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Of Dragons and Fae

Is a Fairy Tale Ending Possible
for the Princess's Hairstylist?

Table of Contents

[Copyright](#)

[Character Page](#)

[Chapter 1: The Stylist Gets Dumped](#)

[Chapter 2: Flowerfolk](#)

[Chapter 3: The Royal Engagement](#)

[Chapter 4: Into the Dragons' Den](#)

[Chapter 5: Vaxwald Castle](#)

[Chapter 6: The Dragonkin Servants](#)

[Chapter 7: The Royal Soirée](#)

[Chapter 8: The Hairstylist's Apprentice](#)

[Chapter 9: A Minor Incident](#)

[Chapter 10: A Request from the Queen](#)

[Chapter 11: A Trip into Town](#)

[Chapter 12: The Mysterious Gift](#)

[Chapter 13: Dragons](#)

[Chapter 14: Tales of Tribal Romance](#)

[Chapter 15: Wedding's Eve](#)

[Chapter 16: A Girl and Her Hair](#)

[Chapter 17: Bondmates](#)

[Chapter 18: Epilogue](#)

[Mona's Observation Log](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Other Series Pt. 1](#)

Of Dragons and Fae: Is a Fairy Tale Ending Possible for the Princess's Hairstylist?!

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Chapter 1: The Stylist Gets Dumped

MY name is Mayna Spring, and I am a hairstylist. Contrary to what the name suggests, however, we do much more than simply *style* hair—we trim it, maintain proper grooming, choose hairstyles to suit a given client, and more.

Personally, I'm proud of the work I do. It's fulfilling, and I love it. But when it comes to most other things—romance included—I can't say I'm interested.

Or at least, I wasn't... until five days ago, when I met a man at the royal banquet who changed my perspective ever so slightly.

"At last, I've found you. You're my Bondmate," he said to me, his eyes glistening.

His name was Ray Alide, and he was a Dragonkin. He was a knight from the neighboring kingdom of Vaxwald, the land of dragons, and he was in attendance as the Prince's bodyguard.

"What's a Bondmate?" I asked.

"For a Dragonkin, it is our destined partner. A soulmate," he explained with a radiant smile.

"O-Oh my," I stammered bashfully.

The sudden confession caught me off guard, but I admit, I swooned a little. With blond hair, golden eyes, and an amicable personality I never would have expected from a Dragonkin, Ray seemed almost like a handsome prince from a fairy tale. And although I was a grown woman of twenty years, I had absolutely no prior experience and, quite frankly, was in over my head.

My parents ran a local barbershop, so I grew up learning about hair care from an early age. Then, just two years ago, I was chosen to serve as the personal hairstylist for the Princess of our great nation of Myulan. Since then, I've found myself far too busy to go on dates or deal with anything of the sort.

“Not to say that all Dragonkin have a predetermined Bondmate, mind you. Quite the opposite, in fact. The vast majority of us learn about love the same way your people do: through trial and error. But for those who are privileged to have a Bondmate, it is a tremendous blessing,” Ray explained, smiling as though he could scarcely contain his joy.

“That’s fascinating,” I replied, “but... I mean, I don’t know anything about you... and I’m not even nobility or anything! The only reason I’m at this banquet is because Princess Patricia wanted me to be on standby in case of a hair emergency. I’m her personal stylist, you see.”

Granted, I certainly looked the part; I was wearing a suitably formal dress, with my perfectly maintained raven locks elaborately coiffed for the occasion. Ultimately, however, I was a mere commoner.

“Oh, that doesn’t bother me. I may be Vaxwald nobility by birth, but to me, one’s social status hardly matters,” he answered without hesitation. After a moment, he furrowed his brows. “That said, this conversation probably should have waited until *after* I introduced myself, now that I think of it. I’ve gotten ahead of myself completely... I hope you can forgive my lack of discretion.”

Though he was clearly elated to have found his one true Bondmate, he possessed the wherewithal to prioritize my feelings, something I appreciated. The two of us took a step back and introduced ourselves, with Ray conducting himself like the perfect gentleman. It was clear he was making an effort not to keep harping on about the Bondmate thing, lest I feel pressured.

Then, three days after the banquet:

“You’re going back to Vaxwald the day after tomorrow, right?” I asked.

During his stay at the Myulan Castle, Ray had consistently found time in his schedule to come and visit me, and it was around this point that I had started to grow attached to his presence.

“Yes, I’ll be returning with His Highness Prince Dario. Not to worry—I promise I’ll write you letters, and I’ll come see you whenever I can. We can take it slow, and if I someday win your heart, I hope you’ll consider visiting me in Vaxwald, even if it’s years from now.” He paused, then added, “Honestly, I’m half-tempted to skip the wait and take you home with me right now.”

The way he said it, I wasn't entirely sure he was joking.

As things stood, I was honored to be the sole stylist in attendance to the Princess of Myulan, and I wasn't eager to give that up just yet. However, I didn't see the harm in visiting Vaxwald someday, as Ray had suggested. I was curious to see what hairstyles were in fashion among Dragonkin women, and I wasn't opposed to the idea of opening my own salon there someday... with Ray at my side...

Looking back, I was stupid to even *consider* planning my life around some guy I had only known for three days. But love is blind, as they say, and first love all the more so.

On the day Ray was scheduled to leave Myulan, his attitude toward me drastically changed.

When I went to say goodbye and see him off, he turned to me with a frown and clipped out, "I'm sorry, but I need you to forget everything that happened between us over the past few days. It turns out you're not actually my Bondmate."

"What?" The almost icy look in his eyes made me recoil slightly. "I'm not your Bondmate?"

"Yes, it would appear I was mistaken."

His tone was too casual for someone who had previously struck me as dutiful and steadfast—someone who, twenty-four hours prior, had gazed at me with eyes that said I was his whole world. I could scarcely believe it. All the romance between us seemed to evaporate, just like that.

"I admit, I'm obviously not a Dragonkin, so I don't have all the details, but... is that even possible?"

"Again, I'm sorry for the misunderstanding I've caused, but the fact of the matter is, I made a mistake. I no longer feel any attraction to you, and I must ask that you forget whatever feelings you may have had for me. This is farewell, Mayna."



And with that, he climbed astride his horse, joined up with Prince Dario and the other knights, and rode off.

Meanwhile, I was left standing there, staring blankly after him. “What?” I said in a tiny voice. “Forget my feelings? Where did this even come from?”

First he drops all this “Bondmate” stuff on me, then he wins me over, and now this? It felt like a rude awakening from what was once a happy dream.

As the Dragonkin riders slowly shrank into the distance, I simply stood there, my fists shaking with formless rage—not at Ray, but myself. *How could I have been so stupid? I always told myself I’d never let a man pull one over on me like that. Why did I let myself get so carried away?*

I grit my teeth in frustration. Apparently, I was a lot more gullible than I realized.

“I guess I should be grateful this happened before things got serious... Maybe I’ll just chalk it up to experience...” I grumbled to myself.

Just then, Princess Patricia wandered over with her attendants. Similar to myself and Ray, she had come to bid farewell to Prince Dario.

“If they can morph into dragons, then why don’t they just fly home? Don’t you find it silly, Mayna?” she asked me, wearing a sweet, almost cherubic expression befitting her sixteen years.

“Indeed,” I replied halfheartedly.

“His Highness complimented me on my hair again today. He said my plaits were ‘quite beautiful’! And it’s all thanks to you!”

“I’m glad.”

“He was *ever* so surprised to learn I have my very own personal stylist! Of course, surely even nobility would think it decadent, or so I imagine. After all, most simply ask a servant to handle it.”

“Our profession is still somewhat of a novelty. Yes, I need to work harder... No more wasting time on romance...”

“Mayna? Are you all right? You seem a bit gloomy...” She blinked for a

moment, then clapped her hands together. “I’ve got it! You must be sad to part with that fair-haired knight, aren’t you? He did call you his Bondmate, after all. And you looked rather happy about it, I must say!”

“L-Let’s not go there...” I was ashamed to think of how giddy and carefree I had been.

Reluctantly, I explained to Her Highness about how Ray had changed his tune.

“A *mistake*?” she repeated, eyes wide, brows furrowed in puzzlement. Meanwhile, her three attendants snickered to themselves, likely pleased to know the handsome knight had lost all interest in a *lowly hairstylist* such as myself. After all, his undivided attention had warranted a fair bit of envy in my direction.

I wasn’t bothered by their scorn, however. Personally, I was ready to wash my hands of the entire affair.

“I’m just going to devote the rest of my life to my work... I never should’ve wasted my time on a man when I still have so much training ahead of me... From now on, my heart and soul belong to hair and hair alone... It’s for the best...” I muttered dispassionately, my shoulders slumped, misery radiating from every inch of my being.

“Why, you look utterly crushed! Poor dear... Are you quite sure you’re all right?” She frowned, her tone sympathetic. Even her attendants seemed to pity me.

There was no need, of course. My job was my whole life’s purpose. Only my career could bring me true happiness.

...You believe me, right?

Chapter 2: Flowerfolk

EACH morning I start my day by getting ready. Naturally, as a hairstylist, this involves making sure my hair is on point—but here in Myulan, you don't have to work with hair to care about it. In our culture, women are expected to grow their hair out and wear it braided or tied up. And heaven help you if you're seen in public with your hair down—nothing could be more shameful.

For commoner ladies without rank or title, we aren't obligated to invest too much time into our hairstyle, probably because we don't generally *have* the time to spare. We can just throw it into a bun and forget about it.

"What should I do with my hair today...?" I murmured to myself as I stood before the mirror. My long ebony locks hung past my breasts, glossy from my daily haircare regimen, the tips curled inward naturally. For me, my hair was my pride and joy.

"I'll braid it into a side bun," I decided aloud, then quickly got to work.

First, I left my bangs down. Next, I styled a headband braid over them. An ordinary bun would give me a stiff, no-nonsense image, which was not what I wanted today. Instead, I took the rest of my hair and twisted it into a loose three-strand braid starting at the crown of my head, then tugged on each section to fan it out. Lastly, I gathered my hair just behind my right ear and pinned it into a messy bun.

Then it was time for the finishing touch: a hair ornament. Today I went with a silver butterfly, positioned just atop the bun. Embedded in its wings were turquoise stones, mimicking the plate-like patterns of a real butterfly. Nothing quite as fancy as jewels, of course, but it matched the color of my eyes; such was how I chose almost all of my hair ornaments. After all, if it matched my hair, it wouldn't stand out—thus, it was more effective to match it to my eyes or my dress instead.

"Perfect. Now it's time for another day of hard work."

Less than twenty-four hours ago I was dumped in spectacular fashion, and yet I found myself smiling. A cute hairstyle never failed to put me in a good mood; plus, my feelings for Ray had already faded. I had only known the man for five days—nowhere near long enough to constitute a full-scale “heartbreak.” In the end, all it took was one night to cry it out, and then I was over him. *Really glad this mess happened before I fell for him completely.*

“Time to go see Her Highness.”

And so I left my quarters and headed off to meet up with my client, the Princess.



“**GOOD** morning, Your Highness.”

“Good morning, Mayna!”

When I arrived, Her Highness Princess Patricia was already wearing a small amount of makeup carefully applied by her other servants. Now it was my turn to style her hair. Then, once she was dressed, she would be ready for the public eye.

“Any special requests today?” I asked.

“Nope! Just surprise me like you always do.”

She was still in her nightgown. I walked up and gently pulled her light blonde strands free of their constraints, letting them hang naturally to her posterior. Hair of this length could be accidentally damaged during sleep, resulting in painful breakage. Hence, we always put her hair up in braids just prior to bedtime.

I watched the other servants as they set about selecting her clothes and accessories for the day. This would serve as my inspiration for her hairstyle.

“Mayna, my dear, are you feeling better?” Patricia asked, shooting me a sympathetic look in the mirror.

“...Are you referring to what happened yesterday?” I asked after a pause.

“It’s just such a shame! That man—Ray, was it? He really seemed like the honest, faithful sort. He was Prince Dario’s bodyguard, so I had the opportunity

to speak with him on a few occasions. He struck me as perfectly sensible at the time... Whenever I mentioned you, why, his smile could hardly be contained! Was it really all an act?"

"I don't know. Maybe it was all an act, right from the beginning. Or maybe he meant it at the time, but changed his mind later on." I shrugged my shoulders casually.

At this, Patricia's expression softened with relief. "Oh, I'm ever so glad to see it hasn't hit you too hard."

"Well, I was pretty crushed last night, but then I thought to myself, 'I don't even know him well enough to be heartbroken over him,' you know?"

"Quite right! You'd only known each other a few days, after all."

"Exactly," I nodded. Meanwhile, I ran my fingers through small sections of her fine, delicate hair. Ordinarily these strands were quick to tangle and break, but with my diligent care, her wavy mane became thick, lustrous, and soft. Today, however, her hair felt dry and brittle.

"It feels like the magic has worn off again, Your Highness. I'll renew the spell."

"Oh, yes, please do. The difference is so very obvious whenever your magic wears off... Honestly, I don't know how I could ever live without you, Mayna."

"You're just trying to butter me up," I teased.

Truth be told, it wasn't really a *spell*, per se. Though I was born with the ability, I had never formally learned to use magic. Instead, what I referred to as a "spell" was actually just me focusing my mana into her hair. I did this by running my hands over her waves in sections while silently concentrating on my desire to "make it pretty."

Yes, I know what you're thinking—but believe it or not, this was actually ridiculously effective. Once imbued with my mana, her locks would become smooth and shiny...but only for about three or four days until it wore off, at which point I would need to repeat the process.

"When you do this, does it actually strengthen the hair itself?" Patricia asked.

"No, I'm pretty sure the mana just creates a sort of 'top coat' that sits on top

of the strands. That's why it wears off after a few days," I answered as I continued to stroke her hair.

She made eye contact with me through the mirror. "And *all* Flowerfolk are born with mana, right?"

"Well, I haven't done any research on the subject, but I believe so."

Now you may be wondering: What are Flowerfolk?

Flowerfolk are a tribe descended from a union between humans and flower fairies, and as it happens, I am one such individual. Naturally, this means my distant ancestors were flower fairies. That said, we Flowerfolk really don't look any different from ordinary humans. Maybe we tend toward the petite or slender side, but that's about it.

There are some other minor differences, too. For example, we're born with mana in our bodies, while humans are not; we're a bit more sensitive to cold temperatures; we generally like classy or pretty things; the list goes on. Who knows, maybe that last one is part of what drew me to my work as a hairstylist.

"My parents were the only other Flowerfolk I knew of growing up, and we pretty much fully assimilated into human culture here, so... I don't really *feel* like a Flowerfolk, if that makes sense."

"You certainly don't *seem* any different from a regular human...in a good way, of course! Granted, you're the only Flowerfolk I've ever met, but in fiction they're all depicted as vain, fickle, and self-interested. You, on the other hand, are nothing like that."

I smiled sheepishly. "As with actual flowers, I'm sure there are all different types of Flowerfolk out there, too. Maybe I'm just a smaller, more modest blossom."

"You may not be as eye-catching as a rose or sunflower, but I'm sure you're every bit as beautiful."

"Thank you, Your Highness." I appreciated hearing this from her, considering she was so very like a flower fairy herself.

For the record, our world has many other tribes besides Flowerfolk. For

example, Dragonkin are one such tribe. Also known as Skyborn, Dragonkin are descended from dragons. There are also Merfolk (descended from mermaids), Treeborn (descended from tree spirits), and Shadowkin (descended from demons). Humans are quite promiscuous...

Because Flowerfolk and Merfolk in particular have a long history of mixing with humans, most fairy and mermaid traits have receded, and our innate mana capacity has diminished accordingly. In contrast, Treeborn and Shadowkin have relatively pure bloodlines, and likewise, their mana levels are much higher. Dragonkin, on the other hand, are somewhere in the middle, and they can take both human and dragon form at will.

For the most part, however, humans are the dominant species, followed by Dragonkin, who have an entire nation to themselves. I don't know exactly how large the other four tribes are, but I would wager they're few and far between.

"There we go... Now your hair's nice and sparkly again."

The pale rays of the morning sun made Patricia's waves glitter like the ocean itself. I couldn't look directly at it for too long, lest I find myself entranced.

Patricia looked into the mirror and beamed proudly. "You know, I used to hate having to deal with my wavy hair every day, but thanks to you, now I love it. I'm going to keep you around for a long, long time!"

"Thank you, Your Highness. To be fair, I'm sure anyone could manage the same thing in my place, so long as they have mana and a deep love of hair."

"Yes, well, that 'love of hair' isn't as common as you might think. Most people aren't as single-minded as you are," Patricia said with a laugh.

"Oh, right... Of course."

Frankly, I wasn't sure if that was supposed to be a compliment.

Chapter 3: The Royal Engagement

ONCE I finish styling Her Highness's hair, I'm generally free to enjoy the rest of my day. For the most part, my services are only needed in the mornings and at bedtime, so I typically spend the time in between brainstorming new hairstyles, looking for ornaments to add to my collection, and quietly observing the hairstyles of any nobles who visit the castle to take note of any trends.

That day I was in my quarters, sketching a new hair design, when a servant called upon me and told me that Her Highness was asking for me. Naturally, I headed over to the Princess's royal bedchamber right away.

There, I found her sitting at the table, drinking tea with her three attendants. This little teatime was by no means cheerful, however. Patricia's expression was one of abject misery, and her attendants were struggling to console her.

"Your Highness, it's me, Mayna. You asked for me?"

"Oh, Mayna..." She looked up at me weakly, then heaved a sigh. "It's been decided that I'm to marry the Prince of Vaxwald."

"So it's official, then."

Although the news had not yet been made known to the public at large, it was a secret far too large to be kept, and the castle had long since been buzzing with excitement at the prospect of marriage between our Patricia and Prince Dario of Vaxwald, the kingdom of dragons. Rumor had it Dario's recent visit to Myulan was meant to usher things along in that regard as well.

As a mere hairstylist, I was not privy to the details, but I had seen this coming for a while now. As the younger of two children, Patricia would not inherit the throne here; rather, it was her elder brother who stood first in line. Thus, it made perfect sense that she would be used as a pawn to further the friendly relations between our nation and Vaxwald.

"Are congratulations in order? You seem...in low spirits."

At sixteen and eighteen respectively, Patricia and Dario were quite close in age, and personally, I was inclined to think she could do far worse. Still, perhaps part of her had hoped to marry for love, not political gain. Regardless, as a princess, surely she had been raised to expect this outcome from an early age.

“I mean...he’s a *Dragonkin*,” Patricia replied, her brows furrowed. “What if he goes on to find his Bondmate after we’re wed?”

I hesitated. “Well...I suppose that is a distinct possibility. I’m not sure how it all works, to be honest.”

“I did ask him about it, and he promised me that if he does find a Bondmate, he won’t give her any special title or preferential treatment. He said it won’t be cause for divorce...but even then, who knows what might happen? Why, perhaps he’ll ditch me in secret to go see her!”

“Yeah... I’m not sure we can really understand what it means for a Dragonkin to have a Bondmate.”

“But it’s not just that... I’m scared to marry into a foreign dynasty. Yes, we speak the same language, but their whole country is nothing but Dragonkin, and their culture is different from ours!”

“Indeed it is...” Hoping to inspire a bit of hope in her about the engagement, I continued in a more cheerful tone, “But at the very least, Prince Dario seems like a good man, doesn’t he? Gregarious and charming and generous... And just think, someday you’ll get to be Queen of Vaxwald! That’s something no commoner could ever dream of! What else... Oh, I know! Surely they’ll let you bring an entourage along with you, right? Your favorite servants, perhaps?”

“No... I’m not allowed,” she replied, pouting her lips. “Once I’m married, all my servants and bodyguards are to be Dragonkin. They don’t want a lot of humans in their castle.”

“Why wouldn’t they let you...?” I muttered under my breath, though a moment later it sank in. Of course they wouldn’t allow it. The people of Vaxwald likely wouldn’t be receptive to a foreign princess who showed up with an entire entourage.

I snuck a glance at Patricia’s attendants. They all hailed from noble families, so

chances were low they'd be permitted to leave the country for an indefinite period of time.

"I guess I won't be styling your hair for the wedding, then," I sighed. As disappointed as I was, I had no strong desire to run off to Vaxwald, so I was content to let it go.

But Patricia fixed me with a firm look, like a cat zeroing in on a mouse. "Oh, I'm afraid you're not going anywhere. You're coming with me to Vaxwald," she declared.

I froze. "How?"

"As a profession, hairstyling is no more common there than it is here. And since they have no one fit to replace you, they've granted me special permission to bring you along."

"...What?"

"You'll come with me, won't you, Mayna?"

Seconds prior, my heart was heavy with loneliness thinking we were destined to part ways. Now I wasn't sure how to feel at all. Me? Go to Vaxwald?

Obviously I was honored to be chosen to accompany the Princess. Plus, I didn't mind traveling abroad; I was excited to learn more about other cultures. All in all, it seemed like a rare opportunity best acted upon—an opportunity to hone my craft and acquire new skills.

But for as much as I wanted to agree wholeheartedly, there was one thing holding me back, and his name was Ray Alide.

"Don't get me wrong, I would dearly love to go with you," I began hesitantly, "but as you know, there's someone in Vaxwald I'd really rather avoid—"

"Yes, I know! But you're just going to have to suck it up!" Patricia snapped. "You have to go with me, Mayna! Otherwise I...I won't have anyone else to turn to!" Her anger turned to tearful sobs. "I hardly know anything about Prince Dario, and the whole castle's full of Dragonkin... I don't know who I can trust! I need someone who's on my side. Just one person, so I can feel secure. I *need* you, Mayna, because I know I can trust you!"

I balled my hands into fists. Before me stood a girl of only sixteen, being sent off to a foreign country, away from everything she ever knew, and she was *scared*. Was I really going to reject her on the basis that some guy who dumped me would be there? No. No way. I couldn't possibly abandon her.

With my decision made, I looked into her eyes. "Very well. I'll go with you to Vaxwa—"

"Oh, I just knew you'd see things my way!" Patricia exclaimed with a sunny smile, no trace of tears to be seen. "Thank you, Mayna!"

As she wrapped her arms around me in a big hug, I found myself wondering whether I ought to be proud of the young adult she was becoming...or lament the gullible fool I was becoming.

Chapter 4: Into the Dragons' Den

NOW that Princess Patricia was to be wed to the Prince of Vaxwald, arrangements had been made for her to leave the country in just ten days. No sense in dawdling now that the engagement was official, I suppose.

Naturally, this meant that I, too, had just ten days to prepare, and I couldn't afford to waste a moment. First I had to pack, then go and explain everything to my parents, then say goodbye to everyone I'd be leaving behind here in Myulan.

Unlike Patricia, however, I was by no means fated to remain in Vaxwald for the rest of my life. The Princess herself had told me she didn't want to tie me down permanently. "Just until I feel comfortable there," she'd explained. "I imagine it won't take more than a year at most." So that was my plan: to live there for a year and see where it took me.

Near the end of our final days in Myulan, I was summoned to the throne room, where the King and Queen personally beseeched me to look after their little girl.

Then, finally, it was the day of our departure.

On that fine summer day, a massive crowd of commoners and nobles alike (as well as the King, Queen, and Prince) gathered to bid the Princess farewell as she climbed into a splendid horse-drawn carriage. I quietly followed her into it.

From there, the royal cavalcade was organized as follows: two rows of horseback knights at the front to serve as bodyguards, our passenger carriage in the center, and then five more carriages behind us carrying Her Highness's dowry items as well as a handful of servants who would be traveling with us to the border and no further. Lastly, another two rows of horseback knights brought up the rear.

Patricia had been tearful all throughout her final farewells to her parents and for some time afterward, but her sobs finally dried up about an hour into the

journey.

“Feeling any better?” I asked as I rubbed her back reassuringly.

“Not at all,” she sniffed. “The thought that...I won’t be seeing my parents again for who knows how long... Oh, I just can’t stop crying...”

“There, there. You’re going to have so much fun in Vaxwald, I just know it,” I said, hoping to cheer her up a bit. “Aren’t you excited to see how all the ladies wear their hair over there? Judging from the knights that came to visit us with Prince Dario, it seems short hair is the standard for Dragonkin men. But what of the women, I wonder? Perhaps they wear their hair long and tie it up, like we do in Myulan. Aren’t you curious?”

“No,” Patricia replied flatly, glaring at me with puffy red eyes. *Strange... I thought she’d be more enthusiastic. Guess I’ll have to use my trump card.*

I held my hands out in front of me, cupping the empty air, and envisioned a bright orange gerbera daisy. Then I focused my mana into my hands—*poof!* A single flower appeared out of thin air, identical to the one I had imagined, and I promptly offered it to the Princess.

“Here. I hope this flower makes you feel better.”

Unlike the Dragonkin, whose bodies were built for combat, or the Treeborn and Shadowkin, whose mana capacity made them adept at magic, we Flowerfolk didn’t really have any talents...save for this one small special trait.

Unfortunately, one measly flower didn’t seem to have much of an impact on her dour mood...so I kept on making daisies in every color until her lap was covered in a rainbow of blossoms. Soon they spilled over to the floor, and by that time, the entire carriage smelled like a garden in spring.

At last, Patricia finally smiled.

“Hee hee... Look at all these flowers! They’re so pretty.”

“There’s more where that came from!”

I kept on producing bloom after bloom until the carriage was carpeted in petals of every hue—at which point my mana finally gave out. *Oh well. At least I managed to make her smile.*

“The pink ones are so cute,” Patricia mused as she plucked one from the pile. She brought it to her nose to smell its fragrance, then turned to the window. “How much longer until we reach the border?”

I checked my pocket watch. “Not for a while yet, I’m afraid. At our current pace, it will take five hours to go from the castle to the border...and we’ve only been traveling for an hour and a half.”

And once we made it to the border, it’d take us another six hours to reach the Vaxwald castle proper.

“We’ll be stopping to have lunch at some point during the journey, but let me know if you’d like to hop out and stretch your legs before then. It’s a sunny day, so be sure to stay hydrated.”

It was the end of August, and while Myulan’s weather was generally mild, it couldn’t hurt to stay cautious. Besides, Patricia’s other servants were riding in the carriages behind us, and once we crossed the border, a number of Dragonkin servant girls would be joining us for the second leg of the journey.

“I will, thank you. Goodness, is traveling ever exhausting,” Patricia sighed, spinning the daisy between her fingers.



WE arrived at the border just past noon. There, Patricia and I would be parting ways with the Myulan knights and servants; the two of us were to cross the border on foot, along with Patricia’s dowry items.

“The Vaxwald convoy is already waiting for us on the other side,” I called to Patricia, who was still inside the carriage.

Similar to the Myulan cavalcade, the Vaxwald convoy was flanked by horseback knights on both sides, with a passenger carriage for the Princess in the center. There appeared to be a crowd of Dragonkin onlookers forming in the distance—nearly a hundred people, if I had to guess.

“Looks like you’ve got quite the turnout, too. It seems the people of Vaxwald have come to welcome you,” I told her, my tone encouraging.

“Really?” The tension faded from her expression ever so slightly. As she

stepped out of the carriage, the gerbera daisies spilled out with her. “Well then... Let’s be off.”

“As you wish, Your Highness.”

With a final farewell to the Myulan servants and knights, Patricia slowly crossed over the border. I quietly followed along after her, admiring my own handiwork from behind.

Today I had given her a more refined, polished hairstyle: all of it—bangs included—pulled up into a high fan-shaped bun with a tiara perched in front. It was the sort of look that would go well paired with a wedding dress, and it complemented her large earrings, too. As for myself, I had chosen to keep my hairstyle comparatively plain, with no hair ornaments. I didn’t want to distract from Her Highness, after all.

As we approached the Vaxwald convoy, a middle-aged knight near the front of the procession hopped down from his horse and knelt before Patricia.

“From here, we, the knights of Vaxwald, do humbly swear to protect Her Highness Princess Patricia and bring her safely to Prince Dario in the castle. Come this way, if you please.” The man rose to his feet and led us to a lovely pale white carriage.

But before Patricia made it inside, the crowd of commoners began to shout:

“ANNUL THE MARRIAGE!”

“What?” Startled, I turned back to look at them. I’d thought they’d turned out in support of Patricia, but on further inspection, the looks on their faces didn’t seem very welcoming at all.

“Send that spoiled princess back to Myulan!”

“We don’t want some gold-digger spending our tax money on pretty dresses!”

I couldn’t believe what they were saying. Spoiled? Gold-digger? Where did this come from? Patricia certainly didn’t have this sort of reputation back in Myulan. If anything, she was viewed as the nation’s “little royal sweetheart.” Granted, she still had a child’s sense of self-interest, but she was kind at heart. And while she *was* known to purchase expensive dresses and accessories, she

was a *princess*. Surely that much was to be expected.

“What’s going on...?” Patricia asked, her eyes wide, her face white as a sheet.

“ANNUL THE MARRIAGE!”

Incensed, the crowd began to close in faster and faster until they were nearly running at her.

“Board the carriage, Your Highness. We’ll handle them.” The middle-aged knight ushered us inside, then quickly shut the door behind us. “On you go, now!” we heard him tell the coachman, and so the carriage began to move, with knights protecting us on all sides.

But just a few steps later, the procession once again came to a halt as the crowd of protesters moved to block our path.

“Get out of the way, all of you! Doing this will accomplish nothing! The engagement has already been decided!” one of the knights shouted somewhere outside.

“You call yourself a knight?! Don’t you care about the future of Vaxwald?!” a protester shouted back. “Surely Prince Dario can find a better queen than *that*!”

“ANNUL! THE! MARRIAGE! ANNUL! THE! MARRIAGE!” the crowd chanted in unison all around us.

At first this protest seemed relatively peaceful, but the argument with the knight had added fuel to the fire, and the carriage shook slightly as someone outside gave it a hard shove.

“I’m scared,” Patricia whispered next to me, nearly on the verge of tears. Gritting my teeth, I pulled her into a tight embrace. I could only imagine how the Myulan knights and servants must have felt right now, powerless to do anything but simply watch the spectacle from the other side of the border.

“Don’t touch the carriage! Arrest him!” a knight thundered.

Though they may have apprehended the one protester, the crowd quickly devolved into a full-scale riot, and the carriage continued to buck and jolt. Were people inadvertently bumping against the conveyance in the scuffle, or were they actively trying to tip us over?

“Why is this happening?! What did I ever do to them?!” Patricia wailed, shrinking into a tiny ball.

What if these protesters try to board the carriage? I thought in a panic. *What do we do then?*

Surely they’d have the sense to keep their hands off another country’s princess, or so I hoped. As for me, however, I was fair game—

Just then, the low roar of a beast shook the carriage. No, not just one—multiple. And I could tell they were coming closer.

“What was *that*?!” Patricia shrieked, clapping her hands over her ears in fright. The cabin of the carriage seemed to vibrate with every growl, and for a moment I wondered if it might shatter the windows.

“Dragons?!” I shouted over the earsplitting roars. “Maybe someone’s transformed!”

Was it the knights, or was it the protesters? Regardless, we were in danger. If this was to become an all-out clash of full-sized dragons, our carriage would surely be crushed underfoot.

Then, out of nowhere, the scene fell silent—deathly silent, with no trace of a dragon’s beastly cries.

“What happened?” Patricia whispered, and a split second later, the carriage door flew open. I dove in front of the Princess, shielding her.

“Your Highness! Are you all ri—”

Who should walk in but a golden-haired dreamboat—I mean, Ray Alide. The guy who *dumped* me.

You know, it’s ironic that a mere knight would look more princely than the actual prince, I snarked internally.

Meanwhile, Ray took one look at me and froze, eyes wide.

“Hi,” I greeted him casually.

“What are *you* doing here?” he growled.

“I’ve come along with Her Highness as her personal hairstylist.”

“I personally requested her company,” Patricia explained.

Ray glanced at her out of the corner of his eye, then looked back to me and implied, “You didn’t decide to...chase after me or anything, did you?”

Mind you, I’m not usually the type to lose my temper, but boy, did that ever set me off. I leapt to my feet.

“*As if!*” Furious at the mere thought, I glared and laid into him, “I don’t give a rat’s ass about *you*. I came here to *do my job*. Get over yourself!”

He scooped me up into his arms, bridal style, and carried me all the way to the infirmary. Between his natural good looks and his prestigious position as Prince Dario's personal bodyguard, Ray attracted attention like a magnet everywhere he went, and I could feel everyone staring at us as we passed. *Ugh, how humiliating.*

"Doc, you in?" Ray called as he opened the infirmary door and carried me inside. Sure enough, there stood a gentleman in a white coat—forty-something, unshaven, his clothes messy and wrinkled—presumably the doctor.

"Well, if it isn't our very own Sir Ray Alide! What happened to your lady friend there?"

"She has heatstroke. Please examine her."

"Heatstroke? Strange... She must be quite sickly for a Dragonkin."

"She's a Flowerfolk, actually. Now please examine her—I'll put her down on this cot."

"Wh—You can't just—Well, all right. Have you given her any water?"

"Yes, sir."

Once Ray had laid me down onto the medical bed, the doctor came over, removed the towels, and felt my skin directly.

"Please don't touch her too much."

"Do you want me to examine her or not, boy?" the doctor snapped back. "At any rate, she's going to be fine, thanks to your excellent first aid. This *was* your doing, right?" he asked, holding up the hand towels. "Come to think of it, you came and asked me about heatstroke just the other day, didn't you?"

He did? I turned and looked at Ray.

"Even on the hottest summer days, Dragonkin scarcely ever get heatstroke, so I admit I was confused why you'd want to know. Now it all makes sense. You were concerned for this Flowerfolk," the doctor concluded.

"You don't mind if she rests here for a while, right?" Ray asked in a hard voice that suggested he wouldn't take no for an answer. Evidently he was in no mood

to respond to the doctor's comments.

"Be my guest," the doctor permitted.

Just then, another knight entered the room, and the doctor left to attend to his injury. Ray pulled the bed curtains shut, then sat down beside me and took my hand. I glanced over at him to find that his fretful expression had now hardened into anger.

"*Not as frail as we imagine you to be*, huh? What a joke." He was quoting the statement I'd made to Rebecca and Mona yesterday. "I understand you felt obligated to honor a request from our Queen, but you need to be aware of your physical limits when you work."

"How was I supposed to know? I've never gotten heatstroke from curling hair before!"

"Because you were living in *Myulan*. But you're in Vaxwald now, and Vaxwald gets hot. You have to be *more careful*," he snapped. "When we first met in Myulan, you told me you didn't really think of yourself as a Flowerfolk. You grew up surrounded by humans, so you felt like you were one of them. I get that. But know this, Mayna: you may look human, but you're *not*."

At this point, he noticed that I was on the verge of tears, and he stopped short.

"Don't yell at me," I whimpered.

"...Sorry." He squeezed my hand apologetically.

He'd been holding my hand an awful lot today. *What are you, my mom?*



THE next day, I felt much better. I was on a walk with the Princess out in the castle's massive front garden. Together with Rebecca, Mona, and Sari, the five of us walked along the edge of the moat and stared down at the fish swimming within. The servants were carrying all the necessary implements to have a tea party in the gazebo afterward.

"It's nice to step outside and get some fresh air," I commented.

"Quite," Patricia replied.

The two of us were holding parasols, shielding ourselves from the sunrays. Normally I wouldn't have brought one, but after yesterday's heatstroke incident, I figured it couldn't hurt to err on the side of caution.

Still, I could feel Ray's gaze boring into me as he and the other bodyguards trailed behind us. I knew he was just keeping an eye out lest I pass out again, but I felt like a criminal under surveillance.

He'd been overly concerned ever since yesterday, and it clearly wasn't an act. So what was going on? Was he trying to be my new overprotective father or what?

As we approached the front gates, I noticed there was a bit of a commotion going on. In the distance, I saw a crowd of people gathered outside. The gatekeeper was gesturing for them to leave, but they ignored him and raised their fists in perfect sync—

“ANNUL THE MARRIAGE!”

“Cancel the wedding between Dario and Patricia!”

The second I registered what they were saying, I felt the impulse to clap my hands over Patricia's ears. Unfortunately, she had already taken notice, and her expression stiffened.

“Our Prince deserves better than that sorry excuse for a princess!”

Thank heavens the crowd didn't seem to notice that Patricia was out here. Perhaps the parasol had kept her face hidden, or maybe they couldn't see through the garden trees.

“Let's get you back inside,” Ray told the Princess.

Staring down at the ground, she nodded, practically hiding under her parasol.

“Don't let it get to you, all right? They don't know the first thing about you. They've been hoodwinked by those false rumors, that's all.”

“Yeah, what Ray said,” Rebecca chimed in. “These protesters are a bunch of idiots who can't think for themselves. They're just a particularly loud minority, that's all. Trust me, the vast majority of Dragonkin know better than to take rumors as truth. Besides, unlike them, we actually know what you're like...and

we all think you're a wonderful princess."

Patricia merely slumped her shoulders. "I know it's unrealistic to want *every single person* to like me, but...this really breaks my heart."

Chapter 11: A Trip into Town

THE next day, I decided to go and explore the castle town.

Outside of eating lunch with the Prince, Patricia didn't have any important plans scheduled, so I styled her hair up nice and tight so it would last throughout the day. Once I was done, I was free until evening, when I'd return for her nightly upkeep. So I had plenty of daytime hours available to tour the city and observe the hairstyles of Vaxwald commoners. Plus, that reward money from the Queen was burning a hole in my pocket, so I figured I could browse around for some hair ornaments and accessories while I was at it.

Patricia's still really hung up on the incident from yesterday... Hopefully she feels better after talking to Prince Dario, I thought as I walked down Main Street.

Just then, I spotted a group of young girls staring in my direction and blushing.

"So dreamy..." one of them whispered as we passed each other.

Dreamy? Me? No, surely not. Upon further reflection, I realized their gaze was pointed over my head...but before I could turn around, I felt a tap on my shoulder.

"Did you bring your parasol, Mayna?"

I whirled around to find *Ray* of all people standing there. "What are *you* doing here?!" I yelped in surprise.

"I had the day off work," he replied flatly, ignoring the gaggle of girls admiring him from afar.

"That doesn't explain why you're *here*. If anything, you ought to be relaxing in your quarters or something. Or do you mean to suggest you had similar plans for today entirely by coincidence?"

"Yeah, something like that."

How very vague. I quirked a brow. “I see. Well then, I’ll be going now. Don’t worry, I’ll be mindful of the heat.”

I opened my parasol, slung it over my shoulder, and turned to go when I suddenly felt a hand on my shoulder.

“Hold on a minute. Isn’t this your first time in the city? I’ll be your guide so you don’t get lost. Besides, there are a lot of pickpockets in these parts.”

“Oh, really? In that case...hmmm...I guess I’ll take you up on that,” I decided after an extended internal debate. Being around Ray was always awkward, but at the same time, I felt safer having at least one other person with me.

Although Ray had seemed rather pleased that I agreed, when put into practice, he really didn’t “guide” me at all—just followed along behind me. *Now that I think about it, why would I need a guide when I’m just walking down the street?*

I thought maybe he could help me find the hair accessory stores, but when I asked, he simply said, “I wouldn’t know—I’ve never thought to look.” In the end, all I could do was keep walking until I found one, observing hairstyles as I went.

“Dragonkin men all seem to have really short hair... They make yours look long by comparison... And as for the women, sure enough, theirs is mostly long and straight...”

But as it turned out, I wasn’t the only one ruminating on hair at the moment.

A group of three young women approached me. “Pardon me, but how do you get your hair to look like that?” one of them asked.

Today I was wearing my hair in a single braid starting from the crown of my head. This was no ordinary braid, however. First, I’d put the upper half of my hair in a ponytail, then tucked it into itself. From there, I braided it into the loose lower half of my hair, creating three small separate braids. Then I took those, fanned them out, and braided them into a single giant plait, atop which sat a hairband.

In Myulan I would’ve styled it up further, but I had been meaning to experiment with Vaxwald style for a change, and today was the perfect

opportunity.

“It’s pretty easy, believe it or not. I could do it for you, if you like.”

“Really?”

“*Mayna*,” Ray chided. He seemed to think better of trying to stop me, however, because he eventually took up the duty of holding my parasol for me as I worked.

I pulled the three of them to the side of the street where we wouldn’t block foot traffic, then set about braiding their hair the same as mine. By the time I was finished, the young ladies were beaming with delight.

“That *was* pretty easy! You weren’t kidding! Now that I’ve seen you do it twice, I’m sure I’ll remember the steps. Besides, I’ve had some practice doing Myulan braids.”

“By all means, give it a try sometime! Oh, and while I have you, take this. It’s the hairstyle Her Highness Princess Patricia wore to her Vaxwald debut party.”

I pulled the spare pamphlets from my satchel and passed them out. This was precisely why I thought to bring them.

“Wow... An authentic royal hairstyle?”

All at once, the ladies’ eyes lit up. Not that I blamed them, of course—surely anyone would dream of looking like a princess.

“Thank you! I’d be more than happy to take this off your hands!”

“You’re very welcome.”

“Just wondering, but...are you two a couple? You’re not Bondmates by any chance, are you?” one of the girls whispered to me, her eyes on Ray.

“No, no, nothing of the sort,” I quickly replied.

At this point they invited him to grab drinks with them, but he wriggled out of it by pointing at me and saying, “I need to stay with her.”

Uhhh, you really don’t, but okay.

“Awww, darn...”

“Rrgh... I just know my one true Bondmate is out there somewhere...”

As the group of girls wandered away in disappointment, I commented, “These young Dragonkin care an awful lot about finding their Bondmate, don’t they?”

“Indeed—and doubly so knowing not everyone is destined to have one at all.”

Granted, I could certainly see the appeal of a soulmate, but I couldn’t help but wonder why they cared *that* much. After all, if Bondmates were really that unique and special, then would Ray have mistaken me for his? I somehow doubted it.

Unfortunately, by the time I realized precisely what we were discussing, the air between us had already grown stiff and awkward.

Ray pointed at a nearby shop to break the tension. “Hey, look. There’s a jewelry store. They might have hair ornaments.”

At first glance, the store in question appeared to be entirely out of my price range, but I didn’t have it in me to argue the point, so in I went.

“Welcome. Can I help you find anything?” an older gentleman asked as we entered—likely the owner, if I had to wager a guess. His probing gaze was fixed on Ray; perhaps he’d deemed my male companion worthy clientele. I, however, was just here to window-shop.

I really hope the owner doesn’t mind.

“Do you have any hair ornaments?” Ray asked while I was busy feeling out of place.

“Right over here.”

I took one look at the display case and let out a gasp of admiration. “Wow...!”

The case was filled with luxurious ornaments made of gold and silver, some with jewels or pearls embedded in them. They sparkled under the display lights, dazzling my eyes—but I couldn’t see any price tags, which meant they definitely cost a ridiculous amount far beyond my personal budget. *Maybe I’ll ask about the price next time I’m shopping for Patricia.*

Since I couldn’t afford anything, I decided the least I could do was take careful note of their designs. *That little bird ornament is so darling... Oh, and I like that*

one there with the tear-shaped jewels hanging from it... I bet I'd look like a chandelier wearing that...

They were all perfectly lovely...but then I spotted something that stole my heart.

"Oh, wow!"

With no precious metals or encrusted jewels to be seen, it was quite possibly the most ordinary item in the case, but I could innately sense its value.

"This is iridian whiteshell, isn't it?"

"It is indeed... You have a sharp eye, miss," the owner replied, looking a bit surprised that a commoner like myself would be so well-informed.

Iridian whiteshell, as the name suggests, is a shell material harvested from beaches. Normally it's white in color, but under the light, it faintly shines with all the colors of the rainbow. And of all the shells popularly used in crafting jewelry, this one is by far the most rare and valuable.

This particular accessory took the shape of a cluster of small flowers, each petal its own separate piece of whiteshell. The shells themselves were normally quite large, so the designer would've had to carefully break it and then sand the fragments into the perfect size for every single piece. In the center of each flower sparkled a tiny pale jewel of some sort—possibly a diamond.

"These flowers are meant to be miniature *Nemophila*, aren't they? I can tell by the shape," Ray observed as he admired the accessory with me.

Personally, I was impressed he knew them by name. I was quite fond of the little blue blooms myself, but they weren't popular like roses, and as such, they weren't exactly the sort of flower the average person could recognize offhand.

"Why, yes. I'm surprised you knew that."

"They're fairly common here in Vaxwald. As a boy I would always see them around town, but I never knew what they were called until recently, when I finally became curious enough to look it up. Apparently some countries refer to them as baby blue eyes, too."

"Interesting..."

His comment reminded me of the time when my mother told me I had “the sweetest baby blue eyes, just like the flower.”

Something stuck out to me, however—why now, of all times, would Ray suddenly take an interest in some common flower? He didn’t really strike me as the plant-loving type.

As I pondered this, I turned to the owner and asked a slightly more pressing question: “Pardon me, but how much are you asking for this?”

I braced myself, ready to pick my jaw up off the floor, but the figure he quoted was actually a lot more reasonable than I was expecting. That said, it was still *very* expensive, so if I was going to buy it, I needed to be one hundred percent committed to the purchase. Still, at the very least, I could afford it.

It probably helped that it was made from a shell. While iridian whiteshell was valuable in its own right, I imagined its jewel-studded neighbors all had an extra zero at the end of their price tags.

“This is the only iridian whiteshell ornament that I have for sale, and once it’s sold, I can’t guarantee when or if I’ll get more in stock. I doubt my competitors would carry any, either.”

“Nngh...”

I hesitated. As much as I wanted it, I didn’t have the entire sum on hand. Granted, I could ask him to hold it for me and return with the full amount another day, but this was a great deal more than I was comfortable spending on an impulse purchase. I needed to think this through rationally.

“I really, really love it, but I think I need to sleep on it and come back another time.”

Dying inside, I wrenched myself away from the display case and left the store with the full knowledge that I might never see that beautiful ornament again.

“You sure? I thought you really liked it,” Ray asked curiously, as though he sincerely had no idea what was stopping me from buying it.

“Didn’t you hear the price he quoted?” I asked.

“Yeah, so? What about it?”

Oh, you sweet, ignorant aristocrat.



AFTER I bid a heartrending goodbye to the iridian whiteshell accessory, the two of us were walking down the main street when I suddenly spotted a small crowd forming in the nearby plaza. There, a newspaper stand had opened for business, and a line of people were waiting to make their purchases. Reading the paper struck me as a good way to stay up to date on the latest Vaxwald happenings, so I walked over—

“Come one, come all! Get the scoop on the truth behind the royal rumors!” the vendor proclaimed.

Frowning, I got in line. Once it was my turn, I took a coin from my wallet and handed it over to the vendor.

“Thanks for stopping by!”

I took the newspaper—more of a flyer if anything—and stared down at it, brow deeply furrowed. Behind me, I felt Ray reading over my shoulder.

Sure enough, the article was definitely about Princess Patricia, but at no point did it clarify that the rumors were false. To the contrary, it was a scathing, libelous takedown completely in line with the rest of the smear campaign against her.

“We received exclusive testimony from a Myulan servant who has worked for Princess Patricia for years. According to her, ‘the Princess is every bit as immature as she looks. She’ll fly into a violent rage at the slightest mistake, and she’s been known to throw vases or hit people during one of her tantrums.’ Our anonymous informant reported that ‘Patricia LOVES to spend money on new, shiny things. You name it, she buys it: dresses, jewelry, furniture, carriages... She’ll get bored and buy new ones every other week. She’ll even replace her pets once they stop being small and cute.’ One can only hope she won’t start looking to replace Prince Dario once the novelty has worn off.”

As I read the article aloud, my voice grew steadily lower and lower. Who could this “informant” possibly be? Or was that fabricated, too? I had worked

for the Princess for the past two years, and at no point did I *ever* hear of her hitting anyone. We had our fair share of gossip rags back in Myulan; surely they would've been all over a story like that, assuming it had actually happened.

Not only that, but this “testimony” about “Patricia’s love of spending” was *blatantly* false. Sure, she was tuned in to the current trends and bought her fair share of new things, and maybe she didn’t always wear the same dress more than once, but was that really so different from any other princess? Surely even Dario had outfits in his closet that he’d only worn once.

“Replacing older pets? She doesn’t even *have* any pets!” I growled.

But everyone else in the plaza was having a completely different reaction to this article:

“She *throws vases at her servants?*”

“Oh my god...”

It wasn’t clear whether they actually believed what was written, but not one of them was openly declaring the article to be codswallop. Perhaps this was only natural, given that no one here knew the Princess on a personal level. They didn’t have the details required to make an informed decision on the subject.

But I did.

I stormed back over to the vendor.

“Did you write this? Were you the one who interviewed this Myulan servant?”

“Lady, I just sell the papers. That’s all I’m paid to do,” the man replied flippantly.

“Then who was it that wrote this tripe?”

“One of our reporters. But if *factual accuracy* is your problem, then take it elsewhere. In this business, sometimes the news is the honest truth, but other times, the news is whatever sells.” He laughed.

Furious, I puffed myself up, but Ray held out a hand to stop me. “The *Sun Guardian* is nothing more than a gossip rag. Their reader base knows it full well, and as such, they don’t take these articles as gospel—”

“I refuse to accept that this woman is going to marry our Prince Dario!” a woman exclaimed nearby.

“...Generally speaking,” Ray finished awkwardly.

I summoned up all of my courage and thrust my copy of the *Sun Guardian* into the air.

“Listen up, everyone!” I shouted across the plaza. “Please, don’t buy into this muckraking! The Princess is *not* the sort of person these rumors make her out to be!”

I wasn’t accustomed to making public speeches, but this was no time to be shy or embarrassed. I fought to keep my voice calm and level as I continued.

“When Her Highness left Myulan, she was forced to leave all of her friends and family behind. She came here with only her hairstylist at her side. She was so anxious about Vaxwald, she broke down in tears—but she didn’t let her fear stop her. Instead, this *sixteen-year-old child* chose to put in the effort to form a strong connection to Prince Dario, all for the sake of their two nations. So please, try to see her for who she is and draw your own conclusions. Don’t let someone else dictate your opinion for you.”

The people in the plaza had all turned their attention to me.

“The royal wedding is right around the corner. On the big day, I hope you’ll all come and visit the castle, or even just watch from a distance. Just wait until you see the smile on Prince Dario’s face whenever he’s with her—that alone should be proof enough that she’s not the monster you’re all dreading. And when you see her in all her grace and dignity, you’ll realize that she’s fit to be Queen.”

I’d never been more resolute in all my life.

“She’s *not* the person you see depicted in this article. I’m begging you, please...don’t reject her before you ever get to know her.”

By the time my little monologue had come to an end, I was completely out of breath. Silence fell over the plaza. Then, after a moment, someone started clapping. Two people. Three. Eventually the entire plaza was drowned in applause.

“That was a great speech!” a middle-aged gentleman said to me. “You don’t look like a politician, but you seem to know the Princess very well... Are you her advisor or something?”

“No, I’m just a hairstylist,” I answered.

As I stood there, other people chimed in:

“I can tell you care deeply for Her Highness.”

“Perhaps we ought to think more critically about the rumors.”

It was such a relief to hear. Of course, I knew it wouldn’t be anywhere near enough to stop the smear campaign in its tracks, but nevertheless, I was proud of myself for taking action...and I wasn’t done yet.

I took out my pamphlets and started passing them out.

“This is the trendy new hairstyle Her Highness wore at a recent soirée. It’s easier than it looks!” I explained, wearing my most professional smile.

The people in the plaza each took one and peered down at it curiously.

Ray smirked as he watched my antics. “I never knew you were so strong-willed.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” I replied.

He grinned, then turned to the newspaper vendor, who was balefully watching my pamphlet trump his paper in popularity.

“The *Sun Guardian* has been crossing the line a lot lately. Clearly you must think these libelous articles are what sells when it comes to news about Her Highness.”

“Come again, pal? Like I said, I only get paid to sell the papers.”

“Yes, and I imagine you’ll be penalized accordingly. Prince Dario plans to take action against any publications that write defamatory statements against his future Queen, and the *Sun Guardian* is on his list. Keep vilifying her and you won’t like what happens next,” Ray threatened, his gaze icy.

A pair of knights rode up on horseback. One of them was clutching a copy of the *Sun Guardian* in his hand. “You there! Are you selling this publication? I

must warn you—”

“Crap!” The vendor promptly took off running.

“Hey! Wait!”

But the knights didn’t give chase; evidently their goal was merely to get him out of the plaza. Perhaps Vaxwald was like Myulan where the concept of *lèse-majesté* had fallen out of fashion, so they wouldn’t be able to arrest him for it.

“Was the *Sun Guardian* the source of all the rumors?” I asked Ray.

“It’s possible it was originally a publicity stunt to sell papers...but the investigation has yet to turn up anything substantial. You see, Prince Dario thinks there’s a chance it’s all a Kazarth psyop.”

“You mean *Kazarth* is trying to manipulate Vaxwald?”

Kazarth—a small nation sharing borders with both Myulan and Vaxwald. Myulan had never been on very good terms with them, so I couldn’t claim to have a favorable opinion of them, myself. Kazarth was known for tiptoeing around Vaxwald in everything it did, probably to avoid a full-scale dragon onslaught.

“Think about it. If this wedding happens, the alliance between Myulan and Vaxwald will be made even stronger. I doubt Kazarth would like that.”

He had a point. To Kazarth, a union between our two sizable nations would make us even more terrifying...but they were probably right to be nervous, considering the marriage itself was almost certainly a deliberate tactic to keep them in check. The little nation had been stepping on a lot of toes over the past few years; if anything, surely they should have expected this result. In my opinion, they had no right to complain.

That said, there was no proof that Kazarth was the true mastermind just yet—but in my view, they certainly had the motive.



“**GUESS** what, Mayna!”

When I returned to the castle that night to braid Patricia’s hair for bed, she told me all about her day. According to her, after their lunch together, Dario

had taken her to try on her wedding dress. The dress itself wasn't completely ready, but the tailors wanted to ensure it would fit her before adding the finishing touches.

"When I walked out of the fitting room, he said I looked beautiful! And that he can't wait for our wedding day!" Patricia gushed. "You know, at first I was scared to meet the Dragonkin Prince, but the more I talk to him, the more I like him! He's more open and extroverted than I could ever hope to be, but somehow talking to him just makes me feel good about myself, you know? He doesn't put on airs; he's always frank and direct."

"I'm glad to hear it. It sounds like the two of you will make a happy couple," I smiled. It was great to see them growing closer and closer with every passing day, and I was certain their marriage would be a peaceful one, even if she wasn't his Bondmate.

Once Patricia was in bed, I gathered up all my tools and left the room, followed by one of her servants, Sari.

"Hey, where's Kirion?" she asked me. This was the first time she had ever spoken to me directly.

I glanced back at her. "He's in my quarters, heating the curling irons. I'm going to have him practice curling my hair."

He needed the experience or else he wasn't going to improve—but I couldn't bear to ask someone else to risk hair damage or contact burns. Thus, it was up to me.

Personally, I felt this practice session could have waited until lunchtime tomorrow, but Kirion was eager to get started tonight, and rather than put a damper on his enthusiasm, I conceded.

"Right now?!" Sari shouted.

"In your quarters?!" Ray cut in as he stood guard outside Patricia's bedroom. I hadn't even realized he was listening.

"It's nighttime!" Sari continued.

"This is unacceptable!" Ray insisted.

I shrank back. "What's the matter with you two?"

Obviously I had my own misgivings about being alone in a room with a man at night, but our options were limited. It was either my quarters or his.

Sari grabbed me by the wrist and pulled me over to the wall. "You already have Sir Ray, and now you want Kirion, too?" she hissed under her breath so Ray couldn't hear. "Don't you think Sir Ray is more than good enough for you? How can you be so *greedy*?!"

"Now hold on a second," I hissed back. "First of all, Ray and I aren't like that. And second of all, I'm not interested in Kirion, either."

"If you insist on doing your stupid curling practice, then I'm coming, too! I refuse to let you be alone in the room with him!" she yelled in my face.

"I'm coming, too," Ray added, his expression severe.

And so I returned to my quarters with the two of them in tow. When we entered, Kirion looked at me in surprise, then grinned. "I see you've brought an audience," he joked. But once I was within earshot, he whispered, "Wish it was just us."

I sharply looked over to find him wearing his most innocent smile.

These people are so exhausting.

Chapter 12: The Mysterious Gift

LAST night was such a nightmare. All I had to do was sit there and be practiced on, and yet I came away completely exhausted.

“Miss Maynaaaa! Every time I touch your hair, Sir Ray starts glaring at me! Help!”

“Kirion, focus. Ray, face that way.”

All night long, there were *dozens* of little exchanges along those lines. Meanwhile, Sari was glaring at me so hard you’d think she was trying to bore a hole straight through my head. Then, not even thirty minutes later, Ray demanded we end the session because “the room’s gotten too hot.” On top of that, for some reason he made me promise that I wouldn’t meet with Kirion alone at night for *any* reason, even for work, *ever* again.

All in all, it was a rather draining night...but the very next morning, my fatigue flew out the window.

Right as I was about to leave my quarters, I opened my door to find a small, neatly wrapped box sitting on the hallway floor just outside. The hallway itself was deserted, so I had no way of knowing who left it, but the card tucked under the ribbon read *For Mayna*, so I scooped it up and stepped back inside my room.

“What *is* this?” I wondered aloud as I untied the ribbon. Then I lifted the lid—

“Oh my god!”

—and there I found the iridian whiteshell accessory I’d swooned over yesterday.

“It’s every bit as beautiful as I remember...!”

I ran over to the mirror, took off the accessory I’d been wearing, and put the whiteshell on instead. Fortunately, it paired with today’s hairstyle rather nicely.

And while it wasn't flashy, it was still eye-catching, affording the wearer an air of pristine elegance.

Giddy, I took a moment to admire myself from every angle, then rushed out of the room. I had someone I needed to thank, after all.

While I was on my way to Patricia's room, I encountered Ray heading the same direction to take his guard shift for the day. Like a gleeful child, I ran after him and touched his arm. "Ray!"

He glanced back, took one look at me—and my hair accessory—and smiled. "Good morning, Mayna. I see you're in a chipper mood today," he greeted. Was he intentionally playing dumb, or what?

"You went and bought this for me, didn't you? Thank you so much!" I exclaimed.

Perhaps someone with a bit more decorum would have declined such an expensive gift, but now that I was wearing it, I couldn't possibly give it back. Still, it was more than I was comfortable accepting from a friend—assuming I could consider him that—so I decided I'd figure out a way to pay him back somehow. But I wasn't going to worry about that until later. For now, I just wanted to express my joy and gratitude.

"See? I put it on right away!"

"It looks great on you. Very pretty."

It was possible he was referring to the accessory and not me specifically, but either way it seemed he was being sincere, and so I was willing to accept the compliment. He gained nothing from giving me this gift, and yet he smiled along with me, almost as if my cheer was contagious.

"That ornament was practically made for you."

"Be honest—it *was* you, wasn't it?"

"Who knows? It's a mystery," he grinned, as if it wasn't completely obvious. This gift couldn't possibly have come from *anyone* else.

"I really, really appreciate this. I'm going to treasure it," I told him.

"Oh! Miss Mayna!" Just then, Kirion turned up, likely on his way to Patricia's

quarters as well—and the next words out of his mouth left me speechless: “I see you’ve already put it on! It looks great!”

“What?”

Baffled, I stared at him. If I didn’t know any better, it almost sounded as though *he* was the one who bought it for me.

“What’s going on? How do you know about this accessory?”

“What do you mean? Obviously I bought it and left it outside your door, silly! Bet you weren’t expecting that, huh?”

“But then...how did you know to choose this specific ornament?” I asked, perplexed. I was pretty sure only Ray could have known how badly I wanted it.

“Well, you see, I was in town yesterday when I saw you and Sir Ray walking down the street together. I wanted to say hello, but the two of you looked like you were having such a great time, and I couldn’t bear to interrupt...but then part of me wondered if perhaps you were on a date, so I decided to tail you to find out.” He shrugged his shoulders sheepishly. “After you left that jewelry store, I went inside, thinking maybe I could get you something. So I went to the owner and said, ‘The woman that was here just now—was there anything she was particularly interested in?’ and then he directed me to that accessory.”

“You’re serious?” I asked dubiously.

At this, Kirion pouted. “You don’t believe me?”

Beside us, Ray quirked a brow, suspiciously narrowing his eyes on Kirion.

I really thought this was a gift from Ray... I guess not. And for some reason, I was actually *disappointed* to learn otherwise. In fact, I couldn’t help but hold out hope that Ray would admit the gift was from him. He didn’t, of course.

“You say you saw us together, but *couldn’t bear to interrupt*? That’s simply not possible. The Kirion I know would come and hassle us without a second thought.”

“Wow, rude!” Kirion laughed uncomfortably.

I removed the accessory and handed it back to him. “I appreciate the gesture, but I’m sorry—I can’t accept something that expensive.”

A few short moments ago I thought that I *couldn't possibly give it back*, and now here I was, doing just that. Why was it that I was only comfortable with this gift if it came from Ray? Was it because I knew an aristocrat like him could easily afford it?

"Come on, Miss Mayna, don't be like that. Just keep it," Kirion insisted with a sly smile, wrapping his hands around my closed fist. "It doesn't matter how expensive it was. When it comes to my Bondmate, I'll gladly pay any price."

"Your...Bondmate...?" I repeated, as though I hadn't heard him loud and clear.

"Of course! Don't you feel it? Ever since we first met, I've felt something between us, and now I'm certain. You're my Bondmate, Miss Mayna."

Frozen, I forced my stalling brain to think back over the days since Kirion had first arrived. There was certainly *something* between us, all right. Every time I looked into his dark eyes, I felt a deep restlessness in my chest. Even now, my heart was thumping out of control...and here at point-blank range, it almost felt like I was on the cusp of being swallowed whole—

"Don't touch her!" Ray dove between us.



He seized Kirion by the collar and slammed him against the wall.

“Guh...!” Kirion winced in pain.

“Ray!” I shouted, panicked.

“What are you trying to pull?” Ray demanded, glaring down at the other man.

Kirion wheezed for breath. “That really hurts, you know... C’mon, let go of me... Miss Mayna, help...!”

“Ray!” I called again, but no response. He didn’t even loosen his grip.

“Why would you invent a lie like that?”

“What are you talking about? I’m not lying...!”

“Are you even really a Dragonkin?” Ray growled.

“What’s going on out here?!”

Patricia’s bedroom door flew open, and Rebecca dashed into the hall, followed by Mona and Sari.

“Kirion!” Sari shouted as she ran over.

But Ray promptly relinquished his grip, and with an icy glare, he turned and left.

“What happened? Are you okay?” Sari asked fretfully.

“I’m all right. I don’t know why, but something I did really upset Sir Ray,” Kirion explained.

Personally, I was tempted to go after Ray, but that would sadly have to wait. Patricia’s hair wasn’t going to style itself, after all.



“**PATRICIA**, what’s the matter with your hairstylist today?” Prince Dario asked the Princess once he noticed the hard look on my face. Today the three of us were going over potential hairstyles for the wedding, and I had presented over a dozen new designs for their perusal.

His comment quickly brought me back to my senses, and I wiped the grimace off my face. “I sincerely apologize, Your Highness.”

“Something happened with Kirion today,” Patricia explained to him, though I wasn’t sure how she knew that, since I hadn’t told her about it. Then again, perhaps it was obvious, considering any interaction with my apprentice was distant and awkward (on my end, at least; Kirion himself was acting fairly normal).

“Oh yeah? Come to think of it, Ray seemed pretty tense when I saw him in the hall earlier,” Darion teased.

“I apologize for the distraction. Let’s go ahead and choose a hairstyle for the Princess.” I gestured down at the designs on the table. Meanwhile, the bride and groom were having a good chuckle at my expense.

“Personally, I like this one. It suits Patricia’s kind and cheerful demeanor.”

“Then let’s go with that one!” Patricia declared swiftly.

“You sure? Shouldn’t you pick one that *you* like?”

“No, that’s okay. I want to match your tastes,” she told him, blushing faintly. Dario laughed shyly in response.

What a happy couple.

With the bride’s wedding hairstyle decided, the Prince rose from his chair and got ready to leave. He was a busy man, and his schedule was packed.

“I didn’t know Miss Mayna could draw,” Kirion mused as he looked over my designs with Patricia.

“What, you can’t?” she replied incredulously.

Dario leaned over to me. “Have fun with Ray,” he whispered playfully.

Torn between “Yes, sir” and “No, thank you,” I stared resolutely at him for a moment, then asked, “Your Highness, um...is it an accepted practice among Dragonkin men to prank a woman by telling her she’s your Bondmate?”

“Is this about Ray?”

“No, not this time.” I stared carefully at the floor.

“Ah, now I get it,” Dario murmured, shooting a quick glance in Kirion’s direction. “No, it’s not an accepted practice...but every now and then, there are

shallow, thoughtless individuals who use the concept of a Bondmate to prey upon the naïve and gullible.”

“I see...”

“Thus, it’s up to you to see through it. You must choose your partner not for the things he says, but for the love he gives you.” And with that, Prince Dario left the room.

He’s so mature, you’d never think he was only eighteen...

That said, this was *not* a matter of choosing between Ray and Kirion. Ray had long since changed his mind and stopped pursuing me. Kirion, on the other hand, was an active problem, and one I didn’t know how to handle.

I sighed and looked over to find him grinning at me. “Kirion, can I borrow you for a moment?”

With my apprentice in tow, I stepped into the hall. I wanted to settle this as soon as possible, and fortunately, Sari wasn’t around to “chaperone” us. But as I turned, I promptly made eye contact with Ray. *Of course*. I’d forgotten he was on duty out here.

“Where are you going?” he demanded. Whether he was speaking to me or to Kirion, I wasn’t certain. Either way, I glanced over my shoulder.

“None of your business,” I shot back flatly. Ray took a step in my direction, so I hastily continued, “And *don’t* follow us. You’re on duty, remember? And for that matter, this doesn’t concern you.”

At this, Ray stopped short, with a look on his face like a puppy who’d just been commanded to *stay*.

Okay, maybe I was a bit too harsh just now—but after everything he’d put me through? The concern for my health? The gift (yes, I still chose to believe it had come from him)? Why would he do those things for me if I wasn’t his Bondmate? At this point, I was exasperated. Not just with him, but with Kirion, too. I couldn’t tell what either of them were thinking.

I led Kirion out to the courtyard, then turned to face him. “Kirion, do you honestly think I’m your Bondmate?”

“Yes, of course,” he asserted, smiling amicably. “I never said anything until today, but I’ve suspected it ever since we first met.”

“Then what about Sari? You two have grown rather close lately.”

“She’s just a friend. But if it makes you insecure, I’ll stop talking to her.”

“No, there’s no need for that.”

This was so awkward. We were all coworkers, and we needed to maintain a civil relationship at minimum in order to get our work done. Still, I wanted to make my feelings on the matter perfectly clear.

“Kirion, I can’t return your feelings. I understand you see me as your Bondmate, but I don’t love you like that.”

“That’s just because you’re not a Dragonkin... If only you were, you’d feel it, too,” he alleged with sadness coloring his voice and face. It pained me to hurt him, but at the same time, I couldn’t trust that he actually meant what he said.

You see, Kirion was a walking contradiction. While on one hand he seemed like a friendly, extroverted, honest young man...he was also the sort of guy to willfully provoke others and flirt with two women at once. There was clearly more to him than met the eye.

I didn’t believe his statement about the hair ornament, either. If it truly was a gift from him, then why didn’t he simply give it to me directly? That seemed much more in line with his personality. Plus, the attached card had read “For Mayna.” If Kirion had written it, surely he would’ve written “For *Miss* Mayna” instead.

“I just want to be friends, Kirion,” I implored him.

Unfortunately, it seemed he wasn’t ready to give up on me just yet. He puffed up his chest, his long dark ponytail swaying with the motion, and declared: “That’s not enough for me. I can’t be ‘just friends’ with my Bondmate! So whether you like it or not, I’m going to prove to you that my feelings are real.”

“Kirion...”

I’d had enough of this “Bondmate” crap the first time around. I was sincerely, completely, at a total loss.

Chapter 13: Dragons

FIVE days had passed since Kirion first called me his Bondmate, during which he grew increasingly more forward with me, to Ray's exasperation, and I found myself growing more and more exhausted as time wore on.

On the sixth day, Prince Dario decided to take the Princess to observe the knights' training.

The training field was a massive plot of land situated right beside the castle. According to the Prince, the royal knights came here for combat training every day. This was no ordinary practice, mind you; as Dragonkin, the knights of Vaxwald would shift into their dragon forms and take to the skies to spar.

We had occasionally overheard distant roars during our stay thus far, but Patricia's quarters were located on the opposite side of the castle, and we couldn't see the training field from her window. But she caught sight of a dragon yesterday while on a walk around the castle, and she was so enthralled that she insisted Prince Dario let her get a closer look. He was hesitant at first, but eventually conceded.

"I should've said this sooner, but...I'm sorry for making these demands of you, Your Highness," Patricia told Dario as they walked side by side down the corridor. "It was my first time seeing a dragon, and I was ever so excited... If this is against the rules, let me know and I'll go back to my quarters."

"It's not *against the rules*..." he trailed off. It was unlike him to be so hesitant and indirect.

I observed them from behind. Patricia had explicitly invited me to tag along, and I had taken her up on the offer. Behind me followed Patricia's bodyguards, and naturally, Ray was among them. As for Kirion, he had declined the offer, stating he wasn't interested—and personally, I couldn't have been more grateful. The last thing I wanted was to increase the amount of time he and Ray spent in each other's presence.

“Yesterday I was reluctant because...I was worried you’d start to fear dragons and Dragonkin alike, myself included,” Dario admitted. “Our dragon forms aren’t small and cute like a dog or cat—we’re enormous and fierce—and some humans find it creepy that we can transform.”

He glanced nervously at her as he spoke; he clearly cared a great deal about his future bride’s opinion of him. And as it turned out, I wasn’t the only one amused to see this.

“I would *never* find you creepy,” Patricia declared with a sweet smile. “On the contrary, I’d love to see your dragon form. I’m told it’s quite awe-inspiring, with shiny silver scales.”

“Well...if you find you’re not afraid of the dragons at the training field, then perhaps...”

In contrast with Patricia’s open-minded stance, Dario’s uncertainty was downright adorable.

I slowed my pace to walk in step with Ray. “You have a dragon form, too, don’t you?” I asked.

“Of course. All Dragonkin have one,” he replied.

“I must say, I can’t really picture what you’d look like. Are you taking part in today’s combat training?”

“No, I’m not. I wouldn’t want to scare either of you.”

“You’re not going to scare me.”

“You don’t know that. This is your first time seeing Dragonkin transform. In fact, maybe it’d be better if you returned to your quarters instead. I can relate to how His Highness is feeling right now... The second you see it, you’ll realize we’re monsters, and you’ll never look at us the same way again.”

“I’m *not* going to see you as a monster,” I insisted. *What is he so afraid of?*

We arrived at the training field, where a large group of knights in humanoid form were staring up at the sky. Above them clashed three pairs of dragons. The sound was tremendous—threatening growls, the flapping of heavy wings, labored breathing. It was overwhelming, to say the least. Their sharp fangs...and

those claws...

I sensed Ray looking at me and hastily wiped any trace of surprise off my face.

“Time’s up!”

At the senior officer’s command, the six dragons flew down to the ground and morphed back into humanoids in knight armor. I was puzzled as to where their clothes had gone while they were dragons. Perhaps that was part of the magic.

Another group of six shifted into dragon form and took flight.

“How are you feeling?” Dario asked Patricia.

“Oh, I’m fine,” Patricia answered with a confident smile.

From this distance, I couldn’t quite gauge the dragons’ exact size, but they were almost certainly larger than a carriage at the very least. I could see how they’d make fearsome enemies, but I didn’t feel like I was in danger, and thus I really wasn’t afraid of them.

I heard Patricia making idle comments like “The scales are so pretty!” and “Everyone has their own unique color!” She didn’t sound frightened in the least.

Then, about ten minutes later:

“I’m simply not afraid, Your Highness. Now will you show me your dragon form?”

“Hmmm... Well, all right. In that case, I suppose I’ll go and join the training. I haven’t gotten much exercise as of late.”

Emboldened by Patricia’s request, Dario strode off toward the center of the training field...but moments later came to a stop, peering up at the sky. “What’s the matter with *him*?” he asked no one in particular.

I noticed Ray staring dubiously up at the sky as well, so I followed suit.

Above us, three pairs of dragons battled at the forefront of a bright blue sky...but one of them, a copper-colored dragon, was clutching his head and shaking it. Did he have a headache or something? He looked to be in pain.

“Is he okay?” I asked Ray.

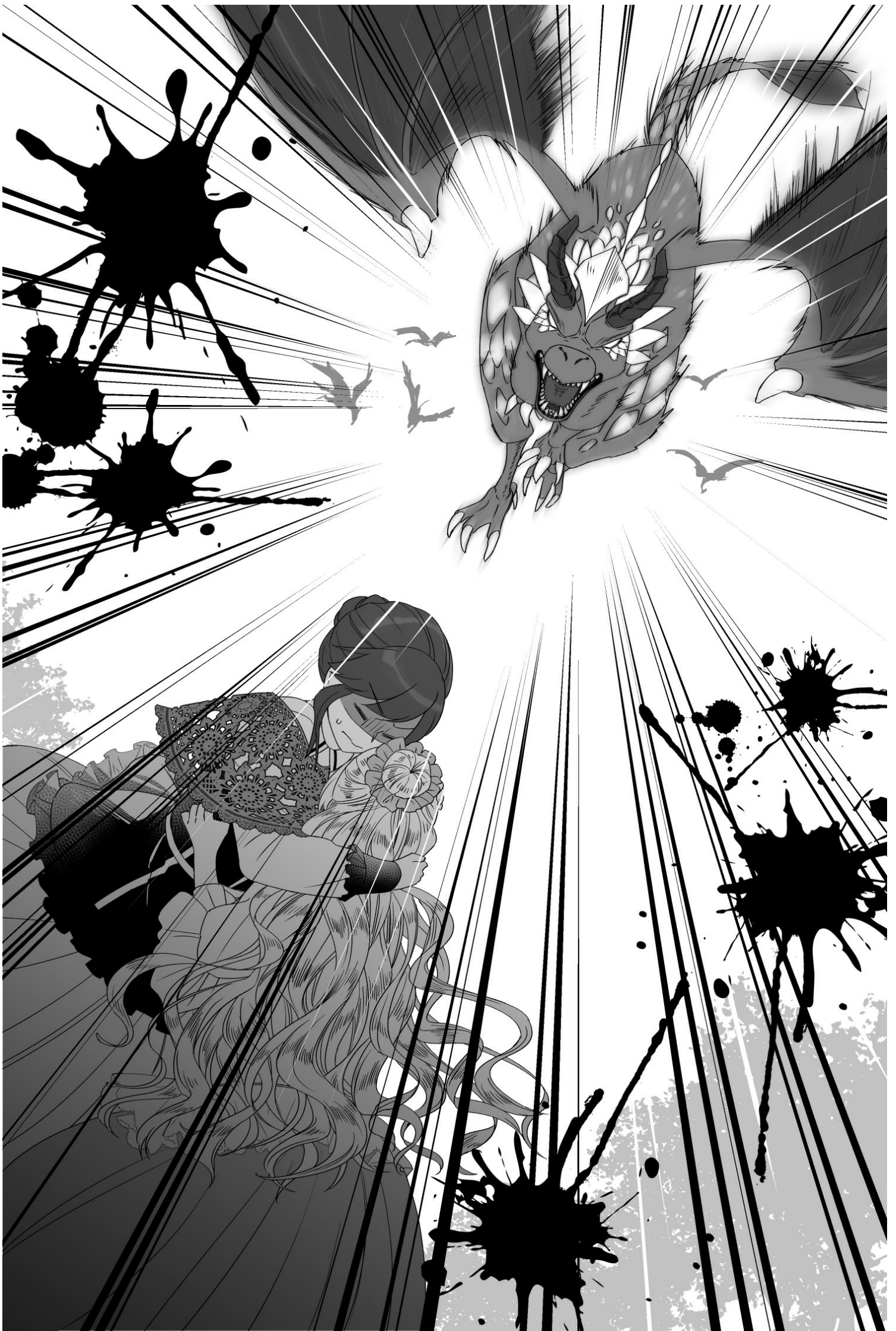
“I’m not sure... He’s acting strange. Stay back, ladies.” As he spoke, Ray

stepped forward to shield me and Patricia—and in that instant, the writhing dragon's head swiveled around, pointing a vicious, bloodshot glare squarely in our direction.

A split second later, he bared his fangs and came barreling right for us.

He was nearly upon us by the time I realized his target was Patricia beside me.

She screamed. I pulled her into my arms, turned, and shielded her with my body. A token gesture at this point.



If that dragon struck us at full speed, surely neither of us would survive. A chill ran down my spine, sending goosebumps pricking up my arms. I squeezed my eyes shut. *We're going to die.*

But then a roar erupted just behind me. I turned to look.

The copper-colored dragon was now physically restrained in midair by three other dragons. Between them and us stood four *more* dragons—Dario, Ray, and the other bodyguards, perhaps?—acting as a defensive barrier to protect us. At first the copper dragon struggled to free himself, but over time his movements grew sluggish, until suddenly he morphed back to his humanoid form...unconscious.

“What was *that* about...?” Patricia whispered blankly.

The silver dragon in front of us turned back and looked at her anxiously.

“Prince Dario...?” she ventured.

“Yes, it’s me. Are you all right?” he asked in a deeper, rumbling voice.

“Oh, yes, I’m fine. Thank you for protecting me.” Still trembling, Patricia tottered over to dragon-Dario at once—and the Prince himself looked quite relieved to see she harbored no fear toward him.

Meanwhile, a flamboyant gold dragon stepped away from the commotion and trotted up to me. “What about you, Mayna? Are you hurt?”

“Is that you, Ray?”

The voice certainly sounded like his, though deeper.

“...Are you frightened?” the dragon asked, somewhat timidly.

“No, I’m not,” I answered. “Because I know who you are, and no matter what form you take, you’re not a monster.”

At my reply, Ray smiled slightly (if you could call turned up lips on a dragon a smile), then shifted back to his humanoid form and jogged over to the unconscious knight. Around me, the other dragons were shifting back, too.

Dario turned from Patricia to Ray. “What happened?”

“I’m not sure.”

“It looked like he was trying to attack the Princess.”

“Agreed.”

More knights ran over from the opposite end of the training field. “Prince Dario! Princess Patricia! Are you unharmed?!”

“Not to worry; we’re fine. Now then, we need to wake this fellow up, because I mean to interrogate him. We’re very fortunate Her Highness didn’t suffer any injuries—if she had, we would’ve had a diplomatic scandal on our hands. The whole wedding might’ve been called off!”

At Dario’s request, the senior officer began to shake the unconscious man. “Ian! Wake up, Ian!”

With one hand clutching his head, Ian pushed himself into a sitting position, groaning in pain.

“Are you aware of what it is you’ve done?!” the officer roared furiously.

For a moment Ian stared back blankly. Then he searched his memory...and, at last, all the color drained from his face. “W-Wait! I never wanted to attack Her Highness! Please, you have to believe me!”

He explained that he’d heard an ear-piercing screech partway through his practice duel, and for some reason, the thought crossed his mind that he needed to kill Patricia.

“It was completely against my will, I swear it!”

“I understand where you’re coming from, and I want to trust you...but for now, I’m going to need to place you under arrest.”

“I understand, Your Highness...”

Ian didn’t protest as the other knights led him away. Dario and Ray watched him go, then turned to the senior officer and started asking questions about him.

“It’s been five years now since Ian joined the knight order. He’s a good man with a reputable background... I haven’t noticed any suspicious behavior from him, either.”

Even the senior officer could scarcely believe what had happened.

Ray paused to think, then asked, “How did he feel about the Princess? Did he mention whether he’d bought into the rumors about her?”

“He never brought them up in conversation. Didn’t seem too bothered by her presence in the castle, never made any personal comments about her. And once the engagement was made official, he celebrated it right along with the rest of us.”

“I see.”

Ray fell silent once more, his gaze focused not on the man before him, but the castle in the distance behind him. I followed suit to see if I could spot anything unusual, but came up short.

“Is it possible he was manipulated by a magic spell?” Ray speculated, his eyes still fixed on the castle. Then, finally, he turned back to Prince Dario, who furrowed his brow.

“I can’t rule it out, but...who could manage such a thing? I daresay there isn’t a Dragonkin alive who could perform such advanced magic.”

Evidently Dragonkin were no better mages than Flowerfolk. Generally they were inclined to be physical fighters, so perhaps they only really needed to use mana for form shifting.

“That may be true of Dragonkin, but...well, I’ll look into it,” Ray replied sternly.

“Please do. Ian didn’t appear to be lying, but we can’t know for sure. Continue the investigation and surveillance,” the Prince commanded. Then he turned to Patricia. “Let’s go back to your quarters. I’ll walk you there.”

“Thank you, Your Highness,” she responded.

And so he put an arm around her shoulder and guided her away with him.

I had expected her to be a little more shaken up, considering she was very nearly attacked by a dragon, but she didn’t seem troubled at all. Instead, she was blushing and fawning over Dario’s kind gesture as if it were any other day. Perhaps that arm around her shoulder was more of a big deal in her eyes... I

started after her—

“Mayna,” Ray called.

I stopped short and turned.

He looked at me with his honey-hued eyes and declared, “Whatever you do, keep an eye on Kirion.”

“What? Why?”

“Like I said, I think it’s possible Ian was being controlled via magic.”

“Yeah, and?”

“And I think Kirion’s the culprit.”

I quirked a brow. “Well, this is sudden. What makes you suspect him?”

“Because I saw him walking down the corridor just now.” Ray indicated the castle. “He was in a position where he could see the training field. You notice how that third-floor window is the only one open? It looked as though he’d just left that area.”

“Sorry, what? Which window are you talking about? And for that matter, how can you tell who exactly is walking down the corridor from this distance?”

“I guess you Flowerfolk only have human-level eyesight,” he mused. “Listen—when I saw Kirion, he wasn’t looking in our direction. He was facing forward as if he were merely going about his business. Of course, this means there’s a chance he was just innocently passing by.”

“Right. I mean, how could Kirion use high-level magic, anyway? Surely his capabilities are no better than any other Dragonkin.”

“Do you really think he’s a *Dragonkin*?”

“Yeah...isn’t he?”

I pictured Kirion in my mind. Back in Myulan, my mental image of Dragonkin on the whole was typically stocky or muscular, but once I experienced Vaxwald firsthand, I learned the tribe had a whole range of diverse body types. For example, Ray was fairly slender, while Mona was short and curvy. Yes, they were *generally* more muscular than humans on average—but even then,

Kirion's thin and petite frame didn't strike me as particularly unusual.

Though his quarry was long gone by now, Ray continued to stare off at the distant castle.

"It's hard to explain. He just doesn't...*feel* like one of us. But perhaps that's simply because I have trouble tolerating him. Perhaps it all boils down to my own personal dislike. Still..." He turned to face me. "His hairstyle is nothing like a Dragonkin's. Granted, I never used to pay attention to people's hair until I met you...but I have to say, the average Dragonkin man would never grow his hair out to that length."

Even I couldn't deny that Kirion's hair was exceptionally long. I put a hand on my chin in contemplation. "Now that you mention it, I've never seen another Dragonkin man with hair as long as his. Generally you all seem to keep it closely cropped. But it's not like it's against the law, right? Surely you can't determine his heritage based on that alone."

"In Vaxwald culture, short hair is seen as masculine. I imagine this is a common view in many countries, but Vaxwald in particular is fairly strict about it. Take *my* hair, for example—you wouldn't believe how frequently other men tell me I should get it cut."

"But it's not even that long!"

"True, but the norm here is a lot shorter. The guys all want me to shave this lower part around here so I can *look more like a real man*," Ray explained, lifting half of his shaggy locks to indicate the back and sides of his head.

I laughed. "I guess long-haired guys really aren't as common here as they are in Myulan. The Dragonkin women all seem to have long hair, though. Perhaps hair length is tied more closely to gender expression here in Vaxwald."

"It is. As it stands now, the average Dragonkin would think Kirion was trying to look like a woman on purpose. At first I didn't think too hard about it—told myself maybe all hairstylists grow their hair out—but now that I'm questioning his heritage, *everything* about him strikes me as suspect. Anyway, I plan to go and speak to Torpan, since she hired him. She told us he used to work for a merchant, and he came with a letter of recommendation, but we can't say for certain it wasn't fabricated... I want firsthand confirmation." He paused, a hard

look on his face, and finished, “This may well be my own paranoia speaking, but...until I can be sure he’s not dangerous, I want you to make sure you’re never caught alone in a room with him.”

“That’s kind of a tall order, Ray. He’s my apprentice.”

“I’m begging you, Mayna. I’ll keep my eye on him as much as I can, but I still have other duties to attend to. I *need* you to stay on guard whenever I’m not around,” he pleaded. He gently reached out and touched my whiteshell hair accessory—the one I was positive he had given to me as a gift.

Once again, it seemed as though he was deeply, sincerely concerned for me, and yet I knew if I asked him directly, he’d probably just ignore the question altogether. Personally, I got the sense that Kirion wasn’t the only one with something to hide...and no matter what I did, I most likely wasn’t going to find out what that something was.

“Fine. I’ll be as careful as I can,” I sighed. “There’s something about him... I just don’t know what.”

But I was forced to break this promise a mere five minutes later.



IT was just after Ray and I had gone our separate ways after returning to the castle. I was walking down a deserted hallway—and there he was. Kirion.

“Miss Mayna!” he called as he approached, a bright smile on his lips.

After that conversation with Ray, I couldn’t help but reflexively take a step back. Then it occurred to me: *why am I taking Ray’s side against Kirion?* Sure, he had an air of mystery that made it difficult to fully trust him...but Ray was hardly worth my trust either, considering he’d named me his Bondmate only to change his mind a few days later.

They were both equally confusing in behavior. For that matter, it was possible Ray was badmouthing Kirion purely to ruin his reputation. But ever since I arrived in Vaxwald, my opinion of Ray had slowly changed. His softer side was peeking through again, reminiscent of those days in Myulan, and it was hard to imagine the fleeting smiles and tenderhearted concern was all one big act.

“Miss Mayna? What’s wrong?” Kirion asked, still smiling.

“N-Nothing.”

“...Did Sir Ray say something about me?”

It felt as though he’d read my mind, and I flinched. At this, Kirion smirked and turned his gaze to the windows.

“I thought I saw him looking over at me from the training field. And then I saw him start talking to you.”

“You were watching us?”

“I happened to catch sight of the training field while I was walking down the hall. And with you back so soon, I’m guessing the session wrapped up a bit earlier than usual. Was there a problem?” he asked, innocently tilting his head. To me, it genuinely seemed as though he had no idea...but I kept my guard up nonetheless. How could he have seen us talking, but not the commotion?

“What were you doing in this part of the castle, Kirion?”

“Like I said, I was just passing through. I’m not barred from this wing of the castle, am I? I was just looking for a friend of mine—one of the servants.”

“Okay then, why didn’t you come to observe the knights’ training? At the time you told us you weren’t interested, but the way I see you, you’ve always been the type to tag along out of pure curiosity.”

“Sure, maybe that’s how *you* see me. But I’m a Dragonkin, and to me, turning into a dragon is an ordinary part of life. I’m not enthralled by it like you Myulan folk. So knight training has nothing of interest to me.”

Just then, an idea struck me.

“Right, you can turn into a dragon! Well, let’s see it, then!”

“What, right here?”

“Sure! There’s plenty of space here in this corridor. Besides, no one else is around.” *Time to find out if Kirion’s really a Dragonkin.* I grinned smugly. “You *can* transform, can’t you?”

Kirion hesitated...then sighed. “All right. I’ll do it.”

“What?” I blinked in surprise. “You will?”

“Here I go, okay? Back up a bit.”

Concentrating hard, Kirion closed his eyes and put both hands over his face. Then his knees buckled and he pitched forward—and in the next moment when he straightened up, he was undeniably a dragon. His scales were jet-black, and as with his humanoid form, he was on the smaller side.

“Happy now?”

“Y-Yeah... Thank you...” I muttered awkwardly. All in all, I felt pretty stupid for suspecting him.

After Kirion had shifted back, he pouted. “I just *know* Sir Ray’s trying to turn you against me. What exactly did he say? That I’m lying about my race?”

“I’m sorry for doubting you, but”—I looked directly into his eyes—“I just don’t fully trust you yet.”

“How can you say that when you’re wearing my gift?” he asked, a sorrowful expression on his face as he touched my whiteshell accessory.

“Because I’m pretty sure it was *Ray* who gave this to me, not you,” I stated without hesitation. “I could tell from the look in his eyes when he first saw me wearing it. Besides, you’d never leave someone a gift outside their door. You’d march right up to them and hand it over face to face.”

“Once again, that’s just your *view* of me. Besides, at no point has Sir Ray ever said the gift was from him—*but I have*. Why won’t you just believe me?”

“Well...because...Ray was the only one in the store with me when I first saw it...” I mumbled uncertainly. I had other reasons, of course, but they were less concrete and thus harder to express.

“Miss Mayna, please... You’re breaking my heart...” Kirion whispered, his brow furrowed. By all accounts, he looked sincerely crestfallen. “Don’t act like you trust Sir Ray over me. He led you to believe you were his Bondmate, then changed his mind about you on a whim, remember?”

“Well, yes, but...”

“I would never do that.” He moved close and pulled me into his arms. “Can’t

you see how crazy I am about you?”

“Let go of me, Kirion.”

“I don’t want to.” As I tried to pull away, his arms tightened around me. “I could make you so happy if you would just let me. I’ll buy you as many hair ornaments as you like. All the other women will be jealous of how much I spoil you. I’ll *cherish* you, Miss Mayna. All you have to do is love me back.”

He loosened his grip, and I stepped back slightly—but then he cupped my cheek and leaned in like he was going to kiss me.

“We’re Bondmates. It’s *destiny*.”

But before our lips could meet, I quickly put my hand over his mouth.

“What is a Bondmate to you?” I questioned.

He frowned as though he didn’t see the point of the question.

“A Bondmate is much like a soulmate, right? You find yourself drawn to them without really knowing why. A feeling so powerful, ‘love at first sight’ doesn’t begin to cover it. They consume your every waking thought, and you yearn to spend the rest of your life at their side. Their personality is a perfect match for yours, and so you get along perfectly.”

“Yes, and? I don’t need you to explain the concept to me, Miss Mayna. I already feel that way about you. I want to be with you always.”

He reached out and took my hand...but I pulled it away.

“I get the sense that you’re very self-centered, Kirion. But according to what I’ve been told, having a Bondmate isn’t about selfish desires. You see, Mona has a Bondmate too, and she was telling me all about it.”

Being Bondmates isn’t about flirting all the time. The love you have for your Bondmate runs deeper than that. You always want to put their happiness first, no matter what...and as long as they’re happy, then your own happiness doesn’t matter.

Frustrated, I stared at the floor. “I don’t get it... Why does Ray’s behavior feel more ‘loving’ than my *supposed* Bondmate’s?”

Not only that, but I was dying to run off and go find him—right this second, if such a thing were possible. I wanted *him* to hold me, not Kirion.

“Miss Mayna...”

His voice sounded weak and forlorn. But when I looked up, for the briefest of moments, his expression didn’t *quite* seem to match—and then a split second later, he was back to making puppy-dog eyes at me.

“I don’t know what Mona told you, but are you sure she’s actually found her Bondmate? Because the love between *real* Bondmates—”

“Kirion!”

At the sudden voice, I looked over and spotted Sari rushing down the hall toward us. At first she looked happy to see him, but then she saw *me*, and instantly her expression soured like milk in the sun.

“What are *you two* doing together?” she asked, fixing me with an accusatory glare.

Her open hostility aside, I was quite glad she had turned up.

“Nothing, really,” I answered. And with Kirion now in Sari’s capable hands, I hurried off down the hall.

At one point I shot a glance over my shoulder just to be safe, but neither of them had decided to give chase.

Chapter 14: Tales of Tribal Romance

THE wedding was nearly upon us now.

“Only five days away? Where did the time go...?”

This wasn’t a serious question, of course. We’d been following a rigorous schedule, so at no point did I forget the passage of time. Still, now that the big day was looming just on the horizon, even I was starting to get a little nervous.

Patricia’s wedding hairstyle was already set in stone, and I was reasonably confident I could pull it off on my first try, but I was still tempted to suggest we do a practice run, just in case. After all, she’d probably want to see for herself how it would look on her, and in the event it didn’t turn out the way she hoped, we still had time to make alterations.

But first, I had my daily tasks to worry about.

That morning, I got ready in a flash, then grabbed my hairstyling tools and hurried off to meet Patricia.

“Oh, good morning, Ray,” I greeted as I walked past him into the Princess’s bedroom.

“Morning, Mayna,” he replied in kind.

Inside, I found that Patricia was already awake. I greeted her along with her three servants.

“Good morning,” Rebecca answered promptly.

“Good morning...” Mona replied dreamily, a vacant smile on her face.

Sari simply glared in my direction. Either she was still upset about catching me alone with Kirion two days ago, or she was silently blaming me for his conspicuous absence.

You see, as of yesterday morning, he had been temporarily relieved of his title as Royal Hairstylist’s Apprentice—likely a direct result of Ray discussing his

suspicious with Prince Dario.

Mind you, Ray almost certainly would've included the possibility of Kirion's innocence in that conversation, so the fact that Dario had taken action seemed to suggest that the Prince was unwilling to allow anyone of even *mildly* dubious character within his future bride's vicinity. Instead, Kirion had been assigned a different job altogether: as of today, he'd been assigned his own room in the castle in which to give haircuts to the servants. After all, with the big day right around the corner, the castle would soon be filled with foreign diplomats and other important guests, and it couldn't hurt to have everyone looking their best. As for Kirion, he seemed to accept this decision without complaint.

In the meantime, the Prince had sent a servant to go and look into Kirion's work history. Should he be proven innocent, he would regain his title and resume work as Patricia's hairstylist. But his hometown was located in a distant, rural part of Vaxwald, so the trip there and back would take a good few days. Timing-wise, this meant the investigation was scheduled to wrap up close to the wedding ceremony.

"Your Highness, why don't we do a trial run of your wedding hairstyle today whenever you can find some time?"

"Why, that's a marvelous idea! I should quite like to see how it will look. I'll have time after breakfast, so let's do it then."

"Understood. In that case, I'll just give you a simple style for the time being."

Once I had styled her hair, I left her quarters. Out in the hall, Ray called out to me. "Mayna, did you run into Kirion yesterday? I can't imagine he was happy to lose his title. I just hope he didn't take that anger out on you."

"No, he didn't." He *did* whimper something about how he wished he could stay with me, but I decided not to mention that. "He's accepted his new post with grace, though he was complaining about the heavy workload when I spoke with him yesterday. It seems there's no shortage of servants interested in a free haircut."

I was trained in cutting hair myself, and at one point I was tempted to help, but after everything that had happened two days ago, I ultimately decided not to. Perhaps he would think me heartless, but so be it; I didn't want to risk him

misinterpreting my kindness as anything more. Instead, I advised him to set a maximum daily quota for himself and schedule haircuts based on that.

Ray nodded pensively. “Don’t let your guard down around him just yet.”

What if this investigation proved that Kirion was telling the truth? That he never used mind control magic on Ian? That he really was who he claimed to be? That he was my Bondmate, and he’d bought the hair ornament for me?

No... Even if the first two proved true, I still couldn’t accept the rest. My *real* Bondmate was the person who gave me the gift, and that was—



“OH, it’s perfect! I love it! And I’m sure Prince Dario will like it, too. I admit, after everything that’s happened, I was a bit worried that something might go wrong on our big day, but now I’m really looking forward to it!” Patricia gushed, admiring her wedding hairstyle. And after all the protesters, rumor-mongering, and even an attempt on her life, I could certainly see why she might be anxious.

Still, I was glad this fancy new hairstyle had brightened up her day, even just a little. Finished with the test run, I took her hair down and restyled it.

With my duties fulfilled, I left the room, and Rebecca followed me out into the hallway in order to go and prepare a cup of tea for the Princess.

“How are you feeling, Mayna?” she asked as we walked down the hall side by side.

“Who, me? I’m fine. You’re not worried about me because I’m a Flowerfolk, are you?”

For whatever reason, these Dragonkin all seemed to see Flowerfolk as feeble, helpless creatures.

“It’s just... Lately it’s been getting colder in the mornings, you know? Suits us just fine, of course, but I was worried it might be a bit much for you.”

“No, no, it’s great!” I reassured with a smile. “I have to ask, though, why is it that Dragonkin see Flowerfolk as frail? I would understand if you all had direct personal experience, but as I understand it, Vaxwald doesn’t have a Flowerfolk or fairy population at all, so I can only assume you’ve never met one.”

“That’s correct. You would be the first,” Rebecca confirmed my suspicions.

“Then what is it? Is it a mental association with flower fairies?”

“I’m sure that’s part of it, but...” Rebecca paused. “I think a lot of us got the idea from *Tales of Tribal Romance*.”

“Oh, I’ve heard of that! I forget when, though... Hmmm...” I tilted my head in contemplation, and a moment later it hit me:

“She’s human, but I daresay she looks like a Flowerfolk.”

“Indeed, she’s quite small and stylish. Fortunate, too, because a real Flowerfolk would never do. I mean, you’ve read Tales of Tribal Romance, surely?”

“Oh, yes, I have. I quite liked the one about the Merfolk.”

“Likewise. I also enjoyed the one about the human.”

It was at Patricia’s big debut party soon after we first arrived in Vaxwald—a conversation between two noble ladies, if memory served.

“Tales of Tribal Romance is a famous anthology. Anyone who grew up here has read it at least once,” Rebecca explained. “There are five short stories, each with a different Dragonkin protagonist, and each protagonist has a Bondmate from a different tribe: human, Flowerfolk, Merfolk, Treeborn, and Shadowkin, in that order. The stories are about the struggles each Dragonkin faces in forming a relationship with someone from a different culture.”

“Sounds like a good book,” I mused.

“It’s really popular. But not all the stories have a happy ending, you see. The tales of the Flowerfolk and Shadowkin are both quite tragic.”

“Oh?”

“Would you like to read it for yourself?” she suggested. “I have a copy I can lend you. And since it’s something we’ve all been reading and rereading since childhood, I’ll bet it can help explain why we see Flowerfolk the way we do.”

“That would be great, actually!”

“Perfect! I’ll bring it with me first thing tomorrow.”

“Thanks, I appreciate it.”

Or so I said...but internally, I was a bit apprehensive.



I didn’t actually get my hands on the book until three days later.

“Sorry about that! I hadn’t read it in a while, so I kinda forgot where I put it. But I found it!” Rebecca apologized.

“Oh, no, that’s not a problem. I appreciate you going to all the trouble!” I insisted as I took *Tales of Tribal Romance* from her hands. It was about the size of an average book—not too thick, not too thin. Depicted on the cover was a woman of indeterminate tribe snuggled against a dragon.

Once Rebecca and I had parted ways, I went straight to my quarters to start reading. With two days before the royal wedding, the rest of the castle was busy with all sorts of prep work, but as a mere hairstylist, I didn’t have much to do.

Before I could start, however, I needed to push my loveseat over to the window to get some light—a formidable task that left me sweaty by the time I was done. Then, at long last, I plopped down on the sofa and flipped through the book until I found the story about the Flowerfolk.

“Here we go...”

It was titled *The Tale of the Flowerfolk*. In this particular story, the Dragonkin protagonist was a man, and the Flowerfolk was a woman. As I turned page after page, I became absorbed in the story—and then the next thing I knew, it was over. No surprise there; these were short stories, after all.

All in all, I found it to be a rather heartrending tale, and sure enough, I could easily see why anyone who grew up reading this would worry about me. After all, the Flowerfolk depicted in the story was much frailer than any actual Flowerfolk in real life.

Not only that, but if nearly every single person in Vaxwald had read this, then Ray had probably read it as well...and if so, that would almost certainly explain his behavior toward me.

As I recalled, I had first told Ray I was a Flowerfolk back in Myulan—back when he thought of me as his Bondmate. It was by no means a secret, so I'd brought it up early on to save time. But looking back, perhaps that was the turning point in our relationship. Ray had been awfully surprised to learn I was a Flowerfolk, and while the change in his behavior was by no means instantaneous, it was still there—even if it took me this long to notice.

Still...if I was right about this, then that would mean Ray was paranoid to the point of stupidity. No offense, but you'd have to be *pretty* naïve to take a fictional story as fact, and I was having a hard time believing Ray could possibly be that irrational. Thus, I was hesitant to come to any conclusions just yet.

But what else could it be? Is a Bondmate's love so deep that it forces you to take fictional possibilities into consideration? No, surely not... He'd have to be insanely overprotective...

Someone suddenly pounded their fist on my door, making me nearly jump out of my skin. "*Mayna!*" a high-pitched voice shrieked angrily from the other side.

"Wh-Who is it?" I called back.

But no response came. Instead, the door flew open. It was Sari.

"Stay away from Kirion!" she demanded without so much as a hello.

"Kirion? Where is this coming from?"

"Don't try to play dumb with me! A servant friend of mine told me she saw you and Kirion talking, just the two of you!"

"I mean, yes, we *did* talk..." I answered, shrinking back in the face of her ferocity.

Obviously I hadn't sought him out on my own; Kirion had tracked me down during his break time for no other reason than to "see me" and chat. Naturally, I had cut the conversation short.

"Kirion is my Bondmate, got it?!" Sari snapped, eyes blazing.

"Your...Bondmate?"

"Yes! He told me so, and I know it's true!"

“...Kirion told you you’re his Bondmate?” I repeated, frowning. “Do you feel anything in return?”

“Yes, of course!” She thrust out her chest proudly.

I decided to ask her something I’d wondered for a long time: “Are you in love with him?”

“Duh!” she replied instantly.

“What is it about him that you like?” I pressed.

“Well...he’s attractive, and he always tells me I’m the most beautiful girl in the world...and he loves me...”

“How much do you know about him? Where was he born? Does he have any siblings? What’s his favorite food?”

“Bondmates don’t need to know each other in order to love each other! If anything, that just proves it’s real!” she argued loudly, and I decided not to push her buttons any further.

“All right, well, I just want to warn you not to trust him. He’s lied and said the same thing to me—”

“Maybe he was lying to *you*, but with *me* it’s the real deal! I was first—he told me right after we first met. He was just using you to make me jealous, that’s all! Got it?!”

“Got it,” I replied with a shrug.

“Hmph!” And with that, she stormed out.

Left alone once more, I wondered to myself: was having a Bondmate that important to her? Perhaps she was one of the many young Dragonkin women who dreamed of having a destined lover. Seeing Mona so affectionate with her own Bondmate probably made her envious, too.

Then along came Kirion, handsome and charming, claiming to be her Bondmate—surely anyone in her position would jump at the chance. But did Sari actually feel the love of a Bondmate toward him, or was she just giddy about being special? I didn’t get the same sense of security from her that I felt from Mona.

Regardless, I definitely didn't trust Kirion now. Not if he was going around proclaiming to be Bondmates with half the castle.

There came another knock at the door.

"Mayna? Why's your door open?"

I looked up to find Ray standing there, peering in at me. While I appreciated the knock as a polite gesture, it was a bit pointless to do so when the entire room was on display. I shut my borrowed copy of *Tales of Tribal Romance* and tucked it behind my back at the speed of light.

"Hello there, Ray. What brings you here?"

Much as I was tempted to ask him about it, I held my tongue. On the off chance I was wrong and he *hadn't* gotten any misinformation from this book, I would simply be making a fool of myself by accusing him.

Ray folded his arms across his chest. "You met with Kirion, didn't you?"

"When are you referring to?"

"Today, a little while ago."

Whew. I was relieved to know he hadn't found out about the incident in which Kirion nearly kissed me. *Wait, but then...how did Ray find out about our one-on-one conversation today?*

"A fellow knight told me he saw the two of you together."

"*Another* witness? Did we have a whole audience or what...?" I muttered sarcastically. "Look, all we did was catch up. It was harmless small talk."

"I understand it must prove difficult to avoid meeting or speaking to him altogether, but it's simply not safe to be alone in a room with him. We still haven't proven his innocence—and even if we do, I still wouldn't trust him."

"Relax. We were standing in a busy hallway at the time. And besides, obviously your knight friend was there, so clearly we weren't alone."

Ray scowled. "Look... I don't have any proof that he used magic on Ian to make him attack the Princess, so I can't say for sure. And though I may question his heritage, you saw him morph into a dragon with your own two eyes, so

perhaps I'm wrong about that too, but..." He looked into my eyes for a moment, then continued, "I've already caught him lying *at least* once—no, twice!—without so much as batting an eye. He's a liar, and I don't trust him."

"What were the lies?" I asked, and Ray fell silent. Still, I could wager a guess: that Kirion was my Bondmate, and that he had bought the hair accessory. "I always have my guard up around Kirion, okay? Relax," I told him reassuringly.

Evidently my tone sounded too lighthearted for Ray's liking, however. "I'm serious. You have to exercise the *utmost* caution. Don't sit in here alone with your door wide open. Try to stay with Her Highness as much as possible. That way I can be there for you, too."

I nodded. "All right."

"Good. I'll be going now—but as for you, I want you to head straight to the Princess's royal chambers, understand?"

And with that, Ray walked off down the hall.

Chapter 15: Wedding's Eve

A single day remained before the royal wedding between Princess Patricia and Prince Dario. The wedding dress was complete, and Patricia was fidgeting as she tried it on for one final test run—equal parts giddy and terrified, by my estimation. She had grown quite close to Dario over the past month, and I wouldn't be surprised if she was starting to see him in a more romantic light—not the volcanic passion of two Bondmates, perhaps, but a tiny candle's flame, burning soft and slow.

"Ooh, I'm getting nervous..." she murmured, clutching a hand to her chest.

"It'll go just fine, don't you worry," I reassured her. There wasn't much left for me to do now except to style her hair on the morning of the ceremony.

In times like these, I could only imagine the massive weight riding on her shoulders, knowing that this wedding bond would make her the new future queen of Vaxwald. Technically I was free to return home to Myulan just as soon as she felt secure on her own, but looking at her now...the way she smiled even in the face of anxiety...a part of me wished I could stay at her side forever.

For now, we just have to focus on making it through tomorrow, I told myself.

Unfortunately for me, however, the next incident wasn't willing to wait that long.



"**YOU'VE** got a big day ahead of you. Be sure to get plenty of sleep tonight, all right?" I told Patricia that night as I braided her hair for bed.

"I'm afraid I can't make any promises. I'm simply too nervous to sleep!" she exclaimed.

"Shall I bring you something warm to drink?" Rebecca suggested. "Perhaps a glass of warm milk, or some sleep-inducing herbal tea?"

"Herbal tea would be lovely, please."

“Right away, Your Highness.”

With that, Rebecca turned to leave. Meanwhile, I had just finished Patricia’s bedtime braids and had started to pack up my hairstyling supplies. As for Mona, she was sifting through the incense in order to select tonight’s fragrance. And Sari—

“Sari? What’s the matter?” Rebecca called as she headed for the door.

Sari was standing a short distance away from the rest of us, staring down at her hands with a hard look on her face. She was holding something concealed between her palms, but I couldn’t make out what it was.

“Sari!” Rebecca called once more.

But Sari ignored her, turned, and walked straight over to where Patricia and I were sitting.

She pulled her left hand away and raised her right.

Her fingers were curled around a pair of gold scissors.

Haircutting shears.

Was she going to exact her revenge on me over Kirion?

No.

Her eyes were focused on Patricia.

“Sari, no!”

I tried to stop her, but she dodged past me, her blades closing around one of the braids descending down Patricia’s chest at approximately neck height.

The Princess screamed and jumped back, squeezing her eyes shut in terror. Too thick to be cut with a single snip, the braid now dangled half-intact from her shoulder.

But Sari was intent on finishing the job.

“*STOP!*” I screamed on impulse. I could imagine no fate more cruel than to lose her beautiful long hair...and on the night before her wedding, no less.

Fury flared inside me. Gritting my teeth, I put my hand directly in front of her

half-severed braid to shield it from further damage.

As a result, Patricia's hair was kept safe. Unfortunately, my palm was not so lucky. For my efforts, I received a deep gash all the way to my pinky, blood streaming down my arm in red rivulets.

"Sari, how could you?!" Rebecca roared, seizing Sari from behind and pinning her arms up. Sari flailed, eyes bloodshot, waving her bloodied scissors in the air—but just then, our backup arrived in the form of Ray and the other bodyguard who had been stationed just outside the room. They took one look at Sari and apprehended her immediately, confiscating her weapon.

"Mayna!" Ray gasped, staring at my injured left hand. He whipped out a pair of handcuffs, slapped them on Sari, left her with the other guard, then rushed straight over to me. "Mayna, you're hurt! No, don't lower it. Keep it raised if you can!"

"Forget about me—worry about the Princess first! Sari cut her hair!"

Still holding my hand in his, Ray turned and looked over at Patricia. "Are you hurt, Your Highness?"

"Mayna...you're *bleeding*...!" Patricia whispered at nearly the same time, staring down at my hand in shock, just as Ray had. "How awful... We need to get you patched up at once!" Her voice shook with emotion as the color drained from her face. Someone she trusted had just physically attacked her, and yet she seemed more worried for *my* well-being.

"But your *hair*...!" I choked in anguish.

"What about it?"

Only then did she finally turn her gaze to the nearby mirror. She inhaled sharply and froze for a moment, unmoving.

As Ray tended to my wound, he glanced at the Princess, then turned to Mona. "Go and call for the knights. Anyone will do—we're shorthanded. Then call for Prince Dario. And while you're at it, go to the infirmary and summon the doctor, too."

"R-Right!" And with that, Mona scrambled from the room, clearly flustered.

“*Why...?*” I muttered bitterly, my eyes on Sari, who stood cuffed beside the other guardsman. Far more painful than the sting of my palm was the deep ache in my chest when I looked at Patricia’s dangling braid. I could understand wanting to hurt *me*, but the Princess? What did she ever do wrong?

Thinking back, Sari was the only one of the three servants who had yet to warm up to Patricia, but even then, she had never shown any strong contempt toward her until now. Or had I simply failed to notice it?

“Isn’t it obvious? She’s not worthy of our Prince,” Sari retorted, curling her lip in a haughty smirk. “Making her queen would put Vaxwald on the path to destruction. She’s just a gold-digger.”

“That’s patently false,” I shot back. “How could you possibly buy into those rumors? You had a whole month to get to know Her Highness for yourself—or were you not paying attention?”

“The rumors are real. Kirion told me so.”

“Kirion?” I furrowed my brow. I could sense Ray frowning along with me as he cradled my hand like it was a precious jewel.

“Yes, Kirion. He says the rumors are true.”

“And you believe him?”

“Of course I do. He’s my Bondmate. I would never question anything he says.”

“And that’s the only reason why you cut her hair?”

“Kirion told me we needed to put a stop to the wedding to protect our country. So he asked me to help him.”

So it was *Kirion* who gave the order to damage Patricia’s hair. My hands automatically balled into fists.

“Don’t squeeze your palm like that. Relax your hand,” Ray scolded me.

But before I could respond—

“What will I do...?” Patricia whimpered in a tiny, feeble voice, still staring blankly at her reflection. She lifted a shaking hand and brushed her fingers against the severed strands. “The wedding is tomorrow...and my hair... It’s

horrid...!”

It killed me inside to see her so utterly crushed. But now was not the time for me to lose myself to emotion. Suppressing my anger toward Kirion and Sari, I spoke in a tone of forced composure.

“It’s going to be all right, Your Highness. I know how to style it in order to conceal the uneven parts. Luckily you didn’t lose all of it—once it’s done up, no one will ever be the wiser. Trust me, I can cover it up. It’ll be all right. This won’t affect the wedding, not one bit.”

I knew I must’ve sounded like a broken record, but I was genuinely confident in my ability to cover for the missing hair. Nevertheless, tears still welled in Patricia’s eyes. No surprise there, of course; I could hide the uneven cut all I wanted, but it wouldn’t undo the fact that her hair was cut in the first place.

Together we had put so much love and care into those long locks. They were an important part of her self-image. And now, with all that hard work down the drain, her confidence was in tatters.

“How could you do this to her, Sari?” Rebecca asked sorrowfully. “Even if you didn’t physically injure her, it still counts as assault. Did you really think you could get away with it?”

“I can and I will,” Sari declared proudly. “Kirion said he’ll come and rescue me.”

And the very next moment, sure enough, Kirion strolled into the room.

“Kirion...” I whispered.

He wore a gleeful smile, his eyes shining with mirth.

“I did it, Kirion!” Sari shouted...but Kirion wasn’t looking at her. He was looking at Ray, who stood with his hand on the hilt of the sword at his belt.

“You *despicable reprobate*,” Ray growled as he stepped forward, positioning himself between Kirion and me. Looking at him made the room feel a good ten degrees colder all of a sudden. His rage was barely suppressed.

But Kirion had no response for Ray. Instead, he raised a hand in Patricia’s direction, muttered a few words—*an incantation?*—and in the next instant, a

fiery vortex shot out from his palm in the Princess's direction.

"Patricia...!" I shouted. She let out a high-pitched scream.

But before I could move to shield her, Ray had already taken action—he scooped her out of her chair and dashed out of the blast radius at the last possible second.

A handful of knights stormed into the room. Evidently they had quickly put two and two together; they wasted no time in drawing their blades and closing in on Kirion.

But Kirion wasn't ruffled. Grinning, he leapt straight at me.

"Mayna!" Ray screamed.

"Kirion, what are you doing?!" Sari howled.

Kirion pulled me close, reciting another incantation.

And then the world around us vanished from sight.



"WHAT happened...?"

In a blink, the two of us were now standing in a different room altogether, with Kirion's arms still wrapped around me. Patricia and the others were nowhere to be seen.

This room was pitch-dark, but I could make out the silhouettes of tall shelves all around us, reminiscent of a library. These shelves held more than books, however; I spotted documents, boxes, rusty swords and dusty shields, as well as a few tools whose purpose I couldn't begin to guess.

Then I realized Kirion and I were concealed between two shelves. Snapping back to my senses, I pushed against him. "Let go of me!"

With a grin, he stepped back slightly.

"Where are we? What have you done?" I demanded.

"I cast a teleportation spell and moved us to the castle's reference room, where no one ever visits." He slid a hand in his pocket. "Truth be told, I would've liked to go a lot farther, but this was the best I could do with an extra

traveler and no magic circle to aid me. Still, they say the closer you are to something, the harder it is to see it. So who knows, maybe they won't find us. I bet they're all out searching the town by now...your Bondmate included."

"...Are you referring to Ray?"

"Aha. You knew, didn't you? Deep down, you knew he was your real Bondmate."

"I don't 'know' anything. I'm not a Dragonkin, so I can't say for sure."

With an air of nonchalance, I turned and started for the door, but Kirion pulled me back and pushed me against the shelf. He leaned in close.

"What's the rush? There are knights crawling all over the castle right now. Let's sit tight for a bit until my mana can recharge. Then we'll teleport in small bursts."

"I'm not just going to stand here and *let you* kidnap me!"

Frankly, I was relieved to hear that we were still in Vaxwald Castle. I didn't know where the reference room was located, but surely if I ran down the hall, I'd find someone eventually.

Unfortunately, Kirion had no intention of letting me escape.

"Oh yeah? What are you going to do about it?" he taunted, placing both of his hands against the shelf on either side of my face to box me in.

And then, I realized—his once-dark eyes were now a brilliant shade of crimson.

"You were just using Sari as your attack dog, weren't you?" I hissed, hoping to conceal my fear.

"I'd *hate* to think of what would happen if the public found out a Vaxwald servant attacked the Princess of Myulan. What a scandal! Why, the whole wedding might get called off!" Kirion commented casually. He took my bandaged left hand and peered down at the bloodstain. "You poor thing... It's plain to see you're the real victim here, and yet bodily harm done to a commoner is considered a mere pittance compared to attempted assault on a member of the royal family. Protecting her stupid hair was only ever going to be

a waste of your time.”

“Not when the alternative was to stand by and watch her lose something she cares about,” I growled back through clenched teeth. The memory of Patricia’s stunned expression made my heart ache. Perhaps some people would shrug their shoulders and say, “So what? It’s hair! It’ll grow back!” but not me. To me, that was akin to saying “So what if you got hurt? It’ll heal!”

“Perfect.” As I grimaced bitterly, Kirion gazed at me with a rapturous smile on his face. “This is precisely the reaction I wanted. This is why I ordered Sari to strike not the skin, but the hair. Because I knew it would hurt you most.”

“What are you after? Is it Patricia, or is it me?”

“Both. At first my target was the Princess—more specifically, the wedding. I wanted to get it called off.”

“You bought into those false rumors about her, didn’t you?” I asked, my tone accusatory.

He laughed. “You really think I’m that stupid? I wouldn’t let mere idle gossip sway my opinion of someone.” He turned his bewitching scarlet eyes on me. “And it hurts my feelings that you’d conflate me with the average simpleton. I mean, who do you think spread those rumors in the first place?”

“You didn’t...!”

“Oh, I did. I even leaked information to the press. But as it turns out, word of mouth spreads much, much faster! Piece of cake, really.”

“Why would you do that...?”

“Because Kazarth hired me to stop the wedding at any cost.”

Considering Kazarth’s relatively small size and proximity to Vaxwald and Myulan, I could see how it might interpret a political marriage between the two as a threat. I recalled a comment Ray had made during the incident with the newspaper seller: *Prince Dario thinks there’s a chance it’s all a Kazarth psyop*. Evidently His Highness was right on the money.

I looked at Kirion. “What relationship do you have with the nation of Kazarth? Does this mean you’re not a Dragonkin after all?”

“I have no particular attachment to Kazarth. I’m not one of them; I just thought the gig sounded fun, so I agreed to it. And no, I’m not a Dragonkin. Don’t associate me with those monsters, if you please.”

“Wait, but... then how did you manage to transform into a dragon?”

“With magic, of course. Good thing you didn’t ask me to fly, though, or else you would’ve blown my cover.” He clutched my injured hand like he was taking it hostage. “I’m a Shadowkin, actually. You can tell by my red eyes.”

For Flowerfolk, countless generations of mating with humans had bred the fairy genes right out of us until we looked mostly human, with the exception of our flower magic and sensitivity to extreme temperatures. We had lost the ability to fly and our wings. But the Shadowkin tribe had no past history of mating with humans that I knew of, and so their demonic heritage was likely still very much intact. They were humanoid in appearance, but possessed long lifespans and a far greater capacity for mana than any Flowerfolk or Dragonkin. Because of this, they could wield exceptionally powerful magic spells.

They were few in number, but they had a great love of conflict, and their mere presence inspired fear and chaos wherever they went. Not exactly the sort of people I was eager to spend my time with, if I had a say.

“That said,” Kirion continued, “it’d be a piece of cake for any Shadowkin to simply change their eye color with magic, like so.” For a moment his irises darkened, but before I could process it, they were scarlet once more. “Some Shadowkin like to start riots or commit heinous crimes for attention. Some prefer to stand on the front lines of battle. Some like to kill. But me? I’m a little different. I like to take advantage of weak or sad people and make them my puppets so I can control them from behind the scenes. Guide them down the wrong path. Especially when I’m trying to pull off something this big.”

“...And that’s why you deceived Sari?”

“I needed someone in close proximity to the Princess, and she was the most volatile one. Torpan was a viable second choice. An old spinster pushing fifty with no living family members—she may seem tough, but she’s empty inside. Ideal for my purposes, really. But Sari was in a better position.”

Torpan had really seemed to trust Kirion, but she’d merely fallen under his

spell. Still, at the end of the day, she was lucky to have escaped Kirion's focus. If she'd fallen for him completely, she might've inadvertently thrown her whole life away, just as Sari had.

"The easiest people to manipulate are those dissatisfied with the status quo. The idealists. But with a little effort, we Shadowkin can take control of just about anyone. We excel at deception. Remember that."

Kirion donned a boyish grin. He was both innocent and twisted, honest and mysterious at the same time. On top of that, he had powerful charisma that could easily mislead people, as well as a distinct lack of sympathy for those who succumbed.

A chill ran down my spine. Perhaps I'd only escaped a similar fate because I was actively wary of him. If I didn't have a passion in life... if I didn't have a job or an income... if I didn't have my family... if I didn't have someone like Ray looking out for me... who knows what might have happened then.

"We understand the weakness in people's hearts. But you? You were nigh impossible," he mused, brushing his fingers against my hair. "You're the sort of person who could never steal or cheat, even if you knew no one else was around. Honest to a fault, in other words. Day in and day out, you put in a great deal of effort for which you are generally rewarded, but even if you aren't, you don't hold it against anyone. You left me nothing to work with."

"Are you seriously complaining that I'm a good person?"

"But on the other hand, nothing feels more satisfying than getting a goody-goody like you to turn to the shadows. By comparison, manipulating Sari is hardly an achievement. I wanted you to give your heart to me... grow jealous over the smallest trifles... lose interest in your work... and eventually fall from grace."

"Sounds like you should get a new hobby. Why approach me, anyway? Did you get bored working on your plan to destroy the engagement from behind the scenes?" I asked with a frown. Did he see us all as toys to be played with?

"Bingo. I volunteered myself as a hairstylist's apprentice purely to get closer to the Princess, but then I found the perfect Flowerfolk target. All the more entertaining since Ray kept getting blatantly jealous every time I made a move."

The way Kirion spoke, he made it sound like Ray and I were a package deal, something I found mildly annoying. But then again, it was thanks to Ray and his stupid “Never mind, you *aren’t* my Bondmate” ordeal that I had kept a level head when Kirion told me I was his... Loath as I was to admit it, I was actually starting to feel *grateful* that the mix-up had happened.

“So you’re telling me your work history with the merchant was fabricated?”

“*Obviously*. Granted, I gave them the name of a real merchant in Vaxwald, but now that Dario’s actually investigating it, I’m sure the truth will come out any day now. I had a hell of a time forging a recommendation letter and putting together a collection of haircutting scissors.”

“For what it’s worth, you were actually pretty good at cutting hair. I watched you work on some of those servants.”

“What can I say? I’m good with my hands.” He grinned.

I furrowed my brow. “Then...that means you were the one who controlled Sir Ian’s mind and made him attack Her Highness.”

“Yep, that was me. But it ended in failure, so I was forced to use Sari next.”

“What about the time the hair ornaments went missing? Was that you, too?”

Suddenly it felt like every tiny incident at the castle was his doing, and I was eager for him to prove me wrong...but he didn’t. Instead, he smiled mischievously. “Of course it was.”

“Why would you do that?” I asked angrily.

“Because I wanted Patricia to think that someone in the castle didn’t like her. And I wanted to make you upset, naturally. Regrettably, it wasn’t quite enough to rile you up.”

“You were messing with me right from the start, weren’t you?”

“*Duh*. Though, to be clear, it was partially to make Sari jealous. Jealousy makes people impulsive, you see, and I wanted to make her more susceptible to my manipulation. But rest assured, I wanted to corrupt your heart right from the very first moment I laid eyes on you.”

Gee, thanks? I’m...flattered?

“Ray was a big part of it, too. I really like him—I think he’d do great things if he ever went rogue. And if his feelings for you grew dark and twisted... Frankly, even I couldn’t handle that. A Dragonkin’s love for their Bondmate really is something special, you know? It’s just marvelous.”

Then, out of nowhere, Kirion seized me by the throat—not to the point that I couldn’t breathe, but very nearly. I wheezed.

“I figured if I whisked you away from here, Ray would go nuts looking for you...but perhaps killing you would be more fun than some stupid game of hide and seek. I can only imagine his reaction upon finding your corpse.”

His lips were curled in an amused smile that didn’t reach his eyes. The contrast frightened me. He was a demon, through and through.

“Or maybe I’ll hurt your hand so badly, you can’t style hair anymore. I bet that would really crush your spirit...and seeing you in pain would hurt Ray, too. Oh, or maybe I should steal your innocence?” His eyes lit up like he sincerely thought this was a great idea. “Well, what do you think? Which would you prefer? The last one, I’m guessing?”

Still smiling, he seized the front of my dress, ripping the buttons and other decorations from the fabric and exposing my brassiere.

“Stop!”

I pulled his hair and punched his chest—anything to get away from him. My injured hand stung, but I couldn’t afford to worry about it right now.

“Ugh, this is so annoying...”

He scowled at my act of resistance, then started to recite something—some sort of incantation. I wasn’t sure what he was trying to do, but whatever it was, I knew I needed to stop him. My good hand was busy fending off his left hand, so I reached behind me with my injured hand, hoping to grab some sort of viable weapon off the shelf.

As fate would have it, my fingers came into contact with a decently thick hardbound book. There was no time to hesitate; I grabbed it and swung it at his head with all my might.

“Gah!” Kirion groaned and clapped both hands over the spot where I struck him.

Thank goodness for hardcover books, I thought.

On a whim, I peered down at my impromptu weapon—and realized it was a hardcover edition of *Tales of Tribal Romance*, of all things. Glancing back at the shelf I’d grabbed it from, I noticed there were several other editions of the same book, each with updated cover art as the years wore on. The oldest copy was practically falling apart.

“Were you trying to kill me?!” Kirion snarled, glaring at me reproachfully. “I can’t believe this! You’re no Flowerfolk! Flowerfolk are all a bunch of wimpy pacifists!”

“That’s what you get for underestimating us. Sorry to burst your bubble, but we’re not as ‘wimpy’ as everyone likes to think. We can put up a fight if we have to.”

Kirion looked at my injured left hand, still clutching the book. “You used your precious hands to hurt someone? Some hairstylist you turned out to be. You realize you’re just going to reopen your wound, right?”

“Don’t worry. As long as I still have a few functioning fingers, I should be able to style hair no problem. And right now, my hand matters less to me than beating the crap out of a scumbag who insults people right to their faces.”

“You *bitch*...”

This was quite the departure from the affable, devil-may-care persona I had come to associate with Kirion. Never before had I heard him use such foul language, and it felt like I’d discovered the real him. This turned out to be quite the freeing revelation.

“Mayna! Where are you?!”

I could hear Ray’s panicked voice in the hall outside the door, accompanied by a flurry of footsteps. Before I could call out to him, however, Kirion clapped a hand over my mouth.

“This is ridiculous. How did he find us so fast? Can Dragonkin sense where

their Bondmate is at all times?" he muttered under his breath.

"Mmph! Mmmmph!" In spite of my muffled mouth, I tried my best to call for help.

"Are you in here?!"

The next instant, the door flew off its hinges and slammed to the floor.

"That door was *locked*, you know. Can't you Dragonkin take a hint? Tsk..." Kirion clucked his tongue in frustration.

"Mayna!"

Kirion turned back to the sudden intruder, wearing his usual confident grin. "Hello there, Ray. You're a bit early to the festivities." He positioned me in front of him like a hostage.

It was hard to make out Ray's expression in the dim lighting, but from what I could tell, he was downright *enraged*—far more so than he'd been back in Patricia's room. The tension in the air was so electric, I half expected sparks to fly any second now.

But if Kirion had picked up on the same vibes I had, he certainly didn't let it show. "I just thought of an even better idea. You've made me very angry, Mayna. So how about I kill Ray instead?"

Evidently I must've gotten him pretty good with the book attack...but personally, I would've preferred he took his anger out on me. Nevertheless, Kirion pushed me forward as though he were setting me free.

"Mayna!" Ray rushed over and pulled me into his arms. When he caught sight of my torn dress, he narrowed his eyes and adjusted my clothing. "Just sit tight while I end his life."

His voice was gentle, but the look in his eyes was dead serious. He was furious.

"Are you going to fight me with a sword?" Kirion asked, his tone laced with amusement. "Personally, I'll be using magic. Oh, and I don't mind if we take this elsewhere, seeing as it would be kind of hard to swing a blade in here."

"That won't be necessary. Mayna, go stand over there." Ray directed me over

to the corner of the room. Once he made sure I was safe, he turned back to Kirion. “This won’t take long.”

“You sound awfully confident, considering you can’t cast a spell to save your—wait, what the?!”

All of a sudden, Ray’s body began to expand right before our eyes. I couldn’t see Kirion’s face from this vantage point, but I could only imagine how shocked he must have been.



“We’re *indoors*, you know!”

In his dragon form, Ray could barely navigate between the bookshelves. He spread his wings up to make sure they wouldn’t snag on anything, then lunged forward on legs the size of tree trunks.

The distance between them wasn’t that big to start with, and so Kirion had no time to run or dodge, much less recite an incantation.

“Guh!”

In a blink, Kirion’s torso disappeared inside Ray’s maw, leaving his head and limbs exposed. Then I heard the low crunching of bone. *Ooof*.

At this point, Ray attempted to back out from between the bookcases...but naturally, since he was so large, he couldn’t help but bump into everything...and before long, he had knocked a series of items and an entire shelf to the floor.

Fortunately I was completely out of harm’s way, but still, I couldn’t help but shriek in surprise. The impact had kicked up a cloud of dust, and I covered my mouth to keep myself from inhaling any of it.

Once the bookcase was out of the way, Ray dashed over to the newly unblocked window—the only one in the room, and a rather large one at that. Then, with Kirion still clutched in his teeth, Ray jumped and smashed himself through the window, curtains and all.

“Ray!”

I staggered my way over the messy floor to the window. I couldn’t risk getting close enough to peer outside, but from what I could see, this room was pretty far off the ground. Perhaps it was located atop one of Vaxwald Castle’s many tall towers.

“*Ray!*” I screamed again. He’d gone through the window at full speed—surely that had to hurt.

But then I heard a voice in the distance: “Up here! I heard some sort of crash. Let’s move!”

“I’m in here!” I shouted back. “Ray and Kirion... They’ve fallen from the window!”

As the knights stormed into the room, I pointed them in Ray's direction. One by one, each of them leapt through the shattered window, then morphed into a dragon in midair and flew down to the ground.

"Is he okay...?" I murmured to myself.

But just then, almost as though he had intentionally waited for the last knight to leave the room, Ray flew back up to the window again.

"Ray!" I exclaimed.

He perched on the window frame, then morphed back to his humanoid form and hopped down into the room. "Hi, Mayna."

"Are you okay?!"

His expression hardened. "I'm fine." Then he unpinned his cape and slung it around my shoulders instead. "What did he do to you?" he asked, his voice teeming with barely suppressed rage.

He must've known something had happened after seeing the tear in my dress...and I got the distinct sense that depending on my answer, he might just fly back out to give Kirion another chomp.

"Nothing. He just ripped my clothes, that's all. I'm fine, I promise," I answered quickly. "Where's Kirion?"

"Do you swear it?"

"What? Yes, I swear it! Now *where's Kirion?*"

"My fellow knights have him tied up. Originally I wanted to break every bone in his body and spit out the pieces, but supposedly they need him alive for interrogation purposes, so I left half intact. At one point he tried to run, but I guess the pain made it too difficult to cast his magic."

"I see..." I was relieved to hear he was safely captured.

"We're going to put him in one of our special anti-magic prison cells down in the dungeon. As I understand it, we had to bring in a Treeborn expert to test them, since they're on par with Shadowkin as magic users."

Whereas Shadowkin were descended from demons, Treeborn were

descended from spirits. And like Shadowkin, they hadn't mated with humans much, and so their mana capacity was on the higher side. But the Treeborn tribe was a respectable one; they preferred to live in harmony with nature, and as such, they rarely saw fit to leave their forests or wage wars.

After a moment, Ray gently pulled me into his arms. "Let's get you to the infirmary. We should have the doctor look at your wound."

"We can worry about my wound later. I need to get back to the Princess. After losing so much of her hair, she's got to be completely devastated... Oh, but maybe it'd be smart to tell you everything I know about Kirion first. He told me he's working with Kazarth."

"You can tell me all about it later on. As for Her Highness, Prince Dario is with her at the moment. Right now, your wound takes top priority."

And so Ray carried me from the room without hearing another word. He had a stern look on his face the entire time, mind you, but perhaps that was proof of how worried he was for my well-being. And I couldn't exactly protest, being in his arms and all.

On our way to the infirmary, I had nothing better to do, so I decided to ask him a question: "Kirion was saying that Dragonkin can sense where their Bondmate is at any given time. Is that true?"

Ray must've been distracted with other things, because he responded without hesitation: "If you're nearby, it's pretty easy to tell. But after a certain point, I can only really tell what general direction you're in. As long as you're close, though, I can use your scent to track you pretty reliably. Dragonkin naturally have a keen sense of smell, but it seems the scent of one's Bondmate is especially strong for some reason. Makes it easy to locate your personal possessions, for example."

"What are you, a dog?" I teased.

He smiled slightly. "I know, right? That said, there's no scent trail to follow if you're teleported away by magic."

Wait... Did Ray use my scent to track the missing hair ornaments...?

"I really am your Bondmate after all, aren't I?" I asked casually.

At this, Ray stopped short and looked at me in surprise. He quickly recovered, however, and glanced away as he set off once again.

“No... I was just using ‘you’ in the figurative sense,” he muttered. But he was too late—I was already convinced.

Rather than ask him a dozen more questions, however, I decided to focus on the Princess and the big wedding tomorrow. Surely it could wait until afterward.

Chapter 16: A Girl and Her Hair

ONCE I had received first aid treatment in the infirmary, Ray took me back to Patricia's quarters. There, I found Rebecca and Mona, as well as Prince Dario and, of course, the Princess herself right beside him. Sari was nowhere to be found—likely in the knights' custody, if I had to guess.

I rushed over to Patricia. She was still sitting in her chair, staring at the floor with an empty expression. "Your Highness!"

"Oh, Mayna..." When she looked up, I could see the pain of losing her hair written all over her face.

From there, Dario and Patricia listened quietly as Ray recounted to them everything I had told him about Kirion—that he was not a Dragonkin but a Shadowkin, that Kazarth had hired him to put a stop to the royal wedding, and so on.

Meanwhile, I undid Patricia's braids so I could get a good look at the damage. Sure enough, approximately half of the left braid had been severed from her chin down. Angry as I was, I was still convinced we could manage somehow. After all, it wasn't as though the hair had been pulled from her head entirely. With the remaining length, I could still style it up—and once it was up, no one would be any the wiser.

"Don't worry, Your Highness. We can still do the wedding hairstyle like we planned. I can just style it so no one will see the shorter strands," I explained to Patricia once Ray had finished telling them about Kirion.

Admittedly I had been worried for her emotional well-being, but as it turned out, the young princess had much more mental fortitude than I gave her credit for...and she had already made up her mind.

"No... There's no need to hide it."

Ray, Dario, and I all looked at her in surprise.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I want you to cut the rest of my hair to the same length. That’s how I’ll wear it for the wedding. I mean, think about it—there’s simply no way we could keep a scandal of this size hidden forever. Surely half the castle is talking about it by now. And from there, it’ll spread to the commoners. So I may as well own it.”

In a blink, warmth had returned to her eyes—the fire of determination to spite those who had done her wrong.

“Plus, this way I might win some pity points. I just know they’ll all feel sorry for me, having lost my precious hair! Not only that, but if I wear it short to the wedding, they’ll see that I’m quite down-to-earth and not at all fussy... Then they’ll realize the rumors were false, and they’ll all start to like me!” she declared quietly, yet firmly. “I’m tired of constantly worrying about what other people are saying about me, and I refuse to suffer in silence. So this is where I take a stand. I’m going to change their minds about me!”

I was incredibly touched. I had only been her personal hairstylist for two years—had she always been this strong?

Thinking back, she used to be a bit more innocent and childlike. And while she had her moments of naiveté, I knew her to be a smart and responsible girl... Yes, there were many times over the years when I thought of her as strong, but it wasn’t until now that I realized just how much she had matured. Oh, how I wished her parents were here to see this... The thought nearly brought a tear to my eye.

Meanwhile, Patricia pouted her lips. “I admit, losing my hair really broke my heart at first...but now all I feel is *anger*. Sari and Kirion had better watch their backs! I’m *not* going to let Kazarth have its way. The wedding’s going to be a total success! They’ll see!”

“It appears my bride-to-be is more formidable than I realized,” Dario commented with a grin.

At this, Patricia seemed to snap back to her senses. All at once, her face flushed bright red.

“Anyway, she’s right,” he continued. “I think telling them is smarter than

trying to hide it. I'll have the newspaper run an article on it... I'll tell them Sari was tricked into doing it by a Shadowkin assassin from Kazarth. Oh, and I'll tell them he was the source of all those rumors, too. Then I'll have them put the paper out tomorrow morning, before the wedding. They may criticize us for hiring Kirion without the proper background checks, but so be it. At least Patricia's reputation will be restored," he finished with a sheepish smile.

"Thank you, Your Highness," Patricia told him, then turned to me. "Mayna, I want you to know, I never would have found the courage to lop off my hair if it weren't for you. I trust you to give me a good cut...and a lovely style tomorrow morning."

Her faith in me warmed my heart, and I vowed to myself not to let her down. "Of course, Your Highness. I'll turn you into a beautiful bride, short hair and all."

"Just be mindful of your injury," Ray cautioned me quietly.

Ignoring him, I began to brainstorm potential short hairstyles for tomorrow.



ON the morning of the wedding, I arrived just outside Patricia's bedroom to find Ray staring at me with his eyes so wide, they threatened to pop out of their sockets altogether.

"Mayna... Your hair!"

I laughed. "Does it look bad?"

"No, no, it's rather fetching...but still..."

With a smile, I opened the door and walked into the room, where Rebecca, Mona, and even Patricia herself all had the exact same reaction.

"Mayna...? What happened to your hair?"

As of last night, the Princess was already sporting her new cut...and now we matched.

"I cut it!" I answered cheerfully.

You see, after I finished cutting her hair and retired to my quarters last night, I decided I would cut my own hair, too. Not quite as short, mind you—just above

the shoulders, but slightly shorter in the back to add depth. Currently I had tucked one side behind my ear.

It was actually really challenging to cut my own hair. For the back of my head, I'd used two mirrors to check my work countless times. Plus, my injured hand had really slowed me down...and as such, I was a touch sleep deprived.

"Mayna... You didn't have to do that!" Patricia frowned, looking deeply guilty.

"Why wouldn't I? Does it look bad?" I asked casually.

"Well, no. It looks quite lovely on you, actually. Very dignified."

"I know, right? Not to sing my own praises, but I think it turned out great. So please, don't blame yourself for my haircut. If anything, you helped me discover a new hairstyle that looks good on me, and now I'm completely smitten! This is the first time I've changed my entire cut rather than just my style!" With that out of the way, I continued, "Your Highness, we're about to start a short hair trend all across Vaxwald. It's not something I can accomplish on my own, but with your help, I can. There are bound to be hundreds upon hundreds of women in this country who are sick of dealing with all the maintenance long hair requires but feel they have no choice due to societal norms... Together, we can set them free."

"Oh, Mayna...!"

"Chasing trends is for commoners. But us?" Gazing into her eyes, I put a hand on my chest. "With one first-rate hairstylist and one royal celebrity, we can make our own trends. And starting now, short cuts will be the cutting-edge fashion."

Patricia broke into a big, bright smile. "I declare, I can never compete with you, Mayna. Yesterday I felt it was rather daring of me to have my hair cut so short, but afterward I actually started to regret it...and now you've made me change my mind all over again!"

"You know, short hair doesn't look as masculine as I thought it would," Rebecca mused. "I actually like it quite a lot. Maybe I should cut mine, too."

"Yeah... Long hair is *really* hard to take care of!" Mona chimed in. "It damages super easily, and it takes so long to wash and dry... It's just such a hassle every

day! Personally, I'd love it if short hair came into vogue!"

Grinning to myself, I rolled up my sleeves and turned back to Patricia. Regardless of length, her naturally curly hair had volume in excess, so my plan was to give her a half-up style that would look good with both a tiara and a veil while letting the lower half of her hair hang free.

"Now then, let's get to styling!"

Chapter 17: Bondmates

AND so the royal wedding went off without a hitch. The austere occasion progressed smoothly right to the very end, whereupon the newlyweds stepped out onto the castle balcony amid deafening cheers from the townspeople crammed into the garden below.

“That article wasn’t kidding. She really did get her hair cut short! Poor dear.”

“She’s so brave, too. I don’t think I could manage a smile if it were me.”

“It still looks rather lovely, though! So glamorous and youthful! A very feminine hairstyle, if you ask me.”

“You know, I’d never given any thought to wearing my hair short, but now that Her Highness is doing it, why, it doesn’t look that strange at all! It’s perfectly cute!”

Standing at the edge of the crowd, I grinned to myself. *I know, right?*

All around me, the Dragonkin were both sympathetic to Patricia’s suffering and impressed by her fortitude. Plus, they were *definitely* interested in her new haircut.

“Wait... You’ve got short hair, too,” one of the women commented as she spotted me. “It just looks so natural on you that I hardly noticed!”

“Thank you. I’m actually the Princess’s personal hairstylist, and cutting hair is my job. Here—this is her hairstyle, and this is mine.” I handed her a flyer from the thick stack I was carrying in my arms. It contained a how-to guide for Patricia’s bridal hairstyle, as well as my own, plus a few other sample hairstyles befitting pin-straight Dragonkin hair—all prepared in the event that the women of Vaxwald would be looking to experiment with short cuts.

“If you ever decide to have your hair cut short, you can take this flyer with you to the barbershop to show them what you want. Oh, and if you know anyone who’s getting married soon, I strongly recommend that you show them

Princess Patricia's hairstyle."

"Oh, my! You know, I'm actually getting married next year! That's why I came—to see the Princess's hair and gown, you know, for reference. I'm not sure if I'll take the plunge and cut my hair just yet, but...oh, I do so love having a nice change of pace every now and then!" she replied with a smile.

I had assumed the older women would be more resistant to the new trend, but boy, was I ever wrong. One of the middle-aged women who took my flyer had this to say about it:

"You know, I've always thought it would be nice to have short hair. After years upon years of wearing my hair in a ponytail, my hairline's started to recede, and no matter how well I try to take care of it, it's always quick to get dirty and lose its shine. All this time, I was afraid of what others would think of a woman who wore her hair short...but now that Her Highness is doing it, I don't have to worry anymore. I'm going to lop it all off first thing tomorrow!"

In the end, the crowd eagerly took my flyers until none remained.

Patricia and Dario had received the blessing of their royal subjects; it was clear the people of Vaxwald had chosen to entrust the two of them with the future of their country. As a result, love and joy had spread all across the nation in honor of their special day.

As for me, I looked up at the clear blue sky. "Now it's time to take care of my *own* business."



THE next day, I was walking through the courtyard with my parasol when Ray called out to me from behind.

"Mayna! Going for a walk? The weather's still really hot during the afternoons. You should try to stay indoors as much as possible."

"It's fine. I won't be out here for long. Aren't you still on the clock?"

"I'm on my lunch break." As he spoke, he took my hand and led me over to a shady spot.

"But I wanted to look at the flowers... Oh well. You know, you're really good

at finding me. How'd you know I was here?"

"I just got lucky," he replied hastily. "Anyway, after the incident with Kirion, it's looking like we'll have to hire a new apprentice, won't we?"

"We don't *have* to. I mean, if someone really wants to study under me for some reason, I'm more than happy to oblige, but there's no real rush to find my replacement. You see, I was talking to Her Highness yesterday, and she said to me"—I paused to put on my most refined and ladylike voice—"I know I told you that you were free to go home once I acclimated to Vaxwald, but the thought of losing you pains me ever so much, especially after all that's happened. It would mean a great deal to me if you'd agree to stay permanently!"

I thrust out my chest proudly, but Ray simply scowled. "So you're going to stay here? In Vaxwald? Forever?"

"I'm certainly thinking about it. Unlike Her Highness, I'm free to visit Myulan anytime, so I can just ask for some time off to take a trip whenever the mood strikes. Besides, when someone tells me they want me to stay, I'm inclined to listen. I just wish a certain *someone* would take a page out of the Princess's book."

"Who?" Ray quirked a brow as though he sincerely wasn't sure who I meant.

I closed my parasol and pointed at him with it. "*You*, obviously! I know you're only trying to get me to leave because you're worried about my health! I admit, your erratic behavior really threw me for a loop at first, but now I've got you figured out. I've read *Tales of Tribal Romance*, you know."

In the story I read, Dragonkin and Flowerfolk were depicted as polar opposites. Nevertheless, the protagonist discovered his Bondmate was a Flowerfolk, and the two fell in love.

After they moved in together, the Dragonkin's strength proved to be a bit too much for the Flowerfolk, and he often inadvertently injured her. He couldn't even hold her hand without being mindful of his grip; he had to handle her as though she were *literally* a flower. Not even flower fairies are that fragile.

But the biggest problem was the Flowerfolk's sensitivity to extreme

temperatures. Vaxwald's four distinct seasons were very stressful for her; she often collapsed from heat exhaustion in summer and was practically bedridden in winter. In the story, Vaxwald suffered a record-breaking cold wave that buried the entire nation in a thick blanket of snow. The Dragonkin were all used to it and could leave their houses just fine, but the Flowerfolk wasn't so lucky.

Worried for his Bondmate's safety, the protagonist kept the fireplace blazing at all hours of the day and night. Each day, he cautioned the Flowerfolk to stay indoors while he went out to collect firewood. But one day, while he was out buying groceries, a sudden blizzard blew in, delaying his trek home. Having noticed that he was late, the Flowerfolk grew worried and left the house to find him...but the winter winds were so harsh that she quickly grew too cold to move.

By the time the protagonist finally returned home, he found his beloved Bondmate dead on the side of the road. The story concluded with him holding her corpse and sobbing openly. All told, it was a tragic tale.

"You don't want me to be here when winter rolls around. You want me to go back to Myulan, where the weather is mild." Framed in this context, Ray's unfriendly behavior made total sense. "Look... *Tales of Tribal Romance* is fiction. It's not real. I told myself, 'He's a Dragonkin; surely he knows that.' And the idea of you actually believing that I'm going to freeze to death was just so ridiculous, I was convinced it had to be some kind of misunderstanding. But when I thought about how you acted back when I had heatstroke...or your behavior towards Kirion...it all started to point toward you being extremely overprotective of me. In which case, it was possible you had started to see *Tales of Tribal Romance* as a cautionary tale."

I glanced up at him. It was kind of embarrassing, since I was basically accusing him of being in love with me, but it had to be done. I was sick of him jerking me around all the time; I needed to get to the bottom of this mystery.

"Mayna... I..." Ray hesitated, his expression conflicted.

"I'm not asking because I want you to date me or something," I continued. "I just want you to know that if you think you can drive me out of Vaxwald over this, you've got another thing coming. I'm not as weak as the Flowerfolk from

the story; I won't freeze to death that easily. And for that matter, I can hold hands with anyone just fine. I mean, look at them! Do these hands look that fragile to you?" I held up my perfectly ordinary hands.

"Yes, they do," Ray replied without hesitation.

"...You're just saying that because of my injury!"

"Even if you weren't injured, I bet I could break them if I squeezed hard enough. Besides, how can you say for certain you can endure our winters when you don't even know what they're like? I concede that this chapter from *Tales of Tribal Romance* was set in North Vaxwald, but we still get a decent amount of snowfall here in the capital...and flowers can't bloom in the snow. But all that aside, I simply can't take you at your word. Not after you've already succumbed to heatstroke once!"

Evidently it was his turn to go on an impassioned tangent. "I only got heatstroke because I was doing a lot of work with fire and curling irons for hours straight," I muttered.

"Well, you never should've agreed to do it in the first place," Ray snapped. "I don't care if it was a request from the Queen—with your talent, you should've found some other way to meet her demands."

"Ngh..."

"You have *zero* self-awareness when it comes to your own physical limits. You think you can do anything a human does. *That's* what worries me. I can never trust you when you say you'll be fine!"

I had no comeback to this.

"And it's not *just* summer and winter you'll have to worry about. A good eighty percent of the year will have temperatures in one extreme or the other. And you'll have to endure it over and over. Every. Single. Year. Do you get that?"

With no way to defend myself, I sulked silently. How did this conversation turn into a lecture? What had I done to deserve it? This wasn't what I wanted at all!

Finally, I just couldn't take it anymore. "Oh, for crying out loud! I *know* the summers will be hot and the winters will be cold. I *know* that the seasons will keep repeating every year. I'm prepared for that! I'm going to take care of myself! And I know I'm not as strong as a human in some aspects. I'm not going to overestimate myself! Happy?!" Then I reiterated my point: "Like I said, if you think you can drive me out of Vaxwald 'for my own safety,' I'm sorry to say, it's not going to work! I have a perfectly good reason to stay here!"

"To support Princess Patricia?"

"That's part of it, but there's more to it than that." Summoning up all my hope and determination, I confided, "I want to style hair not just for Her Highness but commoners, too. Going forward, we're going to see an increase in women who want to wear their hair short, and I want to give them all a nice cut...so I'm thinking about opening my own shop close to the castle. I want to ask each of my clients what they want, and then I want to make that happen for them. I want to help polish the women of Vaxwald until they shine!"

As I spoke, I could feel joy welling in my chest until I was practically gushing.

"And I know the job's too big for just one person, so I want to train an apprentice or two, and I want to forge connections with other people in the industry—crafters that make hair ornaments as well as other barbers—and I want to create a handbook full of how-to instructions for cutting, braiding, and styling!"

My voice was steadily growing louder and louder.

"I know the shop and the handbook are still just pipe dreams, but I'm planning to work towards them, bit by bit."

Filled with excitement at my prospective future, I looked Ray straight in the eye.

"So you see, I still have so much I want to accomplish here in Vaxwald. I won't ask you to support it, but please don't fight me on this. I *refuse* to go back to Myulan. Not yet," I finished with a proud smirk.

Ray stared at me in wide-eyed surprise for a moment, then clapped a hand over his face and fell still. Seconds ticked by.

“Uh, Ray?”

When he finally lowered his hand, after what felt like an eternity...his eyes were shining with the same excitement I felt. “I can never compete with you,” he sighed, his smile conflicted. “How can I possibly tell you no when you sound so giddy?” Wrapping his arms around me, he continued, “You’re always so quick to flush all my hard work down the drain, you know that? Do you know how hard it was to tell you that you weren’t my Bondmate? To leave your side? No...I was so hostile to you, you couldn’t possibly have known.”

“So I *am* your Bondmate!”

“Of course you are.” At last, Ray had finally admitted it. “You were right—when you first told me you were a Flowerfolk, I immediately thought of the Flowerfolk chapter from *Tales of Tribal Romance*. As much as I wanted to take you home with me to Vaxwald, it just didn’t feel right. I didn’t want to put your life in jeopardy.”

I was willing to concede my inability to handle extreme temperatures, but no matter what, I refused to believe that merely existing in Vaxwald over the winter was going to kill me. Maybe if I wandered around outside for hours and hours without a coat or something—but I would never do that. Plus, the castle came equipped with fireplaces.

“You’re so paranoid,” I muttered.

At this, Ray pulled away slightly, then looked directly into my eyes. “I was worried about more than you freezing to death,” he explained. “As I said earlier, in Vaxwald the weather is harsh in some form or another for a majority of the year, and you would have to endure that for years on end. When I thought about how miserable it would make you to have to live here, I just couldn’t bear to do that to you.”

“I get that,” I replied, half-annoyed. *Trust me, I got it the first time.*

“So then I thought about moving to Myulan to be with you...but I hail from the aristocracy, and as an only child, I’m expected to inherit the family legacy. Our bloodline has served the royal family for generations now—I can’t just throw all that away. Besides, just as you have your loyalties to the Princess, I too wish to serve His Highness. He’ll make a great king one day, and I want to

be there to see it.”

“I can relate.” This time my reply was sincere. Besides, I could never ask him to throw away his career, much less his heritage—especially for someone he barely knew. Had he done so that early into our courtship, it would’ve made me really uncomfortable.

“Besides, had I actually thrown my life away to come to Myulan, I would’ve been too ashamed to face you. Perhaps I could find a different job soon enough, but even then...I don’t want to disgrace myself in front of you if I can help it.” He pulled me back into his arms, more tightly this time. “You can’t know how bad it hurt to force myself to leave you. I had to tell myself it was for your own good or else I couldn’t have managed it. And yet...despite my noble sacrifice, you turned up in Vaxwald as part of Her Highness’s dowry...” Ray grumbled.

“That wasn’t my choice! She asked me to come with her!” I argued.

“Do I send you back to Myulan, or do I support your dream...? I just don’t know,” he muttered, burying his face in my shoulder. Soon, however, it became apparent that he’d found his answer. “In my head, I know the correct answer is to send you home, but you just look so happy when you’re talking about your dreams here in Vaxwald...and I can’t just turn a blind eye to my Bondmate’s feelings. I *can’t*.”

I stayed quiet and let him work it out for himself.

“When I left Myulan, it was easier. You didn’t have strong feelings for me, so my absence didn’t pain you.”

“If I cried and begged you not to go, would you have stayed?”

“Well, if you were serious about it, then yes, I imagine I would have. Probably would’ve left my family name and my title to people I could trust. Likewise, I can’t exactly disregard your wishes this time around, either. I know you’re serious about making your dreams come true, and my only option is to support you.”

“Thank you,” I said with a smile.

He laughed and straightened up. “When you’re having fun, I have fun. When

you're happy, I'm happy. And if I'm being honest, I would do anything for you."

"What if I wanted to hike up a snowy mountain?" I teased.

"I would stop you, obviously," he answered with a grin. "But if you honestly, sincerely, *desperately* wanted to go, then I'm sure I'd end up caving eventually. And if we did end up going, I would take *every single precaution* to ensure you won't freeze to death."

"Well, fortunately for you, I don't have a burning desire to hike up a snowy mountain at the moment."

Unless I hear of any rumors that mountain-dwellers have especially healthy hair or unique hairstyles or something like that. Then all bets are off.

"Anyway...I just wish you would've been honest with me right from the start. You should've just told me you were worried about how a Flowerfolk would fare in Vaxwald. Then you wouldn't have pissed me off the way you did."

I scowled slightly.

"And so what if I ended up in Vaxwald? Instead of telling me to 'get out,' you should've just cautioned me against the extreme weather conditions so I could make my own informed decision."

"Even if I had, would you have chosen to leave?"

"...Well, no... I came here to support the Princess," I mumbled.

"I knew better than to try to talk it out with you because I knew you weren't fully conscious of your weak constitution," Ray explained, his arms still wrapped around me. "Even now, you think I'm simply 'paranoid' or what have you. Had I been straightforward with you, you would've merely laughed it off."

At this, I stayed silent...because I knew he was right.

"And I only lied about you not being my Bondmate because I felt it was the right thing to do. If I continued to let you think I was a good man, it might have hurt you more when I left you."

"*Somebody's* full of himself," I snarked...but he simply grinned as if to suggest he knew *precisely* how good-looking he was.

“Oh, please. Be honest—after five days together, you were already interested in me, weren’t you? Any time I drew close to you or smiled at you, you’d always turn red...right here.” He grinned as his fingers brushed my ear.

“Grrr! Quit teasing me!” I growled, embarrassed (and blushing) but not actually annoyed with him.

“I’m not teasing you. It’s just cute, that’s all.” Then his tone turned serious. “I’m sorry I upset you. I just thought it’d be best if I made myself into the bad guy before I left Myulan. And I admit, I’ve been acting coldly toward you here in Vaxwald because I hoped it would encourage you to go home. I *wanted* to piss you off.”

“Too bad for you, I’m not the rage-quitting type. I’m far more professional than that.”

“You’re right. I was naïve, and I underestimated your devotion to your work.” His expression shifted to a confident smile. “So, seeing as you initiated this conversation, can I take this to mean you’re ready for what happens next?”

“What do you mean...?” His bright smile put me on guard.

“You made me admit that you’re my Bondmate. Then you told me about your ambitions for the future and asked me not to fight it. Thus, my only option is to accept that you’re my Bondmate, love you with all my heart, and support you as you work toward your dream.”

“I mean, that’s not your *only* option,” I mumbled shyly.

A big grin crept up on his face. “I’m warning you now: a Dragonkin’s love for his Bondmate is rather intense. And I’m done holding back.”

Suddenly, it felt as though I had inadvertently awoken a sleeping dragon...and my smile stiffened as I realized there would be no escape...

Chapter 18: Epilogue

WINTER had arrived in full force. I remember wondering to myself back in autumn how the weather could possibly get any colder. What a fool I was.

Ray was right. I was clearly not cut out for Vaxwald winters. Fortunately, having a fireplace made life bearable...as long as I didn't go outside more than was absolutely necessary.

I'd been meaning to scope out a potential location for my future shop, but I knew Ray would yell at me if I tried to go into town by myself, so I decided that it would have to wait. This loss of independence grated on me, but I had no choice. I couldn't very well put myself in danger, after all.

Thankfully, I had a formidable roster of allies on my side: thick blankets, fur coats, gloves, winter hats, scarves, boots, cold-resistant dresses and singlets, and much, much more—all gifts from Ray.

I was walking down the castle corridor wearing a thick shawl when I heard him call out to me. "Mayna!"

(Fun fact: He bought me this shawl, too. Not that I asked him to, but since he wanted me to have it, I figured I may as well use it.)

"Hi, Ray. Is your shift over already?"

"Yeah, I'm done for the day. What about you?"

"Her Highness said she'd have Rebecca do her bedtime braids, so I'm free for the rest of the day. Maybe the Prince told her you were getting off work early. Either way, it was a kind gesture."

As I spoke, Ray gazed at me, smiling softly. He seemed to radiate love from every inch of his body. Nothing out of the ordinary for him these days, of course. We saw each other multiple times a day, and yet he always looked at me like I'm his favorite thing in the world. It made me blush.

“Sounds like we get to go home and eat dinner together.” He stroked my hair affectionately.

I was now living at his family estate. Ray claimed it's only proper, seeing as we'll be husband and wife someday, but I suspect he's just afraid I might freeze to death in my bed if I stayed in the castle.

No longer was he assigned to guard Princess Patricia; he'd gone back to serving as bodyguard for Prince Dario. That said, because he sometimes got assigned to the nightshift, his work hours were always a mixed bag, and we seldom went to work or home at the same time.

Fortunately, Ray's family sent a carriage for me whenever I needed to travel by myself, so I wouldn't be freezing to death on the side of the road anytime soon. Personally, I felt bad for imposing on them so much, but they had already remodeled the carriage interior with fur for added cold resistance, so at this point I'd feel worse saying no.

“Your hair's getting longer,” Ray commented, wrapping an arm around me and planting a kiss on my forehead. Once he admitted that I was his Bondmate, he became much more openly affectionate; it's something I've had to get used to (because I've learned I can't fight him on it).

“Do you prefer it long? Should I keep growing it out?”

“I like your hair at all lengths. Right now, I think it looks best just the way it is...and whether you grow it out or cut it shorter, I'm sure I'll say the same thing. Trust me, I'm not the person you want to ask those sorts of questions. Same with clothes.”

“Tell me about it.” Seriously, he was no help at all...but then again, I liked hearing that I'm fine the way I am.

He took my left hand in his. The wound had healed, but in its place it had left a scar. “Are you cold? Your fingers feel a bit chilly.”

“Freezing, actually. They really ought to install torches in the halls. I'm fine, though. It won't kill me.”

“Are you sure? You look miserable.” He paused to kiss my scar, then continued, “Maybe you need to wear more layers. I'm told it's normal to wear

multiple singlets at a time.”

“Any more layers and I won’t be able to extend my arms! Plus, I’ll look fat!”

“So what if you look fat? I don’t care at all.” He paused for a moment...and his expression turned severe. “Or are you trying to look good for someone in particular? Another man?”

“No, of course not!” I replied hastily. Unfortunately, this apparently struck Ray as suspicious, and he narrowed his eyes at me. The silence was so oppressive, I couldn’t take it. “I’m serious! I’m not lying to you!”

Unfortunately, the more I said, the faker I sounded.

“If you were to fall in love with someone else, I suppose I ought to support it,” he mused, my hand still in his. “I couldn’t very well call you my Bondmate if I didn’t put your happiness first.”

“I’m telling you, there isn’t another man!”

“The problem is, I just don’t think I could. Maybe if he proved he could love you and care for you better than I could—but I’m confident no one can.”

“Full of yourself as always,” I teased. He grinned.

“I’m your Bondmate, after all—the only one you’re ever going to get. And no one could possibly love you more than your Bondmate.”

He pulled me into his arms. *Is he afraid that he’ll die if he isn’t touching some part of me at all times?* Not that I was opposed to it, of course.

“Tell me you love me.”

“What?” For a moment, I failed to process this. It was just such a lovesick teenager thing to say.

Embarrassed, Ray buried his face in my shoulder. “I’m scared that I’m being too forward with you. First I told you that I want to marry you someday, then I made you move to my family’s estate... You didn’t really get the opportunity to decide for yourself. Not that I wanted you to say no, of course, but...I can’t help but worry that you don’t love me the way I love you.”

“You’re actually worried about that?” I murmured, slightly taken aback.

Then again...thinking back, I couldn't recall having ever told him how I felt. Any time he told me he loved me, I would always just thank him and leave it at that.

I stepped out of his embrace and looked him in the eyes.

"Contrary to what others may think, I wouldn't date someone I wasn't interested in, much less move into their parents' house. I have feelings for you, so I've made you part of my life. I love your sweet side—your borderline paranoia over me, your enthusiasm about my dreams, even your smile. I love your soft, warm smile, and I love the playful, mischievous smile you wear whenever you tease me. Oh, and I love your dragon form, too. It's actually kind of cute."

Grinning, I reached up and caressed his blond hair.

"Plus, I love your hair. It's got such a lovely warm golden color to it...but most of all, it's so nice and soft! Very fine and silky. Turns out I like to touch your hair just as much as you like to touch mine."

At this point, Ray was starting to turn red. I lowered my hand.

"I'm in love with you, Ray. Madly in love with you. I'm glad I got to spend time with you here in Vaxwald and discover all your good points." I paused. "Wow, you're really blushing."

"And whose fault is that?!"

"You're the one who told me to tell you I love you!"

He seemed embarrassed and happy and touched, all at the same time.

"I admit, I wasn't always glad you came to Vaxwald, but I am now. Back in Myulan it was essentially love at first sight, but your strong-willed passion for your work made me fall for you all over again. My love grows deeper with every new thing I learn about you." He paused to look away shyly. "Quit staring at me, would you?"

"Sorry, it's just... I've never seen you blush before!"

"In that case, I think it's time I got even."

Putting a hand over my eyes, he leaned in and pressed his lips to mine. After a

lengthy exchange, sure enough, I was left blushing even harder.

