



CHAPTER 2

Friday March 22

**Cafeteria, South Piedmont High, Home of the Hammerin'
Vulcans People's Republic of Bloorgloria**

Wherein a girl ponders the differences between being a bat and a Sophomore. Each has its advantages.

Just about four weeks ago, Sophia Cornelia Frederica, Grand Duchess of Bloorgloria had been an enchanted bat. Now she was a high-school student, and she was not sure whether on balance, she was better off. As a girl, she had been (at least nominally) a member of the ruling class, and because of this, she had been trained to think dispassionately. She had tried to maintain that mental discipline throughout her magically induced existence as a bat, so she hadn't got out of practice.

Her first day of school had been miserable, so as she sat in the middle of the cafeteria on her second day of school, she decided to make a list to help her keep things in perspective. On the plus

side, she put that evil wizards were no longer sucking off her psychic anguish to power their various evil enterprises. On the minus side was the fact that she was in a public high school figuratively drowning in a seething sea of students, all of whom seemed to be screaming at each other in a room apparently designed to amplify and distort higher registers.

Unfortunately, Sophia still retained vestiges of her sensitive bat hearing, and the noise was giving her a blinding head ache. Life as a bat had been relatively quiet and structured. Here in the cafeteria she was simply overwhelmed by a shorter ranger of louder inputs that would have caused her normally upright spine to wilt, if she had let it. She resented the fact that even though she was no longer in bat-shape, being a Sophomore required her to follow every detail of a methodical class schedule to the letter. This wasn't freedom, she thought, it was just a different sort of imprisonment, and she added it to the minus side of her list.

Then, there was the food. While a bat, her diet had consisted of mosquitos and rotten fruit. She didn't have to eat that any more: a plus. Sophia poked at the lumps on the segmented tray in front of her. She was fairly certain that school lunches were not insect based, but couldn't be certain. She decided, on balance, "food" was a draw. At least as a bat she had learned to appreciate protein in all its forms.

"Hey Batgirl, Where's Robin?" Sophia was jostled as someone bumped into her. It had only been a day and a half, but already references to the Caped Crusader were wearing thin, especially since they almost always seemed to be followed by an inane musical scale progression, ending in a loud shout of "Batgirl."

When she had been a Duchess, Sophia's musical tutors had favored Vivaldi She was unprepared to appreciate the music of the peasantry.

And whenever anyone said “Caped Crusader”, Sophia still thought of a distant relative.

He had been a great-great-great something or other. He had died in the Crusades. His portrait used to hang in the Great Hall, in between the one who had founded the modern navy, and the one who had introduced winter wheat.

Sophia had walked through the Great Hall every day, when she was a child, and had given called the men in the portraits special nicknames. There had been “Surfer” (in his portrait he was shown becalming the wild surf just by standing on it with the new navy on the horizon and looking pretty smug with himself); “Pinprick” (he was portrayed at the moment of his death, pierced by dozens of arrows on the top of a hill and looking unconcerned) and “Tosser” (scattering seed in the prairie and looking like he was in the middle of sneezing).

It seemed to Sophia that in the century since she had been enchanted, the Revolution had decimated more than the aristocracy; it had also debased the language. Language now consisted screaming “Pow”; Bap!” and “Bam!” and rather more confusingly “Kapow!” “Ker-Sploosh” and “Sock!” For some reason the peasants felt compelled to scream these expressions at her while thrusting themselves into her face rapidly and then tilting their head and body at weird angles. They would then run away, laughing madly and invariably bumping into others of the teeming masses starting another chain reaction which always seems involved with her getting jostled again. Given the way they reacted among themselves, it was seen as the height of wit.

It just made her headache worse.

Sophia was unaccustomed to being jostled in any way shape or form. Social convention, previously reinforced by humorless Cossacks, and the potential threat of execution made uninvited

touches from strangers a seldom occurrence. For much the same reason, people yelling in her ear had never been much of a problem. There had been the crowds roaring, of course, but in those days, the peasants would have been kept far down in the plaza below, and she had tended to be in the back of the crowd of nobles on the balcony. The social convention of sangfroid also tended to make public executions, to which attendance of nobility was mandatory, in general, quiet affairs.

Well, until the executioner blindfolded the accused. That sometimes got a reaction.

Anyways, it seemed that prior to her arrival, the school had thought about how best to integrate one of the “Homecomers” to the school. She had, of course, not been party to any of the debate, if there even had been one. She had been too busy navigating the unwelcome necessity of arranging for food and lodging at the only hotel willing to accept a dragon as one of its guests. Now there was the biggest plus on Sophia’s list: Flaretonia. The dragon and she had been magically imprisoned at the same time, and Sophia was absolutely certain she wouldn’t be able to survive this school nightmare if she didn’t have Flaretonia to come home to every night. The official Homecoming team had apparently located one of Sophia’s last living relatives, but she didn’t think there was any reason to thrust herself upon a complete stranger. There was also no reason why a dragon couldn’t be present at school, especially one who could shrink to a quite manageable size whenever she wanted, except that it sent the faculty into a spin of panic. Sophia had been thrown into the general population with a class schedule, a map, and a complementary set of gym clothes, and the school principal had told her the campus had a strict “no dragons” policy. She would just have to get along dragon-less like any other student.

Some people, it seemed, still took the rhetoric of the Revolution seriously.

What no one understood is that when Sophia had been enchanted into a bat, Flaretonia the dragon who had ostensibly been slated to eat her, had been enchanted as well, in her case into a kitten. The reason they had been captured had been the same for them both: to harness their cosmic anguish as a source of power for the wizards in their dastardly plot to control the world. When the spell that helped was broken, it freed them both from bondage. But being tortured together so intimately for so many years left a bond that Sophia could not imagine breaking. It was stronger the closer they were to one another, and Flaretonia had said she felt it, too. They needed each other.

So Flaretonia, forbidden to enter the school itself, circled overhead, providing as much comfort to Sophia as she could. Even so, on her second day of school, Sophia was still profoundly lonely and confused. Examining her list of pros and cons, she decided that Flaretonia was the one thing that made the Homecoming worthwhile. Otherwise, she didn't think high school was much of an improvement over being a bat.