult still stung, like a thorn stuck in my heart. Even if I was married off to another country this time around, and not the Sunruta Kingdom,

wouldn't I just end up hearing the same kind of insults? I had to do something about this...but all of my efforts came to naught.

As I sank into my gloomy thoughts, Oliphia watched me with concern and then hesitantly spoke.

"Hey, Bel. Why don't we go into town tomorrow? I was planning to go and buy a new hair ribbon. If you came along too, it would be so much fun. You know...a nice change of pace?"

"Town? Tomorrow?"

I'd been sitting with my head in my hands, elbows on the desk, but I now looked up with surprise.

"I'd love to go to town!"

"Really? Yay! Tell your parents tonight."

"I will."

I nodded with excitement.

Since I'd started at Grail, I'd had a lot of opportunities to see how the townsfolk lived during the daily carriage rides to school and back. But I hadn't actually been to town myself.

I wondered how the wares sold at the town shops differed from the wares sold by the merchants who came to make deliveries at the castle. And I also wondered what was down all those little side streets I could see from the carriage windows as we passed down the main street. *I'd love to go to one of those little "café's" I've been taking note of with great interest.*

Just imagining it made me break into an excited smile.

I'd been feeling so down over my magical failures, but now I could feel my spirits lift a little.



THE yummy scent of baking bread. The young girls selling flowers on the street. The smiling man who thrust fruits and vegetables under the noses of passersby. Everything was so...novel! The next day, as Oliphia and I walked

around town on our shopping excursion, I was wide-eyed and mystified by all of the unfamiliar sights and smells.

“Hey, look. I’ve never seen so much fruit in one place!”

“That’s the greengrocer’s shop. It’s a special shop where they sell fruits and vegetables.”

“What are those people doing by that old well? There’s foam everywhere.”

“That’s the laundry. They wash clothes for other people in exchange for money.”

“How fascinating.”

We were accompanied by Olthe, our guard and guide, who was a servant of the Anglate family. Of course, since this was my first trip out, I had my guards with me as well. But I’d insisted on bringing only the bare minimum and having them hang back. I hadn’t wanted to stand out too much, walking around town surrounded by burly men.

Olthe was friendly and answered every question we had with a big smile.

While this was my first trip to town, Olphia had been before, but only a handful of times. So everything seemed new and exciting to us both.

In front of the well, there were three big oak tubs, where a group of middle-aged women stood scrubbing soapy linens on washboards. I’d never seen this sight before, and I wondered if the castle linens were washed in a similar fashion. It was all so fascinating. Perhaps I’d head down to the castle laundry and see for myself sometime.

“Pretty girl, how about this for your lovely golden hair?”

As I bumbled along looking around, an old merchant called to me from his roadside stall. He was holding out a bright-red hair ribbon with a smile.

“Oh, it’s so pretty.”

I stopped to look.

Olphia and I were wearing our Grail Academy uniforms, which identified us as rich young women, but nobody noticed that the princess was in their presence.

I'd never been spoken to so openly by so many people before, and I was enjoying it immensely.

"Hey, Phia. Can we take a look?"

"Hmm? Sure. But don't you have much finer things than that at home?"

"Yes, but I still want to look. It's so pretty."

"Oh yes, it is. Maybe I'll take a look as well."

Oliphia and I approached the stall and took a look at the wares.

The old merchant handed the ribbon to me right away. I took it in my hand and held it up to see it better. Up close, I could see that it wasn't a high-grade item, to be sure, but the red ribbon was attached securely to a hair slide, and it was very pretty.

"I think I'll buy it. To commemorate our first trip to town."

"Then I'll buy one as well. And then we can both have matching ones to remember this day!"

Oliphia picked up another ribbon in yellow, which would look very pretty indeed against her brown hair.

She held it up, and yes, it suited her very much.

Unable to resist, we both decided to buy the matching hair ribbons.

I handed over the coin I'd brought with me to the old merchant, who immediately tapped it against one of his own coins. He must have been testing to see if it was real. Seemingly satisfied, he put both coins away in his pouch and handed the hair ribbon to me.

"I bought it!"

This was my first time exchanging money for goods in either timeline. Delighted, I thanked the merchant.

As we walked through the town, I spotted many small alleys leading off the main street.

Peeking down one, I could see that there weren't many people milling about there, but there were shops with noticeboards out front. The closest

noticeboard had a shoe carved in the wood. It must have been a shoe shop or a place to get shoes fixed.

“What’s down this alley?”

“The alleys have a few small shops with spaces above for people to live. But it’s not for you, Little Miss, or you, Princess.”

“It’s not for us? What do you mean?”

Olphia and I exchanged glances in response to Olthe’s warning.

“The back alleys are full of ruffians. We’re here to protect you, but there’s no need to go actively looking for trouble.”

“Hmm...”

I peered down the narrow alleyway once again.

I could see children about my age, or maybe younger, playing further down the alley. Was it okay for them to play there since they already lived in the area? I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t interested, but I figured I’d better stay away since I’d been warned.

“More importantly...”

Olthe put his hand on each of our shoulders, ushering us away.

“Is anyone hungry yet? Let’s take a little break.”

I placed my hand on my tummy. Yes, I’d been so enraptured by the town, I’d failed to notice my grumbling belly.

“Do you mean take a break, like to go and eat at a café?”

“Of course.”

“Yay!”

Olphia and I both squealed with excitement at the exact same moment. I hadn’t been expecting to have a snack in town as well as shopping, so I was delighted.

We entered the first place that caught our eye, one of those “café’s” with the adorable red awnings I’d spotted from the carriage window.

We picked a table by the window so we could people-watch and ordered fresh-squeezed orange juice. Actually, we really wanted some of that “coffee” stuff that everyone seemed to drink each morning, but Olthe said we shouldn’t, that it was “too soon” for us.

The cake I ordered for dessert was much more crumbly than the ones I usually ate at the castle, and it was hard to get it onto my fork. Giving up, I grabbed it in my hand and stuffed it into my mouth that way. Suddenly self-conscious, I peeked at Olthe and my guards, checking to see if this was improper behavior. But they all gallantly pretended not to notice.

Then I peeked at Olphia. She seemed to have had the same idea as me, and we locked eyes while both clutching handfuls of cake. We started giggling, and it was all so funny that we ended up laughing out loud.

It was all such fun!

The cake was dry and a little hard, but it made for a very delicious snack along with the orange juice.

Then, I realized something.

Hadn’t I declared, while locked up in that dungeon cell, that if I could do it all over again, I would “laugh out loud, go shopping in town, and eat the things I wanted to eat without a care?”

Now I could *do* all of those things.

I kept thinking about my guardian knight, the soothing grip of his hand around mine as we clung to each other through that dungeon cell’s filthy drainage hole.

A kind man, who was stronger than anyone, more loyal than anyone, and who had been with me until the end.

I put my hand in my pocket and felt the Magic Stone with my fingertip.

This life I was living...wasn’t it a gift from him?

It’s all right. I know I can do my best.

Starting tomorrow, I was going to study magic harder than ever. And then I was going to have a happy life...in *this* timeline.

I silently vowed this to myself...and withdrew my hand from my pocket.

5. Magical Practice

AFTER magic class, I was walking with Oliphia along the covered walkway to our next class when I heard a violent clashing of metal and came to a stop. The smashing and bashing sounds continued, coming from the other side of a tall stone wall.

“What’s that all about?”

“Oh, that’s probably sword fighting practice. Sounds like a double session if they’re still at it during the break.”

I stared at the wall with interest after Oliphia enlightened me.

Once Grail Academy boys advanced to a certain year, they could take sword fighting classes. Our fifth-year boys started recently too, and Claude never missed an opportunity to complain about his blisters lately.

Grail Academy was attended by children of the elite, but they didn’t all have peerages to inherit or family businesses to take over. The others aspired to be actors or politicians or go down the path of becoming Magical Knights or joining the Imperial Armed Guard.

In fact, many of Grail Academy’s students aspired to become knights. Oliphia told me the passion they showed in practice sessions made them quite the spectacle to watch.

“We can watch them training from over there. Do you want to see it?”

Oliphia gestured further down the walkway, where the tall stone wall was staggered, making it lower in one area, with steps leading up. That seemed to be the entrance.

By the entrance, I saw a gaggle of female students gathered around. It seemed they’d come to watch the training session too.

“He’s amazing.”

“Prince Charles must be down there.”

“My brother Charles?”

“Yep.”

Walking ahead, Oliphia trotted up the stairs, looking over her shoulder at me with a grin. The wind caught her golden-brown hair and sent it rippling, the sunlight glinting off the silky strands. I quickly ran up the stairs after her.

Come to think of it, as well as being the prince, my brother was also kind and handsome, so he was popular with a lot of the girls. I often forgot that since I knew him so well, and at home, he could be kind of a dork.

We joined the watching girls and peered over the lip of the wall. From there, we had a great view of the training area.

The training area was a stark, walled-in section of the grounds around 160 feet square, with only one break in the stone walls—the section of steps we were standing on. That was the only way in and out.

Down in the wide-open space, a few dozen male students were gathered in pairs. All held practice swords and were solemnly sparring.

“Wow, amazing.”

The castle had its own defense force, so naturally, there was a training area on the castle grounds. And every year, a tournament was held to determine who the strongest sword fighter was.

But I’d never seen that, so this was my first time seeing real sword fighting practice.

The boys had only begun training with the sword a few years prior, so they probably looked like kids pretending to be knights compared to the skilled professionals at the castle. But it was still quite an impressive sight.

“Oh look, there’s Charles.”

I spotted an especially bright blond head among the throng of sparring students, and I raised my hand to get his attention. But Charles was entirely focused on training and didn’t notice me at all.

As I looked more closely, I identified Charles's sparring partner: Dohle.

They were in the same year, but Dohle was almost twice Charles's size and was battering away with his sword as Charles defended. It was obvious there was a big power imbalance there. No wonder Charles hadn't had time to notice me.

I looked with interest at the next pair, and when I saw who was there, my heart skipped a beat.

His glossy, crow-black hair shone in the sunlight. Even from far away, I could see his handsome features and noble-looking nose. Usually, he had his hair hanging in his eyes, but today, he'd slicked it back so it wouldn't get in the way of practice, giving me a good view of his face for once.

Ed...

The two seemed well-matched.

His red eyes were fixed on his opponent, craftily sizing up the other boy's level of swordsmanship. As he blocked each parry with his practice sword, a dull crashing sound resounded. With each blow, Ed braced himself, his black hair shimmering.

In my old life, Ed had been unmatched when it came to swordsmanship. He was so good that even I'd heard about it, and I knew nothing about swords or the Magic Knights. He also used to always win whenever he entered the Magic Knights' sword fighting tournaments.

I should have gone to watch one of those tournaments...

Regret filled me as I thought about how I'd never again have the chance to see the original Ed display his skill as my knight.

Just then, the younger Ed clashed swords with his opponent, and the impact rang out with a loud, violent sound.

Even though technically my guardian knight, Edoile Licht La Boulacherie, and the young sword-fighting boy I was looking at now were the same—they also really weren't. This world's Ed knew nothing of what I'd been through. And he certainly wasn't my knight...he was just a boy who went to the same school I

did.

And yet, as I watched him solemnly wield his sword, he reminded me so much of the old Ed...*my* Ed.

“Whoops, we’d better get going, or we’ll be late for the next class.”

We’d only been watching a few minutes when Oliphia checked her watch and gasped. Reluctantly, we returned to the walkway and began heading to our next class.

“Hey, Phia... Does Grail Academy have a sword-fighting tournament?”

“It sure does. It’s open for sixth, seventh, and eighth-year students. And scouts from the Imperial Armed Guard even come to observe. Things get pretty heated since everyone wants to get scouted and join them after graduation.”

Oliphia’s eyes sparkled as she explained the tournament on our way to class.

“Interesting...”

Maybe Ed would get scouted at this tournament and join the Magical Order of Knights that way.

“I’d really like to watch the next tournament...”

“Oh, yeah. It’s like a big festival, everyone goes wild. It’s held right at the start of the new school year. We’ll be sixth years when the next one happens. I wonder if someone in our class will make it to the finals. Oh, I can’t wait!”

As she talked about the tournaments from past years, Oliphia’s cheeks went red with excitement.

“It sounds really exciting.”

I smiled and nodded.

Ed’s beautiful swordsmanship, as elegant as a dance—I wanted to see it in this world too.



ON the way home that day, Charles seemed especially tired. He swung up into the carriage and flopped down on the seat, sighing deeply.

“You seem tired, Charles.”

“I had sword fighting lessons today. My opponent was really strong. I mean, I’m strong too, you know? But I have to give him credit where credit’s due...”

While grumbling away, Charles was being surprisingly talkative. He could just say he lost, but he seemed to need to explain why. Was he secretly a sore loser?

“I know. I saw you.”

“What? Today?”

“Yes. I waved at you, but you were too focused on your opponent to notice me.”

“Huh. You should have called out louder.” Charles smiled regretfully. “Anyway, I was outmatched today. You see, I was paired against Dohle.”

“Yes, he seemed very big and strong.”

I chipped in to help console Charles.

In my memories of the old world, Dohle and Ed had been the two top-ranked fighters in the armed forces. Ed was in the Magical Order of Knights, who fought using mostly magic as well as the sword. And Dohle was in the Imperial Armed Guard, where sword fighting was vital. Since both fighting disciplines were so different, it was hard to say who was superior. But there was no doubt that they were both formidable knights.

“Charles...who’s the stronger fighter between Dohle and Edoile?”

It was a casual question.

In my old life, the two of them were so well-known for their skill. I figured they must have had a rivalry dating back to childhood.

But Charles was looking at me with confusion.

“Ed? Why are you mentioning Ed?”

“Ed’s a gifted swordsman too, right?”

“Ed? A swordsman?” Charles stared at me, taken aback. Then he broke into a chuckle. “Ed’s sword fighting isn’t up to much. Magic is where Ed shines. No,

Dohle's the swordsman."

"Really? Ed's not gifted with the sword too?"

Now it was my turn to be surprised.

Ed, not a gifted swordsman? True, when we spoke in the Magic Practice Room a while ago, Ed had said his sword skills weren't up to much. But I'd thought he was just being humble.

Was it possible he really wasn't gifted with the sword?

That came as a shock to me.

After all, wasn't Ed famous for his graceful swing, as light as dancing and yet deadly accurate?

"Speaking of Ed, it's funny. Until recently, he talked about sword training like it was a chore, but these days he's really started taking it seriously. I wonder if something inspired him."

I listened to Charles mumbling away, but I was too busy thinking to respond.

This new world I was in...there were some seemingly major differences between it and my old world.

Riding in the carriage that day, a tiny flicker of doubt began to grow inside me...



AT Grail Academy, there were three types of magic class: Practical Magic, Magical Theory, and Applied Magic.

Practical Magic, as the name suggested, involved actually practicing spellcasting.

This was my worst class. After all, I couldn't conjure magic, so how could I practice the ins and outs of it? I always did my best to follow the teacher's instructions to the letter, but I couldn't so much as levitate a dandelion puff.

In Magical Theory, we learned about the history of magic in our world, as well as the theories behind why we could cast magic. It was all book learning, and at some point, we'd end up studying the works of the great magician Longile,

whom Ed had mentioned to me.

I may have been terrible at casting magic, but I shone in Magical Theory. After all, I'd studied most of the material in my old life and it really paid off.

In the final type of magical class, Applied Magic, we studied the ethics of casting spells as well as the various tools of the magical trade. For example, we had classes on magical potions, elixirs, Magic Sigils, and so on.

That day after school, I holed up in the Magic Practice Room and waited for Charles's class to finish while I went over my study notes from that day's Applied Magic class. The vast room was silent and empty as I practiced drawing Magic Sigils, checking my textbook every few moments for reference.

I was working on a wind-summoning Magic Sigil we'd just learned earlier. It was a beginner level exercise. I drew three circles on the floor, one inside the other, with white limestone chalk. After that, I carefully wrote the incantation in ancient runes.

"Okay. I think that's done it?"

I'd drawn it very neatly, and when I compared it to the diagram in the textbook, they looked identical to me. As far as I could tell, anyway.

"Yep. Looks good."

I mumbled to myself, satisfied for a moment.

Agh, it was so maddening to have perfected a Magic Sigil while not being able to test it out!

"What are you doing?"

"Yeek!"

I leaped in fright as someone spoke suddenly behind me. Turning, I saw that Ed was standing there. His red eyes were full of curiosity as he gazed at my Magic Sigil.

"Edoile! You startled me!"

I'd been so focused on drawing my Magic Sigil, I hadn't heard the door open. I placed a hand over my pounding heart and tried to breathe.

“A Magic Sigil, hmm?”

“Yes. We studied them in Applied Magic today. I drew it pretty well, don’t you think?”

I puffed my chest out proudly, pointing to the floor. It was my first time drawing one by myself, and I thought I did a really good job.

“Er...”

Ed tilted his head, looking uncomfortable. When he spoke, his tone was apologetic. “You made a mistake right there.”

“You’re kidding!”

“No, I’m not. Look at the textbook again. Those sections shouldn’t be connected.”

Ed pointed to the diagram in the textbook I was holding, then to the problematic area of my Magic Sigil. It was true that mine had the lines connecting while there was a space in the textbook diagram.

“That’s such a little detail—I didn’t notice.”

“Yes, it’s quite complex.” Ed nodded in agreement. “Did you try casting the spell? Nothing happened, right?”

Ed was looking at me curiously, and I knew there was no malice in his question. All the same, I felt my heart sink.

This was such elementary magic, I should have been able to test it by calling forth just a little bit of magic power. I had seen the other students in the Applied Magic class testing out their Magic Sigils that way. But...

“I can’t...”

I started pouting, despite myself.

“You can’t?”

Ed tilted his head in confusion, looking at me, waiting for me to explain.

“I can’t summon magic! It’s not my fault!”

I scowled at him and Ed’s eyes widened. Ugh, I could have kicked myself.

A few months ago, I'd confessed my lack of magical ability to Ed. But since it had been a while since then, he was obviously under the mistaken impression I'd improved. I was sure he'd never have dreamed I was still floundering about, unable to pull off even the most basic of spells.

"I'm sorry."

"No, it's fine. It's not your fault. It's me, I'm useless. I'm sorry...after all that advice you gave me and everything..."

I waved off Ed's concerns.

But Ed continued to frown, looking honestly troubled.

Ugh, why was I such a failure? Now I had Ed feeling sorry for me. Why couldn't I get it together?

But then...

Plop!

I heard an awful, wet sound, and at the same moment, I felt something fall from the ceiling onto my head. It was heavy and sticky and...

"Huh?"

I reached up slowly, and my fingers made contact with something slightly warm and slimy and wriggly...

I looked at Ed, stiff with shock, but he was looking at the top of my head in silence. Gathering my courage, I poked the slimy thing.

"Ribbit."

Huh? "Ribbit?"

With a shaking hand, I grasped the thing, pulled it off my head and looked at it. I almost fainted right there on the spot.

"Eeeeeek!"



I screamed out loud, forgetting all sense of decorum.

I mean, could you blame me? I was holding a four-inch-long toad in my hand. It must have been one of the ones they bred in the Magic Practice Room for making potions.

“Ew! Gross! Get it off!”

I continued screaming, tears in my eyes as Ed quickly trapped the toad in a basket, muttering an incantation under his breath. That done, he took a long look at me, standing there wiping the tears off my cheeks.

“Hmm, it didn’t work.”

“What?”

“This worked to get my little sister’s magic abilities flowing. Was it not shocking enough for you?” Ed rubbed his chin, muttering. I just stood there, dumbfounded.

Didn’t work? Not shocking enough? So, Ed did that on purpose?

“Edoile! That was really cruel of you!”

“I’m sorry. Next time, I’ll try making it something more shocking.”

“That’s not the problem here!”

“Maybe a scare instead then?”

“!!!”

As I stood there stiffly, tears still streaming down my cheeks, Ed attempted to gaze at me with an air of solemnity. Within a few moments, though, he burst out laughing.

He looked so amused, it was hard to stay mad at him.

And besides...

His red eyes softened his whole face into a gentle smile.

Ed had always kept me, the princess, at an appropriate arm’s length. This was my first time seeing him laugh out loud around me, in this world at least. As I watched him, I felt a funny flipping feeling in my stomach. I pressed my hand to

my chest, where my heart was suddenly pounding.

“Please forgive me, Princess Annabel.”

“No, I don’t think I will!”

I looked away, nose in the air. Ed remained silent. A moment later, I peeked at him to check his expression. He met my gaze head-on, and I quickly looked away again.

“Well, that puts me in quite a bind.”

Ed looked perturbed, scratching his jaw. Seeing him that way, I got a sudden urge to keep up the haughty act and tease him a little more.

“Hmph, perhaps if you agreed to tutor me in magic...”

“Excuse me?”

“If you agreed to be my private magic tutor, I’d be willing to forgive this... transgression. After all, Charles is always saying you’re leagues ahead of everyone else in your year.”

“And you’d be willing to forgive me in exchange for that?”

“I believe I would.”

I folded my arms and looked expectantly at Ed.

A sly smile crept across his face.

“As you wish. But I’ll have you know I’m a strict teacher. If you slack off, I might just have to keep you practicing all night long.”

“Huh?”

He was planning to be that harsh with me?

I looked up at Ed in surprise. He met my gaze steadily at first, but then his shoulders began to shake, and finally, he began to splutter with laughter.

“That’s so mean! You were teasing me again!”

“I do apologize. You’re just so cute when you’re annoyed, Princess Annabel.”

How rude. *Is he teasing me the way he teases his sister?* I wondered.

“Edoile! It’s not nice to tease others. You besmirch your family name!”

“Ah, speaking of names...just Ed is fine.”

Ed grinned at me. I got the feeling he was trying to get one over on me, and I found myself filled with a determination to give back as good as I got.

“It’s highly inappropriate for a magician and his apprentice to be speaking so... informally.”

“Princess Annabel, I assure you that I intend to always retain the proper decorum around a royal lady such as yourself.”

Decorum? Is that what one would call conjuring a toad on a person’s head? I was SO washing my hair as soon as I got home.

I glared at him, and Ed chuckled wryly, clearly reading my expression.

“To ensure I never forget my place, I suggest that I refer to you as ‘Princess’ only henceforth.”

On Ed’s tongue, the word stirred memories within me.

Princess.

In the other world, that was how my knight Ed always addressed me. From the first day we met to our final moment together.

I could still hear Ed’s final words to me, that low, masculine voice, so different from the youthful Ed before me now... *Princess.*

“Is it not to your liking?”

Ed was gazing at me with concern as I’d suddenly fallen silent.

“I like it very much. So, I should refer to you as simply ‘Ed’ from now on?”

“If it pleases you, Princess.”

Ed’s bright-red eyes crinkled with his smile.



IN order to use magic, we first need to call magic forth. It sounds fundamental, and it is. Where no magic power arises, no magic can be conjured.

“Ugh. It’s not going to happen today, I can tell...”

“Don’t be so quick to give up. Your Magic Sigil drawing skills have improved in leaps and bounds.”

“But Magic Sigils don’t work without magic power.”

“Indeed, that is true.”

“So who cares how neatly my Magic Sigils are drawn if I can’t even use them?”

“Hmm...”

Ed smiled wryly with clenched teeth.

It was just as I thought. Even the best-drawn Magic Sigil in the world would be useless to me until I could channel magic.

I stood pouting while Ed watched me with his brows drawn together in consternation. Then he raised his hand to my head.

I stood still as he proceeded to soothingly pat my head and stroke my hair. I figured this was his way of cheering his little sister out of any bad moods she might be having.

Since accepting the role of my magical tutor three months ago, Ed had been tutoring me twice a week as promised. And yet, I still couldn’t channel even the slightest bit of magic. And as a result, I was still unable to cast even the simplest of spells.

On the bright side, though, I’d had no trouble mastering the memorization of incantations and the correct drawing of Magic Sigils, since no magical ability was needed for any of that.

Incidentally, I still retained perfect memory of all the incantations I’d learned in my previous, non-magical life as well. That’s why I was able to use spells the very moment my magic sparked to life.

“Hey, Ed...”

“Yes, Princess?”

I looked up at Ed, and his hand ceased its tentative stroking of my hair.

“Are there any Magic Sigils that you can use without actual magical power?”

“Without magical power? So far, I’ve not heard of such a thing.”

“Oh.”

I looked away from Ed, cupping my chin in my hand and turning my attention back to the Magic Sigil I’d drawn. It was flawless, but I couldn’t use it. I’d been hoping that I could still use them somehow, even if I couldn’t conjure my own magic, but it seemed that it wasn’t to be.

As I gazed at the intricate, interlacing circles, decorated with ancient runes, a sudden doubt sprang to my mind.

“Hey, Ed...”

“Yes, Princess?”

“You can’t conjure magic if you’re wearing an anti-magic collar, right?”

“An anti-magic collar?”

Ed’s voice was suddenly suspicious, and I quickly bit my tongue.

Anti-magic collars are devices intended to block the wearer from conjuring magic. They are considered a humiliating infringement on human rights by all magic-using folk.

The only time you usually hear of anti-magic collars being used is by slave traders, who traffic magicians for illegal human trade.

Or to give another example—when imprisoning a criminal who possesses enough magical power to blast clean out of his cell and escape.

In the old timeline, Ed was fitted with a black anti-magic collar while he was imprisoned with me.

“Sorry, that was a weird question... I was just thinking how wonderful it would be if there were Magic Sigils even non-magic folk could use...it would open the door to so many new possibilities for all!”

I was babbling, eager to paint over what I’d just said about anti-magic collars. Even so, I meant every word. *Imagine if everyone could use Magic Sigils without needing magical ability. How convenient that would be.*

There was one thing that had been weighing on my mind ever since I’d begun

studying magic anew.

Back in that dungeon with Ed, I knew I hadn't imagined that black anti-magic collar. And yet Ed had sent me back to my twelve-year-old life somehow, ostensibly by using magic. So, he must have had some other method of casting spells without using magic, right?

"For everyone to use magic?" Ed was thinking deeply about it, arms crossed. "If such a thing were true, it would challenge everything we know about magic being only for those with innate magical ability."

Ed trailed off then, looking at me with a smile. A reassuring gleam twinkled in his red eyes, and he looked kind and gentle in the moment.

"You'll be able to conjure magic, Princess, I assure you."

"All right."

I nodded and smiled, my hand finding itself in my pocket again. I felt the hardness of the Magic Stone against my fingertips.

"Magic Stones..."

"Magic Stones?"

"Can you make a Magic Stone if you're wearing an anti-magic collar?"

"Making a Magic Stone requires concentrating the individual's magic power into a crystallized, tangible form. It's internal magic, not external. So an anti-magic collar wouldn't necessarily impede the process."

"I see..."

So it wasn't really so strange that Ed was able to make the Magic Stone for me, even under those circumstances.

"Can *you* make a Magic Stone, Ed?"

"Me? Yes, of course I can."

Ed lifted one hand, palm facing up, and frowned with concentration. His expression was so serious, unlike any expression of his I'd seen before, and I realized my pulse had quickened.

"Princess."

“Yes?”

Ed held his hand out to me.

“Here.”

“What is it?”

“My Magic Stone.”

I looked at Ed and then quickly dropped my gaze to his palm. A blood-red marble-shaped Magic Stone was nestled there. When I picked it up, it rolled around on my palm. It appeared identical to the Magic Stone I carried myself.

“It’s beautiful. It’s the same color as your eyes.”

“Beautiful? Don’t you mean gross? I mean, that color...it’s the color of blood.”
Ed smiled ruefully.

So Ed didn’t like the color of his eyes?

“Is that why you always hide your face behind your hair?”

Ed’s eyes widened for a second. Then he looked down, seemingly unable to answer me.

I took his silence as the answer.

Yes, his red eyes were the color of blood, and many people potentially found that color detestable. But to me, the red hue was gorgeous.

“It’s not gross. Deep red is the color of beautiful roses. The woman who receives your stone someday will love it, I’m sure.”

Magic Stones held important symbolism for us magical folk. They were mostly given as wedding gifts or to symbolize one’s undying love for another.

And red roses symbolize love and romance, after all.

It wasn’t like that when my knight Ed gave me his Magic Stone, though. It didn’t hold that meaning. But in another situation...with another woman...well, she’d be happy, wouldn’t she?

Ed’s red eyes widened in surprise as he looked at me again.

“You don’t think it’s gross?”

“Not at all. And you’ve got such a handsome face...you should show it more. You’re wasting those pretty La Boulacherie genes, you know.”

“When I was younger, some other kids my age said my eyes were gross...that I looked like a demon with my black hair and red eyes. Charles was the only one who stood up for me. He said my look was rare and unusual.”

“That sounds like Charles. I’m sure those kids were just jealous of you anyway.”

I could picture that scene as if I’d been there myself. Ed was handsome and from a prominent magical family. Those kids must have had to reach hard to find something to make Ed feel bad about himself.

I reached out and pushed Ed’s thick curtain of bangs aside.

Beneath the bangs, I could see his catlike eyes, looking at me with mild surprise. The high nose bridge, the well-balanced mouth...it was really and truly a handsome face. And I could also see myself, reflected in those red eyes...

“You’re wonderful, Ed. You should be more confident.”

I smiled at him, and his pale cheeks began to turn pink. He looked away, as if unaccustomed to compliments.

Eventually, I handed the Magic Stone back to Ed, who was still blushing slightly. As he gazed at it upon his open palm, it shimmered for a moment before disappearing. It must have been reabsorbed back inside him.

“I hope to grant my stone to someone special someday.”

“I had no idea you were such a romantic, Ed. But I’m sure you’ll find that special someone.” I chuckled.

One day, Ed’s handsome looks and gentlemanly ways would win him many female admirers. And, as the second son of a duke, he would be well-sought after by many a nobleman as a potential son-in-law. I hadn’t paid it much attention in my old life, but Ed had been many a young woman’s dream then too.

Red eyes and black hair weren’t such a big issue.

That would surely be proven as soon as Ed entered adult society.

Ed would one day give his Magic Stone to a woman, someone special...but it wouldn't be me. For I was destined to be nothing more than his charge to be protected in his role as a knight.

That realization caused a prickling, painful feeling in my chest I couldn't identify.

6. My Thirteenth Birthday

I awoke that morning to find a bouquet of beautiful dahlias on the bedside table.

“Good morning, Princess Annabel.”

“Good morning, Ellie. Those are some lovely flowers on the table today.”

Ellie looked at me with a meaningful smile. I looked back at her, wondering what was up.

“These are your favorite flowers, aren’t they? Happy birthday, Princess. Now you are thirteen.”

“Pardon?”

I looked at Ellie, taken aback.

Happy birthday? Thirteen?

I did some quick mental calculations.

Ah yes, today was indeed my thirteenth birthday. I’d completely forgotten, since time had gotten sort of jumbled for me since I’d been transported back.

“Thank you, I’d completely forgotten.”

“Oh my. You mustn’t forget your own birthday. It’s the most special day of the year!”

Ellie chuckled and produced a small box from her front apron pocket.

“This is from me.”

“You got me something? What is it?”

Curious, I took the box. Sitting cross-legged on the bed, I opened it to find a pretty pencil case inside.

It was made of light-blue cloth, with an embroidered white bird sitting on a

branch. Ellie must have sewn it herself during her breaks.

“You’ve seemed to enjoy school so much since you started going. I thought school supplies of some kind would make a good present.”

“It’s adorable! Thank you so much. I’ll treasure it.”

“You’re very welcome. I’m so pleased that you like it.” Ellie smiled, her eyes twinkling.

Did Ellie give me a present in the old timeline when I turned thirteen? I feel like she always gave me a gift of some sort every year, but I couldn’t remember any of them. I was certain she’d never given me a pencil case though.

It sounds obvious, but I was hit again with the realization that this was a different world now.

It’s going to be all right. I CAN change the future.

The pencil case was proof of that.

At the breakfast table, my family wished me a happy birthday. And for my present, I received a beautifully carved silver hand mirror. It wasn’t the sort of gift you’d give a child. It was a real, grown-up present.

“It’s beautiful!”

When I opened the gift, I was stunned for a moment. Receiving such a mature gift for my thirteenth birthday made me want to get up and dance. It transpired that Mother had personally chosen the present, and she and Father exchanged happy smiles, clearly pleased by my reaction.

“Bel, this is from me.”

“What’s this, now?”

Charles gave me a different present he had selected himself. I unwrapped it to find a large hair ribbon inside. It was a bit childish, but I was pleased he’d picked something out especially for me.

“Thank you, Charles. I’ll wear it to school today.”

I was wearing a half-up hairstyle today, and I quickly tied the ribbon to my hair. Charles smiled, and my parents looked on warmly.

It was the start of a wonderful birthday.

“Good morning, Bel! Happy birthday!”

At school, Oliphia came running up with a big smile on her face as soon as I opened the classroom door. I gasped in surprise.

The whole country celebrated my brother, Prince Charles, each year on his birthday, so naturally, everyone knew when it was. But for me, the princess? Not so much. I thought only a few people knew when my birthday was—just my family and the maids and so on.

“Thank you.”

“Here’s your present!”

Oliphia handed me a small bundle consisting of a pink drawstring pouch, fastened with a red ribbon.

“What is this?”

Excitedly, I untied the ribbon and looked inside. In the bag, there was an adorable little soft case for small items, with yellow birds embroidered on it with thread and beads. I stared at it in surprise, instantly recognizing the item...

“But, isn’t this...”

“Yes! I noticed you looking at it, so I snuck out the other day and bought it!”

“Oh, thank you!”

I was overcome with gratitude.

I’d noticed the little soft case the other day while shopping in town with Oliphia, and I’d been debating whether or not to buy it.

After much hesitation, I’d decided to refrain, but the next day, I woke up and just had to have it. I sent a servant from the castle to buy it for me, but they were too late, and the little case had been sold. Who’d have thought it was Oliphia who’d bought it!

“I’m so, so pleased! Thank you so much.”

“You’re welcome! I’m so glad you like the gift.”

Oliphia grinned with triumph, her surprise a big success. After that, Claude gave me his gift—a paper-thin wooden bookmark with intricate carving, a foreign country’s traditional craft.



AFTER school, I was heading to the carriage yard when I heard someone say “Princess” behind me. As I expected, Ed was standing there when I turned around.

“Are you on your way home?”

“Oh, yes. It’s my birthday, so I’m heading straight home to celebrate with my family.”

“A birthday party?”

“Yes. Just with my father and mother and brother.”

As I spoke, I felt happiness welling up inside, and I couldn’t help smiling. In the old timeline, I’d taken birthdays for granted. But now, I appreciated just how special and joyful they could be.

But Ed’s face fell as I spoke.

“It’s your birthday today, Princess?”

“Yes. This is my present from Charles.”

I pointed to my new hair ribbon with a smile.

Ed rubbed his chin thoughtfully as he looked at it. “...Darn.”

“Hmm?”

“A birthday present...”

As Ed hesitated, I intuitively knew what he wanted to say. He was feeling flustered over not knowing about my birthday or preparing a present.

“I don’t need a present. It’s the thought that counts!”

“No, that won’t do...”

“When’s your birthday, Ed?”

“It was recent. Two months ago.”

“Well, I didn’t do anything to celebrate *you* then. I didn’t even wish you a happy birthday...”

“I don’t really care about things like that.”

Ed sounded firm, but I wasn’t convinced.

Really, I didn’t need anything from him for my birthday. But Ed continued frowning until I had a sudden idea.

“All right, for my birthday present, you can show me some magic.”

“You want to see magic?”

“Yes. You’re the best in your year at magic, that’s what Charles says. So I’d love for you to show me something special.”

“Is that really all you want?”

Ed looked somehow disappointed, but then his expression grew serious. “Just a moment, then,” he mumbled. “...Princess, do you have a favorite flower?”

“Flowers? Well, I love dahlias.”

“Very well.”

Ed muttered something under his breath. At the same time, he held his upturned palm to the sky, and in a few moments, it began to glow.

As Ed stared at his palm, a ring of white particles formed in the white-blue glow and solidified, taking shape. A second later, a crystal dahlia sat sparkling on his palm.

“Wow! That’s amazing!”

“Magical manifestation of matter.”

“So cool!”

Magical manifestation of matter involves drawing energy from the environment and using it to create new matter. It’s an extremely difficult kind of magical discipline. I’d been expecting him to conjure me a few sparks or something, so I was suitably impressed.

“Here, Princess.”

“You’re giving this to me?”

“It’s a makeshift present, but if you’d like it... Happy birthday, Princess.” Ed held the crystal dahlia out to me.

I took it in both hands and looked at it. It sparkled in the sunlight that streamed through the windows. It was so beautiful.

“It’s a *wonderful* present! Thank you very much. I’ll treasure it. You’re really amazing, Ed... Next year, I’ll celebrate your birthday for sure.”

Ed’s eyes widened slightly as I thanked him with a huge smile on my face. Then he looked away, possibly feeling embarrassed. “Anytime...” he muttered. Through his thick black hair, I could see that his ears were tinged pink.



THAT evening, I headed back to my room in high spirits.

It had been a wonderful birthday, and everyone had celebrated with me.

“Could you put this on the bedside table? And I want the other presents close by, too. Put the ribbon from Charles right here. Oh, it was such a wonderful birthday. Thank you as well, Ellie. I just know I’ll have sweet dreams tonight.”

“I’m so happy to hear that, Princess.”

Ellie smiled as I babbled with excitement over the day’s events. She arranged my presents on the bedside table where I could see them and finished off by placing Ed’s crystal dahlia in the middle. In the light of the lamps, it glowed with a warm color, refracting the light off in rainbows against the bedroom walls.

“Good night, Princess Annabel.”

“Good night, Ellie.”

Ellie tucked the blankets right up to my shoulders and then put out the lamps by muttering “Extinguish” under her breath. Within moments, I fell into a deep sleep.

In the depths of sleep, I dreamed.

I dreamed about a time when I was very happy in my past life.

It was a year into the future from this current point, on the day of my

fourteenth birthday...



I'D spent the day of my fourteenth birthday in my room. As I was practicing my embroidery, I heard a knock on the door, and Charles peeked in.

"Bel, do you have a moment?"

"Yes, of course."

"This is my friend, Edoile. You've met him a few times, remember? Anyway, since it's your birthday today, he wanted to wish you a happy birthday."

"Oh my, how kind."

Charles turned to Ed behind him and beckoned him forth. As Ed looked into my eyes, he smiled and held out a large bouquet of flowers.

"Happy birthday, Princess."

The flowers were bright pink, with big, beautiful heads. I'd seen similar flowers growing in the castle gardens, and I'd always taken a liking to them.

"I heard that you like dahlias, Princess."

Ed sounded unsure as I simply stood there gazing at the proffered flowers.

"Yes. I do like these flowers."

Cautiously, I accepted the bouquet.

Yes, these were my favorite flowers. I'd often stopped to gaze at them while strolling through the castle gardens. Edoile must have found this out by questioning my maids.

So, these flowers are called dahlias...

The flower heads were as big around as my own palms...how impressive they were!

"These flowers are classy and refined, don't you think? So beautiful and impactful. I like these flowers—these *dahlias*—very much."

"I thought they would complement your beauty very well, Princess." Ed smiled softly. "I also have this for you."

He handed me a beautifully decorated paper bag tied with a ribbon. A birthday present for me.

“Oh my, what could this be?”

I handed my flowers to a nearby maid and took the present from Ed. Reaching into the bag, I pulled out a little figurine of a pony.

“Oh, how lovely. Thank you.”

“I planned to get you riding gear, but then I heard that you don’t ride.”

“No, I’ve never ridden.”

“Have you ever thought about trying it?”

“Um...isn’t it kind of dangerous?”

As I tilted my head, Charles jumped in. “Yes, we wouldn’t want Bel to fall off.”

“...I see,” Ed said, looking disappointed and knitting his brows.

Ed kept on gazing at me. I stared right back.

“Edoile, you have less than one year left at Grail Academy before graduation, don’t you? What will you do after that?”

“I’d like to be a Royal Magician...or perhaps join the Magical Order of Knights. I’m still deciding between the two...”

“Ed’s a skilled magician and a gifted swordsman. He could easily become either.”

I realized that Ed must be gifted at both disciplines indeed, if Charles was willing to vouch for him.

“A royal magician or a magic knight. How splendid.”

The royal family retained the services of a small group of Royal Magicians, all with elite skills, for private use. In the magical land of Najir, advancing to the status of Royal Magician meant you were among the world’s very best at magic.

The Magical Order of Knights was a chivalric order with a high level of magical fighting ability. All were equally skilled with both sword and sorcery, and only the best of the best, with the most moral of character, were even considered

for enrollment.

“Whichever route I take, I’ll stake my life on protecting you, Princess.”

Ed raised one eyebrow, putting his hand over his heart in a solemn gesture of loyalty.

“What? You’re supposed to protect *me*, Ed.”

“I’ll protect you too, My Prince.”

“What do you mean, *too*?”

“You’ll be fine. You’ve got Dohle on your side.”

“Impudence!”

“I am praising you, My Prince. Your sword skills would exceed any knight’s.”

“Do you really think so?”

Charles immediately stopped scowling and started looking pleased with himself. Clearly, Ed knew how to handle Charles.

Seeing the easy way they interacted with each other, I couldn’t help giggling. It was obvious the two of them were close, although I’d barely had an opportunity to see them interact before this.

As I stood there giggling, shoulders shaking with mirth, they exchanged glances. And then they started chuckling too.



WHEN I awoke, it was bright outside. A beam of light came shining through a gap in the curtains.

“I guess it’s morning, huh?”

I was in a great mood.

I reached both arms up and stretched. Then I hopped out of bed, pulled open the curtains, and then opened the windows as well. The fresh morning breeze ruffled my hair.

Turning, I spotted yesterday’s thirteenth birthday presents, all arranged on my bedside table. Ed’s crystal dahlia was sparkling in the sunlight.

Have you ever thought about trying it?

I could hear Ed's gentle voice again, the voice from my dream.

"Maybe I *should* try horseback riding."

In the old life, I'd held back because it was dangerous. But this time, I wanted to try all sorts of new challenges. Horseback riding was one of the options for the final semester of sixth year. Maybe I'd opt to take that class. *Why not?*

I walked over to the bed and picked up the crystal dahlia with both hands.

"The very same flower. What a coincidence."

On my fourteenth birthday in the old timeline, Ed had given me fresh cut dahlias. And in this new timeline, he had given me a crystal dahlia for my thirteenth birthday.

The form of the flowers was a little different, but it was still such a coincidence. I smiled down at the crystal dahlia again...

7. The Magic Stone's Protection

LIFE passed by without any significant changes.

And by that, I mean I continued to be unable to draw forth magic, and all the while, time was hustling me towards my eventual fate.

I became a sixth-year student at Grail Academy, and even though one-and-a-half years had now passed since arriving in this world, I remained effectively non-magical.

I tried all kinds of things with Ed's advice, but nothing worked. At first, I took a laid-back approach to things, telling myself I still had plenty of time. But after a year and a half of effort with no reward, I was starting to realize that it was entirely possible I was going to catch up to myself from the old timeline before I managed to really conjure magic. If I ever managed it at all.

But it's not like I'd given up. How could I? I had a divine task to change the future. I'd do whatever it took.

One other thing I focused on was learning all about politics and the countries surrounding ours.

One day, I asked Claude about the current state of diplomatic affairs.

Claude was the son of the Judeon family who had served as our country's diplomats for generations. Someday, Claude would take on the duty of protecting Najir's diplomatic interests, so even though he was still just a kid, he had his ears perked for everything to do with foreign diplomacy.

Obviously, he didn't have access to any political secrets just yet. But he knew more than you could learn in any lesson, and he taught me a lot.

"Let's talk about Nigren, the land to the south of us. Apparently, there are hill folk living up in that mountain range there that borders the Sunruta Kingdom. And recently, reports say they're gathering strength. Some of them wield powerful black magic, so they've been threatening the government of Nigren

and making all kinds of demands.”

“Black magic? In Nigren?”

I was shocked that this would come up in an everyday conversation. But Claude offered the information up casually.

Nigren was located to the south of Najir.

Going by land mass, it was about twice the size of Najir or Sunruta, but politically, it was weak. And why was a country twice the size of Najir so weak in comparison? Because many of the Nigrenians were unable to use magic.

Najir was a land blessed with a long history of magic, but Nigren was not. The Sunruta Kingdom fell somewhere in between the two. It was hypothesized that magical ability was a matter of birth that differed between demographics.

“Since when was there an ethnic group of black magic users in Nigren?”

“That’s the thing; they just began to appear one day. Probably an uncontrolled genetic mutation or something.”

“Genetic mutation...”

A magical child suddenly being born into a group with a long history of being entirely non-magical...such a genetic mutation would be an extraordinary thing indeed.

In most countries, should a child like that be born, it would be taken as a ward of the state in infancy and put into magical training for the good of the nation. Usually, a noble family would adopt the child, and then it would go into advanced training to become one of the country’s royal magicians.

But in Nigren and other non-magical countries, someone with exceptionally strong magical power would be seen only as a threat and dealt with accordingly.

In a vast land like that, though, it was impossible to keep tabs on every citizen, and some of these so-called genetic mutations would have been able to reach adulthood without being detected. If these magic-wielding folk held warm feelings for their homeland, then all would be well and good, but the ethnic group Claude was talking about didn’t sound so patriotic.

“Threatening and making demands like how?”

“Well, from what I’ve heard, they’ve been using their most magically gifted children as leverage to pressure the government into giving official positions to tribal members. But I couldn’t get any more details. I was told I was too young to know.”

Claude pressed his lips together in discontent.

“*Hmm.* So those magicians are still just children? About how old?”

“How old? No idea.”

The birth of new magicians from a genetic mutation...

Did I ever hear of anything like that in my old life? I went through my memories, but I had no recollection.

I was a sheltered princess in my previous life, though, and I only knew what those around me chose to tell me. So it was entirely possible those magical children existed then too.

“Speaking of Nigren...”

I was shivering a little, recalling past trauma.

Karina Niqvist.

The first-born princess of Nigren, who had cackled and mocked me as I groveled on the ground in my disgrace. With fiery-red hair and emerald green eyes, she had a bewitching beauty. But in contrast to her physical loveliness, she had a cold, cruel heart.

If I ever crossed paths with that woman again...

Just imagining it had me shaking.

Karina had been hostile toward me since the day we met.

Of course, that was after I’d incurred King Daniel’s wrath and been confined to my chambers. I was the princess of a defeated country, and the ex-fiancée of her husband-to-be, the king, so perhaps it was only natural that she acted like I was a bothersome fly she’d just love to swat.

And yet...

I pictured her again in my mind.

She'd been such a heinous witch toward me, far beyond what our circumstances could explain.

Why had she hated me so? I spent a lot of time pondering that in my dungeon cell, but I couldn't think of a single reason.

At any rate, I didn't want to reencounter her in this world. No way.

"Bel? Is something wrong?"

Claude was looking at me in concern. I suppose I'd clammed up all of a sudden. I snapped out of it in a hurry, quickly composing my expression.

"It's nothing. So, what's the princess of Nigren like?"

"The princess? From what I heard, she's wise and beautiful and kindhearted too. I'd sure like to meet her..."

Claude sighed and cast his eyes heavenward, as if fantasizing about this amazing princess from a country he'd never seen.

"Interesting. So, you'd like to date someone like this neighboring country's princess, would you?"

With a low, threatening tone in her voice, Oliphia chimed in from her seat at the table, staring at Claude with a cold look in her eyes.

Claude immediately began to sweat and scrambled to placate her.

"No, no, but I can't exactly speak badly of a princess, now can I? I mean, if you ask me, a simple, unsophisticated girl is much better than a glamorous and flashy one. Yes, indeed."

I couldn't help grinning—Claude looked so cute, clumsily trying to appease Oliphia's rapidly growing wrath.

Oh Claude, you should know better than to tell the lady you like that she's "simple and unsophisticated." It's not exactly a compliment, and besides, if anyone's unsophisticated here...it's you.

After all, Oliphia may look mature and sweet, but you, of all people, should know how sharp her tongue can be...

But Oliphia looked quite pleased, even though she pretended to get mad. It was obvious she knew how much Claude cared for her. They were such a sweet couple.

“Ah, that reminds me. Princess Karina is only a year apart from us. Since we’re basically the same age, I bet we’d get along. Since she’s so nice and smart, and beautiful and all.”

Claude suddenly turned to me, apparently trying to lighten the mood. But his words were like steel daggers to my heart.

Smart?

Beautiful?

Nice?

Her?!

No, I couldn’t agree with that at all.

Beautiful, yes. That I could not deny. But I saw her as a poisonous moth—lovely to behold but secretly venomous. Claude seemed to notice the sour look on my face, and he quickly tried to appease me with a compliment.

“Don’t worry, Bel! You’re doing your best, and I’m sure you’ll be a wise princess, too!”

It sounded like a compliment, but it rang hollow.

After all, that wasn’t what I was bothered about. It was hearing that woman—the witch who’d had our homeland destroyed—referred to as a “wise princess...”

Claude looked up at the wall clock, frowning awkwardly. Then his face brightened as he realized he’d been saved.

“Look at the time! Shall we go and meet the prince...?”

I looked up at the clock as well. Yes, it was almost time for Charles and me to meet back up.

“Yes, you’re right.”

I gathered up my notebooks and began to put them in my bag as Claude gave

an audible sigh of relief.



THAT morning in the carriage, Charles had told me he intended to stay after school for sword fighting practice.

After the three of us arrived at the practice arena, I looked around for him. There were about a dozen students there, practicing their swordplay.

Charles had brilliant blond hair. I quickly identified him from afar, his golden locks shining in the sunlight. Then I spotted Dohle and Ed nearby.

“For seventh-years, the tournament that’s being held next year will be the last one. So that’s why everyone’s practicing so hard right now.” Claude leaned in to explain as we all watched the practice session.

“Wasn’t the last one really recent, though? It was only last year.”

“There’s a tournament every year.” Claude smiled wryly, used to this scene.

The sword-fighting tournament at Grail was a big deal to the students. There was the fact that it was an important event in one’s school life, yes. But the students were practicing hard for another reason too.

Grail Academy was where all of Najir’s most promising young students gathered to receive an education together. As a result, the sword-fighting tournament was attended by scouts from both branches of the Royal Army: high-ranking officials of the Imperial Armed Guard and the Magical Order of Knights, who were in search of fresh talent.

Only sixteen students would be competing in the tournament, whittled down from the knockout rounds held for sixth, seventh, and eighth-year students. Even making it to the tournament was a sign of superior skill, regardless of whoever the eventual winner was.

The eighth-year student who won this year’s tournament had already been accepted into the Imperial Armed Guard, actually, and was due to become a knight right after graduation.

I heard that several other students who competed this year had also gotten scouted by the Magical Order of Knights and the Imperial Armed Guard.

“The strongest fighter among the seventh-years has to be Dohle, but recently, Edoile has really stepped up his game.”

“Really?”

“Yes, one of the older boys was saying that up until last year, he was only just above average, but he suddenly shot to the top of the class. Even more so recently. He was actually only one match away from qualifying for the last tournament. Apparently, he was pretty disappointed.”

“Interesting.”

This was news to me. I watched Ed curiously.

He was diligently practicing his swings and didn’t notice me watching him.

The Ed from the old world excelled at the sword, but in this world, all I kept hearing, from Charles and even Ed himself, was that his skills were only so-so.

Ed hadn’t made it into the tournament that was held this year.

But all he’d said at the time was “Darn.” I hadn’t realized he was actually disappointed. Maybe that was the reason he’d made such great strides with the sword since then.

“Claude...aren’t you going to practice?”

I raised an eyebrow at Claude. He was a candidate for entering the tournament if he wanted, but he was up here, casually watching the practice session. Claude shrugged and waved his hand dismissively.

“I still have two years to go. Besides, I don’t have any aspirations to be a knight.”

“Hmm?”

“Besides, someone has to keep you and Phia company up here.”

“Oh, *really*? You’re here on our behalf?”

Beside me, Oliphia peered doubtfully at Claude, eyes narrowed. Palms to the sky, Claude shrugged innocently.

Still, it made sense. Claude was a scholar, not a sportsman. It was kind of a shame—he had good reflexes.

I wondered what he was like in the original world...

He was a diplomat, so...I had no idea about his sword skills.

Clang!

While the three of us were watching the practice and chatting animatedly about this and that, a particularly loud crash of swords made everyone jump.

“Watch out!”

“...Huh?”

Someone yelled out in panic, and I turned toward the voice.

That’s when I realized all the students in the training area were looking this way.

Something flashed brightly before my eyes. It was a sharp shard of metal, glinting in the sunlight as it spun through the air toward me. Someone’s sword tip had broken and flown off.

“Princess!” Ed’s deep-red eyes went wide as he yelled out to me.

“Bel!” Charles was yelling my name too, reaching out toward me in fear of what was surely to come.

But I was frozen to the spot, eyes wide and fixed on the spinning metal shard.

As it flipped over and over, it got closer and closer.

I can’t dodge it!

I realized it was going to hit me, and there was nothing I could do...

I knew I had to run, or duck, or throw myself on the ground, but I just couldn’t move!

The sword training students all wore protective gear of course, and during a tournament, the crowd would be protected by barrier spells.

But this was just a training session, and we’d stopped by to watch it on a whim. There was no protection in place for us.

And yes, while the students were training with dull, practice swords, a piece of one flying at someone with such velocity would still cause a terrible injury.

I squeezed my eyes shut, unable to do anything more.

The next moment, I heard a clanging sound of impact. Then a tinny tinkling sound as the sword shard fell harmlessly to the ground...

“Bel!”

I opened my eyes fearfully to see Charles looking white in the face, running up to me.

“Are you all right?! Were you hurt?!”

“I’m fine. It didn’t even hit me.”

Charles quickly examined my hands and patted me down, checking for injuries. When he was satisfied I wasn’t bleeding, he heaved a huge sigh of relief. Standing behind Charles were Dohle and the boy whose sword tip had broken off, both of them looking pale.

“That was protective magic, wasn’t it?”

Ed, who had also run up behind Charles, was examining the broken sword fragment, his brows drawn together in a frown.

“Protective magic? I see, you cast a quick protective magic spell just in time, didn’t you, Claude? Thank you. You saved her.”

“Huh? Protective magic?” Claude looked back at them both, his jaw hanging. Then, he looked down at his hands. He didn’t seem to have realized what he’d apparently done.

“That was amazing, Claude!” Oliphia’s voice was high with surprise.

Claude looked confused. “Was that really me?” he mumbled. But there had been many cases of magicians conjuring protective magic by pure reflex in dangerous situations, so it wasn’t all that strange.

“I see. So you cast it unintentionally?” Charles seemed slightly unimpressed by this, but he shrugged, thanking Claude again. “At any rate, you saved her life,” he admitted.

Both the boy whose sword had broken and Dohle—who, it turned out, had been his sparring partner—apologized to me. But it had been a fluke accident,

and we were partly to blame for not paying attention to what was going on. Besides, I hadn't even been harmed, so I wasn't about to blame them for it.

"It's strange, though..." Ed looked up from where he'd been silently examining the sword fragment, mumbling thoughtfully.

"What's that, Ed? What's strange?"

"Ah...no, it's nothing."

Charles frowned at Ed's cryptic remark for a moment before shrugging and placing his practice sword back into its scabbard.

"That's enough practice for today. You must have had a shock, Bel. Let's go home, shall we?"

"Okay."

I nodded and let Charles lead me off in the direction of the carriage yard.



BACK at the castle, my maid Ellie greeted me with a smile.

"Welcome home. Did you have a fun day at school?"

"Oh, yes. Only, when I went to watch Charles practice after school, a broken sword tip came flying at my face. Luckily, my friend Claude cast a protective spell and saved me."

"Oh my. How frightful! Oh, what a mercy it is that you weren't hurt!"

Ellie stopped looking in the closet and gasped in alarm as I relayed my story. Ellie was right. It WAS a good thing that sword tip hadn't struck me.

Sure, we could fix most injuries with healing magic, but a serious injury from a hit like that could be really bad. It would hurt a lot, and I could have been left with a nasty scar.

"Please, do be more careful in the future. Now, you'd better change your clothes."

"Okay. I will."

Ellie held up a simple everyday dress, and I began to slip out of my uniform.

As I did every time, I reached into my pocket to take out my Magic Stone. I always made sure to have it with me.

“Huh?” I muttered in surprise as I looked at it.

“Princess Annabel? Is something amiss?”

“Huh? No, it’s nothing.”

“Are you sure?”

Ellie looked at me doubtfully as I brushed off her concern. Then, shrugging, she set about picking up and putting away my uniform and my school cape.

Checking to make sure Ellie was no longer watching, I pulled my stone out and looked at it again.

“Why?”

I gazed at it in disbelief.

The round, smooth stone in my palm had been blood-red that very morning. But now, it was a dark pink. It had lost most of its color.

They fade, Magic Stones.

Whenever the magical power inside has been released, the color of the stone fades.

When Ed gave the stone to me in the old world, he cast a protective spell upon me. No one should have been able to harm me, under Ed’s protection.

“That incident with the sword tip today...”

I froze as a possible explanation came to mind.

When that magic spell activated and saved me from the sword fragment...it would all make sense if it had been the work of this stone. After all, Claude seemed to know nothing about conjuring any spell. Maybe that was because Claude hadn’t been responsible for it after all.

This meant Ed was still protecting me, through the stone.

I felt my eyes prick with tears as the realization set in.

“Thank you, Ed...”

I squeezed the dark-pink Magic Stone tightly in my fist. Then I brought my fist to my forehead, murmuring words of thanks again.



THE following day, I couldn't stop checking the clock on the classroom wall.

I was desperate for the lesson to end already. The clock hands were moving so slowly, I was half-suspicious that they'd been enchanted to run slower.

I plunged my hand back into my pocket for the umpteenth time that morning. By fiddling with the stone daily, its weight and shape had become as familiar to me as the back of my hand.

I withdrew my hand from my pocket and slowly opened my palm. The Magic Stone sat there, sparkling, its color a deep, bloody red.

I'd noticed it changing color that morning, while getting ready for school. Since being sent to this world, I had kept Ed's Magic Stone on my person at all times.

Today, like always, I had been about to drop the stone into my school uniform pocket, when my hand froze.

"What? The color...it's returning?"

Yesterday, the stone had been a dark pink. But at some point, it had changed back and was now deep red again. I didn't actually observe the change happening, but I figured it must have begun returning to its normal color as I slept.

They say that the depth of color in a Magic Stone represents the amount of magical power it holds. And also, as long as the creator of the stone lives, the magic will regenerate automatically after each time the energy within is depleted. In other words, a Magic Stone's power will never disappear, as long as its creator still draws breath.

This is a big part of why soldiers going to war leave Magic Stones behind with a family member or a lover. Of course, casting divine protection over their loved ones is a part of it too. But it's also a way to tell if the stone's creator is safe and unharmed or even still alive. Because as long as the creator is alive and well, the

Magic Stone will always recharge.

“How?”

I gazed intently at the red Magic Stone. *Ed gave this to me, but he’s dead, isn’t he? So the stone shouldn’t be able to recharge. And yet, look at it. Blood-red once more.*

I spent some time thinking it over, and the only possibility I could come up with was this—that the stone was somehow drawing energy from *this world’s* Ed to recharge itself.

Logically speaking, the old Ed and the young Ed were two separate beings. And yet, at the same time, they were the exact same person. *Ugh, it’s killing my brain trying to crack it.* At any rate, their magical powers were identical, so was it so strange to assume that the stone would respond to either?

After my final class of the day ended, I got up from my desk with a clatter and dashed to the Magic Practice Room. Slamming the doors open, I was met with an empty room and heavy silence.

All right, think about it. Ed was in a higher year than me, and his school day was one hour longer. There was no need for me to have run here in such a hurry.

With nothing else to do but wait for Ed, I wandered around the room, looking at things.

There was an open area in the center for drawing Magic Sigils. Bookshelves lined the walls, groaning under the weight of heavy magic reference books. Workbenches with jars of dried herbs and desiccated creatures for potion-making sat in different corners of the room. And over by the windows was a large tank full of toads, just like the one Ed had dropped on my head as a prank that day.

“Oh, what’s this...?”

I spotted a familiar-looking book on the shelf and came to a halt. The cover read: *Practical Magic: A Comprehensive Guide*. It was the book I’d seen Ed binge reading lately.

I picked it up, brushing my fingertips over the thick leather cover and tracing the author's name—the legendary magician, Longile. As I flipped through the pages, I spotted a section on Magic Sigils.

Until Longile appeared, Magic Sigils hadn't existed in this world, and only a select few could successfully wield magic. But thanks to the methods pioneered by Longile, anyone with innate magical ability could learn to channel it into the successful casting of all kinds of spells. That's why Longile's name became legendary, and his story became a part of our history.

But there was more...

I turned another page.

This Ed seemed to be very interested in Magic Sigils and in the development of new types of magic.

My Ed seemed much more interested in battle magic and defensive spells. But the Ed of this world was much, much more focused on magical theory and research.

As I poured over the pages, I heard a heavy clanking behind me. Turning, I saw Ed standing in front of the doors, looking at me with fondness in his eyes.

"Princess. You're here again today..."

"Oh, yes." I smiled and nodded back. "I still need to practice conjuring magic, and I had something I wanted to ask you."

"You want to ask me something? What could that be?" Ed pushed the doors behind him shut with one hand, walking over to come and stand in front of me.

Ed had cut his hair since I'd told him he should show off his face more. Now I could see his features clearly. Those red eyes were gazing at me now as he tipped his head to the side in curiosity.

"Remember we talked about Magic Stones before? How you can only make one at any one time, right? Well, is it possible for someone else's magic power to recharge a Magic Stone if their magic is similar to the creator's?"

"Someone *else's* magic power...?" Ed's brows drew close together.

He clearly thought what I was saying was crazy. I mean, I'd think it was crazy

too.

I put my hand in my pocket and pulled out my Magic Stone. I handed it to Ed, who was standing there looking quizzical.

He held it up, examining it mutely. For a few moments, the silence hung heavy in the air.

“It resembles your magic...doesn’t it?” Not sure how to phrase it, I spoke with hesitation in my voice.

It didn’t just *resemble* Ed’s magic. The same person had made that stone, and therefore, the magic behind its creation was identical. Ed didn’t answer me. Instead, while still holding the Magic Stone aloft, he raised his free hand, palm up. As he concentrated, an identical red stone shimmered into existence. Now, there were two.

“Here, we have your Magic Stone. And here, we have mine.”

“Yes...”

“They look the same to me.”

“Yes. The...resemblance is striking.”

They looked the same to me too. *Identical*.

Ed dropped his stone into his left palm to join its twin and rubbed his chin silently with his free hand as he scrutinized them together.

“I’m stunned. To see such identical magical power...” I could hear him muttering to himself. “Princess. Who gave this to you?”

Ed lifted his head suddenly, looking at me, and I felt instantly tongue-tied. His red eyes seemed to burn with an innocent curiosity, a thirst to know.

I wasn’t sure what to even say. “*You gave it to me in another world.*” No, I could hardly say that.

“Someone...someone very special gave it to me.”

Unsure of how exactly to explain, I decided to go with that. In my old life, Ed had been irreplaceable to me. But it wasn’t romantic. Our relationship was strictly that of protector and protectee. But in the dungeon of the Sunruta

Kingdom castle, Ed had been an immeasurable comfort to me, my soul's last salvation.

"Someone special, huh."

Ed frowned, seeming deep in thought as he gazed at the Magic Stones. Feeling extremely awkward, I hid my hands behind me, fidgeting with repressed nervous energy.

"It's undeniable. The magical energy contained in this stone seems identical to mine. However, I've never heard of anyone else's magic being able to charge a Magic Stone. The reason being that a Magic Stone contains half of its creator's very soul."

"I see."

His explanation suggested the magical energy which had recharged my stone couldn't belong to this world's Ed. And yet, the Ed from my world had died...

What if he didn't die?

All of a sudden, my heart was beating faster.

That's when I really started to consider that possibility.

When it happened, there was a thick dungeon wall between our cells.

Our only window to each other was a dirty drainage channel four inches wide. So when Ed's hand went limp in mine, and he stopped responding, I believed he'd died.

But I hadn't actually *seen* anything. How could I be sure?

I couldn't be sure. That was the whole problem.

I'd gone back in time, hadn't I? Was this world a completely different world from the original? If so, did that mean my Ed was safe somewhere? What had happened back in the Sunruta Kingdom castle after I'd exhausted my magic in that destructive burst? Was it somehow possible to transfer magical energy across the space-time continuum to another world?

There was so much I didn't know. I felt like my head was going to burst.

"Princess? Are you feeling unwell?"

Ed was concerned, as I'd fallen silent all of a sudden, clutching at the hair on my temples. I lifted my head to see Ed staring at me with worry in his eyes.

His finely shaped eyebrows were furrowed together.

"I'm...fine."

"Are you sure? Do you want to go home now? I'll fetch the prince."

Ed still looked terribly concerned.

The Ed from the old world used to worry about me that way.

"I'm fine. Thank you."

There was no way for me to return to the original world.

...Knowing that I'm going to die...it makes me wish I'd chosen a completely different path. I wish I'd laughed out loud more...cried more tears whenever I was sad. Gone shopping in town, eaten the things I wanted to eat without care...even fallen in love! And then married my true soul mate...

That was my wish, back in that dungeon cell. This world was his gift to me. He'd promised to give me all those things. Whether I'd simply gone back in time, or whether this was a completely different world—that fact remained true.

In that case, there was only one thing I should do.

I reached out and took one of the Magic Stones back from Ed's hand. My stone, given to me by my Ed, back in the original timeline.

"Will you tutor me in magic again today?" I lifted my head, smiling brightly at Ed, to assuage his worries.

I'd sworn not to repeat that same painful fate. I was going to make sure that everyone stayed happy—in honor of his memory.

Ed's eyes widened a little in surprise as he took in my determined look. Then, he smiled. "You really do work hard, Princess."

"Hard work alone doesn't always guarantee results."

"Have no fear. Your hard work will be rewarded. You work harder than anyone I know."

Ed placed his hand gently on the top of my head, as if I was his sister. I felt some of the tension suddenly drain away from me.

It's all right.

Ed's words always had such a soothing effect on me. Just as they did back in that dark dungeon cell.

"Thank you."

I felt so happy that Ed was still here with me, still encouraging me. "You're very welcome," Ed said, smiling back at me.



IT was a beautiful morning, with blue skies as far as the eye could see. Little birds were gathered on the branches of the trees outside, singing adorably. Yes, it was a perfect morning. And I was a perfect mess.

"Ack, what am I to do?!"

What was I to do, indeed? I had less than ten minutes until roll call at school. *How could this have happened?!* I turned on Charles, who was yawning without concern.

"Charles! Hurry *up!*"

"Hmm? *Hehe*. You're so cute when you're in a fluster, Bel."

"Quit it! Hmph! Stop teasing and start hurrying!"

I grabbed Charles's arm and tried to drag him out of his seat.

What's all the commotion, you may ask? Just that I was about to be late for school. *Seriously* late.

Charles and I always rode to school by horse and carriage, a trip that took around fifteen minutes. If we didn't board soon, we wouldn't make it in time. And yet Charles was just sitting there, sipping milk tea without a care in the world.

"Charles! I'll leave you behind!"

"Hmm? Hold on a sec."

Charles blinked up at me as I stood over him, hands on my hips with my cheeks puffed out. I was sighing with frustration, but Charles still looked totally relaxed. His hand inched toward a bunch of grapes on the table. I just knew he was planning to toss one in the air and catch it in his mouth.

“I’ve been practicing swordsmanship during lunch break as well recently. My muscles ache every morning.”

“Just use a healing spell, dummy!”

“No, no, no. This pain is proof of my hard work.” Charles flexed his arm, grinning.

What? Sometimes I couldn’t understand how boys’ brains worked at all.

Why wouldn’t he hurry up? I was going to be late at this rate.

As if hearing my anguished thoughts, Charles finally shrugged and got up from the breakfast table. Then he began ambling across the room.

“Uh, Charles? Where are you going?”

I was glad to see him finally moving, but he was heading in the exact opposite direction of the carriage yard. We didn’t have any time for detours! But in response to my harried squeak, Charles simply smiled at me over his shoulder.

“Why not trust your brother? Follow me.”

He wiggled an eyebrow and started off again. Still vexed, I trotted after him. He ended up leading us both to his room.

“You’re not planning to go back to bed, are you?!”

“Bel, please. What do you take me for?”

I took him for my brother, the prince of the realm, who was generally quite mature for his just-turned-fifteen years. But he could also be a real goofball. And I didn’t have time for goofing around.

Pretending to be wounded by my steely glare, Charles crossed the room and pulled open the closet doors.

He wasn’t about to start an impromptu fashion show at a time like this, was he? But as I watched, Charles parted his clothes down the middle and pushed

them aside like a set of curtains. Then he placed his hand on the wooden back of the closet and mumbled something. Before my eyes, the back of the closet vanished.

“Huh?”

I gazed at the open back of the closet, where there was now only a wide-open space.

“Why is your closet so big?! That’s not fair, it’s way bigger than mine!”

My voice sounded high and shaky with surprise.

There was a whole other room back there, through his closet.

I wondered if the wooden back of my closet was a disappearing type too. Not that I’d be able to make it disappear, with my lack of magic. But why did Charles have the big closet? I had so many dresses and things, and they took up a lot of space. Shouldn’t it have been the other way around? As I began to grumble and complain, Charles chuckled, holding his hand out. I took his hand and cautiously followed him through the closet into a stone-walled room about ten feet square.

Looking down at the floor beneath my feet, I felt my breath catch in my throat.

“That’s a Magic Sigil, isn’t it?”

“Yep. It’s for transporting. It connects the castle to all kinds of places.”

“...Wow.”

A white circle, around six feet in diameter, was drawn on the flagstone floor. All around it, magical runes were inscribed.

“Is there another one in my room that I don’t know about?”

“No, not in your room. Just in mine, and Father’s, and Mother’s.”

“Why?”

I tipped my head to the side, looking up at Charles, who looked uncomfortable.

“Because our lives are always at risk. Father because he’s the king. Me

because I'm heir to the throne. Even Mother, because there's always the possibility she could be with child, a male child who could become a king."

Charles was speaking in subdued tones, and I could read the tension in his expression.

In Najir, the line of succession favored males. In case of war, the enemy would target the men of the royal family. If the country succumbed, the men would not be spared. Allowing any of the male bloodline to survive would only pose risks for the invaders in the future.

On the other hand, however, the women—except for the queen—were almost always spared. Very rarely were they killed.

The reasoning behind it was that if the king of the winning side forced the princess of the defeated country into marriage, the throne would automatically become his. And if a child was born between them, and if that child was a boy, then he would go on to inherit the crown. And, since the original royal bloodline would also be present within him, no one would be able to complain.

In other words, if you captured the princess, you captured the throne.

Just then, a thought occurred to me.

Why had my betrothed, Daniel of the Sunruta Kingdom, tossed me into the dungeons and become re-engaged to the princess of Nigren? With Father and Charles out of the picture, marrying me would have made him the king of Najir as well as Sunruta. It didn't make political sense.

For argument's sake, let's say he was in love with the Nigren princess. All he had to do was marry me, deal with it for a few months and then have me killed. Or lock me away and claim I'd died. There was a ton of different ways to go about it.

Daniel's choice seemed so illogical to me.

Even if his original intention wasn't to seize control of Najir, he could easily have forced a convenient alliance by marrying me. Sunruta had nothing to lose and everything to gain by making me queen.

And yet, I'd been tossed in the dungeons and left to die. If the Najirian people

had found out about that, there would have been a revolt.

I was deep in thought when a hand appeared beneath my nose. Looking up, I saw Charles smiling at me. “Let’s go, Bel,” he said. I stepped carefully onto the Magic Sigil as Charles recited the incantation.



“Open the way.”

Everything shimmered with light, and I closed my eyes as the world blurred around me. For a moment, I felt like I was floating. Then my feet touched back down on solid ground again.

“All right, we’re here. Five minutes before first period. Just in the nick of time.”

I opened my eyes as Charles chuckled smugly. We were in the Magic Practice Room at Grail Academy. I could smell the funk of dried herbs, see the rows of shiny glass beakers. The bookshelves were where they always were, groaning under the weight of magical texts. It was immediately familiar to me. This was where I had spent so many hours trying to practice my magic.

“What? Amazing!”

I couldn’t contain my gasp of surprise.

Magical transportation is one of the most difficult magical disciplines. Few magicians ever master it. But with a Transportation Sigil, even non-magic folk can travel at will.

The science behind it is terribly complicated, though, and it’s not like you can find them just anywhere. Even though I was a royal princess, I’d never used one before.

“But it’s so convenient. Why must we take the carriage every time?”

“If we used it all the time, someone would realize we have a Transportation Sigil in the castle. It’s only for emergencies. I already asked the coachman to drive here with the empty carriage to keep up appearances.”

Charles was right. If the two of us kept appearing at school without our carriage, it would look very suspicious indeed. But wait a minute...

“Only for emergencies, you say? Is being late to school an emergency?”

“A BIG emergency.”

Then with a chuckle, Charles pushed open the door to the corridor.

Several passing classmates looked in and spotted us. I returned their greeting

with a friendly “Good morning” of my own.

Nobody seemed to think our being there was strange.

This is so cool.

I was still reeling with the excitement of it all.

In that dark dungeon cell, I’d overheard the guards talking. When Najir was overthrown by the Sunruta Kingdom, my father, mother, and Charles had disappeared. What if they escaped using the Transportation Sigil?

As I headed off to the classroom, I could think about nothing else.

8. The Sword-Fighting Tournament

TIME flew by and soon, the end of my time as a sixth-year student was drawing near.

Recently, I'd noticed that all the students were buzzing with excitement about something.

"I heard that Lyla was invited by Yugrit!"

"Wow! So I guess the engagement rumors are true?"

"Never mind that, I heard that Celia..."

I looked around, the gossip washing over me. A bunch of female students were gathered, whispering about the latest juicy developments.

"Hey, Phia... What's up with everyone? Haven't they been gossiping way more than usual lately?"

"Ah, that can be easily explained."

Phia looked over at the group of girls standing in the corner of the classroom. With perfect timing, one of them whispered something as the others leaned in. Then everyone gasped with shock and delight.

What could be going on?

"The ball's coming up. Someone must have been asked to attend by an older student, I think."

"The ball?" I parroted Oliphia's words back, surprised.

Of course, I knew about balls. They were a staple socializing event of the aristocracy.

But usually, you had to be an adult before you could attend the balls. At the very least, you'd need to have had your sixteenth birthday. None of the students should have been going to balls. But when I brought that up with

Oliphia, she shook her head.

“I mean Grail Academy’s ball. The school ball.”

“Grail Academy has a school ball?”

“Well, yeah. It’s only one of the top two events in Grail Academy student life!” Oliphia clenched her fists in excitement.

Then she started to explain in breathless detail. Grail Academy’s school ball was supposed to be for preparing students for post-graduate society. It was held once a year, just before the graduation ceremony, and only seventh and eighth-years were expected to attend. You got a genuine letter of invitation from the headmaster, and you had to pick a date to take with you. It was all just like a real ball.

The other major event Oliphia mentioned was the sword-fighting tournament.

“Next year, we’ll get our letters of invitation! Oh, I can’t wait, can you, Bel?”

Oliphia clasped her hands together in front of her chest, gazing heavenward.

Debating into society was proof that one had come of age. This would be the first ball any of us was ever to attend. Obviously, Oliphia was desperate to get a glimpse of this glittering world of adult society.

“I wonder what kind of dress I shall wear...”

As Oliphia mooned over her potential ballgown, I heard a textbook go flapping to the floor behind us. I turned to see Claude there, looking dazed.

“Ph-Phia...has someone asked you to the school ball?”

Oliphia and I exchanged glances.

“No, no one’s asked me. I was just imagining what kind of dress I’d wear if I *was* going.”

“Ah. I see.” Claude looked visibly relieved. “So, you want to attend the ball, Phia?”

“Well, duh. Everyone getting all dressed up...doesn’t it sound magical?!”

“Huh. You too, Bel?”

“Eh, I’m indifferent.”

I shook my head as Oliphia gasped. “Are you serious?” she squawked, but I just shrugged. I wasn’t interested in social events or parties. I’d attended more than enough of them in my previous life.

“But Charles should have gotten his invitation this year. Aren’t you supposed to be his official date?”

“...Am I?”

“I’m not sure, but I think so?”

Oliphia had said that all seventh and eighth-year students would receive invitations, but attendance was mandatory only for eighth-years. All of them were expected to attend.

“Well, I don’t think Charles will be going. After all, the ball is right before graduation day, isn’t it? Well, that’s only a month away. If so, he would have received an invitation already. But he hasn’t mentioned it.”

“What, he hasn’t?”

“Nope. So I’m pretty sure he’s not going. I mean, I don’t think he is...”

But I wasn’t really sure.

I had a good reason to be fairly confident in what I was saying, however.

Charles was the prince, so whoever he married would become the crown princess and then one day, the queen. So if he went to a ball with a date, even a school ball, people would be all over the hapless girl, suspecting her of trying to claw her way to a spot on the throne.

There might even have been talk of underhanded politics, an attempt to influence the royal line of succession. So since attendance wasn’t even mandatory in the seventh year, I figured Charles wouldn’t want to light the touch paper for no good reason. That’s why I was pretty sure he wouldn’t be attending the ball.

But eighth-year attendance was mandatory. Therefore, Charles would definitely be escorting a partner to the dance next year. With no potential future bride on the horizon, etiquette would dictate that Charles should bring

me as his date. I mean, that was the only thing that made sense in the current situation.

“He’ll have to attend when he’s an eighth-year, so I’m sure he’ll be going next year.”

“Bel, aren’t you excited about school events? As soon as the next academic year starts, the sword-fighting tournament will be held. Aren’t you excited to see who wins?”

Oliphia sighed, frustrated with me. I shook my head, not getting it.

“Why are you bringing up the results of the tournament when we were just discussing the dance party?”

“Ugh! Listen, Bel...”

Oliphia explained that whoever ranked high and stood out in the tournament would become a sought-after partner for the next dance. All the girls at school wanted to attend the dance, and everyone was desperate to see who would be inviting whom.

“*Hmm*, I see,” I responded listlessly. I had a feeling that none of this had anything to do with me.



AFTER school, Oliphia asked me to accompany her to the training area. When we arrived, I spotted Charles there, practicing with his friends.

The sword-fighting tournament would take place six weeks after the new school year commenced. Charles was currently a seventh-year but would advance to the eighth year in time for the tournament, which would be the last of his school career.

High-ranking officers in the Imperial Armed Guard and the Magical Order of Knights would be coming to watch the tournament, so all the students who were hoping to become knights were determined to stand out. As a result, they were practicing furiously in the three months left until the tournament was due to be held.

Charles spotted me watching the practice session from the sidelines and put

down his sword before jogging over in a hurry.

“Bel, I want to stay and practice a little longer. You can go home without me. Take the carriage, I’ll find another way home.”

Charles looked up at me, his forehead glistening with sweat. Even his blond hair was soaked.

“No, it’s okay. I’ll wait.”

“Are you sure? I want to stay another hour.”

“I’m having fun watching. You don’t need to hurry at all.”

“All right. Just...stick around this area where it’s safe, okay?”

Charles cast a protective barrier spell around us. He had been a real stickler for safety ever since that sword shard had come flying at my head. He jogged back over to his friends to resume training, but he kept shooting anxious glances at me, which made me smile wryly to myself.

Charles might have worried that he was keeping me after school, but the truth was that I enjoyed watching them practice. I’d been able to observe the boys’ skills improving in ways they probably weren’t even aware of themselves.

“Prince Charles has really gotten good. And Edoile as well. Of course, Dohle is always a force to be reckoned with.”

Oliphia gazed down at the practice session from beside me, clearly thinking the same as me.

“You’re right.” I nodded, still watching Charles and the others.

At first, their sword skills had seemed somewhat clumsy to me, but in just a year and a half, I could appreciate a visible amount of finesse developing. Dohle, the son of the Veligardes, an old family of knights, was highly skilled of course. But Charles and Ed had also greatly increased their swordsmanship abilities. Especially...

Clang!

The sound of clashing metal rang out and was followed by the dull thud of a sword falling to the ground. I could see Ed’s partner, scowling in defeat.

“Did you see that?! Edoile’s amazing!” Oliphia exclaimed.

When I started over again in this world, the Ed I met hadn’t seemed too interested in the sword. But over the past two years, he’d rapidly advanced his sword skills. Charles had even told me that Ed was now considered one of the top five in his year. On top of that, his magic skills were highly advanced. Ed was surely an excellent candidate for the Magical Order of Knights.



THE following day, after school, I was studying alone in the Magic Practice Room, working on potion composition. The large room was silent, save for the sound of me grinding dry ingredients in my mortar bowl. As I dipped a finger into the powder to check its consistency, I sensed someone pushing open the door behind me.

“How’s it progressing, Princess?”

I turned to see Ed there, looking at me with a warm smile on his face.

“Ed! Don’t you have sword practice?”

I got to my feet in surprise. The tournament was fast approaching, and Ed had stopped coming by the Magic Practice Room as much, focusing instead on sword training. As a result, I hadn’t expected him to come today.

“I squeezed in a half-hour of practice already, so there’s no cause for concern. Besides, I promised to tutor you in magic.”

“You don’t have to be so concerned about me right now...” I put my mortar bowl down on the desk and frowned at Ed.

Yes, I’d asked him to tutor me in magic, but I hadn’t intended to distract him from his own studies. But Ed waved a hand airily, unconcerned.

“Actually, this was a good excuse for me to get away from practice.”

“You...*wanted* to get away from practice?”

“Yeah. Recently it’s been nothing but sword practice all the time. I’ve had no time to read magical texts. I need a breather.”

Smiling, Ed started pulling down an armful of complex-looking magical texts

from the bookshelf. Then he took a seat at the opposite side of the table. I followed suit and sat back down to join him.

Examining the cover of one of the books for a moment, Ed then proceeded to read, his eyes darting back and forth across the page. His long eyelashes were fluttering.

“Don’t you like the sword? You’ve gotten so good lately.”

I approached the subject nervously. Ed marked his place with a bookmark and slowly looked up at me.

“I like it. Especially recently. Now that I’ve improved somewhat, it feels good to swing the sword around. But I also equally enjoy spending time doing this.”

“Huh.”

Ed was interested in magical research, so it made sense that he would enjoy spending time like this in the Magic Practice Room. But I also somehow felt that he was saying he enjoyed spending time here *with me*, and the thought made me blush.

“Are you making a potion? If there’s anything you’re not sure of, just ask me.”

“Ah, yes. I’m okay so far, though. Can you check it once I’m done?”

Ed peeked into my mortar bowl.

Potions were used to strengthen the effects of magic, but since I couldn’t use magic, it was impossible for me to test my own concoctions. That’s why Ed always checked my work for me.

“Of course.”

Ed nodded, giving me a smile, and then picked his heavy book back up. He started reading again from the spot he’d marked.

The room was silent once more, except for the grinding noise of my pestle and mortar and the whispery sound of pages being flipped. I stole a peek at Ed. Head down, his shiny black hair was falling over his forehead.

“Are you going to the upcoming ball?”

“The ball?” Ed looked up, shaking his head in confusion.

“You get an invitation from the headmaster, right? That’s what Phia told me.”

Ed eventually seemed to get what I was talking about and responded with a brief “Ah. ...I’m not going. Neither are Dohle or Prince Charles.”

“Oh.”

I’d tried to ask casually, but I actually found myself relieved to hear he wasn’t going. And, as I expected, neither was Charles.

“Next year, it’s mandatory though.”

“Yeah. Next year...” Ed was looking at me, and it seemed like he wanted to say something.

“What?”

“...Nothing. Forget it.”

I tilted my head at him curiously, but he just shook his.

“I hope you make it to the finals of the sword-fighting tournament.”

Ed looked at me, eyes slightly widened in surprise. “You’re rooting for me, Princess?”

“Of course I am.”

“I do want to make it to the finals, but it’s not going to be easy. And if I do make it, I’ll probably have to fight against Dohle or maybe even Prince Charles.”

“Well, if it’s between you and my brother, then I’ll be cheering for you. Ah, Dohle will be a tough opponent though. He’s a Veligarde for one, and he also has physical size and strength on his side...”

Without thinking about it, I just told Ed I’d be supporting him during the tournament!

After all, Charles was the prince. It wouldn’t do for him to win everything all the time.

“Oh, I’m not saying that Charles ought to be weak. A strong prince is always inspiring to his subjects. But our future knights need to be stronger than the prince, of course. How else can they protect him once he becomes king?”

Ed listened to my garbled explanation of this with a wry smile. “You’ve got a good point there,” he said, nodding. It was clear that Ed wouldn’t hold back, even in combat against the prince.

“Well, I shall do my very best.”

“You can do it!”

Ed held up his hand, and I slapped mine against it in an enthusiastic high-five.

The sound of our palms slapping together echoed around the room. I realized I could feel a warm sensation deep down inside me.



THE sky was a deep, cloudless blue above the vast campus grounds.

Was that a falcon I could see, soaring above? Its majesty and power were well matched by the determination and grit exhibited by today’s sword-fighting competitors.

Yes, today was the day of the sword-fighting tournament finals, and Grail Academy’s arena was abuzz with excitement.

In this, their last bloom of youth before manhood, it was easy to notice a discrepancy in size and strength between different year groups. As a result, of today’s sixteen finalists, fourteen were eighth-year students. The remaining two were seventh-years. Unfortunately, no sixth-years had made it this time around. Getting to the finals as a seventh-year was already quite a colossal feat and a sign of a bright future. Dohle was an outlier, the only one who’d made it the past three years in a row.

“Look, Bel! There’s Prince Charles! Oh, and Dohle and Edoile too!”

Beside me in our spectator seats, Oliphia was half-hysterical with excitement.

I looked over to where Oliphia was pointing and instantly spotted Charles’s blond hair, shining in the sun. You could never miss the prince’s beautiful golden hair. Dohle stood hulking beside him, far taller than my brother. And next to him, I spotted Ed’s raven-black hair.

With an impressive display of strength from them both, Charles and Ed had made it to the finals. For both of them, this would be their first time competing

at this level.

“Who’s going to win this year? It has to be Dohle, doesn’t it? It would be so exciting if it was the prince, although that would be a tad problematic, I’d say.” Oliphia grinned wryly.

Yes, if Charles won, his fangirls in the audience would eat up his victory with a spoon. But Oliphia was right. It would be problematic. It would prove that the prince was stronger than his future knights, which would not be acceptable.

Having said that, I was sure that everyone in the audience would cheer for my brother. I felt bad for the student he would be paired against, as he would have to win but would receive little glory.

With a cry of “Fight!” from the professor acting as a referee, the tournament began.

While the competitors were still only students, the fast and furious swordplay on display made my head spin. I’d never tried sword fighting, so the intricacies of combat were lost on me.

The eighth-years were especially impressive, with less than a year remaining until their graduation. Many of those competing would be in active duty as real knights in another year. Their skill level was extremely high.

The tournament was a test of sword skill only, so the use of magic was forbidden. I could only imagine how much more exciting it would be to watch one of the tournaments at the castle, where both sword and sorcery were used simultaneously.

Everyone had watched with rapt attention as Charles won his first round, and the excitement of that match was still heavy in the air.

“Edoile’s up next!” Oliphia leaned in and breathlessly alerted me that it was Ed’s turn next.

I gazed down at the arena in anticipation. The two new male competitors walked out, both dressed in heavy plate armor. They had yet to don their helmets, so I identified Ed easily by his hair. One boy wore a red symbol on his chest and back, the other blue. It was Ed wearing the red symbol.

They both put on their helmets and faced each other in the center of the arena. As the match began, a ripple of excitement went through the crowd as the spectators fell silent.

“Fight!”

At the referee’s signal, one boy immediately lunged forward to attack. The arena rang out with the sound of clanging metal. The boy with the red symbol on his armor—in other words, Ed—defended with his sword, and the two stared each other down. The next moment, the air was thick with the sound of clanging steel as the two of them began to clash swords furiously.

“Amazing. This is a great match.”

I nodded in response to Oliphia’s comment, my eyes fixed on the fight. The two competitors seemed evenly matched, and neither was giving an inch. But then, in a second, the tide of the bout turned.

“Ah, he fumbled!”

At the sound of another massive clang, the audience began to shout. The boy with the blue symbol had fumbled his grip on the sword. Instantly, Ed sprang forward, knocking the sword from the boy’s hand with an almighty clang.

“Halt! We have a winner.”

The referee yelled out, and the audience cheered. The two competitors stiffly shook hands, and the audience broke into rapturous applause.

“Edoile won! Amazing! This means that Ed, Charles, and Dohle have all made it to the final eight!” Oliphia was speaking fast with excitement.

“Yes, that was really amazing.” I tried to control my excitement, gazing out at the arena.

Who could have predicted that in just a year and a half, someone could go from claiming that their sword skills “weren’t up to much” to then reaching the final eight of the tournament? *Ed must have trained tirelessly.* I mentally took my hat off to him.

Ed pulled off his helmet, and holding it under one arm, he started to look around the arena. He seemed to be scanning the audience for something or

someone.

“What’s he looking for?”

“No idea.”

As I watched him curiously, Ed’s gaze turned my way. His red eyes narrowed for a moment, focusing, then he broke into a smile. He raised his free hand in the air, grinning.



“Look, Edoile is waving at us! Edoile!”

The group of girls standing near us began to squeal with excitement. They were all standing on their tiptoes, arms stretched high, waving at Ed. They must have been eighth-years, the same as him.

Was he just looking at me?

I felt like he’d made direct eye contact with me, but perhaps it was just my imagination.

Was he looking for me? Seeking me out in the crowd?

I blushed furiously, chiding myself for having such conceited thoughts.



IN the end, Dohle ended up the winner of the tournament.

Dohle had been the favorite to win from the start. He was an eighth-year, one of the oldest boys in the school, and he was the first-born son of the Veligarde family, a famous dynasty of knights.

Incidentally, Prince Charles, who everyone had been watching with rapt attention, had lost to Dohle in his second match. Charles had immediately begun boasting that losing to the eventual winner meant that he was the second-best fighter in the whole school by default. At least, that was the spin he put on it. Charles really was an ungracious loser.

Ed had lost to Dohle in the final round.

But even in defeat, Ed seemed pleased with his performance, and his positive attitude and cheerful smile impressed everyone.

Some days later, I suggested to Ed that he would have won for sure if magic use was permitted in the tournament. But Ed shook his head. “No, I still would have lost. Dohle’s sword arm is a force of nature. But your confidence honors me. Thank you,” he said with a smile.

“Officials from the Imperial Armed Guard came to watch, did you know that?”

“Yes, I know.”

“Actually, they approached me and asked if I wouldn’t consider joining the

Imperial Armed Guard. But when I told them I favored magic more, they suggested arranging an introduction to the Magical Order of Knights instead...”

I blinked with excitement when Ed revealed this as the two of us were chatting in the Magic Practice Room.

The Magical Order of Knights! Ed had been one of the Magic Knights in the old timeline. I knew he’d end up getting scouted at the tournament!

“That’s very impressive. Congratulations, Ed!”

“Hmm? Ah...thank you.”

“It’s no easy feat to get accepted to the Magical Order of Knights! You’re really something, Ed.”

I clasped my hands together in front of my chest.

The Magical Order of Knights accepted only the most skilled swordsmen who also possessed gifted magical abilities. Like my Ed, back in the old timeline.

Many spent years trying to get accepted to the Order. Being invited to join, however...that was special!

“You’ll take them up on the offer, of course?” I leaned forward, smiling encouragingly at Ed.

In my excitement, I failed to notice the hesitant look on his face...

9. Magical Power Unleashed

AFTER the tournament, I couldn't help noticing that something was different at school.

"Hello, Dohle."

"Hi."

"Good afternoon, Edoile!"

"Good afternoon."

Dohle remained impassive, but Ed was now politely greeting all the girls who were saying hello to them in the halls.

I could hear the girls squealing in delight.

Oliphia had predicted it beforehand and it seemed to be true. Doing well in the sword tournament had a direct effect on one's popularity with the female students.

Dohle and Ed were the first and second-born sons of a Marquess and a Duke, respectively. Neither was bad-looking. In fact, they were both quite handsome. Dohle radiated masculine energy, and Ed had refined features and a cool aura about him. When they walked the halls with Charles, who was also wonderful to look at (*and wonderful inside, too! I'm not saying he's just a pretty-faced prince!*)...well, the three of them certainly turned heads.

Charles was always nice to the girls while retaining a proper sense of distance. And Dohle and Edoile were much the same.

So while nothing had really changed besides an increase in the female students' attentions, I had to fight back a wave of irritation whenever I witnessed scenes like that.



ONE day, I went to town with Oliphia, who suggested an outing. Once again,

Olthe was our bodyguard.

It would soon be two years since I had entered the academy. In that time, I'd visited town a dozen times. So today, the two of us told Olthe to take us someplace we hadn't yet been to.

"Somewhere new, eh? Now, where would be suitable, I wonder..."

Olthe knitted his brows together like a student faced with a flummoxing academic question.

Oliphia quickly made a suggestion. "What about one of those alleyways we always pass?"

Multiple alleyways led off the main street. Olthe always steered us away, saying we ought not to go down them. But we'd already seen enough of the shops along the main street.

"There's a lot of ruffians down those alleys and many dangers too."

That's what Olthe always said, a solemn expression on his face. But when we pointed out that we'd seen small children playing in those alleys, Olthe thought about it for a moment. "All right," he said. "You two have become young ladies now, so how about visiting that shop there?" And then he brought us to a shop neither of us had seen before.

We looked up at the shop exterior in fascination.

Up a small flight of steps, the double doors of the shop stood ten feet tall. The doors were painted gold, with gorgeous embossed and carved designs. Stone columns towered on either side of the doors. The exterior of the shop looked for all the world like a miniature palace.

The name of the shop was painted above the entrance: *San Cleart*.

"What kind of shop is this?" Oliphia seemed puzzled and curious.

"It's a jeweler's. They carry everything from precious stones to costume jewelry for common folk."

Olthe opened the door and ushered us inside.

The jeweler's shop was comprised of three levels. The first level sold costume

jewelry and accessories for commoners, the second level held more upscale pieces, and the top floor had precious stones and gems for the aristocracy.

Dressed in our school uniforms after a day at the academy, we felt more comfortable checking out the costume jewelry on the ground floor.

“Look, that’s cute.”

Oliphia pointed at a necklace in a glass display case. It was a light-blue jewel on a simple chain. The price wasn’t bad, so it was probably a glass jewel and not a real gemstone.

“Oh look, that’s pretty too.”

The next thing that caught Oliphia’s eye was a bracelet with light-blue jewels attached.

“You really like light-blue, don’t you, Phia?”

“Huh?”

“Didn’t you notice? All the stones you keep gravitating towards are light-blue.”

Oliphia blinked at me blankly. I started chuckling.

Claude’s eyes were light-blue. While there were rare exceptions, Magic Stones usually took on the color of the caster’s eyes. That’s why the Magic Stone Ed had given me was red, like his eyes. *Good for you, Claude*, I thought to myself.

After browsing for a few minutes, Oliphia paused in front of a glass case.

“This one’s odd. There’s no stone in it.”

Curious, I came over to take a look.

There were necklace chains and rings on display, but the backing part where a stone would be set was empty on them all. The silverwork itself was pretty, though simple, with delicate engraving of things like leaves and flowers.

“Do you have to buy the stones separately?”

We both peered into the glass case, and then Olthe appeared behind us, saying “Ah” over our shoulders.

“Those are for Magic Stones. You two will no doubt receive one before long.”

“We will?”

Oliphia and I looked at one another.

Receiving a Magic Stone basically meant getting married.

As the meaning of Olthe’s words sank in, we both blushed a deep pink.

Olthe smiled warmly at us as we blushed.

It was sweltering outside.

The sun beat down relentlessly as we left the shop and headed back to the main street. Just walking was making me break into a sweat, and I pulled my handkerchief from my pocket to mop my brow.

Some of the local children were picking up trash nearby. I’d seen them down one of the alleyways before. They seemed to be having a hard time out here in the hot sun. Several young men were sitting in the shade not too far off, having a conversation.

“It’s hot.”

As I mopped myself with my handkerchief, Oliphia concurred: “Too hot.”

Olthe immediately produced a parasol and shaded us both. “Let’s go somewhere for a cold drink and a rest.”

“Yay!”

“I want to go back to that café from last time!”

Olthe’s suggestion was a welcome one for us both. We headed to a nearby café for cookies and fresh-squeezed orange juice and enjoyed a nice break from the harsh afternoon sun.



IT was evening back at the castle before I realized something was wrong. When I was taking off my Grail Academy uniform in my bedroom, I reached my hand into my pocket like always and came up empty.

“What? No...”

In a panic, I turned my pocket inside out. But there was nothing inside. I turned my room upside down looking for it, but my little red stone was nowhere to be found.

“Could I have dropped it somewhere? In the carriage?”

Yes, of course. It must be in the carriage.

I left my room and was on my way to look for it when I ran into Charles, conversing with one of the knight guards.

“Bel, where are you going? It’s almost time for dinner.”

Charles looked at me suspiciously as I was wandering the halls, still wearing my school uniform.

“I forgot something in the carriage. I’ll be right back.”

“Take one of the guards.”

“I’m not a child. I don’t need a guard. I’m not even leaving the castle grounds. Anyway, I’ll be right back.”

“I see. Pardon me, then.”

I was truculent and Charles was quietly amused.

I walked past Charles and headed quickly to the carriage yard. The carriage we’d ridden home in had just been cleaned, and the coachman was unshackling the horses.

“Excuse me, did you find a red stone in there?”

“A red stone? No, I didn’t.”

The coachman stopped wringing out his rag and put down his bucket, shaking his head.

His lack of manners and appreciation for the urgency of the situation made my blood boil. If it wasn’t in the carriage, then where and when could I have dropped it?

I was always putting my hand in my pocket to touch Ed’s Magic Stone. It was a habit. I remembered fidgeting with it while we were out walking in town today, for certain. So I must have dropped it after that.

“What am I going to do?”

I couldn't just *lose* the Magic Stone.

It was precious. In my past life, Ed used the last of his strength to give it to me after protecting me until his final moments. Even now, his protection was with me in the form of that stone, keeping me safe.

“I have to find it! Please! Take me to town at once!”

Thinking about it rationally, I should have gone back to my room, explained things to the guards, and sent them to search where I remembered having it last. But I wasn't thinking rationally. I was too shaken up.

The coachman blinked in surprise at my sudden barked order.

He looked around for the guards I was obligated to bring with me whenever I left the castle, but I shook my head.

“I don't need them. I'm in a hurry!”

“But...”

“Just do it!”

I'd been to town a dozen times since starting at Grail, and I went down the main street every single day by carriage. Nothing remotely dangerous had ever happened, so this would be fine. It was more important to find my lost Magic Stone.

That's how I was rationalizing this foolish act to myself.

At any rate, the coachman couldn't talk back to me, the princess. Nervously, he spurred the horses along the road. Ten minutes later, we pulled up at the familiar coachyard in town.

“Wait here for me.”

“Certainly. But where are you going, Princess?”

The coachman's eyes were full of concern. I shook my head.

“I'll be right back.”

I got down from the carriage and set off, retracing our steps from earlier that

day. I walked swiftly, scanning the ground all around, but I could see no trace of my red Magic Stone.

The sun had almost completely set now, casting a deep red glow on the walls of the nearby buildings. It was also much less crowded out than it was during the afternoon.

Once night fell in full, I wouldn't be able to search for my Magic Stone anymore. I kept searching, growing frantic now.

"It's nowhere to be found..."

I followed the same paths we took that afternoon and went to the same shops. But there was no sign of what I sought.

"Where could it be?!"

I came to a halt, racking my brain.

Suddenly, I got a mental image of the jewelry store we went to that afternoon. After we left the store, I pulled out my handkerchief. What if the stone fell out along with it?

I quickly turned and ran back to the jewelry store. I'd already checked the path outside so I knew my stone wasn't lying in the dirt. But what about the children who were picking up trash nearby? Maybe one of them had seen my stone...

Out of breath, I looked around the vicinity. I must have really stood out, dashing around like a mad thing, dressed in Grail Academy's uniform. At the time, though, I paid no heed.

I looked up and down the alley, but the children I'd spotted playing that afternoon must have already gone home.

The two men in their late-twenties I'd spotted chatting in the shade, however... they were still there. Watching me. From their spot on the stoop of a nearby building, one caught my eye and gave me a grin.

"What are you doing out at this hour, my lady?"

I breathed a sigh of relief. This young man seemed nice.

“Um, I’m looking for something. I dropped something very important somewhere near here. I saw some children picking up trash this afternoon, so I was hoping I could question them. You were here this afternoon too, weren’t you? Did you see anything?”

“I see. It must be something very valuable, if you’re out here looking for it alone this time of night?”

“No, it’s not valuable...it’s a Magic Stone. It was given to me by someone very important to me.”

The two men exchanged glances. “Mm-hmm,” they both murmured.

Magic Stones are a dime a dozen in a land like Najir, and they don’t really have any monetary value. Their protective attributes only work on the person they’ve been given to, so in the hands of anyone else, they just become pretty pieces of colored glass.

“We know where the children are. We’ll take you to them.”

“Really? Thank you so much!”

I was so glad I’d run into two such kind young men! They stood up and beckoned, and I followed along behind them. After walking for a while, though, I came to a sudden halt.

“Down there...?”

They’d led me to the mouth of one of the little alleys that branched off the main street, where Olthe had said we were never to go.

Noticing my hesitation, the men turned to me, grinning.

“What’s the matter? Don’t worry, we’ll show you back to the main street again afterward.”

“Oh...thanks.”

This was an emergency, and I had an escort, so it was fine, wasn’t it? That’s what I told myself, as I nervously followed the men down the dimly lit alley.

I don’t know how long we walked. It was probably only about five minutes, but in that time, the sun had set completely. The walls of the buildings had gone

from twilight red to a dull gray, as if all the color had been sucked out.

“How much longer will it be?”

“We’re almost there.”

But it was getting darker and darker still, and the main street seemed so far behind now. And for another thing, the buildings appeared to be getting shabbier and more decrepit.

At long last, the men came to a stop in front of a house, and I breathed a sigh of relief.

Up a short flight of steps, there was a wooden door with a brass knocker on it. Tiny orange flames flickered in the sconces affixed to either side of the door.

One of the men rapped on the door with the brass knocker, and I heard a key scraping in the lock from the other side.

An older man with a red, wrinkled face poked his head around the doorframe.

“What do you want? We’re closed.”

“Don’t be like that. We brought you something good.”

The man who’d knocked on the door then jerked his chin in my direction. The red-faced man looked me up and down, eyes widening in surprise.

“Where did you find that?”

“Picked her up on the main street. See the uniform? That’s the rich kid school. And she’s dumb as a post. She was raised in a bubble with a silver spoon for sure. She’ll fetch a sweet price.”

“Aha. Good work.”

The red-faced man let forth an ill-natured raspy chuckle.

I’ll admit it. It took me far too long to realize I was in danger.

I have to escape!

I turned and started running.

“You! Get back here!”

One of the men yelled after me, but I didn’t look back as I dashed back the

way we'd come. The dark alley was lit only by the stars above, and I couldn't see the ground beneath my feet. The next moment, I went sprawling onto the hard ground. I'd tripped on a rock.

"There she is! Grab her!"

"I'm on it!"

Just as one of the men bent down to grab me, there was a loud zinging sound, and sparks burst out of the darkness, singeing his hands. He immediately snatched his hands back, sucking on his scalded fingers.

"Sneaky wench. She's using a protective spell!"

"What did you say?"

The other man reached for me as well, but again, sparks shot out in the darkness, and he snatched his hand back in a panic.

"We'll bind her with magic."

One of the men walked up behind me and threw a lariat made of magical rope over my head. Such rope was usually used to capture criminals or wild beasts. But when he pulled on the rope to tighten it around my torso and arms, the rope burst into flames and burned away to ashes.

"The heck is going on?! Darn it! There's no choice left but to damage the goods. Beat her up!"

Looking at the ashy fragments of rope lying on the ground, one of the men started yelling, his face red with rage. The other man picked up a stick that was propped up against one of the walls and advanced on me, holding it high above his head.

"No!"

I squeezed my eyes shut, squealing in terror of being hit.

"Ed, please save me! Ed!"

Without thinking, I found myself calling for my guardian knight.

The next moment, a cool breeze came down the alley, sending dry leaves rustling.

“Who are you? Where did you spring up from?”

The ruffian’s voice was husky with confusion.

I cracked my eyes open, still afraid of the blow that had never come...to see a man standing before me in the alleyway, facing my two attackers. He was casually dressed in a white shirt and pants, and the evening breeze was blowing his midnight-black hair back behind him...

“Ed?”



I was shocked beyond words, my eyes as wide as saucers.

How could he be here? He couldn't be. It wasn't possible.

After all...he was dead...

At the sound of my dry croak, the vision of Ed turned to look at me and gave me a reassuring smile.

"It's all right now, Princess."

His face was still young. It was the version of Ed from this world. He crouched down and leaned in, bringing his lips to my ear.

"I'll handle these fellows. You run away, okay?"

"But..."

The two ruffians were chuckling now in a menacing manner.

"This rich pretty boy thinks he can take us on? How adorable! We used to be in the Royal Peace Preservation Force, you know!"

The ruffian rolled up his sleeves, revealing muscled arms.

I felt my breath catch in my throat.

A pair of brutes like *that* in the Royal Peace Preservation Force? I could imagine how that ended for them—they must have done something abominable and been thrown out.

Ed's expression never wavered, but he leaned in to speak in my ear once again.

"Princess, frankly, you're in my way. I can't let them take you hostage. Please run away now and call for help, would you?"

All of a sudden, I recalled what had happened back in the Sunruta Kingdom. I'd been captured, and the guards had threatened my life to get Ed to stand down. Pale-faced now, I nodded to show I understood.

"Okay. I've got it."

"Good. Off you go, then."

He patted my back reassuringly with his big hand, and I took off at a run. A

zing of pain shot through my ankle, but I paid it no heed.

“Get back here! Look, she’s getting away!”

“Let’s deal with the pretty boy, and then we’ll grab her.”

I could hear the ruffians shouting horrible things back there in the darkness.

I tried to run, but the pain in my ankle was almost unbearable. Within a few steps, I was hobbling and stumbling.

Breathless now, I turned to look back. I was sure Ed had been unarmed, but now he was holding a mighty crystal sword, clearly made with the same kind of magical manifestation spell he’d shown me on my birthday. Using the crystal sword, he was fending off the attacks of the man with the big stick. For all Ed’s prowess with the sword, he was outnumbered by adults three to one, and those ruffians were ex-peace officers...

“I have to hurry and call for help...”

Just as I turned to start running again, I saw something that made me clamp my hands over my mouth in horror.

Back down the dark alley, the third, older man had come up behind Ed as he was locked in combat with the two young ruffians and bashed him on the head with a club. Ed crumpled to the ground like a puppet with its strings cut.

“No!”

A gasp escaped my tightened throat.

I was having a flashback, seeing Ed again in that dank dungeon cell...

Ed, his face bloody from the beatings. I couldn’t see through his clothes, but his body must have been black and blue as well... Ed was *still* taking my hits for me... Still paying the price for my foolish actions...

“Stop it, I beg you! Please stop!”

The man kicked Ed, sending him flying. Through the haze of my tears, I could see a warm light begin to glow all around Ed.

“No, no, no!!!”

I hadn’t even known I could scream this loud.

My screams echoed down the deserted streets of the town's back alleys. At the same time, I felt something powerful bubbling up inside me.

The heat inside me was unbearable! I clutched myself tightly with both arms.

I knew this sensation.

As I bent over, head down and unable to hold it in, the alleyway was suddenly illuminated, making everything as bright as day. I could see everything, even the little pebbles on the street near my feet.

I knew this sensation.

Boom!

Then there was an explosion, loud enough to make your ears ring, accompanied by a rush of hot air. A flowerpot fell from a nearby windowsill, smashing to the ground at my feet and scattering mud and flowers everywhere. I looked up in time to see another flowerpot topple from a higher window and come tumbling down...

"Princess, watch out!"

I heard a yell, then felt someone grab me tightly. Reflexively, I closed my eyes, putting my hands over my ears.

It felt like forever, but it must have been only a few seconds. Then it was silent again. Dead silent. I opened my eyes, wincing, to see that everything was shrouded in darkness once more.

"Princess, are you all right?"

I heard his voice right above my head, and I looked up to see Ed, gazing down at me, his face so close to mine. His red eyes were filled with worry as he looked me over.

"I'm fine... What was that? Where did those men go?!"

"They're knocked out cold. It's all right now. That was scary, wasn't it? I'll call for help at once."

Ed lifted up his palm, where a ball of light began to glow, taking shape and turning into a small sheet of paper. He quickly scribbled something on the page

and muttered an incantation. Then the paper scrap disappeared.

That done, Ed returned his attention to me, holding me and rubbing my back reassuringly. That's when I realized that I was trembling like crazy. I held my hand up in front of me, fingers shaking numbly. I couldn't move them.

"Ed...what were you doing here?"

"I'm not sure. I don't know. I was at home, reading a book on magical theory when I got the feeling you were calling my name. I just couldn't sit still, and I ended up teleporting...here. And that's when I saw you, about to be attacked. I'm so glad I made it in time."

Ed breathed out slowly through his nose.

"If only I hadn't teleported freestyle. I should have used a Magic Sigil. I didn't have enough magical energy left to fight. That was careless of me."

"You're bleeding. Your cheek is all swollen..."

"Oh, I'm all right. It's just a scratch."

Ed's mouth was smeared with blood from his split lip. There was also a bruise blooming on his left cheek, and in the dim light, I could see that he was splattered all over with mud.

"Even an aristocrat like me would get in trouble for pummeling a couple of citizens. I had to let them get in a *few* good hits for the self-defense excuse to hold water."

Ed chuckled like a naughty boy, but I still couldn't stop shaking. What if those men had managed to overpower Ed? It would all have been because of me.

"I'm sorry...I'm so sorry."

"Princess...I'm all right, really."

Ed frowned down at me with concern as I kept mumbling apologies, tears cascading down my cheeks.

"Prince Charles appointed me as your personal knight, after all."

"But you could have been killed because of me! If they'd gotten the upper hand on you, then..."

“A little beating wouldn’t have killed me. I’ve been training a lot lately, and I still had enough magic in me to cast a self-protection spell at the last second, if things started to look really grim. Anyway, never mind about me. I’m just glad you’re safe, Princess.”

As Ed smiled down at me, I could see my guardian knight, *Ed*, in him. He had done exactly the same...risked his life to save mine, without a moment’s hesitation.

“You shouldn’t have done that! I was a fool! I almost got you killed! I’ve inconvenienced so many people, I...I...!”

Feeling like I was on the verge of hysteria, I couldn’t come up with any more words.

Why hadn’t I gone to one of my knights and asked them to come and search with me? My Magic Stone was such a precious thing. But I couldn’t risk the lives of the living for the sake of a stone.

“Please take more care of yourself. I thought I was about to lose you.”

“Princess, I...”

“You’re special to me, Ed. So, please.”

I was sobbing now, not even aware of what I was saying.

My face felt all puffy from crying and I had a hammering headache.

Just then, we could hear heavy hoofbeats approaching, and then suddenly, the alley was full of knights on horseback, leading the way for a horse and carriage. In the moonlight, I could see the emblem shining on the side of the carriage. The door flew open, and Charles jumped down, his jaw stiff with an anger I’d never seen before.

I’d disappeared from the castle grounds after telling him I was only going to the carriage yard to fetch something. Then I’d turned up in a dodgy alleyway on the verge of being sold into prostitution by a gang of ruffians. Of course Charles was angry.

Slap!

A bolt of pain shot across my cheek.

My brother had slapped my face.

“Bel. Do you have any idea what you’ve done?”

“I’m...sorry...”

My big brother had always been so sweet to me. I’d never seen him like this before in my life.

His jaw still stiffly set with anger, Charles turned his gaze toward Ed.

“Ed, thank you for your message. We can discuss this at length later. Our coachman will see you home.”

“I understand, my prince. I’m only glad the princess was unharmed.”

Ed got to his feet and lowered his head deferentially to Charles.

Charles took me by the arm and bundled me into the waiting carriage. Ed looked up at me as I gazed down at him from the window and gave another polite bow.



BACK at the castle, both Father and Mother scolded me until I was a blubbering mess of tears. If the princess of the realm had been kidnapped, it would have been a matter of national emergency. I knew that.

I heard later that the Duke of Anglate himself had shown up at the castle in the middle of the night with a crying Oliphia and a pale-faced Olthe, to apologize for Oliphia “leading me astray.” I have no idea how word of the incident even reached the Anglates that quickly.

Even worse, the guards I’d passed that night on my way to the carriage yard all offered to give up their lives as penance for their oversight, and even the coachman I’d manipulated into bringing me to town offered to give up his post as well.

But my father, the king, pardoned them all, and I realized once again that the responsibility for this whole mess fell to only one person: me.

10. Confined to My Room

I slipped a bookmark between the pages of the book I'd been reading and lifted my head, casting my gaze out the window.

I could see a single carriage rolling this way along the long road which led to the castle gates. I recognized it as the same familiar carriage we used to commute to Grail Academy. Charles was home.

"Is it that time already?"

I turned to check the clock on the wall. It was half-past three. After lunch, I'd planned to read for a while, but I'd ended up losing all track of time.

Around three months had passed since the incident—when I went out to look for my lost Magic Stone and almost ended up being kidnapped.

In the aftermath, Father had declared that my punishment would consist of six months' confinement to my room and volunteer work. I was allowed to walk around the castle for some light exercise, and I was allowed to stop by local hospitals and orphanages to make charitable visits with orphans and cripples. Apart from that, I was to remain in my room, studying with a home tutor. When I wasn't doing that, I mostly read a lot of books.

Two knights were posted outside my room at all times, but I accepted responsibility for what had happened and resigned myself to my punishment.

The worst part of it was that I *still* hadn't found the Magic Stone Ed gave to me.

I sighed deeply and moved away from the window, sitting back down to read.

The book I was currently reading was a gift from Claude, who'd come to visit me after school one day with Oliphia. The book was a new one, only published a few months prior, and it contained a lot of information about the Sunruta Kingdom.

Claude had used his influence as a member of the Judeon family and pulled a few strings to get it for me. Since the incident, I'd been so despondent, and he'd gotten it to cheer me up.

As I scanned the page, I paused on a specific sentence.

"Prince Daniel, the royal heir, has set up a royally funded magical research laboratory. After gathering esteemed magicians from all over the land, research is underway on cutting-edge sorcery."

A simple enough sentence. But for me, it raised so many questions.

A magical research laboratory in the Sunruta Kingdom?

In my old life, I hadn't heard a thing about that. I'd been sent to Sunruta to be its future queen, and I'd spent several months there as the king's fiancée. I was pretty sure I knew all about the country. And yet...

As I mulled over what this implicated, I heard the sound of knuckles rapping on the door.

"Come in."

I kept my eyes fixed on the book, figuring that Ellie was just bringing me a snack or something. I heard the door open and sensed someone entering.

"What are you reading, Princess?"

I lifted my head in surprise, recognizing the familiar deep voice.

"Ed!"

Ed was standing over me in his Grail Academy uniform, looking with interest at the book in my hand.

"What are you doing here?"

"I came by carriage with Charles. I wanted to speak to you about something. Charles just went to change; he should be along shortly."

"You want to talk to me?"

I looked up at Ed, not sure what he could want.

During my confinement period, Ed had been coming by twice a week after

school. Catching a ride in Charles's carriage, he came regularly to teach me magic.

That day in town, seeing Ed about to be assaulted had upset me so badly I'd actually managed to finally unleash my latent magical power. Ever since, I'd been able to actually practice real magic under the guidance of my home tutor, and Ed of course. But Ed wasn't scheduled to come today.

"Princess. Please, hold out your hand."

"All right...?"

I did as instructed. I held out my hand. Ed turned my wrist over so my palm was facing up, and then he covered my hand with his. Our hands fit flush together, and I noticed that his hand was much bigger than mine.

My hand felt warm where his touched it.

Then I felt something heavy drop into my open palm.

Slowly, Ed removed his hand from mine.

"I wanted to give this to you right away."

Ed smiled, and I looked back at him in disbelief.

Sitting on my open palm was the bright-red Magic Stone.

"How did you find it?" My voice was hoarse with surprise.

It looked exactly like my Magic Stone, the one I lost that day. The same blood-red color as Ed's eyes.

"I recalled how I showed this spell to you once before...so I tried using it—the locating magic, I mean—to search for your stone. But for some reason, the spell kept getting a response from my own Magic Stone. It was...difficult work. I apologize for how long it took." Ed's eyebrows drew together in an apologetic frown.

I shook my head hard, almost making myself dizzy.

I thought the stone would never find its way back to me...

"Thank you. Oh, thank you, Ed!"

“No, no. It was nothing.”

He'd been searching for it, ever since that day? I squeezed the round stone tightly in my hand. It had come back to me.

I was so, so happy.

“But wherever did you find it?”

“With some children playing in the back alleys. They were using it as one of their marbles. I offered them a bag of hot buns, and they gladly made the trade.”

“Hot buns?”

I blinked, surprised by this unusual turn of events. Then I giggled, picturing Ed tempting the children with a steaming bag of buns, hot from the bakery. Ed watched me warmly as I sat laughing, shoulders shaking with mirth.

“Prin—”

“Bel! What's new today?”

Just as Ed seemed like he was about to say something, the already half-open door swung all the way open. Charles strode in, wearing casual clothes and a smile.

“Hello, Charles. Welcome home.”

“Thanks. So, what's going on in here?”

I looked reflexively at Ed. He shook his head slightly. “The Princess was engrossed in a book, and I wanted to know what she was reading,” he said.

It looked like Ed was going to keep the return of my Magic Stone a secret. He'd probably realized that nothing good could come of bringing up my behavior that day.

“A book? What were you reading?”

Charles looked at the book on my bedside table with some interest.

“It's that book about the Sunruta Kingdom. I already told you about it at the dinner table.”

I picked up the book and held it up so he could see. It was bound in orange leather and was quite heavy. Just then, I recalled the sentence I'd been struck by just minutes before.

"Charles...this book says that there's a magical research laboratory in the Sunruta Kingdom..."

"Ah, so it seems. Apparently, Prince Daniel strongly insisted upon it."

"Prince Daniel insisted, you say? Do you know why he'd want to set up something like that?"

"I don't know that much. Sunruta probably wants more magical power. Like our country."

Charles sounded a touch boastful. But it was true that the Sunruta Kingdom was clearly inferior to Najir in terms of magic.

"I wonder about that..."

I mulled it over, unconvinced.

A magical research lab in the Sunruta Kingdom. Nope, I don't recall ever hearing anything about that. Why would Daniel push for such a thing? What's changed?

"Speaking of which, I heard from Marquis Judeon that Prince Daniel's coronation ceremony is set for next year. Najir will probably receive an official invitation."

"I see..."

Now that I'd gotten Charles started talking about the Sunruta Kingdom, he wouldn't shut up.

Najir followed the hereditary line of succession, meaning that the first-born prince was automatically in line to become the next king. But in Sunruta, the prince wasn't formally accepted as such until he'd been crowned in a coronation ceremony. And that ceremony was due to happen next year...

In the old timeline, I formally met Daniel on my sixteenth birthday, which was a year and a half from now. At that time, Daniel was already the Crown Prince, so the timing checked out.

After that, the three of us spent some time together, chatting over tea and biscuits.



THAT night in bed, I rolled onto my back and held my red Magic Stone up to the light.

In the dim light of my bedroom, the Magic Stone emitted a fiery glow. It was unscratched, exactly as I remembered it.

I hadn't been carrying my Magic Stone when I was attacked by those ruffians in town. And yet, its powers still protected me.

That had to mean that this stone Ed gave me was created to provide me with protection, even if I wasn't carrying it.

Normal Magic Stones only work if you have them on your person.

During my confinement, I'd read a lot of books on the subject. And what I'd learned was that this Magic Stone—and the protective spell it was casting over me—was exceptionally strong.

"Ed...what spell did you cast on me?"

When I called on Ed for his help—my guardian knight Ed, I mean—young Ed had appeared all of a sudden, in his place.

And yet, Ed himself didn't seem to really know what was going on.

And then, with what I read this afternoon about the magical laboratory being set up in the Sunruta Kingdom...

There were so many differences between this world and the world of my past.

Well, I knew one thing for sure. The spell my Ed cast on me in the old world—it was an unknown type of magic, the kind you won't find mentioned in any of the magical texts.

I stared intensely at the red Magic Stone.

"What was Ed about to say, I wonder."

Ed had been about to say something this afternoon before Charles burst in on us. But he clammed up when Charles appeared. What was it that he was about

to tell me?

I mulled it over, whispering out loud to myself in the silent room, my words melting into the silence. Then, with a final muttered incantation of “Extinguish,” I put out the lamps in the room, and darkness descended.



GALLANT and masculine. That was my first impression of him.

“Princess Annabel, happy birthday. I’m delighted to make your acquaintance on this auspicious day. May I have the honor of partnering with you for the first dance?”

Daniel smiled as he spoke, holding out his hand to me. His brown hair was neatly tied back, and his ice-blue eyes were sharp as he gazed at me. Yes, he seemed very masculine.

“I would be delighted.”

It was the day of my sixteenth birthday. My debut into adult society.

Prince Daniel of the Sunruta Kingdom, nineteen at the time, was in Najir representing his homeland for the occasion of my coming-of-age.

I tended to spend most of my time in my room, and each day, he would come by and invite me to walk in the gardens. As we walked, he would make me laugh, his face lighting up with a fond smile whenever he succeeded.

And he would give me gifts—more gifts than I could possibly ever need.

In my eyes, Daniel, who was three years my senior, seemed like a heroic white knight who had stepped out of the pages of one of my storybooks. From head to toe, he was perfect, and I was instantly smitten.

“You are so very different from how I pictured you, Princess Annabel.”

“How so?”

“You’re much more mature than I imagined and so modest. And of course, far more beautiful than I ever dreamed...” He smiled, turning his dazzling gaze on me.

I mentioned my fondness for dahlias, and from the very next day, and each

one after that, he sent a bouquet of dahlias to my room.

A week after our meeting, the day before he was due to return home, we were chatting in a remote corner of the gardens when silence fell between us.

“Tomorrow, I return to Sunruta,” Daniel spoke slowly, each word seeming loaded with meaning.

“Yes. I shall be...very sad.”

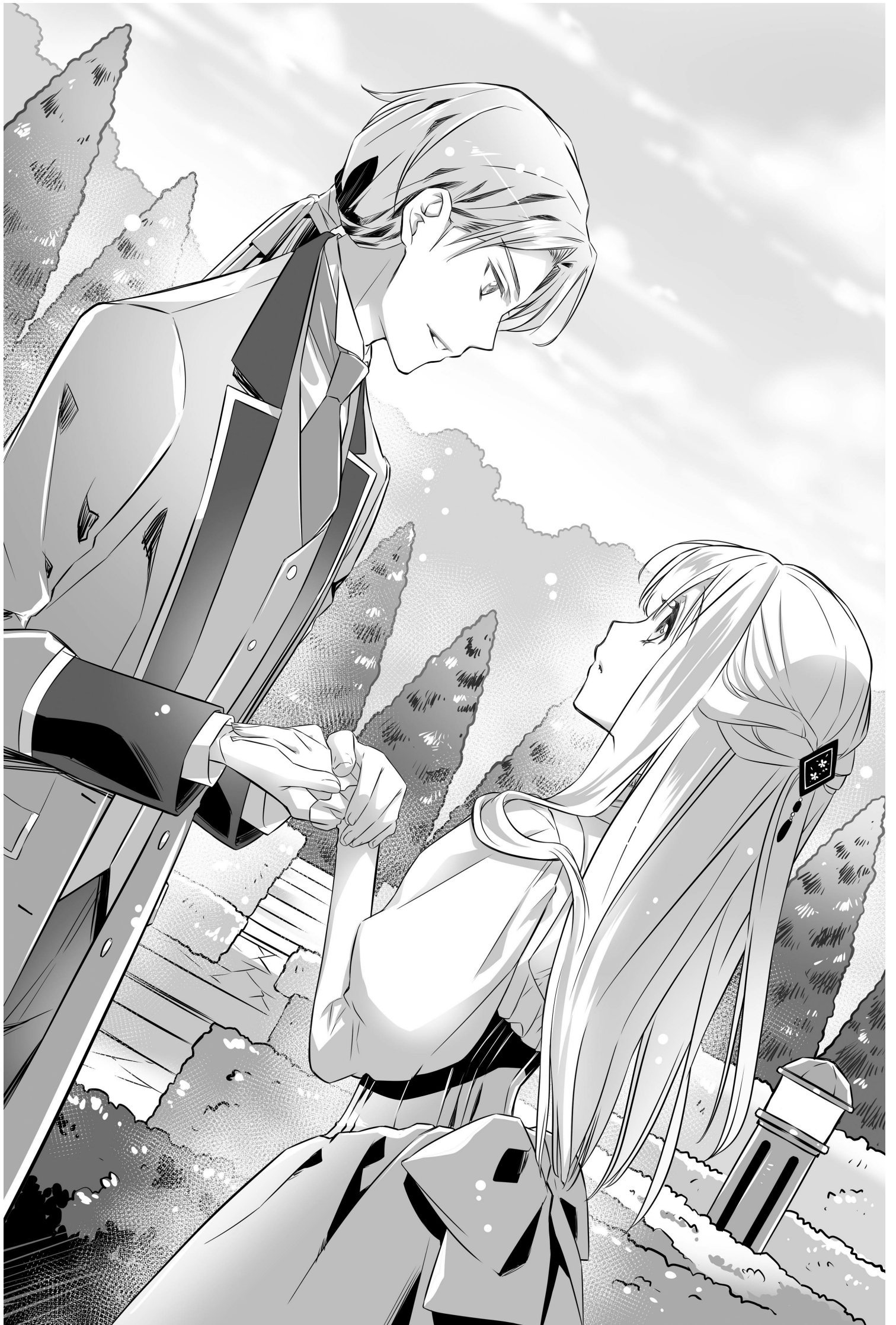
I wasn't just saying it to be polite, either. I had come to like Daniel very much over the past few days and would miss him.

I don't know if that was love or what. But it was the first time I'd ever felt something for a man.

He took my hand silently and held it in his, his hand so much larger than my own.

“Princess Annabel. Won't you come to the Sunruta Kingdom? Won't you come and be with me?”

I looked at Daniel in surprise. He looked back at me with sincerity in his eyes.



“It’s true, I want to forge a stronger relationship between Sunruta and Najir. But more than that, I’ve fallen for your charms. I won’t ask you to come right away. But can we write to one another? And, if you consider me a good enough man to stand alongside you, then would you consider my request?”

I was my country’s only princess, and I’d always known my existence was all for the sake of forging a political marriage someday. Daniel’s proposal did not catch me off-guard.

Yes, I would marry for the good of the country and be sent as a bride wherever politics dictated.

I’d always known that.

But Daniel seemed to be going to great lengths to get close to me, the *real* me. At the time, I really felt that he was sincere.

“...I cannot use magic.”

“What of it? Neither can I and it’s never bothered me. I’m sure it would be a convenient skill to have, however.”

I had expected him to be disappointed, and I gazed at him in surprise. He grinned at me impishly.

“I don’t care if you can use magic or not. I want you.”

His earnest eyes spoke of his sincerity. Suddenly choked with emotion, I felt a tear spill down my cheek.

“If you would have me...then I would be delighted.”

I gave my answer with no hesitation. Daniel broke into a huge smile and pulled me gently into his arms.

“You’ll have a tough time, coming to live in a foreign country. But I swear I’ll protect you. I promise I’ll make you happy.”

His words were so sweet. So kind.

That same day, we went to my father, the king of Najir, and he gave us his blessing for our engagement.

Obviously, a matter of political marriage between countries isn’t something

that can be decided in a day. Clearly, talks had already been held. But at the time, I knew *nothing* of that.



THE room was bright when I awoke. I could see blue sky through a gap in the curtains. It was the first time I'd dreamed about my meeting with Daniel since I'd begun to live in this world.

I sat up slowly and looked around, my gaze falling on the book on top of the table.

"I wonder if things in this world really are different—politics and so on—if it's not quite the same world."

I got out of bed and padded over to the sofa, opening up the heavy book on the Sunruta Kingdom I'd received as a gift from Claude.

With eyes as wide as saucers, I read the book from cover to cover. But apart from that odd sentence I'd already discovered yesterday, I could find nothing else of note in its pages.

11. Changing Feelings

AFTER my six months of confinement were over, I began attending Grail Academy again.

Whether my fellow classmates were aware of my situation or not, they all acted as though nothing had happened—Oliphia and Claude were the exceptions, of course. It was a big relief.

Then, around a month later, toward the end of my time as a seventh-year student, I was heading home when I saw something surprising.

I'd just been enjoying an update from Claude on the latest political matters after school, and I was heading alone to the carriage yard to ride home with Charles when it happened.

The carriage yard was located right near the Grail Academy gates and was built so that all the students leaving by horse and carriage wouldn't end up blocking the road outside. There was space for around twenty horses and carriages to line up at once, and we had our own royal space reserved just for us.

As I was walking to our reserved space, I couldn't help overhearing a conversation nearby.

I figured it was just some of my fellow students chatting, so I didn't pay them much heed at first, but when I looked up and spotted the speaker's longish, raven-black hair, I came to a halt.

"Ed..."

But then, I quickly pressed my hand over my mouth.

I could see a girl standing in front of Ed. I couldn't be certain, but it looked like Eileen, of the Moncherie family. She was very elegant and beautiful as well as nice. All the younger girls really looked up to her.

I quickly took cover behind the waiting carriage and hid from view. Then I quietly observed the pair.

I couldn't make out the conversation topic, but whenever Ed would say anything, Eileen would smile twinklingly and say something back.

Ed looked slightly uncomfortable at first, but then, in reaction to whatever Eileen said in response, his face suddenly brightened. Then, he said something to the La Boulacherie coachman, who nodded in acknowledgment. The next moment, the La Boulacherie carriage drove off, leaving Ed behind.

Why would Ed send his carriage home without getting in?

As I watched curiously, Eileen gestured to Ed, and he followed her up into the Moncherie carriage.

"What's that about?"

I'd seen Ed talking to other female students before, of course, but I'd never seen him act so friendly.

I just stood there, watching the carriage drive away.

I kept seeing Eileen in my mind, standing there chatting with Ed.

Looking up at him, smiling and laughing...her loose blond hair shining in the late-afternoon sun. It wasn't just her blond hair...she also had a pretty face and a graceful way of moving. She was kind to the younger students. A splendid young lady.

Ed always kept a reserved distance when speaking with the other female students. It was obvious that he and Eileen were close, just from the way his expression had softened and the way he smiled at her.

So...the two of them must have gotten close during my absence from school?

Shaken and unsure of what was going on, I clutched my temples, still frozen to the spot.

"Sorry, Bel, were you waiting long? Why are you just standing there? You should have gotten in the carriage while you were waiting for me."

Hearing someone address me from behind, I whirled around to see Charles

there. And Dohle was standing right next to him. Dohle had grown even taller recently, and he was now a full head taller than Charles, who was of average height.

“Uh...I only just got here myself.”

“Really? Well, great timing.” Charles waved goodbye to Dohle and ambled over to join me.

“Edoile wasn’t with you today?”

“Ed said he had something to take care of and left early.”

“Something to take care of. I see...”

Then why was he chatting with Eileen and getting into her carriage? Or was this little rendezvous with Eileen the thing he had to “take care of?”

“Bel? You seem depressed. Are you all right?”

“I’m perfectly fine.”

“Are you? All right then. How is the horseback riding going? Have you improved yet?”

“Oh, yes. I can stay on without assistance now. I dare say I could go on a very long ride if I felt like it!”

“Well done.”

“Thanks.”

Horseback riding was a required subject for boys at Grail, but girls could also take it as an elective class.

In the old timeline, I’d never ridden a horse by myself. Since I always traveled by carriage, it had never been an issue. The only time I’d actually gone on horseback was when one of my knights had ridden double with me.

But in my second chance at life, I’d been trying to do all the things I’d never done the first time around. So, in my second semester of sixth-year, I’d chosen to take elective horseback riding. That dream I had on my thirteenth birthday, where the younger Ed from the old timeline suggested I try horseback riding... that’d given me the idea.

Riding was a literal pain in the butt, and I'd ended up with full-body muscle aches at first, but feeling the wind in my hair as I galloped along was worth every bit of initial discomfort. By this point, I was able to control my mount well, and I often updated Charles on my progress as an equestrienne during our carriage rides home.

What's going on between them?

Usually, Charles and I would chat about school all the way home, but today, I was too preoccupied thinking about that scene I just witnessed.

I had no right to comment on who Ed chose to spend his time with. I knew that, but I still felt all wrong inside.

Suspecting that it would be better not to examine my own feelings about this too deeply, I tried to shake it off. Composing my expression, I focused all of my attention on Charles's school gossip as we headed home.



A few days later, I heard the rumors.

"Edoile and Eileen?"

"Yeah. They were choosing a necklace chain for a Magic Stone at San Cleart, I heard. All romantic and lovey-dovey!"

One of the girls in my class claimed she saw Ed and Eileen shopping at San Cleart downtown. San Cleart was the upscale jewelry store I'd dropped my Magic Stone outside of.

"And this is still supposed to be a secret, but I heard..." My classmate pressed a finger to her lips, leaning in conspiratorially. "I heard from my older sister, who was at an evening party, say that there was talk of marriage between the La Boulacheries and the Moncheries, and it's practically a done deal already..."

At that juicy piece of gossip, all of the girls who'd been listening intently suddenly broke into ear-piercing squeals.

The La Boulacheries, Ed's family. And the Moncheries, Eileen's family. In other words, the rumor was about Ed and Eileen being engaged to be married.

"If they were buying a chain for a Magic Stone, then it's got to be that for

sure.”

“Totally. Oh, the two of them will make such a beautiful couple. Picture perfect!”

My fellow classmates were all smiles...seeming so excited.

This couldn't be true, could it?

I was frozen in place, just listening to the gossip like it was something from a storybook. It just didn't seem real...



JUST over a month had passed since I'd seen Ed and Eileen's little tryst.

I was just going about life as normal.

But recently, I'd felt awkward seeing Ed, so I'd been avoiding him as much as possible. I'd even been making excuses to get out of practicing magic with him after school.

Then, one day, my fifteenth birthday arrived.

Father and Mother both wished me a happy birthday at the breakfast table, and Charles gave me an enormous plush horse as a present.

“What a *huge* plush toy!”

“You've been taking horseback riding classes recently, right? So this is a good luck charm to help you become a decent rider.”

Charles laughed blithely as I stared at the toy horse, taken aback.

“Charles told us about your classes, so we thought a horse would make a fine present for your birthday this year. What do you think of that?”

“A *horse*? For me?”

I stared at Father in shock. I'd actually been taking the riding classes secretly, without telling Father and Mother. I was worried they'd try to stop me, afraid I'd fall off or something. They were both such worrywarts. But it seemed my fears had been unfounded in that regard.

Getting a horse as a present...I'd never expected that. I'd never even dreamed

of such a thing.

At fifteen, I was as tall as any grown woman. But the horses at the academy were meant for helping train future knights to ride, so while wonderful, they were a little on the large side for me.

“Let’s go to the breeder’s together and have a look soon. You can have whichever horse takes your fancy.”

“Thank you so much, Father, Mother!”

In my excitement, I forgot to be calm and refined.

My very own horse! How wonderful those words sounded.

I just couldn’t wait.



THAT same day, I was instructed to return home early from school to celebrate with my family, as we did each year.

I passed the time in the library, waiting for Charles to be done with class. Grail Academy’s library was huge, a match for the public library in town. And it was stocked with a vast array of books, from simple spellbooks for the first years up to complicated reference materials for adult scholars.

As I wandered among the stacks, I surveyed the book spines. Whenever I spotted an interesting title, I would take the book down, flip through it, and put it back before resuming browsing.

“Princess.”

As I was engrossed in the pages of a novel I’d picked up on a whim, a deep voice pulled me back to reality.

My face twitched with tension. It was Ed standing in front of me after I’d been avoiding him for an entire month.

“Catching up on some reading?”

“Yes. But I’m going home now.”

I closed my book with a thud and slid it back onto the bookshelf. If Ed was here, that must mean that Charles was already on his way to the carriage yard.

“Have you been busy lately?”

“Mm-hmm.”

I was feeling guilty, trying not to look him in the eye and keeping my answers as brief as possible.

Ed had asked me if I was busy. Clearly, he had noticed that I’d stopped coming by the Magic Practice Room lately, even after practicing so diligently before. I wasn’t busy at all, of course. I’d stopped going because I just didn’t want to see Ed.

I felt his eyes on me now, and I squirmed uncomfortably.

“Princess.”

“Yes?”

“Happy fifteenth birthday.”

I looked up in shock. I hadn’t thought that Ed would have remembered that today was my birthday. Last year, in the run-up to my fourteenth birthday, I’d made sure to mention it to him a dozen times though.

“You remembered...”

“Of course I did.” Ed smiled softly at me. “If it won’t trouble you, may I offer you a gift?”

“A gift? But I didn’t give you anything for your birthday this year.”

Ed’s birthday was only a month before mine. It happened around the time I saw him with Eileen, and things got awkward, so I hadn’t given him a present this year.

“You didn’t, did you? Well, never mind that. Could I borrow your Magic Stone for a moment?”

“My...my Magic Stone?”

Tilting my head to one side, I pulled out a little drawstring pouch from my skirt pocket and removed the red Magic Stone from inside. I often fiddled with my Magic Stone in the Magic Practice Room, so Ed knew I kept it in my pocket at all times.

Ed took the stone from me and stared at it. Then he closed it up in his fist along with another object that glinted like gold and squeezed his hands hard as he muttered an incantation. A mellow light began to glow from his clenched fist.

“Here you are.”

He opened his fist and held the object out to me...my Magic Stone, hanging on a gold chain like a pendant. The Magic Stone was set on a metal backing disc the same color as the chain. When I looked closer, I could see that the metal was engraved with tiny flowers.

“Wow, it’s so pretty!”

Ed watched as I gazed at the pendant with wonder, a smile on his lips.

“It’s just a pendant chain for Magic Stones. They sell them in town.”

“A pendant chain for a Magic Stone...”

My Magic Stone fit so perfectly in the pendant. Now that Ed had mentioned it, I could recall seeing similar necklaces on sale at San Cleart.

Magic Stones are often given to a bride as wedding gifts, but custom dictates that they must first be set into jewelry, like necklaces, rings, or bracelets. Back in that dungeon cell, though, my Ed had had no other choice but to give me a naked stone.

“I hope you like it. If you don’t, I can set it back the way it was before and get rid of the chain.”

“What? No! It’s mine. I’m keeping it!”

I quickly pulled the pendant back out of Ed’s reach and sealed it in my fist.

Now I could feel the slinky, cool metal of the chain as well as the familiar rolling sensation of the stone. I opened up my hand and gazed at it...the gold chain really looked lovely with the red hue of the stone.

“It’s beautiful.”

“I’m pleased you like it. I spent a great deal of time tracking you down to give it to you.”

“You were looking for me?”

“Yes, using locating magic. Since you weren’t in the Magic Practice Room today.”

Ed smiled warmly. He seemed like he hadn’t even noticed I’d been going to such great lengths to avoid him.

I was suddenly hit with a huge wave of guilt. Ed hadn’t done anything wrong, and yet, I’d been shunning him.

I looked back down at the necklace draped across my open palm.

“Is it all right for me to receive something like this?”

“Why would you ask that?”

Ed looked confused. I slowly bit my lower lip.

“I heard there’s to be a wedding...between the La Boulacheries and the Moncheries... Weren’t you choosing a necklace for a Magic Stone with Eileen at San Clear’s?”

“Ah, you heard about the engagement. That’s not supposed to have gotten out yet. And you heard I was there with Eila too? I suppose someone must have seen us at the shop.” Ed smiled wryly.

Eila...a nickname for Eileen. My heart stung as I realized they were close enough for pet names.

“I see...well, I suppose congratulations are in order.”

“All right, I’ll pass it on, but you could just as easily congratulate my brother yourself, I imagine, now that you know about it.”

“Your brother?”

I parroted Ed’s own words back to him, confused. Ed tilted his head to the side and looked at me, seeming just as confused himself.

“Yes...? Because he’s engaged to Eileen?”

“What?! *He is?!* ” I squawked in surprise.

“Yes. She told me she was going to look at some Magic Stone accessories for

research purposes before going with my brother to pick one. And I asked her if I could tag along and have her help me choose an accessory for you.”

This wasn’t what I’d been expecting at all. I’d been convinced Ed was engaged to Eileen, and that’s why he’d been seen buying a necklace with her.

“So the two of you went to San Cleart and bought this?”

“Yes...?”

“Oh my. Whatever was I thinking?!”

“What *were* you thinking?”

Ed looked at me strangely as I blushed, completely flustered. I was so embarrassed by how I’d just jumped to conclusions.

“I thought you were engaged to Eileen. That’s why I was avoiding you...”

“You were avoiding me? Because you thought I was engaged to Eila?”

I felt ridiculous, listening to Ed repeat my own words back to me. It wasn’t my fault. It had really *hurt*, seeing him so chummy with Eileen. I looked down at my shoes wordlessly, aware that Ed was staring at me with an intense gaze.

“Princess, would you permit me to put that on for you?”

“Pardon?”

Ed took the necklace from my hand and came around behind me, looping the chain around my neck.



I felt myself stiffen as he fastened the clasp, his face so close to the back of my neck, I could almost feel his breath on me. In the old timeline, I'd danced cheek to cheek with boys, but I'd never felt this nervous being near one.

"There, it's on. Turn this way?"

I turned, making eye contact with Ed, who was gazing right at me. He looked at my neck, then at my face, his lips curving up at the edges.

"Very beautiful."

"Thanks..."

Suddenly feeling shy, I looked down again to hide my blushes.

"What other gifts did you receive?"

"Other gifts? Um, well, Phia gave me a folding fan. It's made from lace and feathers, really gorgeous..."

I listed off my gifts, one by one.

"And Charles got me this big stuffed toy horse. He said it was a lucky charm to help me become a decent rider."

"A stuffed toy?"

Ed stopped smiling suddenly and looked taken aback.

He was probably thinking how childish it was to receive a stuffed animal for one's fifteenth birthday. Whatever; I liked that toy horse.

"Haha, that's such a Charles thing to do. He'd probably be happy to keep you a little girl forever."

"What do you mean?"

"We're going to graduate in another month. What do you think is going to happen then?"

"Well, you and Charles will join adult society and start working. And I'll become an eighth-year."

Ed blinked rapidly, shoulders shaking as he tried to withhold his laughter.

"Good, that's good. You really are a princess, aren't you? I understand how

Charles feels. Stay just as you are, won't you?"

"Er, Ed? I'm fifteen now, you know? In one more year, I'll be a grown woman. A proper lady."

I got the feeling he was treating me like a kid, and I pouted. In fact, I was really eighteen-plus-three years old inside. That had to make me twenty-one, didn't it? I was *way* older than Ed.

"I know, I know. I think that's why everyone wants to keep you locked up deep inside that castle. But a bird that's flown the coop can't be caged again. Everyone's just worried about you."

I tilted my head, not getting it. Ed softened his bright-red eyes, reaching for the Magic Stone dangling below my throat. A lock of my hair had gotten caught in the chain, and he untangled it for me.

"Princess...might I ask you for a late birthday present of my own?"

"Of course you may."

"You'll be accompanying Prince Charles to the ball in a few weeks as his partner, is that correct?"

I nodded. The school ball was scheduled to be held the week after next.

Last year, when Charles was a seventh-year, he'd opted out. But this year was his last—the eighth—and so, his attendance was mandatory. As Charles didn't have a fiancée yet, I'd be accompanying him as his date.

"If you'd like, may I invite you to dance with me at the ball?"

Ed gazed at me, red eyes narrowed. He held his hand out to me, as if he was inviting me to do a quick waltz with him right then and there. I placed my hand in his and he held it tightly.

"*That's* what you want for your birthday present?"

"Yes. The right to the Princess's second dance...it would be an honor."

"...All right."

"Then it's a promise."

In the old world, I'd been asked to dance more times than I could count. But

with Ed in front of me now, smiling at me, I was blushing like a maiden who'd never been asked for a dance before in her life.

12. The School Ball

AS I threaded my arms through the sleeves of my ballgown, I realized this would be my first time wearing one in this world.

I stood in front of the mirror and appraised my reflection.

The corset nipped my waist in tightly. Below it flowed a full, draped skirt. The pleated material fell to my ankles in gentle curves.

Here and there, along the pleats, little satin bows were affixed. They gave the dress a cute accent, which alluded to my young age.

Above the lace bodice and the large satin bow over my chest, my red Magic Stone dangled on its chain, reflecting the light. To everyone else, it probably looked like nothing more than a glass bead. The deep red of the stone and the soft orange color of the dress provided a perfectly balanced contrast.

This dress was one that Father and Mother had prepared for me so that I could accompany Charles to his final ball before graduating from Grail Academy. It was a splendid dress fit for a princess while still being modest enough to accommodate my status as a student and a minor.

I took hold of the full skirts and curtsied as I had so many times in my old life, being sure to keep my back perfectly straight. My ladies-in-waiting curtsied back to me. I was just *crazy* about the long, lacy sleeves that flared out from the elbows.

My maid Ellie had helped me get dressed, and as I turned this way and that, I locked eyes with her in the mirror.

“Ellie, I don’t look weird, do I?”

“Weird?! When we’ve just spent three whole hours dressing you to perfection?!”

Ellie put both hands on her hips, looking affronted. It was true, Ellie and my

other ladies-in-waiting had been working hard for hours to get me ready.

It was to be my very first ball, and all of them seemed extremely excited for this chance to dress me up like a doll.

I was honestly taken aback when I was shown no less than a dozen illustrations of potential hairstyles. After much debate, I chose a half-up style with a thick braid going down one side of my head. My hair was finished off with a gorgeous red rose.

“Hehe, you’re right. Thank you.”

“Indeed! You’ll be the most beautiful girl at the ball, Princess Annabel.” Ellie smiled with satisfaction and then went to stand by the door. “Isn’t it about time?” she said.



I’D considered myself an old pro at balls, but over three years had passed now, and I’d forgotten a surprising amount.

Charles escorted me into the academy’s dance hall, and we paused at the entrance. I took in the grand chandelier, throwing flecks of shining rainbow light everywhere, and gasped. The white walls, the wine-colored carpet, the floral arrangements on the tables in the corner...everything was stunning.

It was strange. The opulent dance hall at the palace somehow didn’t seem half as splendid as this.

We were last to enter the ball, as the highest-ranking guests, and so when we walked in, the place was already full of the other students, dressed in all their finery. Red, yellow, pink, purple...they were dressed in elegant colors and sumptuous materials, and everyone was smiling.

I spotted Oliphia and Claude in the crowd and instantly relaxed. It seemed that Claude *had* managed to get Oliphia to agree to be his date after all. Oliphia was dressed in a lovely light-blue dress.

With everyone now present, the crowd gathered in the middle of the dance hall as the headmaster announced the opening of the festivities. Charles and I faced each other on the dance floor. He was often my partner during our dance

lessons, so even though it was my first ball, I wasn't a bit nervous as we began to dance.

With a flourish, the orchestra finished playing as the first song ended. Partners bowed to one another, and then the hall was filled with the sound of happy voices talking away. I realized with a start that Charles was suddenly surrounded by young women. It looked like they all wanted the chance for at least one dance with the prince.

Charles shot me an uncomfortable look, and I smiled, waving my hand. The least the prince could do was treat his female subjects to a dance on this, his last day of academy life.

I turned my back, catching Charles's resigned look from the corner of my eye.

Where is Ed, I wonder?

I set off walking across the dance hall, glancing this and that way.

I'd promised him the second dance, but he was nowhere to be found. He'd told me earlier that he'd be bringing Eileen, but where were they? I rotated on the spot, looking all around, but I couldn't see them anywhere.

"Princess Annabel, may I...?" an unfamiliar boy spoke to me as I was searching the hall. He must have been an eighth-year. He was tall and skinny and wore a fine-looking indigo-colored frock coat.

"Princess. May I have this dance?"

"If it pleases your Majesty, may I?"

Then, all of a sudden, I was surrounded by older boys.

As I froze, boys all around me, I heard a voice shout "Princess!" from behind me. I turned to see Ed, gently shouldering his way through a crowd of girls to get to me. It looked like he was being mobbed by the opposite sex, just like I was.

Ed looked amazing in a gray frock coat with silver embroidery on the collar and sleeves. His longish, black hair was slicked back, and his handsome face was on full display.

My heart skipped a beat.

If a stranger were to walk in, they'd probably mistake Ed as the prince instead of Charles. That's how amazing Ed looked that night. The gaggle of fangirls around him would have only strengthened that impression.

I wasn't very impressed to realize that all the time I'd been looking for Ed, he'd been surrounded by girls. I ended up speaking snarkily to him.

"My, my! Aren't you popular?"

"Don't be cruel, Princess."

Ed drew his brows together in consternation, shoulders slumping. He looked so funny, I couldn't help giggling.

"I'm sorry. I promised this dance to another."

The boys gathered around me all looked disappointed as I explained my position. Realizing that my intended partner was not only the son of a duke but also the prince's personal friend, they quickly dispersed.

"Princess. Your hand, if I may."

"You may."

Ed held his hand out to me, and I placed mine in his. Then, he led me out to the center of the dance hall, holding my hand up high as we went. Once in place, he wrapped his arm tight around my waist, and I blinked in surprise at how close we were all of a sudden.

"You're too close..."

"This is how people dance, isn't it?"

"Yes, but..."

Ed was right. This was the correct dance form. And yet, I felt uncomfortable. Our bodies were pressed tightly together and his head was just above mine. Ed was stronger and sturdier than he looked—I could tell from the feel of his broad chest, his muscular arms.

I hadn't even thought about it while dancing with Charles, but I suddenly felt self-conscious and embarrassed. My heart was thumping so hard in my chest, I was half-afraid that Ed would hear it.

A waltz began and we spun around the dance floor. The gorgeous surroundings seemed to twinkle, and I felt almost like I was dreaming. And there in the midst of it all was Ed, looking into my eyes and smiling.

“I usually only ever see you in school uniform or wearing a modest dress. You look especially beautiful tonight.”

“Thank you. Father and Mother picked it out for me.”

“It looks wonderful on you.” Ed smiled fondly at me as he spoke.

Ed’s voice had been deepening by degrees, and now it was indistinguishable from the voice of Older Ed, my guardian knight. For a fleeting moment, I had the strangest feeling that it was my own, dear protector Ed, who was here paying me these compliments.

Speaking of my Ed...back in my old life, after I’d moved to the Sunruta Kingdom with him as my protector, he often filled in for Daniel as my partner in dance lessons. Daniel was busy with royal matters and Ed was always there. Ed always chose one particular song for us to dance to. He said it was the best one.

Yes, that song...

The music ended, and we all stopped dancing.

“The next song will be ‘The Lake Swan.’”

I shivered as the musician announced the title. It was the same exact song I’d been thinking of.

“Let’s go over to the wall.”

I squeezed Ed’s hand urgently as he started to lead me away from the center of the dance floor.

“Princess? Is something wrong?” Ed turned back, looking at me with concern.

“I want to dance one more time. I want to dance this next song with you. Is that okay?”

His eyes widened in surprise. Dancing more than one song with the same partner gave off the strong message that there was something deeper between the two of you.

If we kept dancing, everyone would start to suspect that there was something more than friendship between us. I knew that, but my desire to dance this next song with Ed was stronger.

“Of course. I’d be delighted.” Ed smiled warmly and faced me. Then he took me into his arms once more. “You’re wearing it tonight.”

“*Hmm?*”

Ed looked pointedly at my neck. The red Magic Stone hung there. Usually, I kept it tucked under my clothes, but the dress I was wearing tonight had an open neck, so it was on full display.

“Yes. I always wear it.”

“And you still won’t tell me *who* gave it to you?”

“...Nope. It’s a secret. But I’ll tell you one day, when the time is right.”

The time would be right once I had proof I’d managed to avert my terrible future. Ed raised one eyebrow and murmured, “I’ll hold you to that.”

After that, we headed out onto the terrace at Ed’s suggestion.

If we were at the palace, or any nobleman’s house, the terrace would surely overlook a meticulously tended rose garden. Unfortunately, this was Grail Academy’s terrace. There was a token flower bed or two, plus a view of the high walls of the arena where Ed and his peers had practiced sword fighting.

“It’s the sword-fighting arena. I won’t be able to see you practicing at school anymore soon. That makes me feel kind of sad.”

“Yes, I know.” Ed gazed out at the view for a moment before turning to look at me. “There’s something I need to tell you, Princess.”

“There is?” I tilted my head to one side.

Ed was gazing right at me with those piercing red eyes. A sudden wind blew, sending the leaves rustling in the trees.

“I’m thinking of becoming a Royal Magician.”

“Huh? What about that offer you got from the Magic Knights, after the sword-fighting tournament? You turned it down?”

My eyes were wide with surprise.

I'd just assumed Ed would go down the same path again and join the Magical Order of Knights.

"I did. There's something I must have...and it would be too difficult to obtain if I were a Magic Knight. Actually, I got offers from both—the Magic Knights and also a role as a Royal Magician. I've been deliberating between the two for a long time, but on your birthday the other day, I finally made up my mind. Having said that, it's going to be difficult to get it even if I become a Royal Magician, but I..."

"My birthday? That's when you decided? ...What is it that you want, Ed?"

"What do you think I want?"

Ed gazed at me, narrowing his red eyes and smiling. My heart skipped a beat in my chest again, like it did when we first danced.

"I don't know."

"...Don't you?"

Ed tilted his head a little and looked at me. All of a sudden, my heart was pounding in my chest. I couldn't stop looking at his red eyes...it was like I could see a fire burning within them.

"If you don't want to, just stop me..."

Then, Ed reached for me. His big hand stroked my cheek, and I made no move to stop him.



Still stroking my cheek, weighing up my reaction, Ed hesitated. Then, slowly closing his eyes, he leaned in...closer than he ever had before...and for a brief moment, his lips touched mine.

I looked at Ed, blinking in surprise.

“Was that unwelcome?”

“...It was *very* welcome.”

I touched my lips, half in disbelief.

“Unwelcome?” It was wonderful...

“I’m glad.” His joy showed on his face. “I know I’m speaking above my position here, but please, Princess...I’ll do my best to proceed with as much haste as is possible, but for a few years, at least...would you wait for me?”

From the serious look in his eyes as he gazed at me and from the words he used...I knew for sure then that what Ed wanted was to become a man of high social ranking. High enough even to pursue, and then propose to, a princess like me.

By becoming a Royal Magician, Ed must have been aiming to ascend to the rank of Magic Count. Since the legendary sorcerer Longile, no other had ever risen to such an exalted rank.

“I’ll gladly wait for you.”

A single tear rolled down my cheek.

Back in that desolate dungeon cell, I wished for another chance, to marry someone I loved. Will you make that come true for me, in this new world?

In truth, I’d known it for a long time. Ever since he squeezed my hand so reassuringly in that dank dungeon cell. I’d been in love with Ed. My brave knight, my loyal protector.

“I swear I’ll obtain what I seek.” Ed took my hand and kneeled there on the spot to swear an oath, in the manner of a knight swearing fealty to his lord. “I promise you, Princess.”

“Yes. It’s a promise.” My voice was trembling and tearful.

Through the doors behind us I could hear the laughter of my fellow students, the orchestra playing a lively tune.

At the first ball of my first life, Daniel asked me to dance, and marrying him led to destruction and ruin.

At the first ball of my second life, Ed asked me to dance, and this time...I wanted a second chance for real love. *Real* happiness.

This time...I *had* to get it right...

Side Story: Ed's Perspective

MY doubts were confirmed while using locating magic to search for the Magic Stone the princess lost.

“Again? But why?”

This object was important enough to the princess that she'd risked going to town alone after dusk in search of it. But *who* had given that Magic Stone to her?

I'd seen the stone before and even touched it, so it should have been easy enough for me to locate. But the only thing my spell drew a response from was the Magic Stone I'd created myself. Whenever I had a free day, I would walk around the spot where the princess said she lost her Magic Stone and cast locating magic over and over in search of it. But every time came up with the same result.

I couldn't fathom why this wasn't working.

I crossed my arms and thought hard about it.

Magic Stones are incredibly precious items. Whoever creates a magic stone is said to put half their soul within it. And a person can only ever create one Magic Stone at any one time. Each Magic Stone is as unique as an individual fingerprint. No two in this world are alike.

Or at least, that was how it was supposed to be.

I did a lot of research on the issue, but there was only one answer that I could find.

Namely, that the princess's Magic Stone and my own Magic Stone were of the same composition. I'd thought they looked similar, but that was a mistake. They didn't look similar. They were identical.

“Father. Did I have a twin who was taken away at birth or was stillborn?”

I eventually asked my father about it, unable to understand why such a thing

would be happening. But Father only stared at me blankly and replied, “What a nonsensical notion,” with a look of annoyance on his face.

When I finally located her stone one day in town, it was brimming with magical energy. When I picked it up, it felt so familiar to me. As a test, I attempted to absorb it, and it instantly melted into my skin, becoming one with my body.

I was shocked.

A Magic Stone, being absorbed into the body of any but the one who had created it—this was an impossibility. It was an absurdity.

“Who could have made this thing?” I muttered to myself as I produced the stone anew from within my own body, just as if it had been originally mine. It sat, glinting on my palm.

The red jewel sparkled in the light of my room, as if it had secrets to tell.

The following day when I presented the stone to the princess, her joy was boundless. Tears glistened in her eyes, proving just how much it meant to her. I felt my chest burn with jealousy toward whoever had made it for her.

Whenever I asked the princess who had crafted that stone for her, she only repeated that it was “someone very special.” I figured it wasn’t someone in close proximity to her, but perhaps someone she never expected to see again. And yet, from the brilliance of the stone and the amount of magical power within it, it was clear to me that the crafter was still alive.

The princess sometimes referred to me as “special” too. She probably wasn’t aware of it herself, but she kept doing and saying things that made me, in my hubris, think she had feelings for me.

What did she mean by “special?”

The princess fervently gripped the Magic Stone in her fist. Seeing her like that caused jealousy to swell within me, making me want to ask stupid questions like: “Who’s more special to you, me, or the one who made you that?” But just then, Charles—Prince Charles, I mean—walked into the room, and the question died on my lips.

I gifted her that chain for the Magic Stone, partly just to see her reaction.

Only the one who had forged a Magic Stone could easily absorb and reform it, and only the one who had forged it could set it magically onto a pendant. I wanted to show the princess that I could do something which, by any right, I shouldn't have been able to do.

But the princess had only watched with sparkling eyes as I drew out the stone and set it onto its chain. It appeared she didn't know that only a Magic Stone's creator could do such a thing. Or perhaps she had expected me to be able to do it all along.

Then, when I fastened the chain about her neck, she had seemed so happy and blushed so deeply.

I felt my chest swell with pride—with a feeling of superiority.

It wasn't *my* Magic Stone that she was wearing. But it was an exact match for my own stone, and it was by *my* hand that it now dangled on a chain about her neck.

It can't be overstated how vital a Magic Stone is to its creator. Anyone who receives a Magic Stone accepts it with the full weight of what it represents. Seeing the princess with the red stone glittering below her throat...made me feel as happy as if she'd agreed to accept my own Magic Stone.

And seeing her get so jealous over what she thought was going on between me and Eileen—that made me feel so tender toward her.

At first, I saw her only as my country's princess...the little sister of my good friend Prince Charles.

But over time, things had changed. The way she paid special attention to me. The way she said my detestable red eyes were beautiful. The way she'd innocently assumed my weak sword skills were worthy of praise.

The way she focused all her efforts on trying to improve her terrible magic skills.

The way that, sometimes, she got mad just like any other girl. And the way she laughed, so loudly—so utterly without inhibition.

And, yes, the way she tried her hardest to pretend to be an adult when all the while, her childish tendencies kept showing adorably through.

The more time I spent around her, the harder it became to bottle up my feelings.

I knew my own social standing well enough.

If I had my family's dukedom to inherit, then I might still have had a chance. But I had nothing. A knight would never be worthy of the hand of the princess.

I knew that my chances were almost nonexistent. But I was filled with an urge to try. The same question tugged at my heart yet again.

Princess...who gave you that Magic Stone?

The man who had given the princess the Magic Stone that now dangled on a chain about her neck. The man who, even now, lived on in the princess's heart. I couldn't help wondering—would the day ever come when I could surpass this unknown man in her eyes?

Side Story: Go Riding With Me?

I was buzzing with excitement and impatience.

I kept looking at the door to see if anyone was coming to tell me that they had arrived yet. Looking out of the window, I couldn't see any signs of movement. I picked up a book and sat down on the sofa to read. Ten minutes later, however, I was back to pacing the room again.

"Why aren't they *here* yet?"

I just couldn't wait. It was due to arrive today—the horse Father and Mother had bought me for my fifteenth birthday present.

The other day, I'd gone with my parents and Charles to the royal horse-breeding farm that supplied mounts for use by the knights. I was shown various horses there, but the one I liked best was a chestnut mare, and I'd chosen her on the spot.

The horse I'd taken a liking to was a little on the small side to become a knight's steed, and they weren't sure what to do with her. But she was perfectly suited to be a young lady's mount, her smaller stature an exact match for me.

The chestnut mare had four white socks and a glossy coat of reddish-brown fur, and I'd immediately named her Ruby.

I walked back over to the window for the umpteenth time and stood looking out. From far away, I could see the procession bringing me my horse, and my face lit up.

"They're here!"

"Oh, how wonderful. Ah, Princess Annabel...please wait!"

Ellie scuttled after me in a panic as I burst out of my room. I knew it wouldn't be ladylike for me to run, so I walked as quickly as was humanly possible.

"Hello!"

“Ah, Princess Annabel. Good day to you. We’ve only just arrived.”

The horse breeder who’d brought me my Ruby gave me a warm smile, his suntanned face crinkling.

Ruby noticed me immediately and turned her big black eyes on me. Tentatively, I stroked her broad back, feeling the warmth of her skin through her short fur.

“You’re so warm...you beautiful thing.”

“She’s a good mare. You take good care of her, you hear?”

The horse breeder gave me another good-natured smile. I nodded earnestly, gazing at Ruby. I felt that some ochre-colored leather tack would look fabulous against her reddish fur.

Hmm, yes. To mark the occasion, perhaps I should have all-new tack and riding accessories?

I couldn’t help smiling as I started making all kinds of plans in my mind.



I focused on my hands, sending my magical energy flowing to them. Within moments, a mellow, warm light began to glow, seeping between my fingers.

Since I finally released my magic powers, I’d been practicing a lot. Now I could call them forth whenever I wanted. It was so strange—after all those years of struggle.

“How’s that?”

I took my hands away from Ed’s left arm, and he ran his fingertips up and down it, checking its condition.

“It seems to be fully healed. Good job.”

“Really? Yay! If you get injured again, just come and see me!” I folded my arms, smiling with satisfaction.

With Ed’s graduation day fast approaching, I was having him give me more lessons in the Magic Practice Room.

Now that I’d released my magic powers, I was working on honing them little

by little in different magical disciplines. Today, I got the chance to try out healing magic on a little cut Ed received in sword-fighting class. He seemed to be surprisingly careless—he often received cuts and scrapes whenever he had sword-fighting class.

As I watched Ed's slightly knobby fingers run over his healed, bare arm, I remembered something. I'd brought a present with me today to give to him. But I was so focused on our training, I'd forgotten to give it to him.

"Oh, by the way, I have something for you."

"What's this?"

Ed looked with curiosity at the beautifully wrapped present I took out of my bag and handed to him. It was a flat box, about the size of a textbook, wrapped in blue paper and finished with a gold ribbon.

"It's a little late, but it's your birthday present from me."

"Huh?" Ed looked taken aback.

The other day, when Ed gave me my present, he'd asked for my second dance at the ball in return. Since I'd already promised him that, he seemed flustered to be receiving an actual gift too.

"I haven't forgotten about the dance. This is just something I wanted for myself anyway, so I had two pairs made. Don't worry too much about it."

Ed seemed satisfied with that. "If you say so, then I'll gladly accept it. May I open it?"

"Of course."

Ed started unwrapping the present with excitement. Then he drew out a pair of white leather gloves, the same as the ones I'd had made for myself. I'd checked with Charles to make sure they were the right size for Ed's hands.

"Are these...riding gloves?"

"Yes. I've just received the most wonderful horse, so I decided to have all new tack and accessories."

Ed nodded. "Aha," he said. "This is the horse your father, the king, gifted you

for your birthday, right?”

“Yes. Her name’s Ruby. I can’t wait to show her to you,” I enthused, grinning and blushing.

I’d learned to ride on the sturdy mounts intended for knights, but it was all so different with Ruby. She and I seemed almost as if we were made for each other.

“I get it. That’s how I felt with the horse my father gave me.” Ed nodded, the corners of his mouth lifting.

I see. Is it different for everyone when it’s your own horse?

“Someday, I want to jump on Ruby and go adventuring across Najir!”

“Is there anywhere in particular you’d like to go?”

“Um, I’m not sure. Not really. I’ve never been away from the capital. Oh, except for when we visit our summer residences. So, I’d like to see all kinds of new places.”

In the old timeline, I had reached eighteen years of age. And in this timeline, I’d lived three more years. In all that time combined, I could count the places I’d been to on trips using just one hand.

I knew it was difficult for a princess to travel as she pleased, but I still hoped to do so someday.

“Why don’t you ask the king?”

“*Hmm*, I wonder if he’d let me?”

“Obviously going alone is out of the question, but what if you brought knights with you? Sometimes Charles goes out riding on his horse. I’ve joined him many times.”

“Huh? Does he?”

I was surprised by this.

Nobody ever told me that Charles was doing that.

It wasn’t fair how I was forbidden from doing so many things but Charles wasn’t. In the old timeline, it would have never occurred to me to even want to

go out riding on horseback. But now, I was determined to be brave and ask Father to let me go.

“If I get permission, would you come with me?”

I posed my question a little shyly, and Ed’s eyes widened in surprise. The next moment, though, he broke into a big smile.

“Of course. I’ll go anywhere you want to go, Princess.”

“Wearing these gloves, of course,” Ed added, holding them aloft.

“Thank you. I guess I’d better practice horse riding as much as I can.” I smiled, feeling my heart soar.

Riding my own horse wherever my heart desired. Just thinking about the places I might see filled me with excitement. I just couldn’t wait.

But it would take almost an entire year of convincing before my anxious father would eventually agree to let me go out on horseback.

And it would take several more years after that until I realized what should have been obvious at the time—the cuts and bruises Ed brought to our tutoring sessions after each sword-fighting class—those were intentional.

Afterword

HELLO everyone, I'm Kei Misawa.

Thank you for reading *Reset! The Imprisoned Princess Dreams of Another Chance!* Did you enjoy it? I really hope so.

This work belongs to a subgenre of the *isekai*, or “another world,” genre of light novels known as a *yarinaoshi loop*, where the story resets at a certain point and then loops back around on itself.

Annabel has been betrayed by her fiancé, had her country destroyed, and faced the devastating loss of her guardian knight when her life resets and begins anew. Her mission now is to change the future to avoid the same terrible fate.

When setting out to write this story, I didn't think it would be very interesting if I wrote a simple “go back in time and change the past” type of scenario. So I included certain elements of foreshadowing.

Why *was* the Edoile from the old timeline so devoted to Annabel?

How did he manage to send Annabel back to the past?

The old timeline and the new timeline seem different at first glance, and yet, they are connected in complex ways.

What kind of future awaits our characters? Annabel's fight has only just begun. I'd be delighted if you continued on this journey with us.

I never expected that this work would reach an audience in countries other than Japan, so when I heard that there would be a translated version, I was surprised and very pleased.

I'd like to express my gratitude to all those involved in the publication of this work.

Thank you all very much. Until we meet again!



cross infinite world



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PAST LIFE COUNTESS, PRESENT LIFE OTOME GAME NPC?!

STORY BY: SORAHOSHI
ILLUSTRATION BY: YUKI KINAMI
STANDALONE / OUT NOW

Oh dear, it seems I was reincarnated into
a modern otome game from a fantasy
world!

HELLO, I AM A WITCH AND MY CRUSH WANTS ME TO MAKE A LOVE POTION!

STORY BY: EIKO MUTSUHANA
ILLUSTRATION BY: VIENT
VOL. 1 OUT NOW

This is the heartwarming story of a
shut-in witch and an arrogant, strait-
laced knight whose romance starts
from a love potion.



THE WEAKEST MANGA VILLAINESS WANTS HER FREEDOM!

STORY BY: KAZUKI KARASAWA
ILLUSTRATION BY: MASAMI
STANDALONE / OUT NOW

Oh, crud, I just realized that I've been
reincarnated into my favorite manga as
the first boss defeated by the heroine at
the start of the story!



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