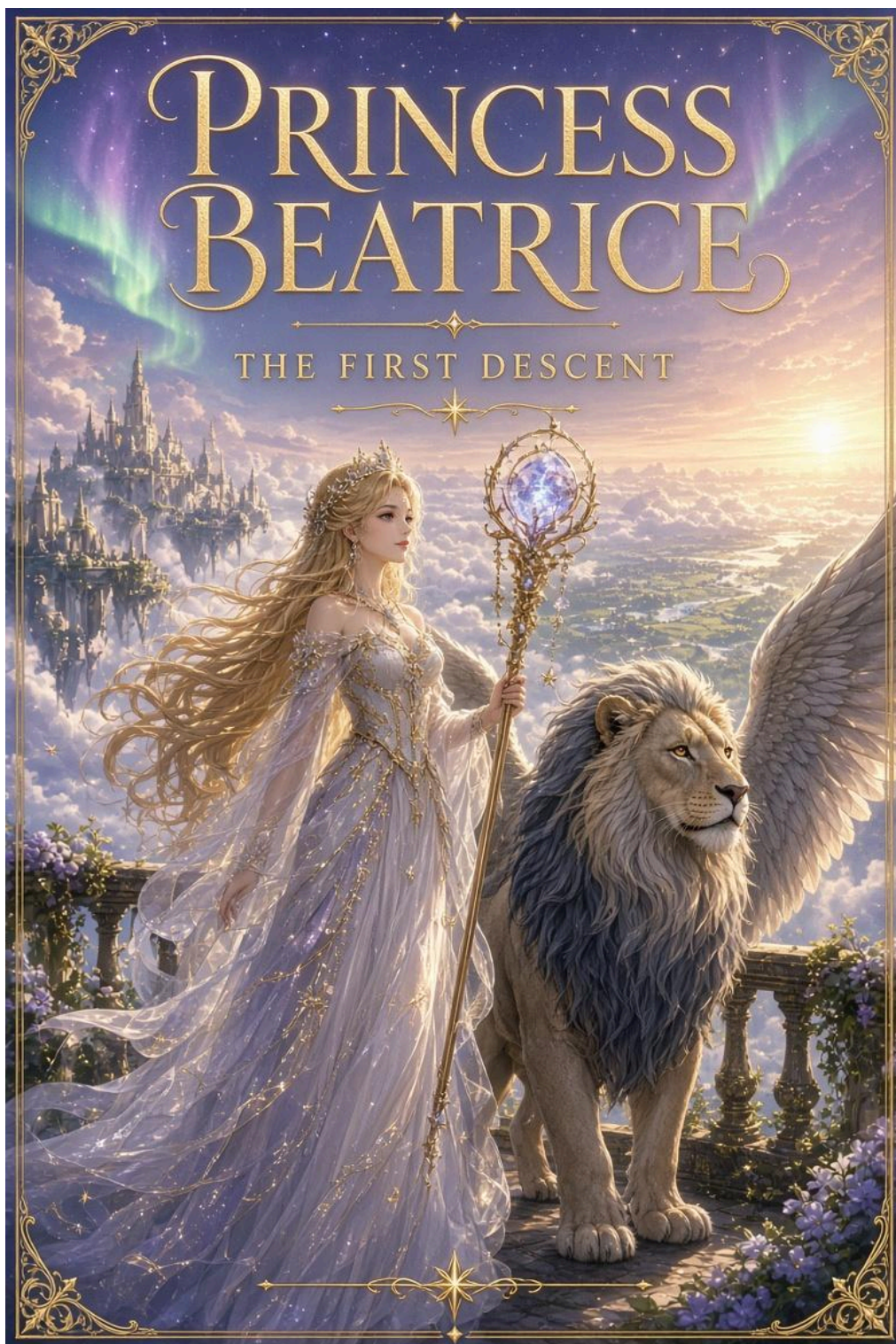




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Princess Beatrice: The First Descent

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****Princess Beatrice: The First Descent****

Character List

****Princess Beatrice of Nooaje****

Princess of the floating city. Rider of the winged lion Zephyrus. Bearer of a staff woven with the power of storms and light. She does not seek thrones. She seeks only to answer the darkness she finds below.

****Zephyrus****

A winged lion of storm-colored mane and golden eyes. Companion, mount, and the only soul to whom Beatrice speaks her true burdens.

****Prince Willip of Tarfantia****

Young ruler of the emerald valley kingdom. Fair of face, kinder of heart. He wears the crown as a duty, never as a prize.

****Cassian****

Eldest advisor to Prince Willip. Loyal, observant, and quietly protective of the prince's guarded heart.

****King Oswin****

The late king of Tarfantia. Father of Willip. His absence still shapes the kingdom.

Chapter 1

The Edge of the World

There were mornings in Nooaje when the floating city seemed to hold its breath.

Beatrice stood at the outermost terrace of the high gardens, bare feet against cool white stone, and watched the world turn far below. Clouds drifted like slow rivers. The land beneath them was a patchwork of dark forests, pale rivers, and the faint scars of roads. From this height the suffering of the world looked almost gentle. Distance had a way of lying.

Zephyrus waited behind her, wings folded, mane stirring in the high wind. He did not urge her. He never did. He simply existed at her side, patient as old weather.

Beatrice rested one hand on the carved rail. Her staff leaned against her shoulder, its length etched with patterns that shifted when the light caught them—like lightning frozen in crystal. She wore the traveling gown: soft grey-blue, practical, the hem weighted so it would not catch in flight. The stardust weave she reserved for moments that needed wonder. Today needed only resolve.

“They will not know I came,” she said quietly.

Zephyrus rumbled, low and distant, the sound of thunder deciding whether to become a storm.

“I know,” she answered. “That is the point.”

She had learned long ago that gratitude could become a chain as easily as cruelty could. Better to arrive, do what must be done, and leave before anyone tried to make her a symbol. Symbols were heavy. She already carried enough.

She turned and laid her palm against the great lion’s muzzle. His breath was warm. His eyes held the deep gold of late afternoon sun through storm clouds.

“Ready?”

He lowered his shoulder. Beatrice swung up with the ease of long habit, settled between the powerful wings, and took the staff in her right hand. The moment her weight settled, Zephyrus stepped to the edge.

For a heartbeat they hung there—princess and lion, city and sky.

Then he leapt.

The world dropped away.

Wind roared past her ears. The floating gardens of Nooaje shrank to white petals scattered on blue. Beatrice leaned forward, feeling the familiar surge of power as Zephyrus's wings caught the air and turned the fall into flight. Clouds tore around them. Light flashed gold and silver across his feathers. Below, the land grew clearer, sharper, real.

This was the first descent of the season. Beatrice did not yet know it would change everything.

She only knew that somewhere beneath the clouds, someone needed her.

Chapter 2

The Weight of a Crown

In the valley kingdom of Tarfantia, the morning light fell soft across emerald fields and golden rivers.

Prince Willip rode without banner or escort along the outer farm roads, sleeves rolled, the simple dark cloak of a traveling merchant thrown over his shoulders. His hair—the color of ripe wheat—caught the sun. His eyes, the grey-green of the sea after rain, missed little. He stopped often: to speak with a farmer whose irrigation ditch had collapsed, to lift a fallen beam with two laborers, to listen while an old woman complained that the tax collectors had grown too proud.

He listened more than he spoke. That was the vow he had made the night after his father's death, kneeling alone before an empty throne while the court slept.

I will not rule as a man above his people. I will rule as a man among them, or not at all.

The court chronicler who had hidden in the shadows that night had written that the torches burned brighter afterward. Willip still did not know if that was true. He only knew he had kept the vow every day since.

When he returned to the palace near midday, Cassian was waiting in the east courtyard, arms folded, expression carefully neutral.

"You were gone before dawn again," the advisor said.

"The northern fields needed eyes that were not already tired of looking at them."

Cassian fell into step beside him. "And the matter of the southern duchess?"

Willip's mouth tightened almost imperceptibly. "She returns home tomorrow with my thanks and a gift of good Tarfantian wine. That is all."

"My prince—"

“I know what you would say.” Willip stopped at the fountain and watched the water spill. “That a kingdom needs a queen. That the people watch and wonder. That I cannot keep my heart locked forever.”

Cassian’s voice softened. “I would say that you deserve someone who sees the man as clearly as the crown.”

Willip was quiet for a long moment. Then he said, almost to himself, “When I find her, I will know. Until then I will not pretend.”

He did not see the faint, knowing look that crossed Cassian’s face. The advisor had served the royal house long enough to recognize the shape of a heart that had not yet met its match—and to know that such hearts were often the ones that recognized the match instantly when it finally appeared.

Chapter 3

Rumors of Chains

The first reports reached Beatrice three nights later, carried on the wind and the talk of river traders.

A quiet trade in human lives had taken root along the lower docks of Tarfantia’s capital. Officially the kingdom forbade slavery. Unofficially, a small, careful cabal had found ways to move people through the shadows—debtors, refugees, the desperate—selling them downriver to buyers who asked no questions. The operation was clever. It left few traces. The prince’s laws were strong, but laws only reached as far as the light.

Beatrice listened to the traders from the shadowed edge of a riverside inn, hood drawn low, staff disguised as a simple walking stick. Zephyrus waited in the deep forest two miles inland, hidden by old magic and the natural caution of creatures that knew better than to approach a winged lion.

She did not need long to decide.

That night she crossed into Tarfantia under cloud cover, descending in silence among the tall pines west of the capital. Zephyrus landed without a sound. Beatrice slid down, pressed her forehead briefly to his, and whispered, “Stay close. If I call, come.”

He rumbled agreement.

Then she walked alone toward the river.

Chapter 4

The Warehouse

The place smelled of damp wood, old fear, and the river's slow rot.

Beatrice moved through the darkness like a second shadow. Her staff rested lightly in her hand, its power held tight and quiet. She had already freed seven captives from the outer storage rooms—cutting chains with precise bursts of wind-sharpened force, guiding the dazed men and women toward the rear exits she had unlocked earlier. She worked fast and without speech. Panic was an enemy. Silence was a tool.

She was kneeling beside the eighth set of chains when a soft footfall sounded behind her.

She turned, staff already rising, and found herself facing a hooded figure in the low lantern light. Tall. Broad-shouldered. A sword at his hip, hand resting on the hilt but not yet drawn. He had been moving through the warehouse the same way she had—freeing captives, quiet, efficient.

For a heartbeat they simply looked at each other.

"You are either very brave or very foolish to be here alone," the stranger said. His voice was low, controlled, the accent pure Tarfantian court, though he tried to roughen it.

Beatrice did not lower the staff. "I could say the same of you. Though I notice you have not drawn that sword on me, so I will assume you are neither my enemy nor entirely a fool."

Something like reluctant amusement touched the corner of his mouth. "High praise. I'll take it."

A shout rose from the far end of the warehouse. Boots thundered. Lantern light flared.

The stranger's eyes flicked toward the sound, then back to her. Decision settled in them.

"Back to back?" he offered.

Beatrice nodded once.

They met the guards together.

She summoned sharp gusts that snuffed lanterns and flung men against crates. He moved with the clean economy of someone trained from childhood—blade flashing, never wasteful, always placing himself where she needed the space. When a heavysset slaver lunged for her with a hooked knife, the stranger's sword took the man in the shoulder and drove him down. When two more tried to flank him, Beatrice's staff cracked against the floor and a whip of wind knocked them sprawling.

It was over in less than two minutes.

The last of the captives stumbled into the night air. Beatrice and the stranger stood breathing hard in the sudden quiet, the warehouse littered with unconscious or groaning men.

He looked at her across the space. Lantern light caught the edge of his jaw beneath the hood. His eyes—grey-green, steady—studied her with something more complicated than gratitude.

“You fight like someone who has done this before,” he said.

“I fight like someone who intends to keep doing it,” she answered, “for as long as there is a need.”

“And what should I call the one who did this?”

She paused. Names were dangerous. Names became stories, and stories became expectations.

“A friend to the people of Tarfantia,” she said at last. “That is enough of a name for tonight.”

He inclined his head, accepting the boundary. “Then the people of Tarfantia are luckier than they know.”

She turned toward the rear exit. The freed captives needed guiding to safety, and Zephyrus would be restless. She did not look back.

But she felt his gaze follow her into the dark.

Chapter 5

After the River

Willip returned to the palace an hour before dawn, cloak discarded, sword cleaned and sheathed. He did not summon the guard captain or the night watch. He went instead to the quiet solar that had been his father's and stood at the window overlooking the dark valley.

Cassian found him there as the first grey light touched the horizon.

“There was trouble at the docks,” the advisor said carefully. “A warehouse. Slave traders. All of them either fled or in no condition to flee. The captives are safe. No one saw who did it.”

Willip's hands rested on the stone sill. “I saw one of them.”

Cassian waited.

“A woman. Hooded. She carried a staff and fought like the wind itself answered her. She would not give her name.”

“And yet you are still thinking of her.”

Willip did not deny it. “She said she was a friend to the people of Tarfantia. I believe her.”

Cassian studied the prince’s face in the growing light. Something had shifted there—something quiet and irreversible.

“Then perhaps,” the advisor said softly, “the kingdom has more than one protector tonight.”

Willip said nothing. Outside, the first birds began to sing. Somewhere far above the clouds, he thought, a winged shape might still be flying.

He did not yet know her name.

He already knew he would not forget her.

Chapter 6

Stories on the Wind

The stories began within days.

A corrupt minor lord in the western hills suddenly returned stolen land to three villages and opened his granaries. Witnesses spoke of a woman with storm-grey eyes who had walked into his hall uninvited and left without taking payment.

A band of marauders who had plagued the northern trade road vanished overnight. Survivors—those who could still speak—described a golden-winged lion and a figure wreathed in wind and light.

In the capital, children started a new game: one child would run with arms outspread while the others cried, “Sky girl! Sky girl!” and pretended to be rescued.

Willip heard every tale. He did not send searchers. He did not issue proclamations. He simply listened, and each night he walked the palace gardens longer than before, eyes turned toward the northern sky.

Cassian finally spoke the name aloud one evening as they reviewed grain reports that neither of them was truly reading.

“They call her Beatrice, my prince. Princess Beatrice, of Nooaje.”

Willip looked up. The name settled into the room like a stone dropped into still water.

“Nooaje,” he repeated. “The floating city. I thought it only a story sailors told to explain lights in the northern sky.”

“Apparently, my prince, the story fights rather well with a staff in her hand.”

Willip turned back to the window. The valley stretched out in soft evening gold. Somewhere beyond the clouds, the floating city drifted. Somewhere beneath those same clouds, a woman who had called herself only a friend continued her work.

He did not know if he would see her again.

He already knew he would be waiting if she returned.

Chapter 7

The Second Meeting

She returned three weeks later.

A fever had broken out in the lower river villages—nothing magical, only the ordinary cruelty of bad water and crowded homes. Beatrice came not with storms this time but with knowledge: which herbs grew in the high meadows of Nooaje, how to purify water with controlled wind and light, how to keep the weakest alive until the sickness passed. She worked through two nights without rest, moving from house to house, Zephyrus keeping silent watch from the tree line.

On the third morning she stepped out of a low cottage and found the hooded stranger from the warehouse already there, sleeves rolled, carrying a full water yoke as if he had been doing the work for hours.

They looked at each other across the muddy path.

Beatrice’s voice was quieter than she intended. “You keep appearing where the trouble is.”

He set the yoke down carefully. “Perhaps trouble and I simply keep the same company as you. Or perhaps I’ve come to believe that a kingdom is better mended with two sets of hands than one.”

She studied him. The hood shadowed his face, but she could see the same grey-green eyes, the same steady calm. Something unguarded flickered across her expression before she mastered it.

“Most princes send soldiers to do this work,” she said, “and stay behind their walls.”

He did not pretend surprise that she had guessed. “Then it is fortunate that I have never wished to be most princes.”

They worked side by side until the sun was high. When the worst of the fever broke and the village could stand on its own, Beatrice walked to the edge of the fields where Zephyrus waited. Willip followed at a respectful distance.

"I will not ask you to stay," he said.

She turned, surprised.

"I think," he continued, "if I keep asking, I will one day succeed in convincing you against your own heart. And I could never forgive myself for that." He stepped closer. His voice dropped. "So instead I will only say this: wherever you go, and whatever road you walk, know that Tarfantia's gates—and mine—are always open to you. Not as a princess. Not as a legend. Only as yourself."

Beatrice felt the words land somewhere deep and unguarded. "That," she said softly, "is a more dangerous thing to say to me than any declaration of love could have been."

"Good," Willip answered. The faintest smile touched his mouth, though his eyes remained serious. "Then perhaps you will remember it longer."

She mounted Zephyrus without answering. The great lion leapt skyward. Wind and cloud closed around them.

Willip stood in the field long after she had vanished, the morning light bright on his upturned face.

Chapter 8

The Song

That evening, after the last petitioner had gone and the candles in the great hall burned low, Prince Willip did not call for his advisors or his maps. He went instead to the quiet garden behind the east wing, where an old minstrel's lute still hung on its peg. He took it down, sat beneath the open sky, and tried the strings.

He was no true musician. His fingers fumbled. He laughed once at himself, soft and private. Then he tried again.

He thought of storm-grey eyes and a staff that summoned wind. Of a woman who refused thrones and still somehow ruled the space she occupied. Of the way she had looked at him when he told her the gates would remain open.

If he could not keep her, he could at least give her a song.

Something simple. Something the children of Tarfantia might one day hum without even knowing why.

Quietly, and a little unevenly at first, Prince Willip began to sing.

Here comes the sky girl, up in the blue,

Riding her lion, big wings and true!

Gold is her hair and white is her dress,

She helps all the people who are in a mess!

Fly, fly, sky girl, up so high,

Flying and flying across the sky!

Fly, fly, sky girl, brave and true,

Off to help someone—that's what you do!

She fights off the evil, she makes them all run,

She saves all the towns till the whole job is done!

Our prince waves up at her, big smile on his face,

And hopes his and her heart will land in the same place.

The last note drifted into the night.

Above the clouds, far beyond the reach of any palace garden, a winged lion flew through cold starlight. On his back, a princess of Nooaje rode in silence, the words of a song she had not yet heard already waiting, somehow, in the wind.

Chapter 9

What Remains

In the weeks that followed, the silent dance continued.

Beatrice returned to Tarfantia twice more—once to stop a border raid, once simply because the northern orchards were failing and she knew a high-meadow technique that could save the harvest. Each time Willip found reason to be present. Each time they spoke little and understood much. Each time leaving grew harder.

Cassian watched from the palace balcony as Beatrice rose into the mist on Zephyrus's back after the orchard visit. He allowed himself a quiet sigh.

"He will wear that same look until she returns, you know," he said to no one in particular. "He wore it the last time. And the time before that."

Willip did not turn from the sky. "Then let him wear it. Some things are worth the waiting."

High above, Beatrice rested one hand on Zephyrus's neck and spoke into the rushing wind.

"Tell me truly," she whispered, "do the people below know how much of themselves they give away simply by surviving another day?"

Zephyrus rumbled, the sound of distant thunder.

"Then I will not waste what strength I have," she said. "Not while there is still darkness for me to answer."

She did not speak of the prince who waited with open gates. She did not need to. The great lion already knew.

Their paths had crossed. Their hearts had recognized each other in the dark of a warehouse and the mud of a fever village. Duty still stood between them like a wide river.

But rivers could be crossed.

And some descents, once begun, could not be undone.

The first descent was over.

The story had only started to rise.

****End of Princess Beatrice: The First Decent****