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The
Legendary Witch
Is Reborn as an **Oppressed**
Princess

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“I love the idea of a magic
academy at the bottom of
the sea!”





Fiolina

A gifted eighth-year student at the Raushneur Academy of Magic. After her lessons, she can be found singing.

Lucas

A gifted eighth-year student. Known as considerate and attentive, he is looked up to by many of his classmates.

Noah

Claudia's loyal manservant. He is placed into the fourth year at the academy as well as the magic class for gifted magicians.

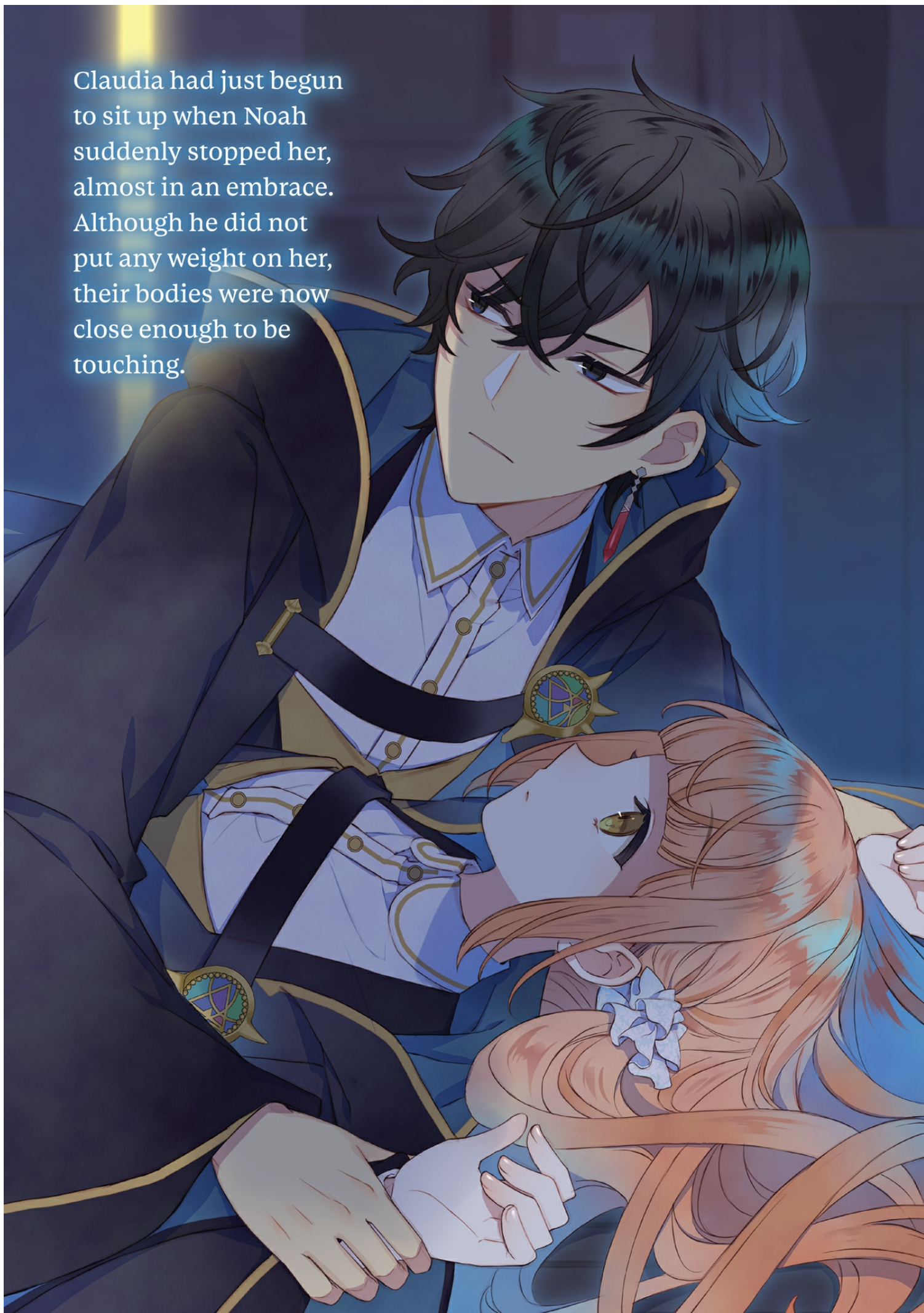
Lauretta

Fiolina's younger sister and a second-year student. She has impressive magic, but she cannot control it, putting her in the beginner's class.

Claudia

A princess who has regained the memories of her past life as a legendary witch. At the academy, she is a first-year student in the beginner's class.

Claudia had just begun to sit up when Noah suddenly stopped her, almost in an embrace. Although he did not put any weight on her, their bodies were now close enough to be touching.



C O N T E N T S



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as an Oppressed Princess

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How to Cherish an
Adorable Servant

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Prologue

“This school was founded five hundred years ago by Adelheid the legendary witch.”

Claudia’s ears pricked up at the words of the elderly woman guiding them. The corridor, echoing with the click-clacking of their shoes, continued as far as the eye could see. Their guide, Professor Svetlana, was wearing a dress in a soothing color.

“Adelheid once said,” Professor Svetlana continued with a calm voice, “it is the sacred duty of a leader to nurture young talent.”

Claudia tilted her head quizzically, catching the attention of Noah, who was walking behind her. She could imagine his perplexed expression without even turning to look. The guide continued without noticing anything amiss.

“Those with exceptional talent may sometimes be victims of marginalization and oppression. This caused the great witch endless heartache.”

Because the corridor cut through magical warding, it appeared far longer than it actually was. It seemed endless.

“And that is precisely why Adelheid founded this magic academy.”

Oh? A magic academy? Claudia thought as she looked up at the blue windowpanes that lined the walls on both sides of her. *This place really brings back fond memories.*

She remembered this long corridor and the blue light streaming through its many windows from five hundred years ago. Of course, Professor Svetlana had no way of knowing that this place was nostalgic for Claudia, for there was no way she would know that Adelheid had been reborn as the little girl she was guiding right now.

Professor Svetlana turned to Claudia. “If I remember correctly, Your Highness is now ten years old, correct?”

“Yes, professor!” Claudia answered brightly with an innocent laugh.

Her milk-tea-colored hair, which had been carefully combed by Noah that morning, swayed gently. At ten years old, Claudia was still small for her age. Still, she had grown taller over the last two years, and her eyelashes had grown thick and beautiful. Her face resembled her late mother’s even more every year, and the beauty hidden in her youthfulness had begun to blossom.

“There are many students your age studying here at the academy, Your Highness. Your time here, immersed in learning and building lasting friendships, will be an invaluable experience.”

“We’re very much looking forward to studying here! Isn’t that right, Noah?”

Noah lowered his gaze when Claudia spun around. “Yes, Your Highness.”

Taller than most boys his age, Noah wore an air of maturity that belied his thirteen years. Though he was still a growing boy, his well-proportioned and supple muscles showed the result of years of hard training. He carried himself with a calm grace appropriate for the manservant of a princess.

“Even though it is only a short-term enrollment, it will be a wonderful experience for Her Highness to spend time at this historic institute,” Noah continued. “I am honored to be here as her escort.”

“What a good attendant you have, Princess Claudia,” Professor Svetlana said.

“He’s my pride and joy!” Claudia laughed cheerfully as she stared once again at the windows. “I’m very much looking forward to studying here with Noah! Besides...”

The view from the windows wasn’t a sunny schoolyard. Neither was it a courtyard with swaying trees, nor was it the neatly lined stones of a school building. Instead, it was the deep blue of the sea. Groups of brightly colored fish darted past the windows. The sunlight shining through the surface cast a shimmer of light on the white sand of the seabed. Silvery bubbles floated up from between the seaweed. Claudia watched with a smile as a black shadow approached from the distance.

“I love the idea of a magic academy at the bottom of the sea!”

The approaching whale swam slowly by the window. It reminded Claudia of a knight trailing behind her in a triumphal procession. The fish swimming around them seemed to follow in Claudia's footsteps. Making sure that their guide wasn't paying attention, Claudia gave them a small wave.

"Most of the students who attend this academy are of noble blood and come from various kingdoms," Professor Svetlana continued. "They are all quite brilliant, so I am sure that you will have no trouble finding friends that will help push you to new heights academically."

"It'll be great to make lots of new friends!" Claudia proclaimed brightly. "Wait... What's that sound?" She tilted her head and listened carefully. "That voice is so clear, so beautiful..."

The elderly guide flinched at her words. However, she kept walking and didn't turn back. "That's probably just a whale's song."

"Oh! Whales can sing too?" Claudia asked.

"Yes. Living on the seafloor, you'll hear many sounds you can't hear on land. It's taking longer than I expected to reach the dorms. Let's hurry onward."

Claudia laughed quietly to herself.

I wonder if she knows that there are mermaids attending this school... Well, I suppose it doesn't matter either way.

Claudia stopped and faced Noah as she put on her faux-naïf act.

"You know, if I was still little," she said feigning innocence, "I could've had you carry me the rest of the way."

"Your Highness..." Noah replied, troubled.

"Ha ha! Noah, that look on your face!" Then she lowered her voice to a whisper that only he could hear. "We must quickly find where the 'song' that lures ships is coming from. We cannot allow any more humans to go missing."

"As you command, Your Highness."

"What a good boy," Claudia said with a smile before resuming the tour. Professor Svetlana had waited for them with a brow raised, but she saw nothing amiss.

“Studying for one month at an academy under the sea,” Claudia cooed as she continued to walk down the corridor that she, as Adelheid, had founded five hundred years ago. “I’m so excited that I could break out into song, Professor Svetlana.”

There, at the bottom of the sea, a beautiful melody seemed to calmly wash over her as she walked.

Chapter 1

Five hundred years before, Adelheid had decided to build a school here. It was a place full of natural magic where the water was clear and full of life. That made it easy to maintain a strong ward, which kept out the intrusion of both seawater and enemies.

“It’s the perfect place both to gather children from different kingdoms who want to learn and to protect both the commoners and nobility equally,” Claudia explained to Noah as they walked through the hall.

She wore a black robe, its gold embroidered hem fluttering behind her as they moved down the corridor. At her neck, she wore a ribbon tie as all freshmen were required to do. Under their robes, students could wear a white shirt or a blouse and either a skirt or slacks.

Claudia’s skirt was a deep red, and her socks were white, in contrast to her black loafers that Noah had polished and shined that morning. The uniform’s design had remained unchanged over the last five hundred years. Its goal had always been to be timeless so that it would remain charming even with the passing of years.

“Magic keeps the seawater out and the air circulating,” Claudia went on. “The wards, which only authorized conjurers can manipulate, act as a barrier that covers the school buildings, the schoolyard, the corridors that connect them, and the courtyard.”

“It’s almost as if the school is encased in a sturdy glass...” Noah said as he looked up at the dome-like warded ceiling. Beyond the dome was a clear blue expanse reminiscent of the sky, but it was actually the open sea. During the day, magic enhanced the sunlight to make the seafloor as bright as day was on the surface.

Numerous creatures swam around the warded dome that surrounded the academy. Noah’s expression did not change, but he could not hide his curiosity as he quietly observed the scenery, which was more colorful than he had

imagined. Claudia chuckled at the sight.

Noah was also dressed in a robe. His slim slacks balanced his outfit well, giving it the air of proper formal wear, yet he still retained the boyishness of a thirteen-year-old.

“Noah, you look absolutely adorable in your uniform. It really suits you.”

Judging by his nonresponse, Noah was clearly unhappy with this praise. This was likely due to his aversion to appearing boyish.

“Your Highness, please refrain from calling me adorable.”

“You’ve only been wearing formal wear lately. That does suit you, of course, but you must also wear clothing that befits your age while you’re able!”

Noah said nothing.

Dressing like an adult did not hasten one’s growth. Noah knew this well, so Claudia’s words cut him to the quick.

“You need not worry about me. There are more important things at hand.” Noah knelt before Claudia. “Let us investigate the song from earlier. I was also able to hear the singing that you asked about before.”

“You’re right, of course.” Claudia smiled and grabbed Noah by the hand, once again leading him down the corridor. “But, before that, we must first attend orientation. This is the first time I’m here as a student, so I’m looking forward to it.”

As she said that, she thought of a conversation they had about a month before coming to the academy.

“It’s said that song lures ships to their demise,” Claudia said as she walked along a beach.

It was the beginning of summer, so she wore a lightweight dress and a large sun hat.

“On a night with a full moon, a ship disappeared among the calm waves. On a morning with fine weather, a ship disappeared after its anchor rode snapped,”

Claudia recounted. “Magic was used to search the seafloor for the ships, but nothing appeared. Only a few survivors still remain.”

Walking just behind Claudia was Karlheinz, Klingate’s chief conjurer. Not a drop of sweat beaded on his face despite him walking under the hot sun of the seventh month. The sea breeze blew through his silver hair, swept back into a ponytail.

“You’re referring to the incidents that have recently troubled the southwestern continent’s nations, I take it?” Karlheinz asked Claudia. “Even our kingdom has received requests for support from our allies there.”

“When it comes to trade, those nations are very important friends of our kingdom, of course. I’m sure my father must have decided to lend a hand as well, yes?”

Karlheinz paused in thought before asking, “Do you think that these incidents are somehow related to a curse, Your Highness?”

Claudia stopped, stooped down, and reached out a hand toward the fine sand. She stood back up with a beautiful shell the color of coral in her hand.

“We heard some veeery scary stories, so meee and Noaaah decided to look into it! Isn’t that right, Noah?”

“Yes, Prin... Your Highness.” Noah, who was walking behind Karlheinz, corrected himself before agreeing with a composed face. “We were able to talk to a few of the survivors, and when speaking to the princess, all of them said the same thing...”

Noah turned his obsidian eyes silently toward the sea. The reflection of the sun on the clear blue water seemed to dazzle his eyes, and he furrowed his brows. “Each said they heard someone singing before things became strange.”

“Singing...” Karlheinz repeated, mulling over the word.

Claudia took off her white sandals and then dipped her feet into the sea. She washed the seashell in seawater, holding it up to the sun afterward to admire it. She looked back at Karlheinz.

“When you map out the location where each boat disappeared, you find that

they occur in a circle centered on a specific part of the sea, though I'm sure you know that already."

"It is as you say, Your Highness," Karlheinz said after a moment of silence.

"And I'm sure you've also realized what lies in those waters. I mean, both you and Father attended school there!"

Noah glanced at Karlheinz in surprise. The man's silence spoke volumes.

Claudia laughed and said to Noah, "Raushneur Academy of Magic... It was built at the bottom of that sea."

"At the *bottom* of the sea?" Noah whispered to himself. It seemed that he could hardly imagine what that would look like.

"It's just as Her Highness says," Karlheinz explained. "A special warding magic surrounds that academy, allowing it to exist at the bottom of the sea. If you look out the window in those halls, you won't see the sky, but instead the open sea teeming with life."

"Why would anyone build a school in such a place?" Noah asked.

"It is said that it was the founder's wish. Of course, that founder was the witch Adelheid, who lived five hundred years ago."

Noah quietly glanced at Claudia, who gave him a bright smile.

"Maybe Adelheid wanted to see all the pretty fish?" she offered. "What do you think, Noah?"

"I suppose that's possible..." He appeared to want to say more, but he instead left it at that.

"I also want to see the fish, so I begged Father to let me go to the school. He wasn't terribly happy about it."

"His Majesty hated the academy, after all," Karlheinz explained. "He always said that he would never send any of his children there, so his displeasure comes as no surprise, I suppose."

Claudia laughed. *As the founder of the school, I am a bit curious as to why he hated it so much.*

They returned from the beach to the rest area farther ahead, where Noah conjured a chair in which Claudia could sit. Because her small feet were covered in sand, Noah cleaned them with his magic.

“Are you intending to enter Raushneur to investigate the curse?” Karlheinz asked as Noah wiped her feet with a fluffy towel.

“Of course not. My *intention* is to utilize the short-term enrollment system to enjoy wonderful parts of school life while skipping the worst.”

It was unlikely that Karlheinz believed what Claudia said, but she didn’t mind.

I’m not going around breaking curses for the good of the world. I’m doing it because it’s what I want to do. I have no intention of being treated like a hero, and so I must make a show to hide that I’m investigating the curse.

To simply dismiss her reason for approaching the place that was likely the source of the curse as being just “the self-indulgence of the youngest princess” was much more convenient for her.

A song that lures ships out to sea... We must head to that academy to find the singer, the source of this curse.

After Noah, kneeling before the princess, slipped her white sandals onto her feet, Claudia stared at him.

“It appears that it would be easier to have you enrolled with me as a student who doubles as my attendant, rather than as merely my escort. But that means that you’ll have to attend class with me. How does that sound to you? I’m sure that doing schoolwork intended for students our age will be quite boring for you.”

“It will be time spent to make sure that I’m by your side, Your Highness. Besides, there is value in going over things that I have learned before.”

“That’s a good boy.” Claudia patted Noah on his head. “Then let us make preparations to attend the academy. I would love to, just once, hear a song so beautiful that it could sink a ship.”

With that in mind, Claudia and Noah arrived at Raushneur Academy of Magic.

“Princess, could we please cancel my student registration?” Noah asked as soon as he and Claudia were alone after hearing the explanation of the short-term enrollment system.

“My, how selfish of you, Noah!”

Claudia had expected this reaction, but she pretended to be surprised and feigned a shocked expression.

She stared up at Noah, who stood behind her, as she sat in a comfortable, padded chair.

“I told you about this at the beginning, did I not? It is best if you enroll both as a student and as my attendant. After all, it is a school rule that even if a child is here as an escort or attendant, as long as they are within the academy, they are expected to attend classes.”

“Then I will maintain my adult form while I’m here. If I am not a child, I need not attend.”

“You’ll risk depleting your magic if you stay in that form for our entire stay. You’re a good boy and a good servant who should be able to attend his classes. You can weather the boredom, and didn’t you say that you’d turn this into a learning experience?”

“The situation has changed. According to the explanation we just received, male students are forbidden from entering the girls’ dormitory under any circumstance,” Noah said in a deadly serious voice as he knelt before Claudia. “My service to you is my top priority. If I am separated from you at night, I will not be able to protect you.”

What a sweet child.

Claudia smiled at the serious, unclouded look in his eyes.

He knows that few things could do any real harm to me, and yet...

Even so, Noah was sincere in his efforts to protect her. But it was precisely because she understood this that she decided not to listen to his plea.

“Noah,” Claudia said playfully, “just who was it that founded this school?”

“The Great Witch Adelheid...”

“Then surely you must know who made the school rules, hmm?”

Hearing this, Noah suddenly seemed lost for words.

“If service to me is your top priority, then you must also follow the rules I set. Children study at school—that’s this academy’s foundational principle.”

Noah hung his head in silence. “As you command, Your Highness.”

Claudia giggled.

“There is one more thing I wish to ask,” Noah said, and she nodded for him to continue. “Did you know that the crown prince of Lemilsia had enrolled here?”

She hadn’t said anything to Noah about that. The boy must have come across this fact while gathering intelligence on the curse. Claudia closed her eyes gently before affirming Noah’s suspicions.

“Of course. That has weighed on my mind. Lemilsia is your homeland.”

Claudia had visited Lemilsia once when she was six years old, the year she regained her memory of her previous life. The king of that country had been Noah’s uncle, who had enslaved and abused the young Noah.

“Additionally, the crown prince of Lemilsia is your cousin.”

With the help of Claudia’s magic, Noah had confronted his uncle and defeated him. At that time, Claudia had asked Noah if he wished to retake the throne. Noah had declined.

“I don’t need this. Not to mention he has a child of his own. My cousin is a year younger than me, and I’ve heard rumors of his brilliance. He’ll probably succeed that man as king.”

“Oh my. You would turn a blind eye to the child of the man you hate?”

“I don’t confuse the target of my revenge.”

That same gifted cousin was attending this academy.

Noah seemed to suspect that one of the reasons Claudia brought him with her was because of his cousin’s presence.

Claudia smiled. “Would you like to see him?”

“We’ve never met. I once saw him from a distance, but I never even knew his name,” he answered coolly, but then he shifted away from her. “It’s just that...” His tone was unchanged. “I’m slightly curious as to what kind of person he is.”

For Noah, this is the boy to whom he has entrusted his homeland.

In truth, the next King of Lemilsia should have been Noah. Even though he had refused the throne and instead swore himself into Claudia’s service, this was still a concern for him. For Noah, who was kind and compassionate, even the kingdom where he had suffered so much was important.

“There’s something I’d like to say so that there will be no misunderstanding, Your Highness.”

“Ohhh?”

“What I feel for that country is probably not what you imagine. What I feel is guilt.”

“Guilt...?”

Noah had accurately guessed her aims—but for what reason did he have to feel guilty?

“I threw away the responsibilities that should have been mine to bear.”

Claudia looked at him in wonder and felt as if Noah’s obsidian eyes were piercing through her.

“And I did that so that I could remain in the place I want to be.”

His words, the factual manner he spoke while kneeling before her—Claudia’s breath caught.

“I bear a heavy guilt for having chosen to live as I wish, as the dog of Your Highness, the princess. That is all I feel for that country, not whatever you may be thinking.”

“Noah...” She smiled and yawned before patting him on the head. “Don’t you worry, my adorable Noah. I didn’t bring you to the academy to force you to reunite with your estranged cousin, Sieghart.”

Noah jerked at that name but soon recovered. “Your Highness, please refrain from calling me adorable.”

“Of course, we can arrange for you to meet your cousin; however, I will do this only if you wish it.” Claudia gazed into his obsidian eyes and smiled. “I brought you with me because I need you. I hope that you take this opportunity at the academy to learn with other children your age and to become even more wonderful.”

This time, *Noah’s* breath caught. He bowed deeply, his lips pursed. “I apologize for doubting you.”

“Hee hee. Such a good boy. Let’s stay together until the dormitory curfew, okay?”

Claudia hopped off her chair, and Noah got to his feet. “Come now, it’s time for them to conduct our magical evaluation. I was told that what class you were in was decided by how much magical energy you have and how talented you are at using it.”

She had heard as much from a professor during their orientation.

With a nod to herself, she eyed the portraits of the past headmasters of the academy around the reception room.

“The general studies classes are divided based on grade level. However, classes on magic are divided based on the strength of each student’s magic and have nothing to do with the student’s age. It’s the same way we did it five hundred years ago.”

As they were talking, a knock on the door marked the return of the headmaster.

“Hello!” Claudia greeted.

“Princess Claudia, my apologies. I still haven’t been able to finish taking care of the sudden emergency, and I must ask you to wait a little longer before I can guide you to the room of magical evaluation...”

“Me and Noah can find it by ourselves! Noah is really good at reading maps!” she said with childlike cheer. “Let’s go, Noah!”

She reached out and took Noah's hand. She curtsied to the headmaster before they exited into the corridor that led out of the school building.

"Many children of royalty and nobility attend this academy," Claudia said as they walked. "That matter remains unchanged from five hundred years ago. The difference is that, now, there are only a few commoner children and that only the chosen few, those who have talent, can attend."

Hearing that, something clicked for Noah.

"Something did feel suspect with the headmaster's explanation. After all, you said that Adelheid accepted all people who came to her to learn."

Claudia giggled. "It's not as if people were flocking to me in droves to learn from me. And many of my disciples decided to leave. I might have been a *teensy* bit harsh when teaching them. I don't think that my lessons are all that bad, though."

"As you say, Your Highness," Noah replied deadpan.

"Are you going to weaken your magic for the evaluation so you'll get placed into the lowest class?"

"Hmm... It *would* allow me to move around more easily if I pretended to be weak and immature..."

As they were talking, a group of six upperclassmen came down the corridor that led to the right side of the school building and walked in front of them.

Their ribbons and neckties were blue, indicating that they were eighth-year students, the eldest at the school. Eighth-year students were generally seventeen or eighteen years old, and most of the students in this group were boys. However, in their center was a single smiling girl surrounded by the boys, almost as if they were protecting her.

Her softly curled purple hair flowed behind her in waves as she walked. She was short and adorable, with a slender, feminine body, and her face was bejeweled with gentle, amethyst eyes and small lips that were painted the color of a rose. There was something fragile about the smile that she gave the boys that surrounded her. She walked while hugging a book to her chest.

“There’s no need to be shy, Fiolina.” One of the boys walking with her reached out to her. “If I don’t carry your things for you, the butler who taught me how to be a gentleman will surely scold me. Come now, hand me your book.”

“That’s cheating, Phillip!” another boy called out. “Fiolina, let me carry it to the classroom for you!”

“You lot just don’t understand, do you?” a third boy said. “Fiolina is a modest girl. Do you think she’ll just have someone carry her things for her? The best thing to do would be to hurry ahead to open the door for her.”

Fiolina watched with an unassuming yet strained smile. Her gaze suddenly turned toward Claudia and Noah. “Oh my, is that...?”

“Ah! Wait! Where are you going, Fiolina?!”

She had suddenly left the circle of boys to walk over to Claudia. When she bent down to speak to her, Claudia could smell the sweet, floral scent of her perfume.

“Good afternoon,” she said. “You two are first-years, right? I’ve never seen your faces before. Is it possible that you’re the Avianoian princess?”

“That’s me! I’m Claudia Nathalie Breitkreuz, ten years old!” She beamed, playing the part of an energetic child.



Fiolina, smitten, and having no way to know that this was an act, chuckled. “My, how adorable you are! Is it okay if I call you by your name?”

“Tee hee! Noah, she thinks I’m cute!”

Claudia was tickled that someone would call her by her name instead of “Princess” or “Your Highness.” Noah appeared ready to say something about that, but Claudia paid him no mind.

“Please do! And what’s your name?”

“My name is Fiolina Elma Scervino. And who is this handsome young man beside you?”

“He’s Noah, the attendant who looks after me!”

Noah quietly bowed.

“Oh my,” she giggled. “You’re so handsome and refined that I thought you must be a prince.”

“You’re too kind.”

“It’s true! Noah is very handsome! He’s my pride and joy!”

As Claudia giggled at Noah, who fell into an awkward silence, Fiolina suddenly hugged her tightly. She brought her lips to Claudia’s ear and whispered sweetly.

“Do you want to know a secret? I’m a princess, just like you.”

Slowly standing up, Fiolina held a finger in front of her lips, her eyes sparkling. “Don’t tell anyone, okay?”

Claudia put her finger to her lips. “Your secret’s safe with me!”

Fiolina laughed and asked, “And where are the two of you headed? If you don’t mind my company, I could take you there.”

When she said that, the boys who had been watching from behind her insisted, “We’ll go with you!”

“Wait!” one of the boys said. “We’ll scare Princess Claudia if we go in a huge, loud group. This time, let *me* help Fioli—”

“I’ll escort them with Fiolina!” another boy shouted before the other could

finish.

“There, there, everyone. There’s no reason to fight,” Fiolina said, trying to get them to calm down.

“Fiolina,” another voice called out.

Fiolina’s expression brightened into a beaming smile. “Lucas!”

The boys around Fiolina began to scowl. Walking toward them was a young man wearing the same blue tie as the other eighth-year students. His eyes were the color of sapphire, and his hair was a blue so deep that it was almost black. He was tall, with a somewhat slender but well-proportioned figure. All of the boys that gathered around Fiolina were handsome, but he was clearly a cut above the rest.

“So this is where you were,” Lucas said. “Your homeroom teacher was calling for you.”

“Aww, you came looking for me?” Fiolina, blushing, gripped her book closely to her chest.

A girl who passed them whispered to her companion, “Oh, oh! It’s Lucas, from the eighth year. He’s so handsome.”

The girl with her replied, “Lucas and Fiolina suit each other so well... They look like they belong in a painting.”

And it wasn’t only these two who thought so. Other girls on their way to do after-school activities could be seen admiring the two of them as they passed.

“The two of them are beautiful. They really do resemble a piece of art,” Claudia said to Noah quietly so that no one else could hear. “Don’t you think so?”

“You’re the most beautiful person of all, Your Highness, so I find it difficult to agree.”

At that moment, one of the passing girls saw Claudia and let out a large gasp. “Look! That first-year girl is so cute!”

“Oh my. You’re right!”

Suddenly, a group of girls gathered around Claudia.

One girl squealed. "You're just like a doll up close! I haven't seen you before! Are you a transfer student?"

"Uh... Um..."

"Her eyes are so bright and her eyelashes are so thick! And look at her cheeks! They're so smooth... She's so small, even for a first-year! How cute!"

"And her hair is so silky! She's going to be so beautiful when she grows up. No, she's *already* beautiful! A perfect mix of beauty and cuteness."

"I wish I had a little sister as cute as her! Hey, would you like a piece of candy?"

"The more I gaze upon her, the more beautiful she is. I want to dress her up in all kinds of cute things..."

As Claudia stood there bewildered, more and more upperclassman girls gathered around her. Noah could no longer stand idly by when one of the girls began to pinch her cheeks.

"Your Highness!"

Claudia had told Noah many times that it was more convenient for her to be looked down upon as a child and had ordered him to not interfere when she was treated like one, but this had gone too far. He swooped in and picked her up.

In recent years, Noah had grown taller than the average woman, and as such, he stood head and shoulders above the surrounding girls as he stood holding Claudia. However, doing that was like jumping from the pan into the fire. The girls, who had been focused on Claudia until that point, noticed Noah for the first time, and now they couldn't take their eyes off of him either.

"You're handsome too!"

Noah flinched and gave them the sourest face he could muster.

But the girls didn't seem to mind at all. In fact, they flocked to him.

"That necktie... You're a fourth-year? So that means you're only thirteen or

fourteen?! You're this handsome?! Are you *still* growing?!"

"And is he protecting that first-year like he's her knight? How adorable!"

Oh my. Noah's popular with the upperclassmen.

"Your Highness, grant me permission to use magic!" he pleaded.

"Now, now. Let's not bully them any more than that," came a voice from the other side of the ring of girls.

The girls jumped and twirled around to see Lucas standing behind them.

"It's Lucas!"

Lucas smiled and narrowed his eyes mischievously. All of the girls' eyes were glued to his playful expression. He shrugged and said in a slightly derisive tone, "You do know that the girl you were just surrounding is the Princess of Avianoia?"

"Eh?!"

The girls all turned to look at Claudia, who was still in Noah's arms, and she gave them a big grin. The girls, realizing the seriousness of the situation, quickly took a step back and curtsied.

"Please forgive us, Your Highness!"

"How could we have been so rude?!"

"Nuh-uh! It was a little embarrassing, but I'm happy that you think I'm cute!" She patted Noah on his head as he held her. "And Noah is my pride and joy! I'm so glad you said he's handsome. Isn't that right, Noah?"

"Your Highness..."

The girls were so relieved by Claudia's words, they looked like they might cry.

"What a pure and innocent child she is. Her heart is just as angelic as her looks!"

"Princess Claudia, if you ever need any help while you're here, just ask! We're going to be holding a party in the sixth-years' rooms in the girls' dorm shortly. Please come by if you have the chance!"

“Yaaay! Thank you!”

“Oh, how cute!”

Even as the girls around him squealed with joy, Noah stood silently and kept his eyes on a certain person—Lucas. The eighth-year narrowed his eyes and then bowed reverently before Claudia.

“Your Highness, it seems I called out to Fiolina just as she was going to be your guide. My humble apologies.” He looked up before turning his gaze to Noah. “Apologies to you as well, good knight. You did well to protect your princess. Are you okay?”

“Thank you for your concern,” Noah said quietly, though he appeared to be wary of the young man. He was hiding it, but Claudia knew him well enough.

Lucas turned to Fiolina, who was watching from afar. “I’ll serve as Princess Claudia’s guide. You go see what your teacher wants.”

“But, Lucas...”

He gave a hearty laugh. “Don’t worry! You can trust me to get her there.”

Fiolina looked like she was going to say something but stopped short. Instead, she flashed a smile at Claudia.

“I’m sorry, Claudia. I need to go see my teacher. Let’s talk more next time, okay?”

“Okaaay!”

“Go on now, the rest of you should leave now too.”

At Lucas’s words, the students that had been surrounding Claudia started to head off in different directions. Claudia waved at them as Noah lowered her to the ground.

Lucas dropped to a knee before Claudia. “I’m honored to make your acquaintance, Princess Claudia. I am Lucas Vim Mölders, an eighth-year student. I will take the place of my friend Fiolina and be your guide.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Lucas! I’m Claudia Nathalie Breitzkreuz, ten years old! And this is my Noah!”

Lucas laughed and said, “It feels so strange to speak like this with a princess. I may look like I’m older than you on the outside, but sometimes I feel like I’m still a child. Please feel free to speak to me just as you do with your attendant.”

“All right! I’ll do just that!” Claudia said with no hesitation.

Even though Claudia was a member of the royal family, many people felt strange being spoken to as an equal by someone her age, so when someone asked her to talk to them as an equal, she complied only if she believed the person truly wanted that.

“And you can talk to me just like you would any of your friends! You don’t need to call me ‘Your Highness.’ Just call me by my name.”

“Then I’ll do just that.” He faced Noah. “Is that okay?”

“If it’s something Her Majesty has decided, all there is for me to do is obey.”

“No need to be so formal!” Lucas guffawed. “You can speak to me like we’re friends too, you know!”

“I’m flattered, but... More importantly, I think we should start moving.”

“We need to get to the magical evaluation room!” Claudia told Lucas.

He nodded and then laughed as if he had suddenly understood something. “It’s this way. Come with me.”

Lucas kept talking all the way to the appraisal room, perhaps out of concern that Claudia would become bored.

“The fish that swim over on that side of the barrier change color at night. Isn’t that strange? And the surface is beautiful when the moon is full—something about it deeply moved me the first time I saw it. You should definitely check it out.”

“Wow, that sounds so fun! Let’s go see it together, Noah.”

“Yes. I’ll keep guard, so you can enjoy yourself to your heart’s content.”

“Another thing, the wards here are of very high quality, by any nation’s standards,” Lucas noted. “The legendary witch Adelheid created them, and last

year the crown prince of Klingate refined them further when he came for an inspection.”

“The wards are so sparkly and pretty!” Claudia exclaimed. “I absolutely must go and touch them myself before we leave!”

As they walked through the school, exchanging small talk, occasionally other students passed by and made note of Claudia and Noah in hushed whispers.

“Who is that boy walking with Lucas? Is he wearing a fourth-year tie? He’s so tall!”

“And the girl is so adorable! I bet she’ll grow into a beauty like Fiolina in the future.”

Claudia used the opportunity to pretend that those words had jogged her memory. She looked up at Lucas and asked, “Are you good friends with Fiolina? She’s so beautiful and kind! I want to be like her when I grow up. What can I do to be like her?”

Lucas rubbed his chin in thought. “Hmm... It’s important to get plenty of sleep, eat well, and exercise. And playing a lot is important, even when it’s playing tricks on people.”

“Umm... Was she really like that growing up?” Claudia eyed him suspiciously.

“Ha ha, you catch on quick! Fiolina was a transfer student as well. She came to the academy about three years ago when she was fifteen, so I don’t know much about her childhood.”

Claudia’s eyes narrowed at that, and Noah glanced at her.

“But surely you know how Fiolina spends her time now...” Claudia said.

A beautiful, soft smile spread across Lucas’s face. “She loves to sing...”

“Oh, so she’s a singer?” Claudia smiled. “I want to know more about her! Is she good at magic?”

“She’s in a special class reserved for the best in the school. She’s one of the two students competing for top grades.”

And I’d guess that Lucas is the one she’s competing against.

Claudia could glean how much magical power a person had, even without an evaluation crystal.

Lucas possessed a considerable amount of magical power, but whether it was because he was humble or hiding it for some other reason, it didn't look like he was going to bring himself into the conversation.

"Though, Fiolina's younger sister seems to be having a harder time in comparison..." Lucas continued.

"Her little sister...?" Claudia asked, inclining her head.

"Lauretta is a second-year student. She has a lot of magical power, but she has difficulty controlling it. People think it's unstable and tend to handle her with kid gloves."

"Is she in the beginner's class?"

"Yeah...she seems to be struggling. She is Fiolina's sister, so I worry... Now, then." Lucas stopped walking and pointed at the school building in front of them. "This is the building. The examination room is at the end of the first-floor hallway."

"Yay!" Claudia made a show of her excitement, twirling around and beaming at Lucas. "Thank you! You don't need to take us any farther! Noah can get me there."

"Are you sure?" Lucas took his right hand out of his pocket and gave her a little wave. "Fiolina said it earlier, but let's talk again sometime. Noah, you're in the same boys' dormitory as me, so I'm sure I'll run into you again."

"See you soon! Bye-bye!"

"I'll take it from here," Noah said politely. "Thank you for guiding us here."

Claudia waved goodbye to Lucas and then took Noah's hand and led him into the building. It appeared that students rarely made use of this building, and there was no sign of anyone around. Claudia cast a bubble of silence around them so that no one could overhear.

She turned to Noah. "I suspect the source of the curse is either Fiolina or her sister."

Noah lowered his gaze. “As expected of Your Highness... To have made a judgment on the first day of our investigation is quite impressive.”

“Oh? I’m sure you made the same judgment. The singing we heard in the corridors wasn’t happening in that moment. It was the remaining traces of a powerful spell.”

Additionally, only those with great magical power would’ve heard that singing.

“When Fiolina hugged me,” Claudia continued, “I analyzed the nature of her magic.”

“I had suspected as such when your demeanor changed.”

“Yes, though that wasn’t the only thing that happened. Fiolina told me something very interesting: ‘Do you want to know a secret? I’m a princess just like you, Claudia.’”

Noah furrowed his brow when she told him this.

“The nature of Fiolina’s magic matches that of the traces of magic in the corridor,” she said. “However, the amount of magic power that remained in the remnants of the song was very small, so it’s impossible to determine who cast it from that alone.”

“And that’s why you consider the younger sister to be a suspect too...”

“Yes. The nature of one’s magic is bound to be similar among blood relations.”

“Then it must be one of the two sisters, but we can’t be sure which...”

Claudia put her index finger to her chin and tilted her head as she walked down the hallway. “I’ve already met Fiolina, so there’s no reason for both of us to enter the special class. Let’s aim to be in different classes, then.”

“What do you have in mind?”

“Noah, you enter the special class. I want you to continue investigating Fiolina.”

“If that is what you wish,” Noah said hesitantly.

Claudia could tell that he was having second thoughts about being separated from her during their magic classes too. His expression reminded her of a dog that had been told to stay home as his master left. She had to giggle at that.

“I’ll enter the beginner’s class. I’ll need to adjust my magic for the appraisal.”

“But, Your Highness, while that might have worked four years ago when everyone believed you were a dismagus, now your magical ability is renowned. Even if you adjust your magic, will they not just think the crystal is defective?”

“About that... Did we not hear something very interesting earlier?” Claudia grinned.

Noah winced. “You can’t be saying...”

Claudia laughed. “Noah, take your appraisal before me! If I take mine first, I might get nervous and mess up!”

That day, the professors who had gathered to administer the magical evaluation for the new students would be left speechless, for the results of the evaluation of the youngest princess of Avianoia were something quite unprecedented.

“I can’t believe it! Both of our evaluation crystals have shattered!” a professor clamored.

The professors, who had shielded themselves with a last-second ward as the crystal shattered, were now talking among themselves in a state of confusion.

“Incredible... I’ve never heard of an evaluation crystal exploding!”

“But...it *did* react to her power before it exploded...”

“And both crystals exploded! Not only the one the princess was holding, but also the spare one in the back... How is that possible?”

The professors turned their gaze back to the girl in question, who was now holding on to her manservant.

“The crystal broooke!” she wailed, burying her face deeper into Noah’s robe. “I’m scared!”

“Our apologies, professors. The Chief Conjuror of Avianoia will be in contact with you regarding reimbursement for your crystals,” Noah said apologetically.

“Ah... And in regard to Her Highness, Claudia Nathalie Breitkreuz...” one of the stunned professors began awkwardly. “Although she clearly possesses an enormous amount of magical power, it seems that she lacks the ability to properly control it, so she will be placed in the beginner’s class.”

Good. All according to plan.

And thus, Claudia became a member of the beginner class so that she could investigate the curse, using a method she claimed she had no choice but to use.



Chapter 2

The rumor that the new student in the beginner's class had an absurd amount of power, and didn't know how to control it, had circulated throughout the academy by dinnertime.

Students whispered to each other as they watched Claudia excitedly reading the dining hall's menu.

"Look there, that's the girl who broke the evaluation crystals..."

"What are you talking about? There's no way that happened. I bet the crystal just happened to break by chance. This is probably a rumor getting more and more exaggerated as it goes around the academy."

"But she's a princess! And, hey—she really *was* put into the beginner's class! It's scary having someone here whose magic might go out of control."

"Not able to control her power... That reminds me of Fiolina's little sister..."

Claudia was using her magic to hear all the gossip whispered around her, but she didn't pay much attention to it. Instead, she read the menu with immense curiosity.

"Noah, look! It says that you can get food from the southern continent at this counter!"

"The cuisine there uses a lot of spices, so it takes some time to grow accustomed to it. If it's too spicy for you and you need a palate cleanser, leave it to me."

"But I really want to try the food over there too," she said, vexed and pointing at another counter. "I bet it's so yummy! I wonder if it has lots of vegetables..."

"If you can eat more than half of your vegetables, I'll eat the rest. Don't worry, and choose whichever meal you'd like."

"Yay! Thank you, Noah!"

A founding principle of this academy was that no distinction would be made

between students based on social status. Attendants and commoners could share their meals with nobles and royalty.

Claudia and Noah often took their meals together, partly so that Noah could learn table manners. As a servant, he didn't think that he should be sitting with the princess, but Claudia wanted to eat with him, so he resigned himself to it.

They began walking to the dining hall's tables as Claudia sang a song composed solely of the word "dinner."

"Your Highness, perhaps it would be better if you allowed me to carry your tray."

"Nuh-uh, I'll carry it! Hmm, now where should we sit...?"

As she looked around for a table, the students sitting around her quickly averted their gazes.

Presumably, things will be easier now that the rumors of my appraisal have spread. It seems they've all bought into why I've been put into the beginner's class despite having immense magical power.

She had expected the students would avoid her now, so they had come to dinner early when the dining hall wasn't too crowded. She and Noah headed toward a table in the corner of the dining hall and put their trays down on the glossy wooden tabletop.

Claudia giggled. "It seems we don't have to worry about erecting a bubble of silence to keep people from overhearing our conversation this time."

"It's difficult for me to turn a blind eye to people speaking ill of you..."

"Oh? But they're all such good boys and girls doing exactly what I want them to do," Claudia said, giggling as she sliced into her rice omelet with the edge of her spoon.

The rice omelet that Noah usually made her was creamy and melted in your mouth, but this one had been stretched thin and thoroughly cooked. Noah's version would always be her favorite, but she definitely enjoyed it cooked this way too. While Claudia munched on her food, Noah, who had also ordered the same dish, sat silently chewing with a serious expression.

That's the face he makes when he's trying to figure out what ingredients and seasoning were used. He's always trying to learn.

Noah tensed when he noticed that she was watching him with a smile, but his expression soon softened. "I contacted Karlheinz to discuss compensation for the damaged crystals. I told him to use your personal funds as you requested."

"Although it was a necessary performance to get into the beginner's class, I feel bad that I broke their crystals. However, I did cry and offer an apology, so everything should be fine."

"I disagree. Your crocodile tears likely fooled no one."

Claudia was offended. "Why is it that you're so harsh in your judgment of my fake crying? You're such a good boy about everything else."

Claudia made a show of puffing out her cheeks, but Noah ignored her. Her obedient manservant could be quite impudent at times.

"I will be sharing accommodations with Fiolina's sister," she told him.

Noah froze, his spoon mid-motion, and narrowed his eyes slightly. "How did you..."

"All the other vacant rooms suddenly had broken locks, loose floorboards, or signs of leakage. A strange coincidence, isn't it?"

"Strange, indeed."

Because the school emphasized using dormitories as a way to teach students how to live in a community, it was forbidden for family members to be paired as roommates. And, since the other students would have been resistant to rooming with a dangerous student who couldn't control their magic, it was easy to imagine why Fiolina's sister was occupying a room by herself.

"Magic classes appear to be held in the afternoon after the general classes in the morning. In addition, the special class runs longer than the others."

"That means you'll have to wait for me after your beginner's class. Perhaps it would be better if I left class early..."

"You will do no such thing. You're a student, which means it's your job to properly attend your classes," Claudia softly scolded him, even though he was

trying to prioritize her.

It was a chance for Noah to have a normal childhood. She believed it was important that he enjoy this experience to its fullest.

“Besides, I’ll be using that time to get to know *her*,” she said, looking to the corner of the dining hall.

There was the eleven-year-old Laretta, Fiolina’s little sister, who had been placed in the beginner’s class despite having a tremendous amount of magical energy. She had the same lilac hair as her sister, but, unlike her sister, she had little presence and seemed to fade into the crowd. Her eyes were bright, but her lips were knit together in a way that made her look expressionless.

Laretta had placed her dishes back onto her tray and was walking over to put them away. Her demeanor indicated she was trying her best to not stand out. This stood in direct contrast to Fiolina, who walked while surrounded by her admirers.

Even so, there were still some students who caught sight of her and whispered among themselves.

“It’s Fiolina’s sister. Look at her. She’s so quiet. It’s almost like she’s a ghost,” a boy said to his friend.

“My brother’s in the same class as her, and he said he’s never even heard her speak once. Plus, she’s trouble for the professors. She doesn’t even answer when she’s called on in class!”

“She’s like the complete opposite of Fiolina. How can they be so different when they’re sisters?”

“Hey, we should keep quiet about this. Who knows what would happen if she heard us...? What if she lost control of her magic again?”

“Y-You’re right... I don’t care if she’s Fiolina’s sister, she’s just too scary...”

Claudia watched Laretta as she continued to munch on her rice omelet. Laretta had the same amethyst eyes as her sister, a near certain sign that they possessed the same magic.

The older sister who’s treated like a princess, and the younger sister who

everyone avoids and keeps at a distance. She lost control of her magic once, and a year later, she's still being treated like she might blow at any moment.

She thought back to how panicked the professors had been when she shattered the evaluation crystals.

If the adults had handled Lauretta's case with more care, then the students wouldn't be treating her like this. When I founded this school, I had tried to create a system not only to educate students but also to train faculty...

She watched her own reflection in her spoon as she chewed.

It appears I am lacking in some ways.

"Your Highness," Noah called to her softly.

Claudia looked up at him and saw that he was staring at her earnestly.

"You didn't join the beginner's class just to investigate Lauretta, did you?"

Claudia chuckled softly. "And why do you think that?"

"Because I'm your servant. It's my duty to know what troubles you and what you feel responsible for." Then he lowered his eyes and grabbed his salad fork. He continued to eat as he talked so that what he said wouldn't be taken too seriously. "You mean to change this school, do you not?"

"Nothing as momentous as that. However..." She snickered, once again turning her gaze to Lauretta, who left the dining hall. "If something's lacking, then you just need to remedy it."

Noah said nothing in response.

That night, the twelve-year-old Sieghart quietly closed his eyes as he lay on the roof of the otherwise empty boys' dormitory. Looking up from the academy, the sea played the part of the sky, spreading out as far as the eye could see. The seawater was as black as the midnight sky.

Sieghart was used to spending the evening alone. This was how he had spent them for most of the twelve years he had been alive.

The laughter of his classmates returning from the dining hall filled the forest

surrounding the dormitory. Sieghart was aware that he was older than his years, but that wasn't the only reason that he didn't spend much time with those his age.

"I'm sorry, Brother."

These were the words that haunted Sieghart. He had heard his father say them many times since he was a child.

"I'm sorry, Brother. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, please forgive me!"

"Your Highness, please don't get too close to your father..."

Sieghart watched his father from behind the attendants who were trying to shoo him away. His father's obsidian eyes were full of terror.

"Please don't hit me. Brother, forgive me. Forgive me!"

He'd heard that his father had killed his own older brother—Sieghart's uncle—the previous king. His father had taken the throne and reigned over the country as a powerful magician. As the heir, Sieghart had received a strict upbringing, but that changed a few years ago when a beautiful witch went to the castle and broke his father.

Sieghart had not borne witness. He had been whisked away to a separate building for his safety during the fight. When he finally escaped from the guards, it was already over. But he still remembered what he had seen looking up from the castle garden as he ran to find his father.

A witch with light-brown hair had stood in the courtyard atop the castle with a dark-haired young man by her side. She had used some type of magic, and flowers of light had bloomed. The flowers had danced across the sky and filled the capital with their petals.

He would never forget that sight. And, in much the same way, the memory of the witch and her servant had been burned into the memory of his father.

"Brother, forgive me. Brother, please!"

"Your Highness, please come this way," an attendant told Sieghart. *"The visitation period is coming to a close."*

“Brother is coming from Hell for me! Leonhard and that witch Adelheid told him where I was!”

Sieghart knew the name of the witch and her servant.

The voices of students drifted up the stairs, breaking Sieghart’s reverie of days past.

“You know who I’m talking about. She was just in the dining hall. You know, the girl with light-brown hair.”

Hair just like the witch that was burned into his memory.

“She’s the new student who broke the evaluation crystals. I heard that they put her into the beginner’s class, but I think they should expel her if she’s that dangerous.”

The students who had walked up the stairs didn’t seem to notice that there was someone already on the roof.

“But didn’t she have a servant with her? The one with the dark hair. As long as he’s with her, I don’t think that she’ll do anything too dangerous.”

“Somehow that servant got into the special class, even though he’s just a servant! He’s powerful enough that he can handle any dangerous situation. That’s why he’s able to serve someone so dangerous without being scared.”

A girl with light-brown hair and her dark-haired servant.

Sieghart looked down and muttered the names that inevitably floated into his mind.

“Adelheid and Leonhard...”

The three buildings for student living were built in the woods that lay to the south of the academy. At the center of these was the dining hall. It had not only a cafeteria and dining area, but also a number of common areas such as a lounge, study room, and game room. After dinner, around half of the students would go to one of these rooms to hang out with their friends.

The boys' dormitory was located to the east of the dining hall, and the girls' dormitory to the west. Both were a few minutes' walk from the center building, and though they weren't far from each other by distance, warding prevented students from approaching the dormitory of the opposite sex.

"I'd like to spend more time with you," Claudia told Noah, "but Lauretta has already returned to the dormitory. I'm going to head back to my room for the night to continue on with the investigation."

"Yes, Your Highness," Noah said with a strained expression before composing himself and kneeling before Claudia. "If something bad happens, please inform me. I will be there immediately."

"Oh my, Noah, I'll be fine. No matter what happens, you mustn't break the barrier, understood?"

She reached up and patted him on the head, then waved back at him once she crossed the barrier. If he really were a dog, his tail would have been between his legs.

I need to solve this case quickly for my adorable little puppy's sake.

Claudia stopped before the door at the end of the third-floor corridor. No one had been in the room as she had unpacked her things, but now she sensed the presence of someone on the other side of the door.

She reached out and knocked on the door.

No one answered.

She grabbed the heavy doorknob and turned it. The door opened with a small creaking sound.

Claudia jolted in surprise as a fish swam across the doorway right before her eyes—and it wasn't just the one fish. The entire bedroom was filled with a translucent magic as many groups of fish were swimming within, chasing after one another. One would think she was walking into the sea, but there was no doubt that this was her dorm room. Looking up at the ceiling, she saw pink jellyfish swaying in the water, which seemed to be watching her.

Directly across the room from Claudia, a girl with light-purple hair sat silently

against the wall, directly underneath the window. Illusory fish darted in and out of her long curly hair that spread out around her. She had a vacant expression in her eyes that made her emotions hard to discern. She was a second-year, meaning that she was one year older than Claudia was currently. However, she looked quite young. With pursed lips, she sat quietly as she stared at Claudia.

This was Fiolina's younger sister, Lauretta, one of those suspected to be behind the curse, and she had turned their room into a magical aquarium.

"Woow!" Claudia lit up as she stepped into the room. "This is incredible! There's so many fish! What is this?"

Lauretta watched Claudia silently with a frown and pointed at the door.

Claudia glanced behind her, where Lauretta was pointing, before quickly apologizing, "Sorry! I forgot to close the door! But before that, I want to introduce myself. I'm Claudia Nathalie Breitzkreuz, a first-year student!"

She grabbed the hem of her skirt and gave a polite curtsy. Lauretta didn't speak, shaking her head instead.

"I'll get the door!"

As Claudia closed it, Lauretta's frown deepened. Claudia pretended not to notice and reached her hand out to touch the fish that were swimming around her.

"And a good evening to you, Mr. Fish! This was just a normal room when I was here unpacking before dinner. This must be your magic, right? It's wonderful!"

Lauretta looked annoyed but didn't say anything. Claudia remembered the rumor that she had heard earlier.

"My brother's in the same class as her, and he said he's never even heard her speak once! Plus, she's trouble for the professors. She doesn't even answer when she's called on in class!"

Claudia had no intention of badgering Lauretta yet. There were plenty of other steps to take in this investigation.

Still, this spell truly is a marvel, she thought, narrowing her eyes as she felt the magic that filled the room. The fish that she had reached out and touched

nudged her finger. It was a tickling sensation, and Claudia examined the room with interest.

This spell wasn't constructed through precise calculation as much as unfettered imagination and expression. I would guess that even Laretta herself couldn't reproduce this exactly if she tried.

Laretta scowled at Claudia, who was moving about without a care, and her mouth began to move silently. She was likely whispering an incantation that even Claudia couldn't hear.

"Oh!" Claudia exclaimed, widening her eyes in faux surprise as the fish reacted to Laretta's spell and turned to attack her.

Magical energy swirled around the room like water, rustling Claudia's hair and skirt. It was clear that this was meant to intimidate her. Laretta was trying to get her to leave.

Magic that rages like the sea. It may be in the shape of fish, but this is a spell with the intent to attack. If she wanted to, she could direct this mass of magical energy directly into me.

Laretta watched Claudia and directed the magic just with the movement of her lips.

"Get out."

The magical power that suffused the fish grew stronger.

"Go away. Leave me alone. You'll just treat me like a monster and say mean things like everyone else."

She's not actually producing any sound with her voice, Claudia thought, yet I can hear her so clearly.

"Everyone bullies me. I hate them. I..."

It's heartbreaking. No one truly sees her for who she is. Claudia looked at the fish that surrounded her and lamented the professor's judgment. *A child that can create magic like this... What were they thinking when they put her in the beginner's class?*

Laretta's eyes widened as Claudia held up her hand.

With a cry, Claudia chanted a short spell and materialized a school of pink fish. Upon seeing them, the ones under Laretta's influence stopped their charge. They retreated, only for Claudia's fish to chase after them.

Claudia laughed. "Look! It's like they're playing hide-and-seek!"

Laretta sat with her mouth open in shock, and Claudia smiled at her.

"See, my fish are getting along with yours. Aren't they so happy playing together?"

In reality, Laretta's fish appeared annoyed as they ran away from her own fish, but Claudia pretended not to see that.

"*Why?*" Laretta mouthed, her face still set in a scowl. "*Why did you stop my fish? Why can you use the same magic? Why?*" Laretta hugged her knees to her chest as she watched Claudia. "*Are you not afraid of me?*"

Hearing those voiceless words, a gentle, happy expression bloomed on Claudia's face. "Laretta."

The girl jolted at her name.

Claudia walked quickly to her side and took her hand. She gave it a gentle squeeze.

"Your magic's so beautiful."

Laretta's eyes opened wide at that. They were the same beautiful amethyst as her sister's.

"How could I be afraid? Your magic shines and is full of life. I love it!"



Lauretta swiftly withdrew her hand. Her eyes said she didn't understand what was happening. Claudia reached out and took her hand once more in hers while she used her other hand to point at the ceiling.

"Don't you think it's beautiful too?"

Lauretta gasped. On the ceiling above the top bunk, Lauretta and Claudia's fish, which moments before had been chasing one another, had begun to swim and play together.

"Look. My fishies love yours too!"

"Ah..." A faint sound escaped from Lauretta and she pressed her hand over her mouth in surprise. She peeked at Claudia before looking down again.

Claudia smiled at her, but inside she was calmly assessing the situation.

She didn't order the fish to attack me.

The more likely answer was that the magic had moved on its own in response to Lauretta's strong emotions of wanting Claudia to leave.

She's a prodigy who's able to think outside of the box. On top of that, she has a tremendous amount of magical energy. However, she lacks control over both her emotions or magic.

Lauretta glared at Claudia as her mouth opened and closed. She brought her hands to her throat as if trying to squeeze the words out.

"Leave—quickly."

"Oh!" Claudia's eyes lit up as she heard Lauretta's voice for the first time. "Your voice is so pretty!"

Lauretta was taken aback, and her face turned red. Claudia pretended she didn't notice and continued, "The way you turned our room into the sea was amazing! And so were all the fish that you made! How did you come up with this? I want to ask you so many questions!"

"Uh... Ah..."

"I'm not scared of you at all. I mean, you're so wonderful! But that's not the only reason." Claudia stared directly into her eyes. She knew what Lauretta

wanted to hear most of all. “Even if scary magic comes and attacks me, I have magical protection. So you don’t need to worry!”

Lauretta looked at Claudia with naked interest at that.

“My attendant—his name is Noah,” Claudia explained. “He is very good at magic, and he’ll protect me.”

Lauretta listened silently.

“He’s a boy,” Claudia continued, “so he can’t come with me to the girls’ dorm. But even if he’s far away, his magic is protecting me, so don’t worry!”

Of course, the truth was that Claudia didn’t need Noah’s magic to protect her. However, she had decided it was better to say it was Noah protecting her, given that she was a member of the beginner’s class.

“Here, hold my hand,” she said, putting on her childlike act once more.

Claudia couldn’t tell if Lauretta had sensed her change of personality, but she reached her hand out nervously and grabbed Claudia’s hand.

“You see! Isn’t my hand warm?” Lauretta tilted her head up at her questioningly, so Claudia continued. “That’s proof that Noah’s magic is protecting me.”

Lauretta’s eyes widened in surprise.

This was a lie too. Another person’s protective magic had no effect on your body temperature. Lauretta was eleven years old, though. She didn’t know any better at her age.

Claudia’s eyes twinkled at Lauretta as the girl stared at her hand. “I’m not afraid of you, so I’m happy that I get to stay in the same room with you. If your magic can’t hurt me, are you still afraid of staying here with me too?”

“Ah...” Lauretta’s eyes wandered a bit and then she silently mouthed, “*Only...a little.*”

“Good!” Claudia reached in to hug Lauretta. Lauretta flinched, but she didn’t try to pull away, and her fish remained stable. “I look forward to being your roommate for the next month!”

Lauretta continued to stare at the floor silently, but finally, she nodded.

After taking her bath and getting dressed into a lavender nightgown, Claudia sat at the foot of the bottom bed of the bunk in her new dorm room.

“Wow, Lauretta! Wow!” she said, clapping her hands.

Lauretta, who smelled of the same soap as Claudia, was wearing an ivory nightgown. She sat across from Claudia at the head of the bed with her knees splayed under her in the shape of a W. Between the two of them were rows of seashells laid neatly on top of the sheets.

“I can’t believe you have so many!” Claudia stared at the shells in full admiration.

Lauretta remained silent but looked proud of her collection.

“I like the shiny white ones and the sparkly pink ones. They’re so cute! But I only have one shell...” Claudia said with a laugh. “Do you like it?”

Lauretta didn’t say anything, but Claudia could sense that she enjoyed seeing her seashell.

“Thank you!”

Claudia was surprised that Lauretta had let her sit on her bed. She must have been excited to show off her shells. This was the very picture of a girls’ sleepover, both of them hugging their pillows and gazing down at their precious seashells.

“Where did you gather these?” Claudia asked as she took her single purple shell and lined it up across from one of Lauretta’s shells that appeared to be the same color. “Are they from the sea outside of the barrier?”

Lauretta shook her head before using hand gestures to explain.

“You got them from the ground? Oh, that makes sense. The ground here was formed from impacted sea sand! Probably loots of shells here!”

Lauretta nodded. “*You can’t leave the barrier,*” she mouthed.

Claudia narrowed her eyes slightly at that. *The barrier is something that’s*

supposed to protect the students. It prevents magicians from even being able to scry its location, much less try to teleport in from the outside.

That meant that it restricted the ability of students to come and go.

The magical ritual that allowed teleportation within the academy grounds was known only to the school faculty. Even when they left employment, magic prevented former employees from revealing that information.

All of that is meant to prevent those with ill intent from trespassing on the grounds. It's necessary to protect the children here, some of whom come from royal families and have the magical potential to one day be powerful people in their own right, but...

Magic that prevents the trespass of intruders also prevents those inside from leaving...

The children of this academy cannot leave of their own free will.

That the barrier had to be constructed that way was one of Claudia's biggest regrets from her life as Adelheid.

"Do you wish you could leave? Or do you want to stay here?"

Lauretta silently stared down at the seashells in front of her. Claudia inclined her head questioningly.

"It's quiet here."

Those silent words seemed to be said more to herself than to Claudia.

"I just float around. Invisible. Like in a dream..."

Lauretta looked out the window to the sea on the other side of the barrier.

"Father—he won't let me leave," she mouthed as she squeezed her pillow. Her expression never changed.

Something Fiolina had told Claudia that afternoon came to mind.

"Do you want to know a secret? I'm a princess just like you, Claudia."

Many members of royalty attend this school. That other princesses are enrolled would not be surprising. Yet...

As she had walked around the academy investigating, Claudia hadn't overheard anything concerning Fiolina being a part of a royal family. Lucas hadn't even mentioned it, so Claudia had to conclude that the other students were unaware of Fiolina's royal status, if she indeed was a princess.

However, it's still possible that she's hidden her heritage from the people here.

For the past four years, Claudia had been continuing her investigation into curses. Their source was a collection of magical artifacts that had survived these past five hundred years. These artifacts chose their own masters, and Claudia had observed that most of these masters were royalty. It wasn't just Claudia's half sister Emilia or her wayward student Sewell.

Claudia tucked her hair behind her ears as she recalled the cases she had resolved over the past four years.

A curse requires strength in both desire and magical power. Consequently, the artifacts often chose royalty and high-ranking nobles...

When Claudia had hugged Laretta, she had sensed that she was of the same flesh and blood as Fiolina. The nature of their magic was nearly identical.

She couldn't determine which of them was the master of the curse, but it solidified that Laretta was a suspect along with her sister.

Does that mean that Laretta and Fiolina are hiding that they are royalty?

If they were, then that would mean that the cursed artifact had once again chosen royalty.

Thereupon, we'd have to surmise this is more than mere coincidence— whoever is spreading the artifacts is intentionally targeting royalty.

She had thought about this a lot over the past four years, and it vexed her. She fell into deep contemplation even now, her eyes unfocused as she stared at the bedsheets until she noticed Laretta watching her quizzically.

"Mmm, I think I'm getting sleepy..." She resumed her childlike act and rubbed her eyes, half in play and half seriously. Laretta nodded, and Claudia smiled at her. "Let's both sleep in the top bunk! That way we don't have to clean up the shells until tomorrow!"

Lauretta stared at her in surprise.

And so, Claudia and Lauretta fell asleep together, even though it was a little too early for a ten-year-old's bedtime.

As Claudia was soundly sleeping, Noah had combined various spells to escape from the boys' dormitory and was now walking beside the barrier that surrounded the academy. All that he could see on the other side was the dark expanse of the nighttime sea.

Noah touched the barrier and felt the chill on his fingers. He closed his eyes and analyzed the magic that he sensed flowing through the wards.

The formula for these wards is intricately structured yet extravagantly presented.

Depending on who cast it, a spell's composition could differ even if its effects were the same. This could be due to the caster's inborn magical power, changes in their bloodline over generations, or the way they used their magic. It was the combination of these factors that made each person's magic unique.

These wards are composed of so many different spells, yet each serves its purpose. Despite that, there is still a sense of imagination and playfulness within.

That brought to mind his master, who was more dear to him than his own life.

So this is Adelheid's magic, which has remained here for the past five hundred years.

This was from another time—from before her reincarnation.

This magic resembles the princess's, but a part of it is different.

Noah kept his eyes closed and pressed the palm of his hand against the barrier. He concentrated on the magic as if he were trying to feel every strand of it, one by one.

Adelheid was more bold in her use of magic. I can tell that this barrier was created in a single burst of magic.

Of course, Claudia was on par with Adelheid in terms of how much magic she held. However, as she was now, she couldn't create something like this with a single incantation. Her body would reach its limit long before she could complete it. Remembering the day that she had coughed up blood brought a scowl to Noah's face.

She can't cast a spell that depletes her magical reserves all at once with her body the way it is now.

She would soon tire, and Noah would need to hold her and keep her safe. And there was a chance that she would die if she attempted to use magic of that magnitude.

That's because her young body wouldn't be able to take it...or at least that's what I thought until now.

Recently, Noah was beginning to question that logic.

The princess is ten years old; in December she will turn eleven. She's older than I was when I met her.

Noah had been nine at that time.

She would be unable to withstand even the magic I used then. So, is it truly because of her age?

It was true that Claudia was small and looked younger than most girls her age. Perhaps it didn't matter how old she was if her body didn't grow. Noah couldn't shake this concern from his mind. He wanted to resolve this problem for her.

I once even brought my concern to her directly.

He had broached the subject over breakfast, upon which she had puffed out her cheeks while staring at the pancakes he had made for her.

"My adorable Noah. You're trying to trick me into eating my vegetables, aren't you?" she had said then.

"No, that was not my intent."

She laughed. "I'm only teasing you. Put your mind at ease. My body still has a ways to grow."

She grabbed her fork and proudly puffed out her chest. “You know, the last time I measured my height, I was two centimeters taller. Like I said, I have a lot more growing to do.”

“I am happy for you, Your Highness.”

Was it possible that her lack of concern stemmed from it not actually being a big problem?

She's not the type to show others her weakness. However, she does trust me more than anyone else and treats me as her confidant...

That was his pride as Claudia's servant. That being said, she didn't tell him everything.

I'll do everything I can.

He didn't want to miss a single piece of information he could get from the wards.

Understanding Adelheid's magic could give me the information I need to help her.

Noah had to remind himself to breathe. He exhaled, trying not to lose focus.

There are some ancient magical formulas mixed in here.

Adelheid had constructed these wards over five hundred years ago, before she had gone on to revolutionize the way magic was thought about. This kind of magic was rarely seen in the present, but Noah had learned a bit about it in his lessons from Claudia.

This one comes from the eastern continent. Instead of increasing its rigidity, it adds a certain degree of flexibility to make the barrier stronger.

Noah not only analyzed and memorized the information but also imagined how he could put it to use.

Everything was silent in the night, yet Noah could hear a noise coming from beyond the barrier—a sound like wind blowing through a cave.

This magic seems to be relatively new...

Noah furrowed his brow. He was sure that he'd seen this magic before. It

reminded him of Stuart, Prince of Klingate.

Noah had heard that Stuart had come to the academy to help strengthen the ward. When he and Claudia had met him two years prior, the prince had shut himself in his room, away from the world. Klingate was a kingdom that had a strong faith in the Great Witch Adelheid, and Stuart was fervent in his admiration of her. In the time since Claudia had lifted the curse from Klingate, Stuart had emerged from his room and become a good servant for his country, using his talent for warding magic to build relationships with other nations.

Noah retracted his hand from the ward and narrowed his eyes.

Stuart had likely come to help with the ward because it was tied to Adelheid. It pained Noah to admit it, but Stuart's talent with wards was real.

Noah reached out to the barrier again—this time, to analyze Stuart's magic. But before his palm touched the cold barrier, Noah could practically feel a set of eyes fixed on his back. He swung around.

In the distance, a lamp was swaying on the roof of the boys' dorm. In its light, Noah could just barely make out a person's silhouette.

Who...?

From where he stood, he couldn't quite make out the figure. It was hard to determine the person's physique, much less see their face. He could guess that whoever they were, they were likely just slightly shorter than he was.

A child younger than me...?

The figure on the rooftop seemed to be looking straight at Noah, who stared right back. He took in the figure, who, after a few moments, walked away.

It was likely that the person had just happened to be on the roof and noticed his presence. Noah realized this, but he felt a vague sense of foreboding. He whispered the name that Claudia had told him just earlier that day.

"Sieghart..."

The first-year classes that began the next day were a new experience for Claudia, who had never before assumed the role of a student. In the morning,

she had her regular classes, tailored to ten-year-olds. Nonetheless, sitting in class was interesting enough. When she was in Avianoia, she had taken on the role of the princess who did as she pleased and refused any tutors that had been prepared for her, so sitting in a classroom wasn't something she had much opportunity to do.

During recess, she sat down with Noah by the courtyard fountain, unfolded her notebook, and gave him her report.

"Ta-da! What do you think about this? The math teacher complimented me on how neat my notes are."

Today was another beautiful, sunny day, and plenty of sunlight poured in through the barrier. A large sea turtle swam by them.

Noah nodded his head. "Congratulations. It's only natural that he praised you, Your Highness."

Claudia laughed, more at the seriousness in Noah's voice than the words themselves.

"How are you doing? You weren't late for class because you came to my classroom during each break, were you?"

"I am your attendant, Your Highness. It would sully your reputation if I wasn't there every break."

"There, there. I'd give you one hundred points for being a good boy if I could," Claudia said as she reached up to pat his head. He didn't shy away from it, as there weren't many students in the courtyard.

"I'd like to bring up something we didn't get to talk about much this morning," Noah said, looking slightly uncomfortable even as he sat obediently. "You've confirmed that Lauretta is Fiolina's sister, correct?"

"Yes. They aren't complete strangers pretending to be sisters at the very least."

Noah glanced at Claudia before continuing. "To review, you've confirmed that the song that we heard in the corridor came from one of the sisters, and, on top of that, Fiolina told you that she is a princess..."

“It’s likely that many students are hiding their social status. Even if this academy is protected from outside intruders, there’s always a chance that something bad might happen.”

“Something else that worries me is that Laretta rarely uses her voice to speak.” Claudia had mentioned this to him this morning in the dining hall.

“Every testimony we heard from the survivors said that they heard a voice singing before the ships disappeared. If singing was used to transmit this curse, isn’t the voice itself a key to this mystery?”

“Yes, though that is itself unusual. Most curses are transmitted through silver artifacts that the user pours their magic into. This is the first time I’ve heard of a curse being transmitted through singing.”

Claudia inclined her head and kicked her legs back and forth before continuing, “Last night, I slept in the same bed as Laretta.”

“Wha...?” Noah’s eyes widened.

Claudia ignored his reaction. “If she’s the one who cast the curse, then surely she would have the cursed artifact somewhere on her body, right? I thought that if we shared a bed, I might be able to find it.”

Noah stared at her silently.

“But it was futile. I put on my act and played like I was going to tickle her, but I didn’t want to actually touch her when she was unwilling. She might have been hiding it in her clothes, or she may not have it on her at all times.”

Noah continued to sit silently as he listened with a complicated expression.

“I had more success when we bathed together... Uh, Noah?”

Noah’s silence deepened. Seeing the wrinkles in her servant’s furrowed brow brought a smile to Claudia’s face.

“Don’t tell me that you’re jealous.”

His silence was deafening.

Claudia had thought that Noah would rush to deny it, but instead he murmured, “I thought that I was the only one you turned to when you had

trouble sleeping...”

Claudia’s heart jumped at Noah’s honesty. It was the first time he had said something like this.

“Oh my! Sweet Noah, how precious you are! What a good boy! Were you lonely last night?”

“Y-Your Highness!”

“This was a strategic sleepover, so don’t worry yourself over it. The only time your princess can sleep soundly is when she’s being held by you.”

“I apologize. What I said went far beyond my station. So, please... Please stop rubbing my head so hard!” Noah couldn’t take Claudia’s pats of affection any longer. “More importantly, I need to make my report.”

“What report?”

“I heard a rumor in the fourth-year classroom that there’s a ghost here at the academy.”

Many schools had similar rumors. Children loved scary stories, and even Claudia’s siblings would read ghost stories under their blankets at night.

“It may end up being a dead end, but I wanted to mention it just in case.”

“Tell me more. What kind of apparition is it?”

“It’s a student that no one at the academy has ever seen before.”

Claudia listened quietly, though she was deep in thought as Noah continued.

“Supposedly, when the rumor started, it was about a boy that no one knew. There were sightings of a boy from the lower grades, but it quickly changed to a rumor about a girl no one knew.”

This academy had a lot of students in attendance, but it was a boarding school where students were not allowed to come and go as they pleased. Even if they were in different grades, the students would know each other well. That’s why everyone immediately recognized that Claudia was a new student. Therefore, it was hard to believe that they wouldn’t recognize another student, especially when it wasn’t the time of year when new students would come.

“Each time the rumor makes its rounds, it appears that its description becomes more detailed,” said Noah. “Right now, the ghost is said to be an eighth-year student...a girl of about eighteen...with purple hair.”

Noah looked at Claudia, his obsidian-colored eyes boring into hers, which were magically disguised as light gold.

“The same physical characteristics of the legendary witch Adelheid, you might say,” he said.

Adelheid’s hair was a purple that had the slightest touch of blue to it, and her age at death had indeed been eighteen. That meant that the students of this academy at least knew that much about the founder of their academy.

Claudia couldn’t stop a burst of laughter from escaping.

“Your Highness...”

“Things are getting interesting. Her soul has reincarnated already, so it wouldn’t be surprising if a piece of her has been left behind somewhere and become a ghost.”

Claudia had said that lightly, but Noah’s response was quick and heavy.

“Even if it’s just a piece, a small fragment, I can’t stand the idea of a piece of you that is not by my side.”

“Noah...” His sincerity warmed her heart. “Don’t worry; all of me that is me is yours. And besides, there are other girls here at the academy that resemble Adelheid.”

Noah nodded and then said just what Claudia expected him to say: “An eighteen-year-old, eighth-year student with purple hair... Fiolina...”

“The difference is that she’s not likely to be mistaken as a student no one’s ever seen before.”

Fiolina was one of the few students at the academy that everyone kept an eye on. It was hard to think that anyone wouldn’t know what she looked like.

“Then, if we were to consider who else fits that description...” Claudia murmured.

Noah lowered his eyes. Her attendant and protégé seemed to have guessed Claudia's thoughts. But Claudia smiled without saying anything further.

"Well, then! Finding the origin of the curse is, of course, important, but maybe we can find your cousin too. I can't wait to go visit the third-year classrooms."

"Please be sure to call me when you do. There is a possibility that the strange presence last night really did belong to Sieghart."

Noah had told Claudia that he had felt someone's eyes on him coming from the rooftop last night when he had snuck out of the dorm. Although he had no proof, he believed that it might have been his cousin.

"Also, I'm concerned about your security during class," Noah said. "I hate to ask you again, but are you sure you didn't see anyone suspicious?"

"I'm fine. The first-years are all so adorable, and no one has said anything mean to me."

"Hopefully it stays that way..."

"Perhaps the dining hall is less crowded now. Let's get in line for lunch. We'll be attending our long-awaited magic classes afterward, so we must ensure we're in tip-top shape."

Thus, she cut the conversation off and took Noah's hand as they stepped away from the edge of the fountain and walked toward the dining hall.

I didn't tell Noah a lie. The first-years, having heard that I broke the evaluation crystals, haven't spoken a bad word about me. In fact, they haven't talked to me at all.

She couldn't bring herself to tell him the next part.

And the person who did cause trouble was a third-year boy, not any of the cute first-years in my class.

"Hey! This morning, I went out of my way to tell you to get out of our school, monster. So why are you still here?"

Claudia happily regarded the boy stopping her on her way to the magic classroom for her afternoon lessons. He stood before her, watching her with cold, garnet eyes. His skin was a beautiful dark brown, his hair a soft silver.

He had come up to Claudia just after her first period class that morning while the other first-year students had kept their distance. He had stared her down and asked, “So you’re the monster who broke the evaluation crystals? You can’t control yourself, can you?”

At that, the class fell silent. Claudia paid it no mind, but the other first-years had frozen, and a heavy silence followed.

“Good morning! I’m Claudia! I’m a first-year student, not a monster.”

“Huh? No way. I’ve never heard of someone shattering an evaluation crystal just by pouring magical power into it. You’re either a monster or a liar who broke fake crystals.”

“Ah, you’re wearing a yellow ribbon. You must be a third-year.”

He clicked his tongue. “You’d better listen when I’m speaking to you!”

At the academy, students chose either to wear a tie or a ribbon for their uniforms. Boys tended to choose ties, but this boy was wearing a neatly tied ribbon around his neck.

“We don’t need your type disturbing the order here. Monsters like you and Laretta scare the other students.” The utter contempt on his face was palpable.

Regardless, Claudia smiled warmly.

“Laretta is adorable; she’s no monster. And her magic is amazing!”

“No matter how much magic you have, if you can’t control it, then you can’t use it. Drop out and get out of my sight. You’re causing trouble for everyone.” Then he looked her in the eye. “I speak for everyone. Now, if you finally got it through your skull, go and get a withdrawal form for your father to sign. Bye.”

Claudia hadn’t spoken of this incident at lunch. If she had, things would have gotten terribly messy.

The silver-haired boy interrupted her thoughts. “Hey, are you listening to

me?” When she sighed, he frowned at her, annoyed.

A few other boys were standing a small distance away with frightened expressions. One of them spoke up. “Hey, Cedric, maybe you should just leave it at that. If you get into a fight with her and something happens...”

“So, your name’s Cedric, then?” Claudia asked.

“I told you to listen when I’m speaking. There’s no need for a monster like you to know my name,” Cedric said sullenly, pointing his finger into her chest. “Don’t tell me you’re actually going to the beginner class?”

“Um...yes? I’m excited to learn magic with everyone!”

“I can’t believe it.” He glared at Claudia before clicking his tongue and straightening the collar of his robe. “I see. Wait a moment.”

Curious, Claudia paused and looked at him.

“Here in the academy, the best student in each class is allowed to assist in lower classes. I’m going to ask the professors if I can assist in yours.”

Claudia, of course, knew this, but she feigned surprise. She made her eyes go wide. “You’re going to be my teacher?”

Cedric smirked, plenty smug about her fawning. “Ha. Just so you know, I’m in the—”

“The intermediate class?” Claudia interrupted.

“The advanced class! The second class from the top after the special class!”

The boys behind Cedric stepped up and started speaking one after another.

“There are five classes: special, advanced, pre-advanced, intermediate, and beginner.”

“That’s right. Cedric’s in line to get into the special class next year. He’s the real deal!”

“There are only seven students in the special class. It’s an honor to be selected as one of them.”

“And he talks with Lucas from the special class all the time!”

“H-Hey, guys, she is still a princess, you know? Maybe think a bit more about how you’re speaking to her...”

“I’ve heard that Cedric’s a member of royalty too. It’s not that rare, and one of the academy’s core principles is that no one gets special treatment, right?”

Hearing them say he’s royalty, Cedric turned sharply. “You guys talk too much.”

“S-Sorry, Cedric.”

He whipped back to Claudia, his fiery, garnet eyes filled with disapproval. “You’re just like Laretta. You both came to a place where you don’t belong without caring what problems that would cause.”

“Did you say this to Laretta too?” Claudia challenged.

“Of course I did. And I’ll tell you too. People who can’t control their magic don’t belong here.”

Claudia beamed at him. “Cedric, um, guess what? I want to challenge you to a match.”

Fiolina hummed to herself as she touched the glass of a window of the upper floor hallway of a rarely used school building. From here, she could clearly see the courtyard used by the beginner class.

Usually, she was surrounded by a crowd of fawning classmates, but she was alone now, as most of her friends were in their magic classes.

But she wasn’t the only person who wasn’t in class.

“Laretta isn’t there again,” Fiolina said to herself as she stopped humming.

That wasn’t surprising. Her only sister was afraid of using her magic in front of others. At some point, the teachers had also begun to overlook Laretta’s absences. They preferred to turn a blind eye to that than allow the possibility that she might lose control of her magic again.

Fiolina watched the beginner class below.

“If only I hadn’t been told not to involve myself too much with Laretta...”

She looked toward the dormitories, but then someone spoke to her.

“Fiolina.”

Her heart skipped a beat when she heard that gentle voice.

“Lucas!”

“It’s unlike you to skip class so brazenly,” Lucas said, walking toward her.

To Fiolina, he was an irreplaceable friend. Just talking to him made her heart feel like a garden in bloom. When she thought of Lucas, the songs she was always singing would become ones of love and longing.

“Oh, Lucas,” she said with a pout to hide her embarrassment. “Please don’t tease me. And are you not skipping class too?”

“Only because you weren’t there. I came to get you.”

Her heart fluttered at times like this, when he went out of his way to show he cared for her.

Lucas looked out the window and seemed to guess what was worrying Fiolina. “Your sister didn’t go to class again.”

“Yes. And also...” —Fiolina searched for the girl she had met yesterday—“...it seems Claudia isn’t there either, which is worrisome...”

Claudia was perfect like a doll, beautiful with her silky, milk-tea-colored hair and bright eyes. She sympathized with the attendant who stayed by her side and was so adamant about protecting her.

“Claudia is such a pretty first-year, isn’t she?” she continued.

“Hm? I suppose so. She looks so young and innocent, but there is an air of elegance and grace about her. As one would expect from a real princess.”

Fiolina jumped at Lucas’s offhand remark.

“Fiolina?” he asked, concerned.

After a pause, she replied, “It’s just as you say.” She grasped her right hand in a way that Lucas wouldn’t notice. She forced a grin. “I’d like to get to know her better. Do you think she’d mind?”

“No, I’m sure she’d be pleased. You know, she said that she admired you when I talked to her yesterday.”

“Really? That makes me so happy! Then I should call on her sometime,” she said, beaming. “I’d so like to have her listen to my songs.”

As she was finishing her sentence, Lucas opened his mouth in surprise as something outside the window caught his attention.

“Fiolina, look.”

Once she did as he asked, she saw that there was some commotion among the students of the beginner class upon the arrival of two new students. From here, Fiolina could barely make out who they were other than by the color of their hair.

“Is that Claudia? And the other is...?”

There was a girl with soft brown hair, and she was holding the other student’s hand, as if she were pulling her along. And that student had hair the exact same purple as Fiolina’s.

“I can’t believe it... Is that Laretta?”

Laretta stood shivering where she had been left by her tiny roommate after she had dragged her out of their room.

The rest of the beginner class stood around her, watching. There weren’t many of them, about twenty students in all. Even so, she didn’t recognize most of them, as she rarely attended class.

The rest of the beginner students had moved to a distant corner of the courtyard when they caught sight of her. That didn’t come as a shock to her. That was a normal reaction to someone who had once lost control of their magic.

“Ah, uh. Uh...” Her mouth flapped open and closed silently as she tried to apologize.

She was afraid of their stares.

Holding her hand was Claudia, the first-year who had become her roommate just the day before.

“And that’s why I brought you here,” Claudia warmly told her. Even to Laretta’s jaded eyes, Claudia’s smile was adorable. Not only that—it held an inexplicable power. “I’m going to have a match with Cedric. So, please stand here and cheer me on!”

If one was to try to explain the power in that smile, perhaps they would say it was the ability to persuade others to go along with her plans like this.

After a few seconds, Laretta remembered what was happening and shook her head. Cedric, the third-year who was standing on the other side of the courtyard, eyed them suspiciously. Laretta dropped her gaze to the ground. She remembered what Cedric had said to her when she was a first-year student.

“You’re Laretta?” Cedric’s voice had been cold as he stood before her. “I heard you got a strange reading during your magical evaluation. Something like you have a lot of power, but it could go wild. So, you’re dangerous, right?”

“Um...”

“Guess they put you in the beginner class, but I hope you’ll drop out before you cause an accident. If you have the inclination, that is.”

As she remembered the incident, Laretta couldn’t bring herself to look him in the eye.

“Your presence in the beginner class would be a nuisance.”

A short time after he said that, Laretta had lost control of her magic.

Whenever she saw Cedric, the accusation in his gaze cut through her; he didn’t even have to speak to her. Claudia was making a mistake in asking for her support against him.

She mouthed to Claudia, *“I can’t. I can’t cheer you on. You should stop.”*

“Why?”

“If they see me cheering you on, everyone will be afraid of you too.”

Claudia looked at her as if she had said something strange. “That wouldn’t change my mind!”

“B-But—!”

Claudia squeezed her hand. “I want your support because you’re amazing!”

Lauretta took a deep breath in surprise. She was unable to resist Claudia’s earnest pleas. Her new roommate was staring at her with the same alight eyes as she’d had the previous night while watching Lauretta’s magic.

“Please. I want you to be here with me, okay?”

Ah, uh...

Claudia’s smile was dazzling. Lauretta swallowed her words.

Is it possible...that she knows what Cedric said to me?

As she thought about it, Lauretta realized that there was no way that Cedric, who had gone out of his way to confront her, wouldn’t have said something terrible to Claudia.

Is that why she wants me here? So that she isn’t doing this for herself.

That explained why she had suddenly showed up at the dorm room and dragged Lauretta out to the courtyard.

Is she challenging him for me?

As she tried to figure out what was happening, she hesitantly looked at Claudia, who stared right back at her.

Ah... Lauretta finally acquiesced. She gave Claudia a small nod.

“Thank you!”

Claudia bounced happily, and the hem of her robe bounced with her. Seeing her childlike joy, the other students began to whisper to each other. Although Lauretta had experienced this targeted at herself many times, it always made her uncomfortable.

It’s natural for them to be afraid. They’re not wrong to be scared... So why is Claudia doing this?

For some reason, Claudia, who was in the same situation as Lairetta, didn't mind the fearful glances the other students had for them.

"Cedric, thank you for accepting my challenge!"

Cedric exhaled derisively. "Don't go thinking you have any chance against me just because someone is cheering you on."

"Are you sure? Just having Lairetta here and wanting me to do my best makes me feel like I can do anything!" Claudia pumped her fist above her head. Even Lairetta looked at her in disbelief.

"What nonsense. But if you really believe that..." Cedric smirked, his arms crossed. "I don't mind if she joins you instead of standing on the sidelines."

Lairetta shook her head violently before Claudia could propose anything. Cedric saw that and sneered.

"I guess Lairetta wouldn't be willing to help. I mean, she hasn't been able to show her face in the beginner class even once before now."

"Instead of being mean, how about you let me decide what the challenge should be?" Claudia raised her hand with a suggestion. "You're good with fire magic, aren't you? Can you control it well?"

"Of course I can. Who do you think you're talking to?"

"Then, how about this? Let's play a game of tag with our magic. I win if I can put out your fire magic; you win if you can keep it away from my magic for three minutes. Does that sound good?"

Cedric shrugged his shoulders in exasperation. "I'd really prefer to win in an instant instead of this being a timed challenge, but I guess it's fine if that's what you insist on."

"Yay! Thanks!"

"And just for the record, if anyone is injured, or if there is even the slightest possibility of injury, the game will be stopped immediately and will result in my win. If we don't set that rule now, who knows what you'd try to do with no control over your magic."

Claudia didn't interrupt, but she was displeased with the way he had phrased

that. Laretta, who had lost control of her magic in the past, felt like she had no right to say anything.

“Then how about we start... Professor?” Cedric turned to the quiet—and perhaps a little unreliable—man in charge of the beginner class. He seemed to be intimidated by Cedric’s demeanor, and he began with a bit of trepidation.

“Th-Then with the help of Cedric Phil Hartshorne from the advanced class, we will begin.”

“From the abyss, rise, mine faithful flame! O Burning Hellfire!”

As Cedric chanted his incantation, a gust of wind blew through the courtyard. A mass of flames appeared in the air above and took the form of a bird. It spread its fiery wings and flicked its tail, flames billowing as if it had let out a roar. Laretta cowered from the heat, which could be felt even from a distance. The other students cowered too and huddled together. Everyone watched in awe at the bird of flame that Cedric had created. It began to fly to and fro over the courtyard.

“Ha ha ha!” Cedric bellowed. “How about that?!”

A student screamed in terror. The students were crouching down and holding their hands over their heads. The flaming bird that flew above them was clearly a predator, not some prey to be chased.

“Come now, what’s the matter?! This is the match you wanted, right? Come, try to catch me!”

Ah, ah... Laretta’s heart thumped in her chest. No... I’m scared!

Feeling offensive magic at such close range for the first time in a long time had filled Laretta with terror.

She remembered the time she had lost control of her magic, causing everyone around her to be engulfed in a whirlwind of screams. She hugged herself tightly and watched Claudia from behind.

The girl was looking up at the bird of flame, and she seemed so small and powerless.

Is she afraid too?

It was natural to be afraid of magic.

Lauretta was sure that Claudia was frightened by the flames above her. The girl who had watched her magic with her eyes bright and shining last night was now afraid and searching for help.

My favorite magic. Claudia wasn't afraid of it. She said it was amazing.

Lauretta had wanted her to leave, so she had used that magic with ill intent. She had believed that Claudia would flee when she saw that Lauretta, who had no control, was using magic like that in their room. One of the reasons she liked living by herself was because she didn't think she could withstand living with someone who was constantly afraid of her. But sharing her bed last night with Claudia, who had so appreciated her magic, had been as comfortable as floating in the warm sea.

I have to help her. I have to...

But her body refused to move.

Even as she tried to move her lips, no words would come out.

"Ah..."

She was so disappointed in herself that she felt like crying. Her face scrunched up. In her fear, she was wasting time when the bird of flames was circling Claudia tauntingly.

"What's wrong?!" Cedric yelled at Claudia. "There's only a minute left, and then I win!"

I have to do something...but how? There's nothing I can do. Nothing...

Her lips were drawn tight as she remembered Claudia's words.

"Just having Lauretta here and wanting me to do my best makes me feel like I can do anything!"

Lauretta's head popped back up. She summoned her courage, trying to force the words out.

But at that exact moment, the bird passed by directly above Lauretta, who reflexively ducked and protected her head.

“Only forty seconds left!”

She was afraid, and there was no time. She didn’t know what to say to Claudia.

“Thirty seconds!”

She opened her eyes just enough to get a peek of Claudia’s back.

“Twenty-five... Twenty-four... Twenty-three...”

Lauretta opened her eyes wide in surprise as she realized what was happening: Claudia was waiting for something. Lauretta took a deep breath and squeezed out one word.

“Claudia!!!”

It wasn’t a cheer or any word of encouragement. It was just her name. Even if she had been able to vocalize it, if it wasn’t something helpful, what was the point?

That’s not good enough. I have to...!

She needed to say something else, but she was shaking from fear and the anxiety from having yelled.

But then, Claudia turned back to look at her. Lauretta’s eyes widened.

“Lauretta!” Claudia called out. There was no fear on her face at all. “Thank you! That made me so happy!”

Instead, her face wore a dazzling smile. The same one she had worn when she had seen Lauretta’s favorite magic.

“Here I go.” Claudia took a deep breath and uttered a clumsy spell. “*Come, I call upon thee, Mr. Fish. O, be strong and cool, Mr. Fish.*”

“Ha ha ha! What is that? A nursery rhyme?”

Claudia remained cool in the face of Cedric’s goading laughter.

“*Come forth to me with eyes so cute and mouth so big. With a mighty tail that swims so swift!*”

Cedric began counting again. “Ten seconds remaining! Nine, eight, seven...”

Suddenly his voice cut off. The students other than him, including Laretta and the professor, were all gaping as they looked above his head.

It can't be...

This time it wasn't just Laretta who was unable to speak. Everyone in the courtyard stared in shock at the large, floating fish, molded out of water.



Claudia smiled and pointed at the bird of flame that stretched its arms as if to try and protect Cedric. She chanted the last part of her incantation.

“Feast.”

The fish swallowed the flaming bird, which disappeared with a sizzle reminiscent of a last, desperate cry. And then the fish disappeared like a mirage.

“Wha—?!” Cedric stood trembling.

Claudia turned to Laretta and jumped up and down with her hands in the air.

“I came from behind with the win! It’s all thanks to you, Laretta!”

After a few seconds of silence, those around the courtyard started to make a commotion as they realized what had just happened.

Well, that’s that.

Claudia calmly surveyed the situation as she watched Cedric, who stood shocked while the others sorted out what had happened.

Now that I have reached a certain understanding with Cedric, I no longer need be concerned with what would happen were Noah to see his attempt to intimidate me.

Cedric was staring at Claudia in disbelief. He must have understood by now Claudia’s desire to study magic in the beginner’s class.

“Thank you for the match, Cedric!” she called out, beaming at him.

“Ah...” He was aghast.

She turned her attention away from him and to another person.

It seems my actions have affected Laretta as well. She appeared to have startled herself when she called out to me.

Laretta had collapsed to her knees, her cheeks flushed, with her hands over

her mouth.

Today's events had been a big step in the right direction.

Claudia had been watching Lauretta for a day now and had determined that Lauretta feared both herself and her magic. She was even hesitant to use her voice.

As she should be.

Claudia examined her own hands.

Her voice carries with it a powerful magic.

She moved her fingers, checking the feeling there.

She spoke only my name, yet even that was enough to trigger a spell that enhanced my abilities.

Claudia had intended her water magic to create a much smaller fish, yet it was ten times the size.

Though it was unintentional, I fear I might have startled Cedric.

Claudia once again looked toward him, and his ears flushed red.

He flinched. "Wh-What are you staring at?!"

His legs are shaking. I'd best leave him alone for now.

Instead, she walked over to Lauretta and grabbed her hand, helping the girl stand up. "Thank you for casting that enhancement spell on me!"

"Huh...?"

Claudia speculated that Lauretta was unaware she'd even cast a spell. In that case, she would reveal the truth. She made sure to speak loudly enough that the students and teacher would all hear her.

"It was thanks to your magic that I was able to make such a big fish! Your enhancement magic is amazing!" She faced the rest of the class. "Everyone, let's clap for Lauretta!"

"Enhancement...magic?"

Smiling, Claudia looked Lauretta in the eyes and squeezed her hand.

“See, your magic strengthens those around you.”

Lauretta’s eyes opened wide, as if she was seeing something she’d never seen before.

Even without an incantation, her words become a potent magic when she pours her emotions into it—likely the very reason she lost control of her powers in the first place.

Perhaps...that would be enough to even lure ships astray...

Lauretta dropped Claudia’s hand and stared at the ground in embarrassment. Although she often kept her head down, this time the mood held a different feeling. Lauretta brought a finger to her lips, the same lips that had cast the enhancement spell on Claudia, and blinked repeatedly. Lauretta’s heart was beating so hard that Claudia could practically hear it.

I must continue the investigation. However... Taking a step away from Lauretta, Claudia’s legs began to give out. *I used too much...*

Lauretta’s enhancement magic had drawn more power than Claudia had intended. She rubbed her eyes, suddenly consumed by drowsiness.

If I fall over here, I’ll cause Lauretta trouble. I need to...get to a safe place...

Lauretta eyed Claudia in confusion, noticing that something was wrong.

If I’m going to collapse...I should find a place where I can do so alone...

The fuzziness in her head seemed to be spreading. She was struggling to stay afloat in rough waters.

Claudia managed to say one last thing before she collapsed. “Noah...”

The world seemed to be tilting...but then she felt strong, familiar arms enveloping her.

“Princess.”

Claudia blinked softly at the sound of his voice.

She looked up in a daze to find Noah’s obsidian eyes staring into hers. She saw his worried expression and smiled.

“You really will come whenever I call for you.”

“Always. I am your servant, after all.”

She reached up and patted him on the head. Noah didn’t resist. He swept her off her feet and turned to the professor.

“Professor, it seems that Her Highness isn’t feeling well, so she’ll be leaving class early.”

The professor stood in place, blinking. “Huh? Oh, of course...”

Next, Noah turned to Cedric and said in a cold tone, “And you, sir—I will be speaking with you later.”

Cedric’s breath caught. He looked frightened. Claudia felt sorry for him, but she was too sleepy to say anything. She made a small noise. Safe in Noah’s arms, she was struggling to stay awake, but she did manage to hear a familiar voice from behind them.

“Noah, does that mean you won’t be attending class?”

“My apologies, Lucas. I’ll be taking Her Highness to the infirmary.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll tell the professor when I get back.”

“I’m worried about her... Please let us know any way we can help, Noah,” another person said.

Claudia was falling in and out of sleep, but she felt Noah turn to the previous speaker. “Thank you for your concern, Fiolina.”

And then, for the first time in a long time, Claudia fell into a peaceful sleep in Noah’s arms.

Chapter 3

“I apologize for the wait. For you, my lady,” said Noah, setting a plate on the table in front of Claudia. “It is a simple dish, but I hope that it suits your taste.”

“Oh! You made me a sandwich!” Claudia excitedly clapped her hands.

It was late at night, and she was sitting at a table in the empty dining hall. On the plate in front of her was a small sandwich cut into triangles. Claudia instructed Noah to sit across from her. Once he did, she swiftly picked up a slice and bit into it.

It was a chicken sandwich with cheese and a healthy dollop of a sweet yet savory sauce. It appeared that Noah hadn’t just thrown something together, but instead he had taken his time to make it just how Claudia liked it.

“I do like the food they usually serve here, but nothing beats the food you make. Thank you, Noah.”

“Your words are more than I deserve. If I were able, I would have liked to have prepared you a better meal.”

“I’m just grateful that they let a student use the kitchen so late at night. Here, you eat too.” She held out her sandwich toward his mouth. “Say, ‘ahh...’”

“Your Highness...” Noah protested, embarrassed.

“Don’t hold back. You must be hungry. You’re a growing boy, so you need to eat properly.”

Flustered, Noah averted his gaze away from Claudia. “There are more important things to worry about. I want to discuss what happened earlier.”

Well, well. It appears he’s attempting to change the subject. Claudia brought the sandwich back to her mouth and took another bite.

“At its base, magic is created when the caster constructs a magical formula in their mind and then pours magical energy into it like fuel,” Noah began. “Then, they chant words to activate it. The incantation they use is composed of words

related to the magic that's being cast, correct?"

"That's right. And that's why the more skilled a magician is, the less they need to chant. They can trigger their spells more quickly. However, except for those who don't need to chant at all, no matter how skilled you are, the incantation must be something related to the spell itself to trigger it."

"And yet, Lauretta was able to activate her magic just by saying your name," Noah said, deep in thought.

Claudia had explained how she had exhausted her magical energy to Noah when she had woken up.

"While you were sleeping, I took the liberty of asking Lauretta about what had happened," Noah continued. "It was difficult to get her to say anything, but from what little she did, I believe she's unaware of how her own magic works."

"As I expected. I was thinking that I would go and ask Fiolina what she knows about it..."

"Fiolina didn't seem surprised by it," Noah cut in.

"I should've known you'd already be a step ahead," Claudia said, impressed. Once he'd ensured her safety, her precious servant had been continuing his investigation of the curse as she slept in the infirmary.

"I knew that staying by your side would have been selfish of me, so I decided to make myself useful to you." Noah's conviction and his loyalty were always reassuring.

"Thank you. Still, that wouldn't have been selfish of you—I truly enjoy having you by my side." A warm smile spread across her face. "Do stay with me when you don't have other pressing matters to attend to."

"I intend to do so, even without an order from you." His eyes locked with hers.

Claudia giggled before she took another small bite of her sandwich. "Why did Fiolina and Lucas come with you to the beginner's class?"

"They didn't. Fiolina wasn't in class at all."

Claudia fixed a quizzical expression upon Noah, so he continued. "Fiolina

hadn't arrived at the lecture hall when the special class started, so Lucas went to look for her. I began to head to the beginner's class when I saw your fish over the courtyard, but I didn't run into them on the way there."

"Then you arrived before they did?"

"No, they were already there."

The courtyard where the beginner's class took place was well out of the way from where the eighth-year students typically had their classes. Claudia looked down at her plate and thought for a moment.

"Then Fiolina must have been watching us from somewhere."

"And not just because her sister came to class, if I had to guess."

"She had no way of knowing that Lauretta would be there. It's likely that she was watching the courtyard before I brought her sister there."

"That means..." Noah murmured with a frown, "that she was watching for *you*." Footsteps slowly approached the dining hall as he'd spoken, and he'd kept his voice quiet.

"What's this? Looks like you're doing fine, after all."

"Oh!" Claudia slipped back into her role and excitedly pointed at the dining hall entrance. "Cedric!"

"Hmph." Cedric walked toward them with the air of a child fulfilling an annoying task.

Noah stood up quietly and walked over to intercept him. "Do you have some business with Her Highness?"

Cedric flinched at that, but then he examined Noah closely.

"Black hair, black eyes... You must be the servant they let into the special class."

"State your business, and I will pass it along to Her Highness later."

Noah was standing politely and being courteous to Cedric. Yet, the atmosphere around Noah was still intimidating.

Cedric, as a third-year student, is likely twelve or thirteen years of age—one

year younger than Noah.

That brought to Claudia's mind the other person she wished to find here in the academy.

According to his friend, Cedric possesses royal blood—and he is quite talented with magic.

He was also a member of the advanced class. Claudia knew that Noah, a fourth-year student, was the youngest member of the special class, which meant that the most skilled third-year students would be in the advanced class.

Cedric bears little resemblance to Noah...yet the possibility remains. He may well be using an assumed name.

"Noah... Is that your real name?" Cedric asked, not bothering to hide his wariness of Noah.

Claudia once again found herself questioning why Cedric was so concerned.

He harbors doubts about Noah's true identity. But what could be his reasoning for such suspicion?

"Noah's the only true name that I have," he answered without hesitation, which was enough to convince Cedric to back off.

"I'm sorry for the rude questions," Cedric said before turning his garnet eyes to a smiling Claudia. "But the actual reason I came was to..."

"Cedric, come look at this! Noah made it for me!" Claudia interrupted, holding her sandwich in the air for him to see. "I was sooo hungry," she said, ramping up her acting, "because I slept all day in the infirmary!"

"Do you feel better after resting?"

"Yeah! I couldn't sleep last night because I was so excited about my first day of school, so when our match ended, I felt so happy and got sleepy!" Claudia said and took a big, rather not princess-like bite of her sandwich.

"So, you're saying that you collapsed because you didn't get enough sleep last night?" Cedric asked, uncomfortable.

"I didn't collapse! I fell asleep!" Claudia would allow no ifs, ands, or buts.

Cedric looked at her in disbelief before letting out a sigh of relief.

“I see... I honestly thought that you had collapsed because of our match. I was worried that your magic had caused you to feel sick.”

That’s not far from the truth. He possesses the ability to perceive and assess the effects of magic on the body.

He probably felt like he was at fault and came to see how she was doing.

“And, uh, if there’s anything else that you might need, then...” Cedric had still not ceased to appear uncomfortable.

Noah cut him off there.

“If there’s anything she needs, I will see to it. There’s no need for you to trouble yourself,” he said coldly.

“I-Isn’t that a bit too much for you to do alone? I heard that you not only took care of her while she slept but also went around delivering messages and checking in with people.”

“That’s all a part of my duty. First of all,” Noah said with an edge to his voice. He narrowed his eyes and continued. “If you’re feeling guilty, I think it would be best if you put that into words first, instead of these roundabout promises of help.”

Cedric floundered for a moment, as he seemed to be at a loss for words.

Claudia, who had been eating her sandwich the whole time, smiled when Cedric looked at her. That seemed to help Cedric make up his mind.

“I’m sorry.” He lowered his head in apology. “I still haven’t changed my mind about your presence here in the academy, but I think I should have chosen my words more carefully.”

Claudia brought her index finger to her mouth as if in thought—and then laughed.

“I’m not gonna forgive you, even if you say sorry,” she said innocently.

Cedric jerked up to look at her, and Claudia turned away from him.

“I mean, I wasn’t the only one you were mean to, was I? You said the same

things to Lairetta."

"But that's...!"

"I won't forgive you until you apologize to her too."

Claudia might have been being mean and childish, but Noah was in complete agreement with her on this. Flustered, Cedric glanced back and forth between them.

"To Lairetta? But..."

"Let me ask you something, Cedric. Do you not like Lairetta and I?"

"I-It's not like that! You don't understand what Lairetta did!"

That piqued Claudia's interest. Sensing this, Noah asked in her stead, "Could you tell us more?"

Cedric tried to compose himself and cleared his throat. "I suppose I must, if no one's told you," he said, uncomfortable.

His words have more thorns when he speaks to Noah.

Claudia hid her thoughts as she watched Cedric.

"On the day of the entrance ceremony for first-year students, Lairetta arrived at the academy," Cedric began, "but from the beginning, everyone was wary of her. There was a rumor going around that she had lost control of her magic once when she was young."

"Hm?" Curious, Claudia tilted her head. "That was the first time anyone had met Lairetta, right? So how did a rumor like that get started?"

"It was secondhand knowledge, of course." Cedric sighed. "Her older sister, Fiolina, had told people about the incident."

Noah furrowed his brow slightly. Cedric glanced at him but continued as if he hadn't noticed.

"Fiolina had been worried about Lairetta. She was afraid that having to adjust to life here might make her sister unstable again."

"Fiolina is *such* a caring sister!" Claudia exclaimed.

“She only told her best friends about her worries. They wanted to help her, so they went around the academy asking for everyone’s help to make sure that Laretta’s first days at the school went as smoothly as possible.”

And that would have achieved precisely the opposite of the intended effect.

“Because of that, everyone knew that Laretta was prone to magical outbursts before she even came here,” Cedric continued, proving Claudia’s thoughts correct. “And so she was isolated here at the academy.”

“Then why didn’t Fiolina spend time with her? They’re sisters.”

“If she had, I think she would have ended up hurting Laretta even more. They’re complete opposites. Their situations are too different.” Then he muttered, “It was best for Laretta if Fiolina stayed away.”

He sighed and then continued, “But I’m sure she couldn’t bear to see her sister being isolated like that. So, one night, Fiolina visited her before lights out...and a short time later, Laretta lost control of her magic.”

“What happened?” Claudia asked.

“The barrier...” Cedric frowned as he remembered the incident. “The barrier that the legendary witch constructed to protect the academy from the surrounding waters broke.”

Claudia blinked in surprise. “The barrier broke?”

“Seawater poured in near the girls’ dorm. The girls started to panic. We could hear the screams even from the boys’ dorm.”

Claudia didn’t need to hear the details to be able to imagine the chaos that would have caused. The barrier was a strong ward that kept in the air needed for breathing and the water out. That’s what allowed people to live here. If it broke, causing water to come rushing in, that would only mean death.

“The hole was quickly sealed. Adelheid had created a fail-safe that allowed the barrier to repair itself. No one was hurt, but Fiolina still blamed herself for such an emergency. Since then, she’s kept away and distanced herself from Laretta,” Cedric said, his voice heavy. He spread his arms. “Do you understand now? There’s a reason that everyone is afraid of her. The idea that ‘everyone

should get along' is something that only exists when everyone's safety is guaranteed!"

He continued, frowning. "Unless you're put into the right environment, you and Laretta are dangerous to others. The beginner's class should only be for students who can only use less powerful magic, not for those who can't control more powerful magic."

Claudia suddenly noticed something in Cedric's tone.

"Having someone with such powers outside what you normally see at an academy designed to educate normal magicians is a mistake in and of itself. She should drop out immediately and learn in an environment that matches her abilities."

"Cedric."

"It's a waste otherwise for both sides. Students who have power shouldn't be treated as failures, and other students shouldn't have to feel intimidated by a peer who's far beyond them," Cedric continued, his words growing even more disdainful. "And Laretta, aside from her magic issues, is good at school. She's only a second-year student, yet she easily solves problems meant for eighth-years. She clearly belongs somewhere her talents can be properly valued."

"Laretta *is* amazing! But, Cedric..." Claudia blinked in slight surprise. "You're not just trying to kick us out, are you? You want us to find a place where we truly belong."

"Naturally. Both you and Laretta may be dangerous elements here within the academy, but you could each become heroes if you were in the appropriate environment."

My, my.

Claudia had sensed that Cedric hadn't meant to bully them. Yet, it was still difficult to pinpoint exactly what he wanted to portray.

As he himself admits, the issue lies in the way he chooses to express himself.

Noah also looked on in disbelief. However, just because she now knew that Cedric had good intentions didn't mean she would take it easy on him.

“Still, you hurt my feelings, I thought you just wanted to get rid of me,” she said, smiling innocently as she continued. “I bet you scared Laretta too. Even if you had kind intentions, that doesn’t excuse your actions. When someone says hurtful things to you, all you feel is pain, and nothing else matters.”

Cedric shifted back and forth. “But I didn’t mean...!”

“Even if you had good intentions, the way you show that matters. Don’t you agree, Noah?”

Noah closed his eyes and nodded quietly. “It’s as you say.”

Cedric frowned. He still had reservations about Noah.

Claudia smiled sweetly once more at the older boy in front of her. “You need to apologize properly. Not to me, but to Laretta!”

Cedric turned his gaze to the floor.

“Otherwise, I won’t forgive you. I’m a ‘monster,’ you know, so I’ll haunt you. Rawr!” She spread her arms in a mock-threatening pose, to which Cedric winced slightly.



“Ugh...”

He was clearly remembering calling Claudia a monster.

He's still a child, so I'm not truly mad at him. However, if I overlook this, Noah may take offense.

Noah continued to stare at Cedric, his gaze as icy as ever. Cedric seemed to sense it too, as he carefully avoided looking his way.

“Fine... I'll apologize to Laretta first thing tomorrow.”

“Remember that Laretta is probably scared of you!”

“I'll be nice, I swear! I'll send her a letter of apology first and then...” Cedric muttered to himself. His attempt to show goodwill appeared earnest, at least.

Claudia smiled slightly as she watched him. *Cedric, are you actually...?*

“Cedric, it's quite late. Is it not time for you to return to your room?”

At Noah's prompt, Cedric's brow furrowed slightly. “Y-You don't need to tell me. I'll be going now.”

“I apologize if I overstepped. Good night.”

“Good night!” Claudia called out cheerfully, waving her hand as Cedric walked toward the door. He paused briefly, casting a final look back—not at Claudia, but at Noah. For a moment, he stared at Noah, the very person he'd avoided looking at the entire conversation.

“Hmph.”

Then Cedric whipped around and resumed walking.

As his footsteps faded into the distance, Claudia turned to Noah, a question on her mind.

“Have you seen anyone who might be your cousin, Noah?” Claudia asked, causing Noah to raise his head.

Claudia had left a few sandwich triangles on the plate between them because she knew that Noah wouldn't eat until she had. Her eyes narrowed slightly in a

happy expression as she stared up at him.

“I have a few leads, but that’s it,” Noah replied, but he already knew the truth.

Most likely, she already knows which student matches Sieghart’s description, he thought.

Noah looked away from her, his eyes on the table as he pushed his chair back to rest under it. “I’ll keep looking into it as I investigate the curse.”

Claudia giggled. “You’re such a good boy. I half expected you to focus on the curse entirely.”

“I know that you’re worried about it. I wouldn’t dare not take that seriously.”

Once he had tidied up, he picked up the plate from the table. Infusing it with magic, the plate became weightless and vanished with a puff.

Besides, the investigation into the curse itself is...

“Let us retire to our rooms for the night, Noah.”

So she said, but he knew the reason she wanted to return wasn’t likely for rest.

“You plan to speak with Lairetta?”

“Yes, and she might have been worrying about me this whole time, considering I lost consciousness so suddenly.”

She headed toward the exit of the dining hall but stopped and glanced over her shoulder with a mischievous smile.

“Besides, if I don’t rest, it doesn’t look like you’ll eat anything at all,” she said.

Noah fell silent, and Claudia seemed pleased with herself, having guessed his intentions.

“Make sure you eat that sandwich you put away. It was delicious, so I’ll expect you to make it again.”

“Yes...as you wish.”

But there was something that Claudia hadn't guessed: Even if Noah did return to the boys' dorm now, rest was unlikely.

"Hey, Princess Claudia's attendant is back!"

Just as he had expected, chaos had broken out as soon as he returned to the dorm. The time for lights out was approaching. The boys who had kept their distance from Claudia just that morning immediately surrounded Noah, calling out to him as he tried to make his way through the hallway.

"Come on, could you please introduce me to Her Highness? I would like to ask her to marry me! I got permission from my father through magical mail!"

"I'd like to propose as well!" another boy shouted. "I found out that Princess Claudia has an impressive record in magical research from Avianoia—why didn't you tell us sooner?!"

"The magic she did in today's class was incredible! That kind of magic..." another said. "I must bring her into my family, even if she's a bit unstable... Does she like flowers? If I were to get her a gift, would you take it to her?"

"No, I will be the one to marry her! Could you imagine a child that would inherit our magic? They'd be a prodigy!"

Noah had listened in increasingly irritated silence. He looked at the boys desperately pleading to him with a cool gaze. Dozens surrounded him, all sons of royalty or high-ranking noble families. Seeing Claudia's magic firsthand must have finally opened their eyes to her true power. While it was satisfying to see his master receiving the recognition she deserved, the talk of marriage proposals was another matter entirely.

Put your personal feelings aside. Respond appropriately and in accordance with custom, as a loyal servant to Her Highness.

He kept this firmly in mind as he began speaking. "Unfortunately, I, being merely her attendant, do not possess the authority for such matters. Should you wish to propose to Her Highness, please follow the proper diplomatic procedures."

“We don’t have time for all that bureaucratic nonsense! Princess Claudia is right here in the academy. Let me speak with her directly—”

“He’s right!” another boy butted in. “I’ve heard that her father, the king of Avianoia, rarely consents to meetings concerning marriage prospects!”

The first boy nodded in agreement. “If formal arrangements are difficult, then we’d better get close to her first. If she already fancies someone, then her father might not object as strongly.”

Noah’s glare was so sharp that it caused the boy to blanch and take a step back out of fear. However, he didn’t have the time to deal with each boy individually. There were too many of them trying to flock to the princess.

But precisely at that moment, a voice called down from the stairs above. “Hey now, what’s with all this noise?”

They found Lucas leaning over the railing.

One of the boys answered, “Lucas, well, this is...”

“I thought I heard something about becoming engaged with Claudia and marriage prospects. Surely, you lot aren’t cornering her attendant and trying to force him to act as a go-between, are you?”

“No, we’d never...!”

The boys surrounding Noah quickly took a small step back. Lucas had accurately guessed what was going on, and he walked toward Noah.

“All of you outrank Noah. He can’t dismiss you outright as he risks disgracing his master...”

“Oh...”

“So...surely, I must be mistaken about what’s going on here, because the lot of you wouldn’t do anything so underhanded, right?”

Although his tone was calm, Lucas’s demeanor left no room for argument. Placing a reassuring hand on Noah’s shoulder, he asked quietly, “Are you all right, Noah? Unfortunately, I don’t think my interference will put an end to this kind of trouble.”



“Thank you for your consideration, but please don’t worry. I should be able to handle this myself.”

“Oh?” Lucas chuckled, intrigued. Noah let out a small sigh and looked around calmly.

“I have no right to involve myself in the formal marriage proposals that Her Highness may receive.”

He, of course, understood that. Whether Claudia desired a marriage or was forced to comply with an arranged meeting by her father, Noah had no grounds to intervene.

“However, your attempts to bypass traditional etiquette and use me, a mere servant, as a go-between can only be interpreted as a disrespectful and unworthy proposal to Her Highness.”

Something changed in the atmosphere then. Noah, his obsidian eyes glinting, looked around at each boy who surrounded him. Lucas’s expression widened in surprise.

“Her Highness enjoys observing displays of magic, swordsmanship, and martial arts.”

These were also the very disciplines Claudia had Noah trained in as her disciple.

“I extend an invitation to each of you. If any of you defeat me in a match, I will personally introduce you to Her Highness.”

Noah narrowed his eyes, and the boys around him turned pale.

It was the afternoon of the tenth day since Claudia had entered the academy. Her morning classes had finished without incident, and the day’s magic class had been canceled to give the students a break.

Her classmates were gradually trickling out of the classroom after homeroom. They were free to spend the afternoon as they pleased. Some went to play outside, while others headed to the library or the recreation room.

Claudia laid her head on the railing of her classroom window as she watched the students leave the school building.

Everything is so peaceful...

She let out a small yawn and looked up at the barrier that enveloped the academy. Far above her, a ray chased a group of small fish.

It's already been ten days. I've started to understand the way things work here in the academy, and people have begun acclimating to my presence.

Over these ten days, Claudia had befriended Laretta. They were now attending their magic classes together. While Laretta still didn't actively participate in the class, it was a big step forward for the girl.

Laretta's made clear progress. The fact that she's been using her actual voice more to talk to me is proof of that. And Cedric wrote her a letter of apology.

In it, he had expressed his desire to apologize to her in person. After much deliberation, Laretta had written a short reply of "We can when I'm no longer afraid of you." She added to the end, "I, too, want to apologize once more for frightening everyone during my outburst."

And we've been secretly practicing magic in our room at night. We have our fish chase each other around the room. It's perfect for practicing her control.

Claudia created a small magical fish with her fingertip as she remembered their private lessons. It gently poked the tip of her nose before floating away and vanishing.

The next thing I need to investigate is the eighth-year...

"Wow! Look, look!"

She turned around as a voice from the hallway cut her off mid-thought.

In front of the classroom, a group of first-year students from another class had taken one another's hands and were talking excitedly.

"Oh! It's Fiolina! Why is she here?"

"What I would give to speak with her, even just once... Pleeese!"

As the girls scurried away, Claudia peeked out curiously into the hallway.

There, she saw Fiolina walking down the hallway, surrounded by about ten students who were chatting and laughing around her.

“And so, the gardening club is planning to try out magic that will make flowers bloom in the courtyard! We’d love for you to come see it, Fiolina!” said one of the students following her.

Fiolina chortled pleasantly. “That sounds wonderful. I’ll be sure to go see them when they’re blooming.”

Another student spoke up. “Our equestrian club is doing great too! As third-years, we’re still just caring for the horses, but they’ve really warmed up to us! You should come with me the day I’m on feeding duty!”

“Oh my, you’ll let me help you feed the horses? That sounds delightful, though I might be a little scared...”

“There’s nothing to be scared of! I’ll protect you!” replied the boy.

“That’s most reassuring. Maybe I’ll drop by sometime, as long as I’m not intruding.”

Students ranging from first-years to third-years trailed Fiolina with sparkling eyes. They reminded Claudia of children enamored with a princess from a fairy tale.

“Please do! If you come, even the horses would be—”

“Oh!” Fiolina said as her eyes met Claudia’s. “Claudia!” she called out cheerfully.

Claudia quickly put on a bright smile and darted down the hallway toward her. “Fiolina!”

Some of the surrounding students frowned slightly at her.

“Why does a first-year from the beginner class know Fiolina...?”

“But isn’t that girl a princess?”

“Hmph, I’m the thirteenth prince of the Kingdom of Frestier! Everyone is equal at this academy. If you think being royalty will automatically get you in Fiolina’s good graces, you’re gravely mistaken.”

As the surrounding students whispered to one another, Fiolina pulled Claudia into a warm embrace. “I’ve been wanting to see you.”

The students around them widened their eyes in astonishment.

“Wha—? But Fiolina never gives anyone special treatment like this!”

“Did she just hug that first-year?!”

The hallway buzzed with murmurs of disbelief as Fiolina gently released Claudia and gazed down upon her. She smelled of roses, which Claudia identified as coming from some classy perfume.

“I’ve been wanting to speak with you, Claudia, but it’s been difficult to find the opportunity. And so, I decided to come see you today.”

Claudia giggled. “That makes me so happy! You’re always surrounded by lots of people, so I was worried about whether it was okay to talk to you.”

“You can always come to me. After all, I’ve so been looking forward to spending time with you.”

“What’s going on? How does she know Fiolina?” The students were all in a clamor.

It’s no wonder they’re confused, thought Claudia as she maintained her cheerful expression. *I don’t understand this either. I can’t think of any reason for her to give me special treatment.*

“Are you getting along with Laretta? I’m so grateful that you’re with her now.” Fiolina took Claudia’s hands in hers and squeezed them gently, almost like she was holding something precious. “Laretta is dear to me. I’m always so worried about her, but I’ve been told it’s better if I stay away,” she said softly, so the other children couldn’t hear her.

Claudia smiled and whispered in reply, “We’ve become friends! Just yesterday, we had a pajama party together. We even snuck in some cookies and marshmallows, but don’t tell any teachers.”

“Now that sounds like so much fun, doesn’t it? How lovely,” Fiolina said with a small laugh, pulling something from within her uniform robe. “I wanted to give this invitation to you.”

“An invitation?”

She handed Claudia a small card. “I want to become better friends with you, so please do come and visit, won’t you?”

With that, Fiolina stood up, brushed her purple hair back with her fingers, and tucked the side strands behind her ears.

“Now, I must head to choir rehearsal. I hope to see you again soon.” Everything about her radiated warmth.

“Me too! Goodbye, Fiolina!” Claudia waved goodbye, and Fiolina smiled happily and waved back.

“Oh! Wait, Fiolina! Can I come with you to watch the rehearsal?” called one of the boys.

“Me too!”

“My, my.” Fiolina chuckled. “Well then, shall we all go together?”

The students that had gathered around Fiolina now followed her as she left.

Once Claudia walked back into the classroom, she opened the card. The writing on the invitation was pretty and gave a refined impression of the writer.

As Claudia read what was written there, a voice called out to her from outside the window she was standing next to.

“Hey, Claudia!”

Claudia walked over to the window and found Lucas standing directly below. She waved at him.

“Lucas, hello!”

He had taken off his robe in the afternoon heat, revealing a white shirt with a loosened tie. It seemed that he had been playing a game with his friends and was now holding a ball in one of his hands.

“And what is the Princess of Avianoia doing standing around after school?”

“Well, Fiolina was just here! She came to see me!”

“Oh? She did?” A soft smile spread across his face. “She might not show it,

but she can get pretty lonely.”

If any other girls had seen the expression he had just made, they perhaps would’ve been inclined to faint.

“I’m surprised you’re alone, though, Claudia,” he said, changing the subject. “Where’s your knight in shining armor?”

“I’m sure Noah’ll be here any minute! Today is his turn for cleaning duty, so I’m waiting for him to finish.”

“That’s good to hear. These three saw you alone by the window and were worried that something had happened,” he said gesturing toward three boys standing near him. Judging from the color of their ribbons, they were third-year students.

“You hear that? She says she’s okay. Now, you don’t have to be worried.”

“Th-Thanks, Lucas. That’s a relief!” one of them said, embarrassed.

Lucas really seems to be well-liked by the younger students here. Not that the eighth-years don’t respect him, but younger students seem to be drawn to him.

“If that’s the case, if you’re feeling bored, why not come join us, Princess Claudia?” one of the other boys asked.

Thanks to Lucas’s influence, the younger students are no longer bullying me. There are still some whispers behind my back, but they’re nothing too cruel. On the other hand, ever since the boys learned of my magical ability, the blatant attempts to get my attention have increased. That part—

Much to her surprise, Claudia was suddenly swept off of her feet, but this wasn’t due to any magic. Instead, she found herself staring up at Noah, who now held her in his strong arms.

“My apologies for keeping you waiting, Your Highness.”

“Noah!” Claudia called out brightly.

Contrary to Claudia’s reaction, the third-years below let out a small screech and turned pale at the sight of Noah. Resting her hand on Noah’s shoulder, Claudia craned her neck to look down at them.

“Oh, they left.”

“I’m afraid that they must have been overcome by emotion when they were able to exchange greetings with you,” Noah said.

They clearly ran off, terrified of Noah, but let’s just leave it at that.

She did not wish to interfere with how Noah chose to protect her. It was best to leave that up to him.

Still cradled in Noah’s arms, Claudia stared into those deep, dark eyes of his. “Noah, let’s do our homework together! Once we finish, we’ll explore the academy and have some fun!”

“Yes, Your Highness. Then, I’ll carry you to the library.”

“You can let me down!” She hopped from his arms. She made sure that she put on a show of being childish, since Lucas was still listening to them. She waved out the window to him. “See you later, Lucas!”

“Yeah! And you too, Noah. Come visit the eighth-years’ floor again sometime!”

“Thank you, I will.”

After parting from Lucas, they walked through the hallway together.

“I’m surprised. Do you go to the eighth-years often when you’re at the dormitory?” Claudia asked Noah.

“Not often. Since the eighth-years are preparing for graduation next year, they often talk about how they’re going to use their magic in the future. I listen in on those conversations to gather information.”

“Oh my. I suppose that’s the thing they call ‘career counseling,’ is it not?”

It was a foreign term to Claudia, so it had a fresh and intriguing sound to it.

“I suppose you could call it that. The students here come from different countries and have a wide variety of circumstances. Some hail from wealthy nations, others from lands with few natural resources, and some even come from countries that suffer from constant warfare. There are students who rose from commoner status to nobility through sheer excellence, as well as those

destined to become king by right of birth.”

“Oh? It must be intriguing to listen to such diverse perspectives,” Claudia said with a smile.

Noah nodded earnestly. “Even the most trivial conversations in that dormitory might one day change the world. Maybe that was the goal of gathering children from various nations here and establishing a rule that all be treated equally regardless of status...” Noah asked with a glance toward Claudia.

She tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear and laughed softly. “Any gathering of children, no matter how trifling, has the potential to change the world,” she said to Noah’s surprise. “It doesn’t matter if you bring together children from the same background or from different ones; something new is bound to emerge. With that in mind, I wanted to observe what would happen if I brought together children from across the world.”

Claudia was so happy that she had been able to bring Noah, the child she cherished most, to be a part of this environment.

Opening the library door, she murmured, “Perhaps it’s even a bit like a song.”

“A song, Princess?”

“When multiple people sing the same part in unison, it becomes richer and more beautiful. And when they sing different parts in harmony, that, too, is beautiful.”

Stepping into the library, they found their conversation was the only thing breaking the silence.

The academy had two libraries. One was always bustling, as students had no contact with the outside world and entertained themselves through reading. The other was filled with tomes of an academic nature and reference materials. Students rarely visited the latter outside of school hours, apart from exam periods.

This second library was the one that Noah and Claudia had come to. Even so, Claudia erected a bubble of silence as Noah spread his notebooks on the table.

“I’ve finished gathering information about the ghost from the rumors. I believe I’ve collected everything in line with your instructions.”

“Thank you. You’ve done an excellent job as usual,” Claudia said as she read over the notes. “This is precisely what I was hoping to find.”

The first notebook contained dates of reported sightings of the so-called ghost. The second notebook also listed a set of dates for another matter.

“They’re a perfect match.”

Noah furrowed his defined eyebrows. “Yes. The days that the ghost—that is, the mysterious student no one at the academy has ever seen before—appeared are the same days that the boats disappeared. In other words, the same days that the curse was triggered.”

Claudia rested her chin in her hands and stared at the notebooks. “The academy’s ghost appeared when the curse took the ships...”

Noah’s handwriting was unrefined but not sloppy, making his notes easy to read. As she looked them over, Claudia mentally organized the sequence of events. “The first ship disappeared a little over a year ago. April 6th of last year, to be exact.”

Noah then voiced the same thought Claudia had been considering. “That would be shortly after the current second-years enrolled at this academy.”

Claudia extended her right hand in front of her and drew figures in the air with her finger. Glowing letters appeared as she began to write the dates in question, each occurring at roughly thirty-day intervals.

“Noah, do you know what these dates are?”

“April 6th of last year. May 6th. June 5th, July 5th...”

As Noah read the dates aloud, he seemed to realize something. “They all fall on days with a full moon. But that would mean...”

“Precisely. The days concerning these ships and the ghost all coincide with the full moon.”

Claudia dispelled her magic, causing the glowing numbers to vanish. Noah frowned and looked back down at the notebook. “The next full moon will be in

two weeks, on August 28th.”

“Only ten ships have vanished in total, meaning that the incidents don’t occur every month. But we should still be wary.”

If they couldn’t solve the mystery in the next two weeks, there would assuredly be more victims. Claudia narrowed her eyes, as she felt the added pressure of the looming deadline.

“This is troublesome, even if we’ve already narrowed down the possible sources of the curse,” Noah said. “To destroy the magical artifact responsible for the curse, we need to figure out the wish—the deepest desire—that’s driving the owner.”

“Yes, the moment that the person feels that desire strongest will be when the artifact is at its most vulnerable, but even if we want to expose them and cause them to waver in their desire, we can’t act decisively until we confirm whether it’s Fiolina or Lauretta as the source.”

Jellyfish floated softly by the library’s windows. Claudia watched them before turning to Noah with a question. “If Lauretta is the source, what do you surmise her wish would be?”

“If I were to speculate, I believe it would involve her struggle with magical instability. Or perhaps a desire to overcome her personal insecurities.”

“How about Fiolina?”

“That’s more difficult. Fiolina seems to have everything she could want...at least on the surface. She has the trust of the teachers, commands respect from those in her class, and is admired by the younger students.”

Most people who knew Fiolina would likely share that view of her. If this was a tale of the fortunate older sister who had everything and the younger sister burdened with envy, then it would be clear to everyone who would likely hold the strongest desire.

Yet Claudia posed another question, “What if Fiolina *does* have something that she yearns for?”

Noah watched her with an expression of curiosity, which caused Claudia to

giggle.

“But in the end, this is all speculation. It’s meaningless.”

“How do you mean, Your Highness?”

“Look at this.” Claudia pulled out a small card from beneath her robe.

A sweet fragrance lingered upon it, likely the perfume of the person who wrote it. The card, adorned with lacelike cutouts, bore the following message:

“You are cordially invited to a tea party to be held at midnight at the end of August. I’m very much looking forward to having you hear my song.”

“This is from Fiolina?” Noah asked.

“What do you think, Noah? Will this midnight tea party be on the night of a full moon?”

Noah frowned, but Claudia tried to calm his nerves with a smile. “Noah... Do you really think I would sit here and patiently wait for her tea party?”

“No, Your Highness,” he said, letting out a sigh. He fixed his obsidian gaze upon her before continuing. “I believe that you won’t wait, but instead try to seize the advantage before then.”

“Exactly right. Tonight at ten-thirty, after lights out, let’s have a secret rendezvous.” Claudia flashed a grin.

Resigned, Noah lowered his gaze, accepting his fate. “As you command, Your Highness.”

All magical lamps in the academy were extinguished when it turned ten o’clock.

After that, it was, of course, prohibited for students to leave their dorms. Members of the staff were posted at the entrances, and some went on patrol periodically as well. Yet, the doors remained unlocked to ensure that students would be able to evacuate in the case of an emergency.

And so, every once in a while, there were students who snuck out in the middle of the night. For example, those students who claimed to have seen the

ghost, or in tonight's case, Claudia and Noah.

Claudia stood in the woods where she'd agreed to meet Noah. Lighting the darkness were small orbs of light, glowing faintly like fireflies, which she sent to show Noah the way.

"This way, Noah."

He soon emerged from the darkness, trailed by the same orbs.

"Oh, that's right, you told me that you had already been using transportation magic. As expected of my dearest pupil."

"Yes, thanks to the method you taught me, I was able to modify the spell formula and teleport with ease. Only you, having been deeply involved with constructing the wards, would know such a literal back door in the system."

Claudia laughed at that. "But be careful. We *will* get in trouble if we're caught."

She reached both of her hands out toward him. Understanding what she wanted, he intertwined his fingers with hers and softly chanted an incantation.

A warm sensation enveloped her body as Noah's magical energy flowed into her. When Claudia opened her eyes again, she saw things from a different viewpoint.

"Good boy," Claudia said, proud. She had taken on the form of someone of about sixteen. Her height had increased and her body now had soft curves and a well-proportioned, feminine figure.

Noah now stood before her as a young man of about nineteen years.

He was taller than before, and his features had become sharper and more defined. Noah quickly let go of Claudia's hands.

"How do you feel?" he asked her.

"I feel good. Your work is marvelous." She clapped her hands, truly delighted by the growth of her disciple and servant. "The magic to manipulate one's physical age is incredibly difficult, and yet you've mastered it perfectly, Noah."

"Is it not the same magic that you said Reinard, your disciple from five

hundred years ago, mastered? I believe it's logical, then, that I, his descendant, would be able to use it as well."

"Oh my. Even if you are Reinard's descendant, you wouldn't have been able to learn this without effort or talent. Besides, even among my disciples, only a handful would have been capable of using this magic."

Noah appeared to want to say something. With a twinkle in her eyes, Claudia knew exactly what was bothering him, but she decided to leave it at that.

"Even so, Your Highness, changing our age might not be enough to disguise us here in a place where people cannot enter freely."

"True. A person's facial features do change between childhood and adulthood, yet it might not be sufficient here."

As one aged, the proportions of their facial features shifted. Even if a person knew what someone looked like, seeing their childhood portrait would likely make them think they were seeing a different person, or perhaps a sibling. This phenomenon usually worked in Claudia and Noah's favor and was why they used it as a disguise. However, within the closed confines of the academy, it carried more risk than usual.

"Someone might notice our combination of hair colors and immediately connect us to the first-year student with milk-tea hair and her dark-haired servant. And so..." she said before softly laughing as she reached out to touch Noah's black hair.

Noah flinched slightly but did not resist Claudia's touch. Claudia began chanting a small incantation as she gently stroked Noah's head.

"This should do better," she finished. When she withdrew her hand, Noah's hair had changed to a silver hue.

"Silver hair suits you well, Noah. Of course, your black hair is my favorite, but this is lovely too." Claudia smiled and ran her fingers through her long hair.

"And, yes. My hair is now the same color it was in my past life."

Instead of its usual soft brown, her hair was now a shade of purple mixed with streaks of blue.

Now, even if someone saw them together, it was unlikely that they would guess who they were. Especially since age-altering magic was all but lost in this era.

“Well then, shall we begin our investigation, Leonhard?”

“Yes...Lady Adelheid.”

Transformed, Claudia and Noah proceeded into the school building, guided by the faint light of glowing orbs at their feet.

For their disguises, they wore the same ubiquitous school robes but had removed the ribbons and ties that indicated one’s year of schooling. It would be much harder for anyone to recognize them now.

They spoke only in whispers.

“It’s so strange to be here at night,” Claudia said. “There’s no one here and it’s so silent.”

The only sound was the *whoosh* of the ocean’s currents flowing around the academy.

She continued, “Did you know that whales sleep at night? Perhaps they’re floating somewhere above us, dreaming. I wonder if we might be able to see them from here.”

“The moon is only a thin crescent tonight. Even if it were full, it would be difficult to see into the ocean with moonlight alone.”

“You’re right. No matter how full the moon is, nights here are always so dark.”

While they were making small talk, they entered a classroom, which Claudia explored. Classes at the academy did not have assigned seats.

“So this is Fiolina’s class.” Claudia’s loafers clacked softly as she walked to the center of the classroom.

Raising her hand into the air, she channeled her magical energy. Light radiated from her hand, scattering throughout the classroom like stardust.

The light twinkled and illuminated the ceiling, walls, and the curtains along

the windows. This light was a type of investigative magic Claudia had created to analyze traces of magical energy. If it detected a curse, it would manifest as a red starlike glow within the scattered light. Noah surveyed the classroom, illuminated in a white sea of stars.

“There’s not a trace of red,” he said. “The song we heard the day we came here was most certainly imbued with the curse, yet there seems to be no traces of it here.”

“Indeed, it seems that way. There’s not even an echo of the song.”

Claudia closed her eyes. No matter how much she strained her ears, the only sound she heard was the faint murmur of the ocean.

“Your classroom is across the courtyard from here, isn’t it? You said that you’ve heard Fiolina singing during breaks?”

“Yes. She hums when it’s her turn for cleaning duty, or as she moves around during her breaks.”

“Thus, we can conclude that the songs she sings every day aren’t connected to magic or the curse.”

The starlight Claudia had cast across the classroom flickered several times before fading away.

Yet, one faint star remained, refusing to disappear even after she had waited some time. It glowed faintly on a desk in the corner of the classroom.

“My lady?”

“Look,” she said, pointing at it. “It’s a trace of magic.”

The light revealed a small inscription.

“This isn’t Fiolina’s handwriting,” Claudia said.

Narrowing her eyes, Claudia traced her fingers over the letters illuminated by the light. They read: *“Tonight, at the chapel.”*

“The chapel...” she whispered.

A building that hadn’t existed five hundred years ago. Claudia constructed a mental map of what she knew from five hundred years ago compared to what

she'd seen in the present. "If I remember correctly, it's on the eastern side of the academy."

As a rule, teleportation magic could only take the caster to places they'd been to before. As Claudia began to calculate how far they would need to walk, Noah quietly took her hand.

They were enveloped by light, and then Claudia felt her feet touch solid earth.

Before her was a beautiful stone building with a towering steeple. Standing in the middle of the woods, it was the very picture of a chapel.

"You've been here before?" she asked Noah.

"I've walked around the entire campus and committed it to memory. I believed it would help you if we were ever in a situation like this," he said as if it weren't a big deal, but that would have taken considerable effort to do. The academy was vast. And yet, Noah had never even mentioned before now that he had done so.

"See, you *are* a good boy. Thank you."

"Such dedication is to be expected as your servant, but more importantly..."

Claudia nodded graciously before turning to look at the chapel. "I can hear singing," she said, finishing his sentence.

Claudia started to let go of his hand, but Noah reflexively tightened his grip. She smiled gently to chide him before carefully releasing her hand and walking to the chapel.

Its door was slightly ajar.

They stopped walking, stooping to the side so that someone inside wouldn't be able to see them.

"There are people inside," Noah whispered. "A lot of people. I'd guess over a hundred."

"There's no way that many students could sneak out of the dorms without being noticed. Maybe we *do* have a ghost problem."

"Wait here. I'll check inside."

“No, we’ll go together. Your magic is still disguising us, right?”

Noah nodded. As a result, they walked to the double door and each quietly opened a side.

Claudia blinked as the narrow sliver of light spilling through the gap widened and revealed what was hidden inside the chapel’s brightly lit interior.

A large crowd had packed itself inside the pews, but they were clearly not students. Most appeared to be adults, though their ages varied. Some looked old enough to have children or grandchildren, while those younger appeared to be members of the working class.

All of them had skin that was weathered from working outdoors, and they wore simple clothing. Their heads were bowed as they sat in their pews, though they looked less like they were offering prayer, and more like they were swearing fealty to some lord.

At the far end of the chapel was a woman singing.

What a beautiful song.

She was kneeling with her back turned toward her audience, and her long, flowing hair was the same purple as Adelheid’s. Her singing voice was sweet and gentle. The song was soothing and pleasant to the ear.

Claudia stepped into the chapel, and all the people in the pews, and all those who filled the second-floor balcony, turned to look at her at once.

Their faces wore no expressions, and their eyes were devoid of any emotion. They said nothing, only staring at Claudia and Noah.

It was almost as if they truly were ghosts.

Amid this eerie scene, the solemn and beautiful singing continued, uninterrupted.

“What is this?” Noah muttered, confused at the strangeness of it all.

The contours of Claudia’s face naturally turned upward as she called out to the singing woman in a friendly manner, “Good evening. What a lovely voice you have.”

The singing stopped abruptly, replaced by stark silence. The woman stood up and began to slowly turn toward them. Just as her face was about to come into view, Claudia felt something strange and let out a gasp.

“Lady Adelheid!” He grabbed her hand as she felt someone’s magic envelop them.

“Hngh!”

Her sense of balance was thrown off, and the view around them shifted. The world was distorted. She couldn’t tell if they were falling or floating.

She blinked. *Is this teleportation magic?*

By the time she realized what was happening, they were no longer in the chapel but instead had been transported to a small, unfamiliar space.

Noah grunted in pain, “Your Highness...”

She had avoided hitting her head thanks to Noah’s strong hands, which had enveloped her in an embrace.

They were lying on what seemed to be a hard floor in a pitch-black room, still in their adult forms. Noah leaned over her with pain on his face.

He gently laid her on the floor and put an arm on either side of her head as he looked down at her. Although he was still in his adult form, his hair had reverted to black from silver. Claudia reached up and moved a strand of her own hair into her vision and saw the familiar milk-tea color. Her hair had reverted too.

“Are you unharmed?” he asked.

“Yes. Thank you for cushioning my fall.”

Noah let out a sigh of relief, but he also realized the position they were in. “I will move immediately. Please hold on for a moment—”

“Wait.”

Claudia reached up and covered Noah’s mouth with her hand, which gave him a jolt. With her other hand, she raised a finger to her lips in a signal to hush. By this point, he also realized that someone was coming.

“Someone’s coming this way. Noah, do you know where we are?” she whispered.

He frowned as he looked around, assessing their surroundings, waiting a while before he answered. “I believe this is the storage room of the boys’ dorm.”

“I recognize the wooden boxes and the clutter of the cleaning tools. I came here on my first day to retrieve my bedding... I also remember that the door is slightly broken and opens with the application of a little force.”

“I feel a draft. I can’t see it, but I assume the door is already open.”

Noah silently stared into the darkness, trying to see the door.

“And with how cramped and cluttered it is, I fear that we’ll make a noise with even the smallest of movements,” Claudia continued. “So don’t move.”

If this *was* the boys’ dormitory, it would cause an uproar if Claudia were discovered here.

Claudia could hear footsteps approaching. That was surely one of the staff patrolling the halls of the dorm. Noah wore a pained expression as he remained leaning over Claudia.

“Shouldn’t we use teleportation magic?” he asked.

“No, the light from casting it would draw attention. They’d know that someone had teleported even if they didn’t see who it was. We were already lucky that they didn’t notice when we were teleported here.”

Noah’s lips tightened into a fine line as Claudia glanced at him. The footsteps in the hall were getting closer.

She dropped her eyes to the ground. “It’s been a long time since I was teleported by someone other than you,” she murmured.

Noah frowned and replied softly, “The woman in the chapel bore an uncanny resemblance to Fiolina.”

“Yes, though we only saw her from behind. Her voice was very familiar, but still, I wonder...”

“She must have been the one to teleport us, yet...”

“I was watching her movements. She showed no signs that she was casting a spell, nor did I hear an incantation.”

Of course, that wasn't the only matter they needed to consider.

“The people in the chapel,” she continued. “The way they were dressed, they must be...”

Claudia noticed the strain on Noah's face. She had let herself lie back and relax as she spoke, but Noah didn't have that luxury. He was straining to keep his weight off of Claudia while not moving within the confines of the tight space.

Claudia reached up and stroked his hair as she said, “That position must be uncomfortable. You can lean on me, you know?”

“I wouldn't dare to do something so disrespectful. Absolutely not.”

Claudia giggled. He was so serious, yet she found that both incredibly endearing and reassuring. She smiled as she was reminded why she trusted Noah from the bottom of her heart.

“The footsteps are getting closer. You'll protect me, won't you?”

“No matter what.”

She smiled, satisfied with his answer.

She listened once more for the footsteps and realized the sound was not what she expected; they were too soft.

These are a child's footsteps.

Noah became aware of it as well.

“That's not a member of the staff,” Claudia concluded. “A child snuck out.”

“Princess, he's talking...”

Claudia listened and realized that the boy was murmuring to himself.

“How could he not be in his room at this hour? Surely, he didn't slip out of the dorm...”

It's Cedric.

"Damn it. He doesn't have much time left at the academy. What the hell am I doing?!" he continued mumbling. There was a trace of irritation, and perhaps some urgency, in his voice. "It was *definitely* him. He's here! But if he's hiding who he is and can change his appearance, then I'm at a terrible disadvantage."

It was clear that he was looking for someone. Noah's lips tightened as he quietly glared at the door.

I can't hear him anymore. I'll need magic to better make out his words.

Claudia had just begun to sit up when Noah suddenly stopped her, almost in an embrace. Although he did not put any weight on her, their bodies were now close enough to be touching. He had grabbed her wrists and pinned them to the floor to keep her in place.

She realized that Cedric had stopped in front of the storage room. With a faint hint of hostility, Noah tensed. They heard a creak as Cedric gripped the doorknob. He was so close—

"Honestly," Cedric said with a sigh as he quietly closed the door. "I can't believe they haven't fixed this door."

Then, with a small *click*, the door was fully shut, plunging the storage room into complete darkness.

Cedric's footsteps gradually receded into the distance, and a deep silence enveloped the storage room.

"Noah..." Claudia said softly, and Noah activated his teleportation magic.

In the blink of an eye, Claudia found herself standing in the woods where she and Noah had arranged to meet.

"Good work. We were only able to get out of there without anyone noticing thanks to you," she said.

"I only did...my duty." Noah was utterly exhausted. He pressed his fist against the trunk of a nearby tree and exhaled slowly.

Claudia approached him and reached out to gently stroke the black hair on his head.

“The spell I used to change the color of your hair has been completely dispelled. And yet, the spell you cast to change our ages remains...”

“You didn’t dispel it yourself when we were teleported?”

“No. It must have been dispelled by the person that teleported us.” She narrowed her eyes as she examined her fingertips.

Someone used a counterspell on my magic.

“I’m going to return to the chapel,” Noah said, looking in its direction as he furrowed his brow. “Please wait here, Your Highness.”

She took his arm. “It’s pointless. I’m certain that the mass has ended, and I doubt anyone is still there. Upon our next visit, it will become a fight. If it were just us, that would be one thing, but as long as we’re here at the academy, we must take care to protect the students. We must prepare for such a confrontation.”

Noah nodded. “As you say.”

“Good boy. Now, about the person Cedric was searching for...” She took a moment to think.

Cedric had been racked with anxiety and frustration. From what he said, Claudia surmised that he was searching for someone who was both hiding their identity and leaving the academy before long.

“How many naughty boys do you think would have been out wandering the campus after lights out?”

Exasperated, Noah turned to her. “I’m sure that you have a guess as to who he was looking for.”

She giggled. “Oh my. I’m sure that you do too.” She reached out and took Noah’s hand and channeled her magic into him.

With a gentle *poof*, the two of them returned to their natural sizes. Claudia shook her head slightly to manage her disheveled hair.

“Still, we must confirm our suspicions. And we’ll need people we can trust to protect the students when we take action.”

“In that case, surely, you can’t mean...”

“Yes, we’ll need him. Don’t you think so, Noah?” she asked with a smile.

Noah finally acquiesced with a bow of the head. “As you say, Your Highness.”

“In that case, we’ll need to write him a letter! I can’t wait. And we must insist that he take great care to dress properly!” she said, clapping excitedly, before turning toward the dorms. “Now it’s time to return to our rooms before anyone notices our absences. We’ll get in trouble if anyone finds out.”

“Your Highness. Are you truly going to return to your room?”

“Yes. It’s even more important that I continue my usual routines if the enemy has begun to suspect me.” She laughed as she turned, her robe fluttering in the wind. “Even if they are planning to kill me, for instance.”

Noah watched her silently.

After parting ways with Noah, Claudia teleported to an empty storage room in the girls’ dormitory. There, she used magic to transform her robe back into her nightgown, which was the blue of a forget-me-not flower. It was the same nightgown that she had been wearing earlier that evening when she’d left her room. Next, she conjured a paper bag she’d prepared earlier for this very walk back to her room. Holding it tightly to her chest, she walked quietly into the hallway.

She stopped suddenly when she reached a corner and noticed that someone was coming from the other direction.

Quickly adjusting her bag, she walked around the corner as if she hadn’t noticed anyone coming.

“Eeek!” she said when she collided with the other person.

“Oh!” shouted the person who caught her.

It was Fiolina. Of course, she had known who it was before she had stepped around the corner. Sensing the girl’s magic was but a trifle for her by now.

“Fiolina!” she exclaimed in an act of surprise.

“Claudia?!” Fiolina was wearing a simple white nightgown, and her eyes were wide. “You should be in bed. What are you doing here?”

“I-I’m sorry!”

“Oh my. Might you be trying to sneak out of the dormitory?”

Claudia let in a sharp breath as if she had been caught red-handed. Of course, this was also an act.

“It’s just that,” Claudia began with a sniffle, “I heard about...the *ghost*. I was so scared that I couldn’t sleep, but I didn’t want to tell Laretta and scare her too...”

She looked at Fiolina with teary eyes. She was the very picture of a frightened child.

“I thought that maybe I’d sneak out to see Noah and bring him a gift, to help me feel better,” she continued. “But it was so dark outside that I couldn’t bring myself to leave, so I came back instead...”

“Oh, dear. You poor thing,” Fiolina said. She paused for a moment, considering something, before giving Claudia a warm smile. “Why don’t you come and have some tea with me in the common room?”

“With you?”

“Yes. I’ll make you some tea that should help calm your nerves. It might help you sleep.”

Claudia beamed and nodded. “Yes! I’d love to!”

The common room was cozy, an inviting place on the first floor of the dormitory.

Fiolina brought out her own tea set and brewed the tea she had promised Claudia. It had a sweet smell, and the mild flavor soothed Claudia as she drank it.

After setting her teacup down, Claudia let out a contented sigh. “This is wonderful,” she said in appreciation.

“I’m so glad it’s to your taste.” Leaning forward so that her chin rested in her hands, Fiolina happily watched the younger girl. “You’re just adorable. Your enjoyment of it is more than enough to fill me with bliss.”

Her voice was gentle. Claudia felt like she was being enveloped in a warm embrace as she listened to it. It was no surprise that Fiolina was well-liked by the younger girls of the academy.

“I chose this teacup specifically for you, you know? Look at how small and adorable it is, yet so refined. Try placing it on its saucer.”

“Oh!” Claudia exclaimed as she set the teacup on the saucer. The intricate vines on the saucer met the roses on the cup, together forming the image of a beautiful rose garden.

“How adorable!” Claudia was quite taken with it.

“Each piece is beautiful on its own, but when they’re put together, they become something even more beautiful,” she said warmly. “Taking individual strands and weaving them together into something beautiful... It reminds you of the harmony in a song, does it not? I love this kind of composition.”

“I’ve fallen in love with it too! Thank you for showing it to me.”

“I’m glad,” Fiolina said softly as she watched Claudia. “It seems you’re no longer afraid of the ghost, are you?”

“Oh!” Claudia feigned surprise. She decided to act shyly. “But... It’s just that I’m so happy to be talking with you. May we stay here together a little longer?”

“Oh my, of course we may. Would you like another cup of tea?”

“Yay! Yes, please!”

“Very well. Wait just a moment,” Fiolina said with a smile as she began to pour more hot water into the teapot. She began to sing softly as if music came to her naturally.

What a beautiful song.

Claudia was struck by how this song made her feel the same way the one she heard in the chapel had.

It's a song that's an invitation. A song that invites you in, embraces you, and then holds you close.

Claudia closed her eyes. She felt as if she might drift into a peaceful sleep.

"That song is so lovely. If I could learn it, I'd want to try and sing it together..."

Fiolina's smile widened. "I want that too. We could sing in the same key together, or we could sing in different keys. Either way, wouldn't it be wonderful?"

"Isn't it just about layering different melodies?"

"There are many different techniques. If you wanted to learn about music, I'm sure your father would provide you with the best teachers to guide you." Fiolina refilled the tea in Claudia's cup. Then, as she turned with the pot and the rose-printed cup in her hands, she regarded the younger girl below her. "You *are* a princess, after all." Her voice had grown cold as she offered Claudia the teacup.

"But, you're a princess too, right?" she cheerfully asked Fiolina as she accepted the refill. "The same as me!"

"Yes," Fiolina said after a moment. "However, I keep it a secret from everyone else."

Fiolina wrapped her hands around her own teacup in the motion of someone trying to warm herself up. She closed her eyes.

"Lauretta and I are royalty."

"Royalty?"

"I'm sure you've realized that Lauretta has powerful magic, even if she has trouble controlling it. And she's very studious—a sister I can proudly say is worthy of our royal lineage. But there's a reason that we must hide who we are."

As Cedric had said before, Lauretta was an incredibly gifted student. It was for this reason that she had never received a harsher punishment for not attending her magic classes.

"Why are the two of you hiding your lineage?"

“She and I have little political backing, so our father told us to be careful and not reveal the truth, or else our lives might be in danger. He’s so worried because of his love for us,” Fiolina said reverently. Her words showed a loving conviction.

“Father will come and take us home before I graduate,” she said after a sip of her tea. She smiled as she carefully placed her teacup back onto its saucer.

“And so, I want to become closer friends with you, Claudia. You’re a real princess. And you’re only here for a short period; you’ll be returning to Avianoia soon, yes?”

“Yes, that’s correct. It’s sad to think about, now that I’ve made friends here.”

“Oh, but haven’t we become good friends, even so?” Fiolina tilted her head slightly, making her hair, which was the same color as her sister’s, sway gently. “I hope that we can still be good friends as fellow princesses even outside of the academy.”

Claudia wore a look of concern. “But what about Lucas?”

“Oh, Claudia!” Fiolina exclaimed, her cheeks turning a bright red. “That’s... Lucas is... What makes you bring him up?”

Claudia giggled. “It’s just that you’re so adorable when you’re around Lucas!”

And Claudia thought Fiolina looked adorable even now as her blush spread all the way to her ears. She grinned at her sincerely this time.

“The truth is, after my father comes to take us back, I plan to ask him for permission to marry Lucas.” Fiolina lowered her gaze.

“Oh, wow! Does that mean you’re betrothed? But surely Lucas can’t marry a princess?”

“I’ve had a feeling for some time that Lucas must be hiding his status too. I believe he has royal blood.”

“Do you think so?”

Fiolina placed her finger in front of her lips and softly whispered, “With his exceptional magical ability, he must be from a noble lineage. This is just speculation, but perhaps his father is of royal descent while his mother is from a

lower station—perhaps she’s a singer or a dancer.”

I suppose she doesn’t realize that description fits my background exactly, Claudia thought to herself as she played along.

“And if that’s the case, you believe that he may be able to marry you?”

Fiolina bashfully lowered her head before giving a small nod. “Father, when he comes to get me, will surely say that he’s sorry for making me be patient for so long.”

“Oh, Fiolina.”

“He’ll say, ‘If you love him, I will support you fully.’ And then, I’ll come to Lucas when he graduates, and we’ll have a wedding. It will be on the day of the full moon, a day that brings happiness, and everyone will celebrate with us.” Fiolina softly and happily gazed into the depths of her tea. “And by then, I’ll be able to talk freely with Lauretta. Though I’m not supposed to be with her right now, I’m certain by then...”

“Fiolina, who told you not to be near Lauretta?”

Fiolina laughed. Her smile was beautiful. “That’s still a secret.”

And this time, as she placed her finger to her lips, a silver ring gleamed on her finger.

After parting ways with Fiolina, Claudia walked down the hallway with the paper bag in hand, tracing lines in the air with her finger.

The lines turned into glowing letters that lingered for a moment before fading away. The words coalesced into a magical letter that would be sent to the Kingdom of Avianoia.

This message should suffice. Now, then...

She stopped in front of her door and carefully turned the doorknob. She peeked inside.

At that moment, Lauretta jumped out of the room and threw her arms around Claudia. She looked like she was ready to explode.

“Lauretta!” Claudia said, pretending to be shocked. She hugged her back. “What’s wrong?”

Lauretta remained silent, but she looked like she wanted to say a million things.

“Oh! Did you wake up and get worried because I wasn’t in bed?”

Lauretta nodded jerkily. Her eyes were teary, and she pouted as she looked at Claudia.

“I’m sorry. You see, actually,” Claudia said, lowering her voice. She held out the paper bag and opened it. “I got hungry, so I had Noah bake these for me. There’s some for you too!”

When she untied the ribbon that held the bag closed, the sweet smell of buttery baked goods began to fill the room. In the bag were golden-brown cookies.

Lauretta looked at them in surprise.

Claudia giggled. “Let’s have a secret cookie party!”

Lauretta’s eyes sparkled, and her cheeks flushed with excitement.

It’s not as though I can tell her that I snuck out to investigate the curse. Or that I had tea with Fiolina, Claudia thought as she sat down next to Lauretta on her bunk bed. She’d had Noah bake these just in case something like this happened.

The cookies came in two varieties: sugar and chocolate. Each had been made with chocolate chips mixed into the batter and cut into bunny and star shapes.

They each took a cookie they liked, but instead of eating it themselves, Claudia gave the signal—“Ready?”—and they each tossed it into the other’s open mouth.

They both chewed slowly, savoring the taste. “Mmm...”

These cookies had a texture more similar to powdered sugar than traditional baked goods. They crumbled delicately in their mouths, releasing the rich flavor of butter and just the right amount of sweetness.

“Mmm!” Laretta couldn’t help but make a noise.

“Yummy, right? Noah’s cookies are always so good! He can make soft and chewy ones too, not just crunchy ones like these! And he even makes some with jam in the middle!”

As Claudia proudly boasted about her servant’s baking skills, they fully enjoyed their midnight snack.

The cookies had already been prepared as an excuse for why Claudia hadn’t been in her room with Laretta when the girl woke up, and Claudia couldn’t help but think it was a brilliant strategy.

“They’re delicious... I love them,” Laretta murmured softly.

Her voice, which Claudia had recently started hearing more often, was as sweet as the pleasant chime of a bell, resembling her sister’s.

“By the way, I’m surprised that you’re awake. What happened?” Claudia asked.

Laretta had been fast asleep when Claudia had left the room. Laretta lowered her gaze as if she was uncomfortable, and Claudia’s heart dropped.

“Oh no, did I accidentally wake you up when I left the room? I’m so sorry.”

Laretta hastily shook her head. “No...you didn’t wake me up.”

“Then what happened?”

Laretta hesitated a moment. “My sister... I...”

“Fiolina?”

“I... I heard her...singing. She was calling me.”

Laretta’s voice was so small that it sounded like she was talking to herself.

“You’re drawn to her when you hear her sing?” When Laretta nodded, she followed up with more questions. “Why? To hear her sing?”

Laretta looked away. Claudia couldn’t tell if that was a yes or a no.

So that really was Fiolina who was singing in the chapel...

Claudia closed her eyes, recalling Fiolina’s words from before.

“That’s still a secret.”

There had been a silver ring on Fiolina’s finger as she had brought it to her lips. It was an elegant design of an old-fashioned make. Something that looked like it could have been passed down for generations.

That ring must be the cursed artifact.

And yet, it was still not the time to expose the truth.

Claudia tried to make eye contact with Laretta, whose head was still lowered.

“Hey, Laretta...” Claudia began with a soft smile.

About a week passed, during which Claudia and Noah continued their academy life as usual.

When Claudia had shared her thoughts with him after that night, he had just quietly nodded and said, “I see.”

Having investigated curses for four years, he knew that it could be unwise to act immediately even after discovering the source.

A cursed artifact could only be destroyed after the person that wielded it fully manifested their wish. As a result, he and Claudia continued on as normal. So did the other students. As long as no ships were disappearing from this part of the sea, then everything was business as usual.

But today was special.

Even with the admittance of a rare student who transferred into the academy partway through the year, the teaching staff had not changed; it rarely ever did. However, today a guest lecturer arrived.

“Ugh, even though classes ended early, I wasn’t able to sit in on today’s special class lecture because too many students were already there!” said one student.

The area around the lecture hall was full of students lounging about, creating something of a commotion.

“If we go around to that window over there, we might get a better view!”

“Hey, aren’t you all kids from the intermediate class?” a student said to those crowding around the window. “It’s about time you let other people get a look! This kind of lecture is meant for advanced students like us!”

“Shush! We’ll get in trouble if we’re too loud!”

Able to hear everything from within the lecture hall, the guest lecturer sighed.

His beautiful silver hair was tied back away from his face and he held a spellbook in his hand. He pushed up his glasses, something he didn’t usually wear.



Claudia waved at him from the front row of student observers. "Professor Karlheinz, good luck!"

"Your Highness..." he muttered. He looked like he was on the verge of a migraine.

Noah, who was attending the lecture as a member of the special class, watched Karlheinz and felt the smallest amount of sympathy.

"You did such a good job today, Karlheinz! And your glasses suited you perfectly! I award you one hundred points!"

"I'm honored by your praise, Your Highness..."

Claudia applauded him as she sat on the plush sofa in the academy's reception room.

Sitting opposite her, Karlheinz sat looking utterly drained from his exchanges with the students. Ever the diligent person, he had taken the time to answer each and every question posed to him by the eager students who had crowded him after the lecture. It was no wonder he seemed to be suffering from mental exhaustion.

"Everything went exactly to my plan," Claudia declared. "If you had arrived as a visitor, you would've had to return immediately, but what if you came as a guest lecturer? Then you could stay here longer. Isn't that right, Noah?"

"It was unlikely the academy would reject such an offer when it came from the chief conjurer of Avianoia. And it seems that there are precedents for an alumnus of the academy to come back to give lectures."

"The students loved you! You look like you're still in your mid-twenties, so you were especially popular with the eighth-year girls. Maybe you'll have a few marriage proposals to sort through by the end of your stay?"

Hearing this, Karlheinz sank even further into his seat.

"Shall I brew you some tea to help you recover?" Noah asked him politely.

"Please do. Now then, Your Highness, regarding the orders you gave me..."

While Noah used magic to prepare some tea, Karlheinz swiftly cast a bubble of silence over the reception room as a precautionary measure.

“I’ll start with the report on Lemilsia.”

“Yes, go ahead.”

A grin slowly spread across Claudia’s face as she heard the name of Noah’s homeland.

I suspect that Karlheinz has already discerned Noah’s ties to the royal family of Lemilsia.

However, he was a trustworthy man and would refrain from probing deeper or asking unnecessary questions.

The only matter regarding Noah that he cared about was whether Noah was loyal to her.

“The crown prince of Lemilsia is indeed attending this academy. However, his enrollment hasn’t been made public. This isn’t uncommon; many members of royalty attend the academy without revealing their identities for their safety.”

“Of course. The academy may be protected from outside threats, but the inside isn’t guaranteed to be safe.”

“Additionally, according to the information our spies have given us, Crown Prince Sieghart is expected to leave the academy soon.”

Hearing this, Noah, who had been lining up teacups, frowned. Claudia noted this to herself and continued.

“Interesting. The prince of Lemilsia has been studying here for years, right? It seems like such a waste to leave without graduating.”

“It appears to have been a decision made by their royal family.”

“What do you mean?” Claudia said, her eyes narrowing.

Noah’s uncle, the King of Lemilsia, shouldn’t have been able to make such decisions, much less convey them to his son.

“Reportedly, the chief conjurer of Lemilsia made the decision on behalf of the king.”

Claudia recalled what Cedric had said a few days prior. *“Damn it. I don’t have much time left at the academy, so what the hell am I doing?!”*

That sense of urgency, it seems, had stemmed from the chief conjurer’s decision.

With that, everything finally became clear.

Noah’s cousin, the crown prince of Lemilsia, is...

Noah placed a freshly brewed cup of tea in front of Claudia. She thanked him and picked up the cup as Karlheinz handed her a sheet of paper.

“Next, here is the list of prospective marriage proposals for your two elder brothers. As you requested, I’ve included only those from royal families.”

“There’s so many. They sure are popular!”

It came as no surprise. The Kingdom of Avianoia was one of the largest and most powerful nations in the world.

It was no exaggeration to say that nearly every nation had submitted marriage proposals, seeking an alliance with Avianoia. So, this was, in essence, a list of eligible princesses from nations around the world.

“I’d like to narrow this list down further,” Claudia told Karlheinz.

“I’ve already taken the additional conditions you outlined in your letter and prepared another list for you.”

Claudia laughed. “Efficient as ever.” She took this second list, which had significantly fewer names than the first.

“The names at the top of the list meet the conditions that their families are traditionally known for their expertise in either spatial magic or mental enchantment magic, and are also from kingdoms that touch the sea. As for the final condition,” Karlheinz continued, gazing at Claudia as he held his teacup before him, “princesses from kingdoms with traditions of using lunar phases to divine omens are listed at the bottom.”

“Lunar phases...” Noah murmured, his eyes drifting to the list in Claudia’s hands. “Your Highness, what is the reasoning behind these conditions?”

“The congregation we saw in the chapel was probably at least some of the sailors taken from the missing ships,” Claudia said, closing her eyes as she leaned back into the sofa. “You saw their vacant expressions, right? They were under some sort of enchantment. And if the sailors are there...”

“Then the ships weren’t swallowed up by the sea, but instead they’re at the academy... No, within the barrier,” Noah finished for her.

“The ships are being stored here somewhere, and they’re *large*. Furthermore, if they’re also keeping the sailors alive inside, then this is highly advanced spatial magic,” Claudia said as she swung her legs back and forth childishly. “And, when Fiolina spoke of marrying Lucas, she spoke about the day of the full moon as if it were auspicious. All of the ships also disappeared on days when the moon was full. This leads me to suspect that her ‘wish’ which drives the curse is somehow tied to the ships and the full moon.”

“And what of the condition that the kingdom they’re from is on the sea?” Noah asked.

“Of course, the sea is often seen as a symbol of hope even in landlocked nations. Many myths, fables, and dramatic works portray the sea that way. However, a ‘ship’ is much more specific, and I believe that means that it’s there for a specific purpose.”

“So, you believe that whoever it is whose wish is driving the curse has a specific purpose for using ships,” Noah concluded.

Claudia nodded and glanced at the paper in her hand.

“The names of the two princesses listed here are Fortunata and Lionella. These are likely Fiolina and Lauretta’s real names.”

“As I suspected, their relationship is more complicated than just being sisters,” Noah said, furrowing his brow.

“Your Highness, have you been able to rest well here at the academy?” Karlheinz asked.

“Oh my, of course I have. Why do you ask?”

“It looks like you’ve been investigating both those involved in the curse and

the Crown Prince of Lemilsia. Noah, I trust you've been keeping a close eye on Her Highness's health?"

"Of course. Though there are many times that I've been unable to help her, which vexes me."

Claudia laughed softly at her worrywart of a chief conjurer. "No need to worry too much. Whenever I get sleepy, Noah holds me. Isn't that right, Noah?"

"I'd much prefer it if you'd rest before it got to that point."

"And Karlheinz, it's not as if these two investigations are unrelated. These cases are... How should I put it?" Claudia began. She thought about the tea that she had with Fiolina and smiled. "They are *layered* together."

"Layered, you say?" Karlheinz said. He looked skeptical.

Claudia nodded slowly. "Yes. Like the harmony in a song, or two images intertwined on a teacup and saucer."

Karlheinz raised an eyebrow. Claudia looked up at him again and beamed brightly.

"It's only natural that you're confused. You haven't been a part of the investigations so far, but don't worry. I'll tell you everything I know before the full moon comes."

"Wait a moment, Your Highness. How does the full moon factor into these matters?" Karlheinz asked.

"Noah, I'm writing a letter to Cedric. Will you deliver it for me?"

And thus, Claudia began her preparations to lift the curse.

As August drew to a close, the day of the full moon finally came. After classes let out, Fiolina could barely contain her excitement as she walked down the hall.

How could I not be excited? I've been waiting for this day for so long, she thought.

Any other day, her classmates would swarm her in the hallway, but today she

headed to the headmistress's office alone. She hummed a gentle melody as she waved at those she passed.

Fiolina had treasured singing ever since she was a child. She remembered her mother smiling as she stroked her daughters' cheeks, telling Fiolina, "Always keep singing. Your voice sounds so much like mine. One day, it will call your father to come and find you."

"He'll come for both me and Laretta?"

"Yes. On another full moon, aboard that same beautiful ship. So please keep singing for me, now that I cannot."

"I will!"

Her mother's words had proven true. A few years later, he had appeared at the small island that Fiolina and Laretta had been hidden on. He took them on a beautiful ship with fresh, new sails for a visit across the sea to a grand city.

That day had been a full moon too. The image of the white moon aligning with the spires of the castle in the daytime sky had never left her memory.

"Is that our real home?" she had wondered aloud at the time, her eyes shining brightly. As her late mother had told them, Fiolina's voice, so much like her mother's, had drawn their father to them. And on the other side of the sea, a princess's life awaited them.

Or so I had believed.

Fiolina and Laretta were instead soon given orders to attend the academy at the bottom of the sea.

"Please tell me, Lord Chancellor, one day, our father will come for us there, won't he?" she'd asked.

"Yes, of course, Lady Fortunata."

She had never gotten used to the name *Fortunata*. To her, *Fiolina*, the name her mother had given her, had always felt like it was really hers. Surely, the same was true of Laretta, whose true name was *Lionella*.

"I will enroll so long as my requests are met. Once a month, on the day of the full moon, I would like to receive a letter from my father."

“I will, of course, inform His Majesty, but he is very busy, so he may not always be able to write to you. Nonetheless, I am sure he will do his best for his beloved daughters.”

“Thank you. And about my sister, Lairetta—I mean, Lionella...”

Now it was finally Fiolina’s last year at the academy.

And this full moon also marks the fourth anniversary of Mother’s passing.

The despair she had felt that day still made her chest ache.

And that’s why I’m sure that today’s letter will say that Father’s sorry he’s made us wait for so long and that he’s on his way to bring us home.

Letters and packages addressed to the academy arrived by ship to the sea directly above them. And from there, teleportation magic transported the cargo to the academy below.

Visualizing the ship that was carrying her father’s letter, Fiolina stopped in front of the open door of the headmistress’s office. Everything that was brought into the academy passed through here first.

While the headmistress wouldn’t go so far as to read the contents of the letters, she used magic to ensure that nothing suspicious had been smuggled in.

“Excuse me, Headmistress Svetlana?”

“Oh, Fiolina. Good afternoon. Is there something you need?” Svetlana replied, seated at her desk.

A jolt shot through Fiolina. Something was amiss.

Why would she ask me that? She’s surely already reviewed Father’s letter. It should be okay to talk to me about it.

However, despite her thoughts, Fiolina maintained her approachable composure. “Forgive me for disturbing you after school is out. I was near your office and wanted to stop by and thank you for always allowing me to use the music room for practice.”

“Oh. I appreciate that, but there’s really no reason to thank me. I am always willing to make accommodations for talented students such as you. Besides,

your father has been most generous with his donations to the academy.”

“Th-Thank you. A-And, um, may I ask you something further?” Fiolina asked somewhat stiffly. “I recently sent a thank-you letter to the prince of Cartonesia, the Musical Kingdom, for his donation to the academy. Have we received a response? I would like to be as prompt as possible with my reply.”

“Oh, you needn’t worry about hurrying,” Svetlana replied as if it were a matter of course. “We haven’t received a reply from him. In fact, there haven’t been any letters addressed to you.”

Dumbfounded, Fiolina hesitated for a moment before she uttered, “What?”

What in the world was she saying? she thought despite herself, but she kept her face neutral.

“Pardon me, Headmistress Svetlana, I don’t think I quite caught that...”

“Hm? Oh. As I said, we didn’t receive any letters from Cartonesia, or from any of the other musical organizations. You don’t need to worry about thank-you letters or replies at the moment,” the headmistress replied.

“Th-Then...what about other letters addressed to me? Perhaps from my father?”

“The only letter we’ve received lately was addressed to Princess Claudia from her father, the King of Avianoia.”

With that, Fiolina’s smile finally disappeared and her arms fell limply to her side. “Oh. So, Claudia received a letter from *her* father.”

“Are you all right?”

“Please excuse me.”

Fiolina bolted out of the office. She had never flouted the rules and run in the hallway as she was doing now. She had always been careful to obey the adults. Even though she knew it was wrong, she couldn’t stop herself.

Why? Why, why, why? Why wouldn’t Father...?

Tears threatened to spill from her eyes, and as Fiolina moved to wipe them with her hand, she suddenly bumped into someone. She shrieked in surprise.

“Fiolina?”

“Oh, Lucas!”

He’d caught her when she bumped into him, and now that she saw him, he instantly washed away her sadness.

“What’s wrong? Have you been crying?”

“Oh...I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to...” Flustered, Fiolina quickly wiped at her eyes. Lucas reached out with a gentle hand, patting her head.

“There, there. No more tears, okay? There’s a good girl.”

“Really, now. I’m not a little kid.” She sulked.

Though Lucas usually acted as everyone’s dependable older brother, he would sometimes act more childlike with her. Even so, her heart would always flutter when she saw his carefree smile as he teased her.

“Lucas, it’s just that today I was supposed to get a letter from my father—” She abruptly cut herself off when she saw what Lucas was holding.

“From the king? Did something happen to him?” he asked.

“Lucas... What are those papers in your hand?”

“Hmm? Oh, these?” Lucas glanced down at the papers and chuckled. “I’m applying for the graduation exam,” he said.

“Graduation?” Fiolina couldn’t grasp why this was relevant at this time of year. She stared at him blankly.

“I already have enough credits to graduate. If I pass the exam, then I can graduate early and not have to wait until March.”

“Early...? Why would you want to do that?”

“Once I graduate, there’s someone I’m planning on proposing to, someone I’ve been in love with since I was a child.”

Fiolina and Lucas had met only three years prior when both were fifteen. They had never known each other as children.

“Will you cheer me on, Fiolina? I hope that my unrequited love will finally be

returned.” He flashed a grin at Fiolina with pure happiness.

But her world went dark.

Her legs gave out and she sank to the ground. Her voice trembled. “I need to stop the ship.”

“Fiolina?” Lucas asked, concerned.

Hugging herself tightly, her lips quivered as she repeated to herself, “The ship. It’s carrying Father’s letter. Maybe he’s even on board. I need to stop the ship and bring it...!”

Chapter 4

Claudia felt a sharp pressure in her ears as she left her classroom with Noah. It was the evening of the full moon.

“Your Highness, is this...?”

Noah had instinctively stepped in front of Claudia as if to protect her. Claudia looked out the window and did not reply.

Outside the barrier, rather than swimming slowly through the seaweed as they usually did, fish were now fleeing frantically.

“Eeek!”

A scream echoed from farther down the hall as students began to collapse one after another.

There was a high-pitched noise, like an endless, piercing ringing in the ears. Noah erected a barrier around them while holding one of his ears with a hand, his face contorted in pain.

“Thank you, Noah.”

“It appears that the curse’s effects have begun earlier than anticipated,” he said.

“My, my. How unexpected. Fiolina seemed so fixated on it being the night of the full moon. How fickle of her.”

None of the nearby students were able to stand. The barrier around the academy vibrated violently as it resonated with the high-pitched sound.

The vibrations grew louder and louder, the barrier trembling as if it were being rattled by an earthquake.

The hallways were strangely devoid of any other sounds. If any students had remained conscious, they would surely be screaming.

The barrier appeared to be dragging something into it—something enormous.

Something about the size of a ship or, at least, what was left of it.

“At this rate, the barrier will shatter. I’ll head outside to—”

“Worry not, Noah.” Claudia interrupted him and smiled calmly. “Though it’s earlier than expected, we are not unprepared for this. Rather, the great chief conjurer of our nation, the lofty guest lecturer of our academy, Professor Karlheinz, has already made the arrangements.”

The moment Claudia finished speaking, the barrier began to glow brightly, at which time the vibrations ceased. The silence was like the calm before a storm.

Claudia laughed. “As expected of our professor. He’s as reliable as ever.”

“He’s probably hanging his head in his hands while sitting in the teachers’ lounge right now,” Noah said with a hint of sympathy. He turned to Claudia. “I suppose there’s no need to look for the source of the curse, is there?”

“No, I suspect we’ll know where she is soon enough.” Claudia glanced around the hallway. The students who had collapsed began to stir despite not having regained their consciousness. They rose to their knees and then lowered their heads in the same direction.

They looked like loyal subjects prostrating themselves before their sovereign.

“She’s in the chapel, it would seem,” Noah said.

“Would you cast the spell to transform us into our adult forms?”

When they had been forcibly teleported the last time, the spell that Claudia had cast had been undone. She didn’t want a repeat of that, so she had Noah cast it this time.

Noah, now in his visibly older form, held out his hand to Claudia.

“I’ll teleport us. Your hand, please.”

“Yes, let us depart.”

Holding Noah’s hand tightly, Claudia closed her eyes.

Outside the barrier, the deep blue of the sea, now devoid of life, was gradually giving way to the blackness of night.

As Claudia stepped in front of the chapel, the hem of her skirt fluttered lightly.

Brushing back her milk-tea-colored hair, she turned to Noah behind her. “Remember to watch for the magic we discussed.”

“I shall. I’m opening the door.”

As he did so, they squinted against the light pouring into the night. They could hear a voice singing beyond the doorway.

They had heard this same voice back in the chapel. It also unmistakably belonged to Fiolina; after just having had tea with her, Claudia wouldn’t mistake it.

Once again, at the far end of the chapel, a woman stood with her back to them in song.

“Good evening again,” Claudia called out.

The beautiful singing came to a stop, but the woman didn’t turn to face them. Claudia continued smiling as she walked down the red carpet between the pews.

“There’s no audience tonight, it would seem. How delightful! To think I get to enjoy such a beautiful song all to myself,” she said. “Your voice truly is lovely.”

The woman was about as tall as Claudia was in this form. Though her limbs were slender, her figure was graced with the gentle curves of a grown woman. Just as Claudia had surmised after their first encounter, she seemed to be around eighteen years old.

The woman slowly turned to face her. Her long, wavy purple hair swayed with her movement, and thick lashes framed her fathomless eyes. And just as Claudia had expected, the girl standing before them bore Fiolina’s face.

“Claudia.”

“I’m surprised you recognize me.” Claudia chuckled, but the expression of the woman standing before her did not change. “Even if the face belongs to the same person, there’s quite a difference between the features of a child’s face and that of an adult. Once, when I was shown a painting of my father made

when he was a child, I didn't even recognize him."

The young woman listened silently.

"Observing my appearance as an adult, most would never suspect that I am, in truth, Princess Claudia who is ten years of age. This is especially true in an era devoid of magic capable of altering one's age."

This was the very reason that Claudia and Noah held the magic in such high regard. It was a most convenient tool as a disguise.

"Yet you recognized me right away, didn't you?" As Claudia tilted her head, her silky, soft-brown hair flowed gracefully over her shoulders. "But you would recognize this magic quite easily, wouldn't you? For you, age-altering magic is hardly a novelty."

Still, the singer said nothing as Claudia walked toward her.

"You're aware that as one's age changes, their face takes on subtle changes as well."

Noah stood silently watching Claudia from his place at the entrance of the chapel. Claudia fixed her own gaze on the girl of about eighteen in front of her.

"You are no eleven-year-old second-year student. You are Fiolina's *twin* sister," Claudia asserted. "Isn't that right, Lauretta?"

The young woman narrowed her eyes, her face devoid of the childlike innocence with which Claudia associated her. Lauretta regarded Claudia with the same facial features as her elder sister, Fiolina.

"You're wrong," she said, her voice reverberating through the chapel. "I am not Lauretta."

"Dear Lauretta, you are a poor liar," Claudia said with a gentle smile. Lauretta pressed her lips together. "You know, both Cedric and Fiolina did tell me that you could solve eighth-year exercises with remarkable ease."

"And is that your sole reason for thinking Lauretta is eighteen?"

Claudia giggled. "Hardly."

While that had been one clue, it wasn't the main reason for Claudia's

conclusion. She decided to explain her reasoning to Laretta step by step.

“You and your sister share a magical essence so remarkably alike that even I, having heard the cursed song, could scarcely tell which of you had cast it,” Claudia explained. “And the same was true of the song I heard in this very chapel. It sounded as though it could have been either you or your sister’s voice. Sure enough, I couldn’t discern between the two.”

Claudia recalled that moment before continuing.

“Even if I had seen your face that night, I doubt I would have been able to tell which of you it was.”

Laretta’s face was, indeed, the very image of Fiolina’s. It was not uncommon for twins to bear some differences in appearance, yet the only distinction between these two lay in their expressions.

“I asked a student who had the trust of the faculty to ask questions concerning the circumstances of Fiolina’s arrival at the academy three years ago. What they discovered was this: Initially, two transfer students were to join the fifth-year class,” Claudia said, still smiling. “But due to what was later recorded as a ‘clerical error in the admissions process,’ one of the admissions was abruptly canceled. And that cancellation, I suspect, was for a twin sister the same age as Fiolina. I suppose that would be you, right, Laretta?”

Claudia’s question hung in the air before Laretta slowly responded.

“You’re wrong... There would be no reason to hide that we are twins.”

“Of course not. But that wasn’t the purpose, was it?”

Laretta’s shoulders tensed, her eyes widening in surprise.

“The reason you hid the fact that you are twins, I suspect, is because you *did not* wish to live here as twins in the first place. Isn’t that so?”

“No! That’s not...!”

“If I may add one more observation, there are instances where being completely identical poses a problem. That is precisely why you altered the age of one twin—to change something specific about them, is it not?”

Claudia calmly touched her own throat.

“The two of you wanted your *voices* to be different.”

Lauretta’s face went pale instantly. “No, that’s not... We didn’t...”

“The person who instructed you to do so no longer seems inclined to keep it a secret.”

Lauretta gasped audibly, her breath catching in her throat. When Claudia slowly turned to look behind her, she saw her—identical in appearance to Lauretta—standing at the entrance to the chapel that Noah was guarding.

“Good evening, Fiolina.”

“Claudia...”

As Fiolina stepped into the chapel, Noah’s quiet voice interrupted her advance.

“I must ask you not to approach Her Highness any further.”

The usual warmth in Fiolina’s smile had vanished, and her face had become a mask of icy indifference, her glare fixed upon Noah. At that moment, the resemblance between Fiolina and Lauretta became indistinguishable.

“I apologize for arriving before the time stated on the invitation,” Claudia said.

“It’s quite all right. I began ahead of schedule myself,” Fiolina replied, smiling with her lips alone. Her eyes remained utterly devoid of emotion.

“Claudia, you look so very grown-up in this form that I mistook you for someone else at first. And to think, you had already discovered we are twins—I took the opportunity to listen from outside, and I must admit I am quite surprised.”

“F-Fiolina,” Lauretta muttered in shock.

“There’s no point in continuing this charade any longer, Lauretta.”

The lie Lauretta had stubbornly clung to was dragged into the light without much resistance by her elder sister. Visibly shaken, Lauretta said nothing. Fiolina refused to look at her.

“More importantly, how did you deduce that our goal was to alter one of our

voices?”

Claudia chuckled. “Fiolina, remember our little tea party?” Standing between the two sisters, Claudia narrowed her eyes slightly. “The teacup and saucer—a hidden design only completed when layered together.”

Fiolina watched her silently.

“At the time, you said that when singing with another person, there are harmonies where you blend different pitches together, but you also spoke of unison, where voices could be layered together.”

The curve of Fiolina’s lips returned to a flat line.

“The magical outburst incident involving Laretta—it occurred late at night when you visited her room, correct?” Claudia asked.

“And what of it?”

“Noah.”

At Claudia’s glance, Noah gave a nod from where he had been keeping Fiolina back.

“The magic to alter one’s age cannot be maintained indefinitely,” Noah explained. “Perhaps that night, Laretta had reverted to her true age.” Noah then turned his gaze to Laretta. “On Her Highness’s first day at the academy, the reason Laretta used magic to try and drive her out of their shared room likely stemmed from more than just shyness or fear of causing another magical incident. Considering Cedric’s account that Laretta’s outburst was powerful enough to damage the barrier, it’s unlikely that merely placing her in her own room assignment would have prevented harm.”

Claudia remembered her conversation with Laretta on that first night:

“If your magic can’t hurt me, are you still afraid of staying here with me too?”

“Only...a little.”

Laretta had been afraid of something more than just her magic harming Claudia.

“The spell that keeps Laretta in her younger form isn’t perfect. She

periodically reverts to her true age. To avoid this being witnessed, she tries to spend as much time alone in her dormitory room as she can. However, when Fiolina visited her dorm that night, something must have happened—because all of the necessary conditions were met.”

Lauretta’s voice possessed a unique magical quality. Even without the formal structure of an incantation, merely speaking Claudia’s name became a spell that enhanced Claudia’s magic. It was highly probable that her twin sister, Fiolina, shared the same ability.

“Twin sisters with identical voices. The activation condition for the curse is *layering*.”

“...quiet,” Fiolina muttered, barely audible.

“When you sing in unison, layering your voices, a powerful magic is unleashed.”

“I said, be quiet!”

“Fiolina!” Lauretta called out.

Fiolina lowered her head, clutching her ears with both hands to shut out Claudia’s words. Lauretta instinctively reached out toward her sister. A glint of silver caught the light on her outstretched hand—it was a silver ring.

Noah caught sight of it, and his gaze shifted immediately to Fiolina’s hand. He tensed when he saw a similar ring gleaming on her finger.

“Cursed artifacts—as I suspected,” Claudia said.

The rings were crafted as mirror images of each other.

“A pair of rings!” Noah exclaimed.

“Two halves of a whole. A single voice is not enough to imbue the song with the curse’s magic,” Claudia explained.

That explained why Fiolina’s singing voice in the classroom left no lingering trace of the curse’s magic—it was incomplete without its counterpart.

“Noah, be on your guard.” Claudia had deliberately raised her voice, ensuring her command to her servant was heard by all. She continued, “I apologize,

Fiolina. Truthfully, I had hoped to resolve this without revealing anything further.”

Fiolina appeared to struggle with the meaning behind Claudia’s words. “What are you talking about?”

“The cast of characters is incomplete. So far, our discussion has not revealed the key person who allowed you to successfully disguise the fact that you are twins.”

In that instant, Fiolina’s face grew taut. “Whatever do you mean? Lauretta’s ability to assume the form of a child is due to our own magic.”

“That, too, is a lie. If you could freely wield such magic, Lauretta wouldn’t have reverted to her adult form—and certainly wouldn’t have caused a magical outburst when it happened, hmm?”

Fiolina tensed.

Claudia laughed softly, placing a finger to her lips. “Neither of you can use age-altering magic.”

“Lauretta!” Fiolina yelled. She was now openly panicking as she turned sharply to her younger twin and issued a command. “Sing! Let us sing the same hymn as before!”

“B-But...”

Claudia had anticipated this. “Noah, cast a spell to prevent them from chanting.”

She knew that, if she gave this order, a certain someone would step in to interfere.

And just as I had planned, he’s here.

Just as Noah began the incantation, it came to a stop, interrupted by the unmistakable light of teleportation magic flaring near the chapel ceiling. From that shimmering light, a lone figure descended.

Noah instinctively summoned a sword forged of magic, its ethereal blade shimmering in the dim chapel light.

The intruder also wielded a sword, bringing it down in a swift arc toward Noah. The two blades clashed violently, the impact sparking and ringing out in the quiet space.

Momentarily repelled, the figure adjusted their stance with ease.

Claudia, observing the man now that he had revealed himself, allowed a satisfied expression to grace her lips.

“I thought a display like this might be enough to draw you out.”

“Ha! So, everything was just as you predicted? You truly are a remarkable witch.”

The young man’s playful tone earned a sharp rebuke from Noah, who pointed his blade at the intruder.

“Do not address Her Highness so casually, Lucas.” Noah’s obsidian eyes glared at the man before him, cold and unyielding. “Or should I call you Sieghart instead?”

At the name Noah uttered, Lucas’s lips curled into a dark smile.

“Sieghart, you say? Do you speak of the crown prince of Lemilsia, perhaps? I’ve no personal acquaintance with him, but I’ve heard of the boy. Twelve years old and a third-year student, is he not? That would make him six years younger than Lucas.”

“You were eavesdropping on Her Highness’s conversation earlier, weren’t you?” Noah replied in a low voice, shielding Claudia behind him.

“Age-altering magic, was it? I’ve never heard of such a thing.”

“It existed five centuries ago. In fact, both Her Highness and I are capable of using it.”

“Just because you can wield such magic doesn’t mean everyone else can,” Lucas said with a dry laugh. He positioned himself so that Fiolina was hidden behind him.

“I never said everyone could. Which is precisely why we know that you and I share the same blood.” Noah watched Lucas with calm eyes. “Five centuries ago, only a few conjurers could wield age-altering magic. You and I both bear

the blood of Reinard, the first king of Lemilsia.”

The man who called himself Lucas—who was, in truth, Sieghart—kept a smirk fixed upon his lips as he glared at Noah.

The “ghost” sightings now mostly speak of a purple-haired girl who looks like Adelheid. This is likely Lauretta, who looks different enough from Fiolina that students wouldn’t have recognized her. However, if one traces the rumors back to their origin, the earliest accounts spoke of a boy’s ghost, Claudia thought.

When Noah had first investigated the ghost stories, he had reported, “Supposedly, when the rumor started, it was about a boy whom no one knew. There were sightings of a boy from the lower grades, but it quickly changed to a rumor about a girl no one knew.”

A young boy from the lower grades whom no one knew—this was likely Sieghart’s true form before his age-altering magic.

And, besides, I spoke with Cedric. Though he conceals his rank, Cedric is the son of a duke from Lemilsia.

Cedric had carried a sense of guilt toward Claudia after their “game.” She had used that guilt to enlist his cooperation in several investigations. One of these was to confirm whether there had been another student who was supposed to transfer in alongside Fiolina. The other, however, was far more revealing: Cedric’s very purpose for being at the academy.

Cedric had confessed that his father, who opposed the current royal family of Lemilsia, had tasked him with infiltrating the academy to monitor the crown prince—a third-year student, like himself. Yet despite his efforts, Cedric had been unable to locate Sieghart.

Cedric’s desperation to find him had only grown after the royal court’s chief conjurer decreed that Sieghart would soon leave the academy. That was why Cedric was wary of Noah—he questioned whether Noah, who is around the same age, was actually Sieghart in disguise. Who could blame him?

Claudia looked at Sieghart, who was facing off against Noah. His eyes were no longer their disguised blue, but instead the same shade of obsidian as Noah’s. *He’s been disguising himself. Not just his name, but his eye color and even his*

age, all magically altered.

There was no way Cedric would have found him. However, Sieghart had now deliberately restored his original eye color.

“You don’t intend to hide yourself anymore, do you?” Noah remarked.

Sieghart let out a self-effacing laugh. “No, there’s no point in pretending now. It’s good to see you again, Leonhard.”



Though Sieghart's eyes shared the same black hue as Noah's, there was no resemblance between them as Sieghart's eyes were narrowed in hatred.

"And I've waited for this moment—for the chance to meet you again, *Adelheid*."

Sieghart surely knew that she was Claudia, but it seemed he had deliberately chosen to address her by this name.

"Did you hear that name from your father?" Claudia asked.

"That day, when you stood with Leonhard on the castle roof, gazing down upon the royal capital..." Lowering his sword, Sieghart took a step forward, moving toward Claudia, whom Noah was still standing in front of. "From that moment, I've been desperate to ask you something."

Claudia laughed. "And what, pray tell, would you want with the one who did *that* to your father?"

"I do not care about such trivial things. What's most important is that..." Sieghart said with a smile, stepping within an arm's reach of Noah.

"Claudia, I wish to propose marriage to you."

In that instant, Noah's blade swept through the air.

Sieghart barely dodged the strike. Noah gave no quarter, immediately adjusting his grip on the blade for another attack.

The clash of steel rang out again as their swords met. Sieghart, observing Noah's precise strikes, laughed in excitement.

"Not only magic but such mastery of the sword as well! You are truly formidable, cousin!"

"Fiolina! Lauretta!" At Sieghart's call, Fiolina flinched. He continued speaking to the sisters even as he traded blows with Noah. "Sing for me as we taught you—now!"

"Lucas..." Fiolina whispered.

“That song will make your wish come true. The power to realize it lies in your hands!”

Claudia narrowed her eyes slightly. There was more to uncover here—she needed a bit more time.

“Then...I’ll do it!” Fiolina said, breaking into a run, heading toward her sister at the far end of the chapel.

“Noah, could you buy us a little time?”

“As you command.”

“Good boy,” Claudia said. She chased after Fiolina, her robe billowing behind her.

Sieghart laughed at their exchange.

“I don’t know what you’re planning, but I must say, I’m jealous.”

“Bark as much as you like,” Noah growled as he deflected Sieghart’s sword with a sharp parry.

Noah was Claudia’s trusted servant. He would never fail to carry out her orders. Confident in this, Claudia didn’t look back. Her attention was focused entirely on the sisters before her.

“Please, let me go!”

Lauretta twisted in an attempt to free herself, but Fiolina’s grip on her shoulder tightened.

“We must sing... Hurry!” Fiolina insisted, her voice frail and trembling. “Our hymn, Lauretta—if we sing together, as we have before, everyone will bend to our will.”

“Fiolina!” Lauretta cried out.

“If we do this, Claudia will always remain our friend. If we become close to the Avianoian princess, maybe Father won’t treat us so harshly anymore. He won’t shut us away!”

Hearing the true purpose behind her invitation to Claudia, Noah furrowed his brows in displeasure.

Fiolina, her head bowed, muttered as if trying to convince herself, “No one will defy us—not people, not ships, not even the sea itself.”

“Fiolina, please stop!” Lauretta cried.

“If we call Claudia to our side and make her ours, no matter what happens, she’ll obey us. After all...” Fiolina slowly raised her head, her voice dropping to a whisper, “As Mother always said, we *are* princesses...”

At that moment, the chapel floor began to warp and shift. Claudia began to sink into the red carpet that covered the marble floor.

When she looked around, all she could see was blue. Schools of fish swam beneath her feet, and her body, which had been in the chapel only moments ago, was now submerged in an underwater world.

Oh?

Claudia let out a small laugh, intrigued by the turn of events. Her hair and skirt floated gently, as though she were adrift.

Yet I can still breathe.

The space around her was vast and the water around her was a clear, shimmering blue and had no discernible temperature.

This isn’t real seawater—it’s an illusion, so advanced that even my eyes are being tricked. A year ago, when Lauretta’s magic ran wild, it wasn’t that the barrier was actually broken; it was an illusion of seawater all along.

This much, Claudia had already suspected.

On her first day at the academy, the dorm room she shared with Lauretta had seemed to be filled with water, like a giant aquarium. But in truth, it hadn’t been water at all.

That water was also an illusion. Even after the magic dissipated and it was time to sleep, neither the bed nor the sheets were wet, and I could go to sleep without tidying anything up.

Understanding that, Claudia had concluded the water had been a highly convincing illusion.

An advanced illusion created by Lauretta—essentially, mental manipulation via magic. And yet...

Claudia pressed down her gently floating skirt as she surveyed her surroundings.

Though the water is an illusion, this space itself is real. The academy's ground—in other words, the seafloor—has been connected to a different place entirely. The illusion of water likely masks the instability of the gravity in this space. No, wait...

Her sharp eyes focused on the distant seabed below.

It's concealing something. In the event someone enters this space, it ensures they don't notice whatever has been sunk down there.

The moment Claudia had that thought, something seized her ankle.

"Everyone, please keep Claudia from leaving," came an echoing voice, as if it were reverberating through the water. Claudia recognized it as Fiolina's.

"If Lucas intends to leave the academy—or propose to Claudia—then perhaps, if Claudia cannot leave, Lucas won't go. Perhaps he won't marry her at all!"

Her delighted laughter filled the water. What gripped Claudia's ankle was one of countless hands reaching up from the seabed below.

The sailors—most of the hands belonged to the missing sailors, their vacant, ghostlike faces looking the same as in the chapel before. Controlled by Fiolina, they were dragging Claudia downward, pulling her into the deep.

These are the sailors who were aboard the missing ships.

Claudia sank slowly like her feet had been caught in thick mud.

The ships lying silent on the seafloor were surely the same vessels that had been dragged down by the very curse that had ensnared their crews.

"Keep her here. And the ship—the one that must be carrying Father's letter!"

A piercing, metallic screech reverberated through the illusory sea.

"No, not just a letter! Surely, Father himself must be aboard that ship! Our great king—come to take us home! So, please! Please stop the ship!"

The curse seemed to resonate with these desperate words.

A powerful wish tied to the curse—a longing for her father to come for her.

The moment one believed in the illusion, mistaking it for true water, they would be unable to breathe. Keeping this in mind, Claudia cast her gaze upward.

“If you cannot do that, then at least, please don’t leave me behind.”

The small silver bubbles rising to the surface were delicate and beautiful, like tiny jellyfish.

“Please don’t go, Lucas. I could not bear it if you were to leave me! You, who helped me even before I transferred to this academy. I obeyed your every instruction. I kept the secret of the magic of layered voices. I acted as though we were not twins!”

Claudia listened silently to Fiolina’s desperate pleas.

“To ensure we wouldn’t activate the magic accidentally, I stayed away from Laretta. To make it seem natural, I even had her pretend to be a failed student. I did everything exactly as you told me to, didn’t I?”

The voice, taut with despair, finally rose to a mournful cry.

“Even though I’ve kept the ring you gave me safe, you were the one that told me that if I wished hard enough, my wish would come true!”

Hearing this, Claudia slowly closed her eyes. *That’s more than enough.*

When she reopened them, she addressed the sailors who clung to her.

“I’m returning to Noah. Would you be so kind as to let me go?”

At her words, the hands stopped moving, freezing in place. Sensing this, Fiolina’s voice reached Claudia.

“Are you giving them commands? How futile. Everyone there has heard our song—they are our audience. Which means they are now our subjects! And subjects obey their sovereign. They will never defy my orders!”

The sailors here were merely victims of the curse. They had only been aboard ships carrying letters to the academy when Fiolina’s magic dragged them into

her grasp.

“Oh, Fiolina,” Claudia said in reproach. “These people cannot be called subjects, hmm?” She smiled with a light laugh. “Loyalty, true loyalty, must be offered willingly by one’s subjects. Obedience without will is nothing more than control, and that is entirely without value.”

“Y-You’re wrong!”

“And furthermore...” Claudia said as she lowered her gaze, extending her hand toward the sailors gathered at her feet. “As for *control*, this is far too crude.”

Fiolina’s gasp echoed through the space as Claudia unleashed her own magic, shattering the false seabed apart.

Then the despairing princess screamed.

“Fiolina!” Laretta yelled as Fiolina collapsed to her knees, clutching her ears.

In the pews of the chapel, the sailors who had been held captive now lay sprawled. They were unconscious, yet their faces were no longer pallid and void of life. The vacant, haunted expressions they once wore had softened.

“This cannot be happening... Our precious magic...!”

“The power you used to drag those ships into the depths—it isn’t magic. It’s a curse.” Claudia’s voice was punctuated by her steps toward the sisters. Fiolina flinched.

“It is a vile power. As for the one who gave you those rings...” Claudia’s gaze locked onto the descendant of her former pupil.

When Claudia had vanished from the chapel, Sieghart, locked in combat with Noah, allowed his focus to waver ever so slightly.

It was the smallest opening, but Noah had no intention of letting it pass him by. Closing the distance in a single step, he thrust his blade toward Sieghart’s eye.

“Whoa! Ha ha!” Sieghart, regaining his focus in the nick of time, dodged the

strike and let out a forced laugh. “Did you not even glance her way? Your liege has been swallowed into Fiolina’s domain!”

“What of it?”

Noah intercepted Sieghart’s blade. Sieghart deftly adjusted the angle of his sword, dispersing the force of Noah’s strike.

“You seem to trust her a great deal!”

He’s good.

Noah shifted his stance, resetting the distance between them as he carefully analyzed the situation.

“Or perhaps,” Sieghart continued, “it’s more so that *she* trusts *you*?”

“It’s both,” Noah replied without hesitation. “Naturally.”

Sieghart’s eyes narrowed. “Why is it, I wonder, that you alone are allowed to remain by Adelheid’s side?”

The emotion in his voice was one Noah had encountered before—envy, colored by bitter longing. This was not the sentiment of a person confronting the accomplice of his father’s tormentor.

“Lady Adelheid and I—are we not your enemies?” Noah questioned.

“Ha! Hardly.” Sieghart attacked Noah again, but Noah deflected the strike, sending the attack rebounding. “My father means nothing to me. The only family I have is my late sister, Anna Marie.”

Noah’s brows furrowed slightly, though it was unlikely Sieghart noticed.

“That day, when Adelheid stood on the rooftop garden overlooking the royal capital... She was breathtaking.”

The sound of clashing steel filled the air as their blades crossed once more. Noah glared at Sieghart, who kept speaking.

“I want to have her. I’ve been preparing for this moment for a long time. Are you certain you should leave her be? If she succumbs to Fiolina’s magic, not even the reincarnation of the legendary witch Adelheid could survive unscathed.”

This boy... Noah grumbled internally.

Noah's blade bounced hard off of Sieghart's, and Noah immediately deflected Sieghart's counterstrike. Their relentless exchange continued. Noah narrowed his gaze.

How does he know she's the reincarnation of Adelheid?

Noah was certain that Claudia had not told him herself. Not that it mattered—Sieghart would never answer truthfully were Noah to ask. More pressing was the subtle shift in energy emanating from the back of the chapel.

It must be time.

Noah readied his sword.

"Has our lady—" Sieghart began.

In a sudden, fluid motion, Noah advanced. Sieghart's eyes widened as Noah stepped into his range, sending Sieghart's sword flying far out of reach.

"Wha—!"

"Abandon this foolish notion of 'having' her."

Momentarily stunned at being disarmed, Sieghart could do nothing as Noah swept his legs out from under him, and then Noah pressed the tip of his blade to Sieghart's throat.

Behind Noah, a flash of light burst forth. He didn't need to turn to know that it was Claudia's magic.

"My master belongs to no one."

"Ha ha!" Sieghart laughed, his gaze shifting between the boy holding the sword squarely at his throat, and the girl who had shattered Fiolina's spatial magic. "So all this time, you were holding back! I gave it everything I had, and yet... Ha ha ha!"

"There's no need to lie. If you'd truly been fighting at full strength, you would have used magic."

Sieghart, his breathing labored, cast a self-deprecating glance at Noah. "One must follow the commands of their guardian, after all."

“What?”

At that moment, the entire chapel shook.

“A curse? That can’t be!”

Claudia lowered her eyes at Fiolina’s desperate cry.

“Lucas told us,” Fiolina insisted, her voice strained. “He said that if Lauretta and I wore these rings and we sang, our wishes would surely come true! So that’s why I—why we—”

“What is your *true* wish?” Claudia’s question caused Fiolina’s slender shoulders to flinch. “To have command over a great many people? Or to trap the ship that wasn’t even carrying the letter you were waiting for in your spatial magic, ensuring it could never escape?”

“That’s not—”

“Did you simply want to be acknowledged as a princess? To live a life befitting your lineage and command the respect of others?” Even as Claudia’s questions pierced Fiolina, her voice remained soft. “That isn’t what you wanted at all, is it?”

Fiolina’s eyes overflowed with tears, threatening to spill at any moment.

“Your only wish,” Claudia continued softly, “was for your father to come for you. Isn’t that right?”

“Ah...”

At those words, pearl-like tears fell down Fiolina’s cheeks.

“To twist such a modest wish into malice and to spread that malice to others—that could only be a curse. What else could you possibly call it?”

“But... I...”

“Things could have been different...” Claudia said, turning her eyes to the girl who sat next to this crying princess. “You have always had family by your side, Fiolina.”

Fiolina gasped, her eyes widening in startled realization.

“You gained the power of a curse. To conceal the condition required to activate it, you went as far as to alter your sister’s age. You stayed apart to avoid triggering the curse by mistake. But was that truly the right choice?”

“I... I...”

“Just as your father kept his distance from you, Fiolina, you distanced yourself from Laretta—”

“Stop it!”

The voice that rang out was not Fiolina’s.

Laretta, trembling at her sister’s side, threw her arms around Fiolina as if to protect her from Claudia’s words. Her tearful gaze was fixed on Claudia.

“Please, Claudia. No more.”

“Laretta...”

A tingling sensation constricted Claudia’s throat, startling her. Nonetheless, she couldn’t help smiling.

To think her magic could almost silence my voice... Magic fueled by raw emotion is far more potent than ordinary magic.

Laretta, as if drawing on every ounce of courage, spoke carefully, each word heavy with meaning.

“My sister...has always protected me.”

“Laretta?” Fiolina looked up at her younger sister. She was still held tightly in Laretta’s arms, her expression one of wonder.

“Before Mother passed away, Fiolina sang on the street corners to gather money for her medicine. And for our food as well.”

“That was so long ago...”

“I’m here today because of you, Fiolina. I’ll do anything to help you. Anything.” Even as she spoke, Laretta’s tears streamed down her face. “I... I’m sorry, Fiolina...”

“Laretta, wh-why are you crying?” her sister asked.

“I’ll do anything to help you. It’s true. It really is...but I’m sorry, please...” Her face scrunched from emotion, Lairetta sobbed uncontrollably, yet she pushed through the tears to say, “Please... I don’t want to sing a song that will hurt Claudia!”

Claudia’s eyes widened slightly.

“I-I...” Hearing her sister’s heartfelt plea, Fiolina’s face contorted with guilt, mirroring Lairetta’s anguish. “I’m sorry, Lairetta.”

Lairetta continued to sob.

“I’m your sister. Your twin. And yet I forced you to endure so much for my sake, to try and hurt what you hold dear.” With trembling arms, Fiolina pulled Lairetta into an embrace. “I’m sorry, Lairetta. As long as I have you, I don’t need Father to come for us!”

Lairetta gasped.

Claudia smiled as she watched silently. With a turn, she gave a signal to Noah, who had just finished binding Sieghart with magic.

“I’ve neutralized Sieghart, as per Your Highness’s prior instructions,” Noah said once he’d walked over.

“Good boy, Noah.”

Claudia turned back to the sisters. “May I destroy those rings?”

The sobbing twins wiped their tear-streaked faces, exchanged a glance, and nodded to one another. They extended their hands toward Claudia.

“Thank you.”

Claudia smiled and began to chant a spell.

The rings encircling the twins’ fingers glowed faintly before slipping free.

The two rings floated gently upward, rising toward the chapel ceiling.

“With this, it’s over.” Claudia closed her right hand into a fist, and with a *snap*, the rings shattered in midair.

Fiolina and Lairetta cried out as the chapel was flooded with an intense light.

Noah pulled Claudia into his arms, shielding her from the blinding light. When it finally subsided, Claudia lifted her face from Noah's chest to find Fiolina and Lauretta asleep, holding each other as if both had been trying to protect the other.

"And so, the case has been solved. Everything has gone precisely as planned," Claudia said with a giggle, slipping slowly from Noah's embrace. "The sailors trapped by the spatial magic should now be scattered throughout the academy grounds. As for the students who were being controlled, they'll all be unconscious as well. Karlheinz, who should still be awake, can handle the rest of the cleanup."

"Understood, but... Your Highness...are you certain this was the best course of action? Even though it all unfolded as you planned..."

Noah's expression was conflicted as his gaze shifted to the corner of the chapel. Claudia followed his line of sight with a knowing smile.

Sieghart, whom Noah had restrained, was no longer there.

"Are you worried about letting Sieghart escape?"

She had given Noah precise instructions beforehand: Detain Sieghart just long enough for her to uncover the information she needed. And then, when the time came, make sure that the magic detaining him was deliberately lax—allowing him to escape.

"He desires you, Your Highness. There's no telling what he might attempt." Noah's warning was heavy.

"That's exactly why we needed to let him go. Your cousin may be connected to someone whose actions I'd like to understand more clearly."

Earlier, within the spatial magic, Fiolina had revealed something intriguing.

It had been Sieghart who had given the rings to Fiolina and Lauretta while whispering instructions to them from the shadows. He had been influencing them even before Fiolina's entrance into the academy.

"Royals and those of royal blood are receiving cursed artifacts. I had suspected this wasn't random. Now, finally, we've begun to grasp at the

threads tying it all together,” Claudia said.

There was no doubt that Sieghart had been in contact with someone who was using the artifacts.

“Sieghart was also aware that you are the reincarnation of Adelheid, Your Highness. Additionally, there is one more thing you should know. When crossing swords with me, he never once used magic.”

“There must be a reason for that, and for the enemy refraining from direct contact with us until now, even though they know I’m a princess from Avianoia.” Claudia paused to stretch her languid body. “But pondering it further right now won’t do us any good. It’s been a long time since I’ve broken a curse. I’m tired.”

“Your Highness, surely you’re not...”

“Noah,” she said, smiling. She extended her arms toward him, her voice taking on its usual playful tone. “I’m sooo sleepy. Will you carry me?”

Noah pressed a hand to his forehead and let out a long, exasperated sigh. “As you wish, Your Highness. But at least revert to your child form first.”

Claudia giggled. “Thank you! Being in your arms always makes me feel safe. I’m sure I’ll have lovely dreams tonight.”

Claudia turned back toward the sleeping twins. She slipped off her uniform robe and gently draped it over their entwined forms, where they lay in their slumber.

“There’s no reason to sing a lullaby,” she murmured.

With that, Claudia reverted to her smaller, childlike form. Noah lifted her into his arms, where she fell asleep.

Epilogue

On the final day of her enrollment, which came at the end of August, Claudia had exchanged her academy uniform for a vibrant yellow dress. Her robe was carefully packed away in her travel bag.

“It’s only been a short time, but I’ll miss this place,” she said.

She was standing next to Noah, holding a large hat in place on her head with one hand, while the other was clasped firmly in Noah’s hand.

Noah was no longer in his uniform either. Instead, he was dressed in formal attire as Claudia’s attendant.

“The lessons at the academy were so refreshing—I truly enjoyed them. I’ll have plenty of stories to share with Father, won’t I, Karlheinz?” Claudia mused. She turned her gaze to Karlheinz, who stood on her other side.

“If this place has been kind to Your Highness, then His Majesty will undoubtedly be delighted to hear of it,” he replied.

“We won’t be able to tell the whole story to Father, but I truly am grateful that you came. To think that you managed to care for that many people when they collapsed across the academy all on your own. It’s incredible.”

“In the chaos of a battlefield, such tasks are commonplace. What required far more effort, however...”

“Undoubtedly, the things you needed to do to cover up the damage caused by the curse, yes?” Claudia interjected with a knowing smile.

Karlheinz gave a silent nod.

“Noah and I both hold you in the highest regard. Isn’t that right, Noah?”

“It is. It was incredible how you so easily uncovered the headmistress’s extensive embezzlement of donations from Fiolina’s father. Using that truth as leverage to force her into announcing that a mysterious student had broken the curse under the alias ‘Lucas’—that was a stroke of brilliance.”

“And on top of that,” Claudia added, “you even convinced the headmistress that you were the one who resolved the situation. From her perspective, Karlheinz is the hero of the hour. She would never suspect little old me.”

Claudia was clearly pleased with this outcome. Karlheinz, however, looked deeply troubled that he had needed to reluctantly accept the mantle of hero for her sake.

“Noah and Karlheinz—I’m so fortunate to have such loyal vassals whom I can trust with all my heart.”

“Truly, you are incorrigible,” Karlheinz replied with a resigned sigh, though his expression softened.

Though they were not bound to her by magic, both Noah and Karlheinz had made it clear that Claudia’s words alone were reward enough. Their loyalty was something Claudia deeply cherished.

“I’ll ensure you are both rewarded properly, so think of what you’d like. Oh, and Noah, we’ll need to reward Cedric as well.”

“I’ve already made arrangements. Once his withdrawal from the academy is complete and he has returned home, he will contact us discreetly.”

“You’re always a step ahead,” she said with a laugh.

Cedric, who had infiltrated the academy for political ambition, no longer had reason to remain after the departure of Crown Prince Sieghart. Claudia’s gratitude toward him, however, extended beyond just his contributions to their investigation.

Cedric, for his part, had been frustrated that he hadn’t been able to see through the trick of age-altering magic, but he had promised his cooperation going forward.

The Lemilsian royal family, Sieghart’s movements, and the people with whom he is involved...

The chief conjurer of Lemilsia had been the one to decide that Sieghart should withdraw from the academy.

Is the chief conjurer truly nothing more than a servant of the royal family?

Still, no matter how suspicious, it would be unwise to act without proper preparation.

Sieghart and his associates were already aware that Claudia was an Avianoian princess. And that wasn't a recent discovery—they had likely known for quite some time. Yet Sieghart had chosen to approach her only within the confines of the academy.

And when his true identity had finally been revealed, he'd had the audacity to brazenly propose marriage.

Even Sieghart's reasons for being at the academy remained a mystery.

As Claudia pondered this, Karlheinz said, "The ship is nearly ready. I will teleport there now with your belongings to finalize the preparations. You may join me shortly with Noah."

"Thank you, Karlheinz. We will see you soon," Claudia replied.

Once Karlheinz departed, Claudia turned to Noah beside her. She couldn't help smiling when recalling Karlheinz's report from a few days prior.

"Even so, it was a surprise. I thought Fiolina's father might choose to abandon his daughters entirely. Promising fair compensation to the sailors who had been kidnapped and offering heartfelt apologies to the nations affected—he's taking responsibility not just as a king but also as a father."

"That doesn't make up for everything that happened. Still, he's helping to shoulder what Fiolina and Laretta couldn't possibly bear alone."

Noah seemed to always take a harsh view of the role of a father. Claudia laughed. She glanced back at the school building one last time.

"Laretta also wrote a letter of apology to Cedric, just as she promised. She's still frightened of him, but she wants to send it before he leaves the academy. Furthermore, it seems she and Fiolina decided to write a letter to the entire student body."

"Together?"

"Yes, the two of them. The responsibility for what has happened has been placed on Laretta alone, but this is a matter for both twins to take

responsibility for. Fiolina knows that.”

This information about the letter hadn’t come from Lauretta, but from Cedric himself.

In truth, since the night she had destroyed the cursed rings, Claudia hadn’t seen Lauretta even once.

In the commotion that followed, the adults had summoned Lauretta, who hadn’t returned.

The same was true for Fiolina, which had led to a flurry of rumors circulating through the academy. Most of the things being said were wild speculation, but one detail appeared to be true: Fiolina and Lauretta, who had rarely spoken to each other before, were now never seen apart.

Glowing letters appeared in the air in front of Claudia.

“A message from Karlheinz. The ship is ready,” she said.

The ships crossing these waters would never again vanish without warning. That thought brought her a sense of relief as she started to walk. But when she glanced back, she noticed Noah was standing still, rooted in place.

“Noah? What’s the matter?”

“It’s nothing. It’s just...” Noah took her hand once more. “You seemed reluctant to leave.”

Now that he mentioned it, Claudia realized something unusual—normally, it was she who playfully reached for his hand, yet today, it was Noah who had taken hers.

“Hmm... You’re right. I do feel a little sad,” Claudia admitted, her words having an almost melodic quality to them. “But that’s only natural. After all, in this life, I’ve decided to do only what I truly want to do.”

“Your Highness...”

“Staying at the academy forever was never what I wanted. It’s only natural that farewells be a part of this journey. I am content with that.”

Claudia’s departure from the academy had been kept a secret from the other

students. Just as was true in all the places she visited to break curses, she would leave without fanfare.

“Come now, Noah. Let’s go.” With those words, Claudia activated her teleportation magic.

Though she often left such spells to Noah these days, teleportation magic was one of her specialties. As they were gently enveloped by a soft, glowing light, Noah’s gaze shifted upward, as though he had noticed something.

“Your Highness.”

Claudia let out a soft gasp of surprise as Noah suddenly lifted her into his arms.

Perched securely, her vantage point now elevated, she watched as Noah raised his free hand and pointed toward the academy building.

“Over there... Look.”

At a window on the second floor, two girls leaned out, their purple hair identical.

Even from this distance, their resemblance was uncanny. Yet, even with their natural forms restored, it was easy to tell which was the elder sister and which was the younger.

“Claudia!” Laretta’s voice, louder than Claudia had ever heard it, rang out clearly across the distance. “Thank you!”

Laretta’s words transformed into a spell, the magic swirling gently around Claudia like a soft current.

The enchantment, reminiscent of water, was a magic they had played with often in their dorm room.

“Magical fish...”

The shimmering fish Laretta conjured darted around Claudia and Noah, playfully brushing against their skin and clothing.

Their gentle touches carried a warm, soothing energy that Claudia recognized as restorative magic.

She's saying, "Take care."



Claudia understood the sentiment behind Lauretta's magic, but she chose not to respond with the same magic. Instead of leaving fish behind, she waved energetically in their direction.

"Lauretta! Fiolina! Bye-bye!"

The twins looked like they were about to cry. When they nodded, Claudia activated her teleportation spell.

"Ah—whoa!"

She heard Noah's startled voice as the world tilted sharply.

A moment later, now in the cabin of their ship, Noah landed on a bed, still holding Claudia in his arms.

As she looked down at him, Claudia noticed the knowing expression on his face—he had clearly realized that she had deliberately set the teleportation spell to take them to her bed.

"Your Highness," he muttered.

Claudia threw her arms around him, clinging tightly, prompting him to let out a long, weary sigh.

"Please refrain from clinging to me as you fall asleep when you're still in high spirits. You are, after all, older than me on the inside."

"Oh my, how insolent of you, Noah. I simply wish to sleep in my favorite place." Lying sprawled across his chest, Claudia leaned forward to peer into his face, her expression mischievous. "Even if I were to sink to the bottom of the sea, I'd feel safe as long as you were there, Noah."

"I..." Noah began hesitantly. Claudia let out a small gasp as Noah suddenly pulled her closer, wrapping her in a firm embrace. "The truth is, I can hardly breathe when you're in danger. No matter how much faith I have in you, the thought of you being swallowed by an enemy's magic is enough to still my heart."

Noah's words, spoken quietly into her hair, carried the weight of a confession—a glimpse into his heart.

Claudia realized how much she must worry him. And yet, Noah stayed at her side, striving to ensure that her every wish was fulfilled to the best of his ability.

To have someone like him by her side was irreplaceable.

Claudia recalled the sailors trapped in Fiolina's spatial magic, forced into obedience. "If fate had played out differently, and I hadn't met you when I did, I doubt I would have ever allowed anyone to stay by my side again in this second chance at life."

Even if the sequence of events had been altered and she had encountered Sieghart first, she knew she would never have accepted him as her servant.

In her past life, she had lost so many apprentices that the fear of such loss still haunted her. That was why she had resolved, in this life, never to allow anyone to remain by her side for too long. And yet, Noah had overturned that resolve and was still by her side.

To gain someone like that was a feat even a masterful conjurer could rarely achieve. No spell of domination, no cursed artifact, could ever bring such a bond into existence.

"Your Highness..."

Even though Claudia had only spoken what she truly felt, Noah exhaled slowly as he took in her words. Claudia noticed there was something different about the way he held her now.

"You are my queen. No matter how our fate might have been different, no matter what way we met, I would have sworn my loyalty to you just the same."

Claudia smiled. "Truly?"

"Truly. No matter what."

Noah's words carried a weight that felt almost magical as if imbued with a spell of their own.

For a fleeting moment, Claudia wondered if Noah, like Lauretta, possessed some rare form of enchanted speech. Of course, she knew better. But in the haze of drowsiness, her imagination wandered.

Noah held her close, gently stroking her hair, until Claudia finally drifted off to

sleep.

In the rooftop garden, where flowers bloomed wildly, Sieghart allowed his thoughts to drift into memory.

It had been years since he had last taken his true form, as his time at the academy had required otherwise. Now, as he stood in the body of a twelve-year-old boy, he saw things from a different point of view.

Yet the images burned into his obsidian eyes had never changed, not once in the years of concealing their true color.

“Four years... It was worth the wait,” he murmured to himself.

He stood where Adelheid had once stood, overlooking the royal capital. What had she been thinking as she gazed out over the city below?

The image of her as he had seen her as a child merged with the image of her as he had seen her in the chapel at the bottom of the sea.

“The forced teleportation worked. By using the magical formula to neutralize her magic, I was able to undo the magic that was altering her hair color. The research is progressing. No issues so far.”

His thoughts turned to the youth who had stood by her side, the one who shared his obsidian eyes.

“Adelheid and Leonhard...”

The wind carried the names he whispered into the night of Lemilsia.

To be continued...



Special Story: How to Cherish an Adorable Servant

Now thirteen years old, Noah had grown taller, reaching a height of 162 centimeters. This meant he now stood taller than Claudia, who, even in her adult form, measured a mere 157 centimeters.

As a result, Claudia now found that she was always looking up at Noah. The realization stirred a mischievous impulse within her, compelling her to voice something a bit self-indulgent.

“Why, upon further reflection, it seems I’m nothing but a child compared to you!” she declared with an impish grin.

“Your Highness...” Noah said in exasperation. The expression he wore more than showed that he was dubious about where this thread of conversation would lead. Although he was ordinarily most dutiful, he never had patience with this kind of teasing.

Claudia was sitting at a table, sipping her tea.

“With the life experience of someone who lived until the age of eighteen, what could possibly prompt such a claim?” Noah said as he cleaned the teapot.

“In this life, I’m only ten years old,” Claudia countered with a mock affront. “Whereas you are thirteen—three years my elder, in fact!”

Noah frowned. It was when she saw this exact expression that Claudia would think that Noah was beginning to resemble Karlheinz.

For a boy of thirteen, Noah’s single-minded devotion to duty was perhaps not in his own best interest. It was this that drove Claudia to draw him into her schemes, helping him enjoy moments of levity for his own good.

Claudia giggled.

“What is that smile for, Your Highness?” Noah asked warily.

Oh, do relax. It’s not like I’m going to do anything nefarious, she thought.

She enthusiastically voiced her idea. “I’ve thought of something delightful!

For a little while, treat me as a child and dote upon me.”

At this, Noah’s frown deepened even more. “What exactly do you mean by ‘dote upon you’?”

“Oh, something simple! For instance, you might offer me a sweet and feed it to me.” She demonstrated by opening her mouth wide and saying, “Ahhhh.”

Noah took the opportunity to place a freshly baked cookie into her mouth.

Claudia bit down happily. As she chewed, Noah poured her a second cup of tea.

“Mmm, that was delicious. And after this, perhaps we might hold hands as we walk and admire the flowers outside together?”

Without saying a word, Noah held out his hand. She took it and he transported them both into the forest.

The tower in which they lived was surrounded by dense woods teeming with magical creatures, yet to Claudia and Noah, this was merely their garden.

“Oh, look, Noah—a butterfly!” Claudia exclaimed in delight.

“This is a species that feeds primarily on nectar. They often frequent flower fields; shall we follow it?” Noah asked.

Hand in hand, they made their way to a riverside meadow where clusters of white blossoms swayed gently in the breeze. After walking some distance, Claudia seated herself upon a smooth stone at the riverbank to rest.

“If you’re to indulge me as a child,” she said, “then you might also remove my shoes, wash my feet, and put them back on for me.”

“Very well. If I may.”

Noah first removed his own boots and stepped into the water up to his ankles. Then, he carefully unfastened Claudia’s shoes and slipped them off.

Next, he pulled off her stockings, letting her toes dip in the cool, clear water. The sunlight filtered through the trees and painted the scene with shifting patterns. The sensation of the flow of the clean water on Claudia’s toes was refreshing.

After Claudia had fully enjoyed the water, Noah dried her feet with a fluffy towel. With her footwear snugly secured, Claudia extended her arms toward Noah.

“When indulging someone as a child, carrying them is an absolute must. So, Noah—up we go!”

Noah hesitated for only a moment. “As you wish. Here, Your Highness.”

Noah lifted Claudia into his arms. She was seated securely on one of his forearms, allowing her to gaze down at him.

“How very high up this feels! It offers quite a view. Being treated as a child every now and then is rather fun.”

“Your Highness...” Noah stared up at Claudia as he supported her. His tone was as candid as the mild suspicion in his expression.

“You say ‘now and then,’ and yet, all of these so-called ‘childlike indulgences’ are things I regularly do for you already, are they not?”

Oh, dear. He’s caught on, Claudia thought, though outwardly she put on a startled expression. Of course, Noah likely saw through her acting with ease.

“Your Highness.”

“Well, can you blame me? Lately, you’ve stopped allowing *me* to dote on *you*. Thus, I’ve no choice but to be the one doted upon instead, wouldn’t you agree?”

“Please, wait a moment. I fail to see the logic.”

“For instance, you’ve taken to using more formal speech when speaking to Karlheinz and other adults. I feel that I can no longer dote upon you as I would a child.” Claudia pouted. “And I so adored how only you called me ‘Princess.’”

These days, Noah had adopted the same formal “Your Highness” as everyone else. Losing his unique way of address was, if she were honest, just a little disappointing.

“I...” Noah’s voice faltered slightly, in his discomfort. “I cannot afford to act like a child forever. Should my behavior fall short of propriety, it may reflect poorly upon your reputation as well, Your Highness.”

“I don’t care about my reputation even a little bit. Nor would I dream of stopping you from speaking however you wish. However,” she added, playfully, “if you insist on maturing so quickly, then I see no harm in compensating for my sadness by enjoying being treated as a child in your stead.”

Noah was at a loss for words. His expression betrayed a flicker of uncertainty. Claudia guessed that he was gauging just how much truth lay behind her claim of *sadness*. It was precisely this earnestness, this gentle sincerity, that Claudia found so endearing about him.

“Whether you’re my adorable Noah or my dashing Noah, you will always be precious to me,” she said.

“If I may say one thing, Your Highness,” Noah said quietly with an air of unease. He averted his gaze. “I do not consider my daily care of you as treating you as a child.”

“Oh? Is that so?” Claudia replied, laughing softly. “Then what, pray tell, would you call it?”

Noah’s obsidian-black eyes turned to meet hers. “It’s my duty to you as my queen.”

Caught off guard, Claudia sat blinking.

“Whether you are a child or an adult, whatever you wish of me, I shall see it done,” he continued, his voice straight and true.

“Noah...” she whispered. “If I wished to pat your head, would you allow it?”

Noah’s face flinched as if in pain, but he hesitated only for a moment before he nodded stiffly. “As you wish.”

“Oh my. Thank you!” Claudia said, her smile bright as she reached up to gently stroke his head.

Though Claudia could sense his unease, Noah nonetheless closed his eyes as her hand rested on his soft black hair. She ran her fingers tenderly through the strands, relishing the feel of the ends of his hair that poked out slightly and the deep, rich shade of black that seemed almost to shimmer.

It’s true. This is something different from the indulgence of a child.

When she had finally stroked his hair to her heart's content, Claudia withdrew her hand.

"That was quite satisfying. Thank you for indulging me, Noah."

Her heartfelt gratitude was met with a moment of silence as Noah blinked in surprise. Then he broke into a rare smile.

"Then, it was to your liking?"

Oh my.

His vulnerable, boyish smile contrasted with his typical serious expression.

He had likely found some happiness in Claudia's delight at patting his head.

He's grown into quite the dashing figure...but he's still adorable to me.

Even if he were to become an adult, she suspected he would always be the same adorable Noah to her. Imagining such a future, Claudia suddenly wrapped her arms around him in a tight embrace.

"Y-Your Highness!" Noah exclaimed.

Claudia, utterly unbothered by his flustered reaction, stifled a yawn before issuing her next request.

"After splashing about in the water, I've grown rather sleepy. Let's have a nap now. Would you kindly conjure a hammock for me with your magic?" She blended her childlike demands with the authoritative tone befitting her role as his liege. "Make it a large one. Big enough for the both of us. We'll nap together."

"That would be most improper," Noah began, his voice a mix of protest and resignation.

"It's a mistress's duty to ensure her servant gets proper rest, especially one in the midst of a growth spurt, don't you agree?"

She knew all too well that Noah couldn't say no when she smiled at him like this. As expected, he hesitated briefly before exhaling in quiet defeat.

"As Your Highness commands."

"And until I drift off to sleep," Claudia added, "you'll stroke my hair."

Thus, a hammock was strung up between two sturdy trees, swaying gently in the sunlight of early September, and together they enjoyed a peaceful afternoon nap.

THE END

Afterword

I'm Touko Amekawa. Thank you so much for picking up volume 3 of *The Legendary Witch*!

More than two years have passed since the previous volume, and Claudia is now ten years old, and her servant, Noah, is thirteen. Their official ages are ten and thirteen, but since Noah's birthday is in November and Claudia's is in December, and the story takes place in August, technically this is the year they turn eleven and fourteen! So far, each volume has jumped two years ahead, but I'm excited for you to see how old they'll be in the next one!

Once again, I had the honor of having the wonderful Kuroyuki-sensei illustrate this volume! Each time I plan the setting for a new volume of *The Legendary Witch*, I look forward to seeing what kind of cover art Kuroyuki-sensei will create. This time, the design was absolutely adorable, with cute aquatic designs and musical symbols! The three new characters in this volume are a perfect mix of cute, cool, and elegant, and I can't help but adore them. Thank you so much for bringing this world to life with your art!

This volume wouldn't have been possible without the support of so many people, starting with my editor. I'm deeply grateful to everyone who lent their time and effort to make it happen. To all of you who patiently supported me through the process, thank you from the bottom of my heart. This book means so much to me, and I couldn't have done it without your help.

I'm also thrilled to announce that as of February 2023, *The Legendary Witch* is being serialized as a manga by the amazing Nae Serizawa-sensei! The manga brings the story to life with incredible energy and a sense of immersion. It captures everything from the coolness of Claudia and Noah to their more playful sides. I hope you'll enjoy following the manga as much as I have!

The story will continue in volume 4, and it's only thanks to the readers who support this series and everyone involved in its creation that I'm able to keep sharing it with you. Through these stories, I'll keep doing my best to give

something back to reward you for this support.











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by Touko Amekawa

Translated by Jeremy Browning Edited by Carly Smith

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