

A Tale of Beauty and Beast

Epilogue

Dominic: Weddings

I had thought about my marriage too many times to count. For years it had been an obsession with me. The only way to break my curse.

Only now did I realize I had never taken any time to consider the actual wedding. Not in any detail, at least. And those fleeting thoughts I had assigned to it couldn't possibly have prepared me for the reality of the fervor that had gripped the entire palace.

I watched Sophie across the cavernous throne room. The wedding was to take place in here, and the two couples had been summoned to discuss decorations. Thankfully no one had noticed when Jon and I drifted so far across the room we could no longer even hear the conversation.

"They're beautiful, aren't they?" said Jon beside me. I had become so used to the presence of the Marinese prince in my palace that sometimes I failed to notice him at all. His return to Marin to negotiate the details of his wedding with his parents had been so brief, he had returned before I even noticed his absence. He spoke again before I could reply. "Of course, one is more beautiful than the other, somehow, despite their being identical."

I opened my mouth, but Jon chuckled and held up his hands to forestall me. "Let's not argue about which one that is."

Reluctantly a grin spread across my face as I shook my head. Soon enough we would be brothers—by law, at least—and I was already warming to him more than I would have previously believed possible. We had become allies of a sort against the madness that was royal wedding preparations.

A moment of silence ensued as we watched the distant figures of our fiancées. Eventually Jon broke it.

"Did your guards find anything?"

I glanced over at him, and he gave me a straight look. "You did send scouts out after that man who disappeared, did you not? And the potential godmother object he may or may not have?"

I raised an eyebrow at him, surprised at the questions since he hadn't asked me about the matter before.

He shrugged. "I just didn't like to ask about it with the girls around. I don't want to cast a shadow over their wedding joy. There will be time enough to talk it over with them afterward."

I grimaced. "They do seem very excited about flowers. And menus."

"And don't forget dresses." Jon grinned. "I think they're just giddy having their family here."

I had to acknowledge the truth of that—their excitement had definitely seemed to increase

once their mother and older sister-in-law arrived. Alyssa. I needed to think of her by her name. I was still trying to adjust to all these new arrivals who would soon be part of my family.

Jon seemed to take it all in stride, loving them as an extension of his love for Lily. I was sure I loved Sophie more than anyone had loved a woman before...but I was still learning how to extend that to include other people. I'd only just adjusted to the physical and mental presence of her twin. For Sophie's sake I was glad she had Lily back—I knew how much they meant to each other, and I would never try to come between that—but I was still gripped by the occasional desire to throw Sophie onto my horse and ride off somewhere where we could be alone together.

Shaking my head, I forced my mind back to Jon's question. "All of the men we managed to capture and lock up were mercenaries, gathered from Eliam and Talinos mostly."

"Yes, I heard that." Jon kept his eyes on the discussions on the far side of the room. "And it struck me that the most interesting thing they had to say was that they were hired not by Cole, although he was temporarily issuing the orders, but by the other man. The one who got away. Thus my question."

I turned to look at him in time to catch the raised eyebrow he shot my way.

"Yes, you're right," I said. "I did send my best scouts out after him."

"And?"

I sighed. "They lost the trail in Eldon." I frowned. "Somehow he disappeared into all that endless snow."

Jon mirrored my frown. "Do you think he's Eldonian? There's something mighty strange—and dark—going on in that kingdom."

I shrugged. "It's a possibility. Of course, there were strange and dark things going on here in Palinar until very recently, and he's not Palinaran."

"Yes." Jon ran a hand through his hair. "I suppose by that measure he could come from almost anywhere." He sighed. "We'll have to tell Celine to keep a lookout for him."

"Celine? You mean Princess Celine?" I remembered that the foreign princess was planning a visit to the Eldonian princesses after the double wedding.

Jon's face twitched, as if suppressing a smile at the doubt in my tone. "I keep forgetting that since they stayed behind to meet the twins' parents in Marin, you haven't had the chance to get to know any of the others from the original delegation." He paused. "Celine is...well, Celine. If Sophie was able to take on you and all of Palinar, I'd be willing to back Celine against Eldon. Even with our mystery man floating around."

"I'm touched by your faith in me, Jon," said a dry voice behind us. We both started and glanced guiltily between the Lanoverian princess and the main action across the room.

"Yes," she said, "I, at least, noticed your attempts at escape. But I think you're safe for now. At least, I can't imagine either of the twins wanting your opinion on the ratio of lilies to roses."

"Celine, you're a gem," said Jon.

She chuckled. "Don't thank me yet. I overheard some of what you were saying, and now I want a full report."

I shifted uncomfortably, and she pinned me with a bright gaze.

"Forewarned is forearmed. Isn't that what they say?" Her words were light, but

something lurked behind them that gave me pause. Maybe Jon had been right in his assessment of her.

I could only hope so since he immediately launched into a detailed description of everything we knew. He had obviously been following the investigations even more closely than I had realized.

An “aww” swept through the packed room as the nearly four-year-old page boy stepped onto the long red carpet. He looked eager rather than shy, tugging on his mother’s hand as she tried to keep step with him. I wasn’t sure if the response of the audience was for my soon-to-be-nephew, Harry, or for his just one-year-old sister, gripping their mother’s other hand. Tiny Rose was an early walker, or she wouldn’t have been able to toddle down the aisle at all. Dressed in a puff of white silk, the girl had been adorned with a profusion of her namesake flower.

Their mother, Alyssa, glowed, as she looked between her two offspring. But it was the occasional furtive glance she cast back behind her that kept my attention. Could she see Sophie?

I tried not to fidget, my hands clenching and releasing as I contained my nervous energy. The girls had insisted that the brides and grooms be kept separate for three days before the ceremony, and somehow those days had felt longer than the three years I spent trapped in my castle before Sophie arrived.

And now I was finally about to see her again. And not just see her but bind myself to her forever. I still couldn’t quite believe she had come to love me despite my beastly state. When awake, I could just remember it was true. But the last two nights, nightmares had plagued my sleep. Always some variation on the same theme—Sophie had come to her senses and run before the ceremony.

I glanced at Jon, who stood across the aisle from me. He appeared to be making no effort to control the excitement that raced across his face as he watched the distant door across the heads of the crowd. At least we were both standing on the dais that filled the front of the room so our view was unimpeded.

Celine appeared and followed Alyssa and her children down the carpet. She met my eyes briefly and grinned, apparently recognizing my impatience. My eyes swept the packed room as I tried to suppress any obvious emotion and maintain a dignified bearing in keeping with my station as king of Palinar.

The happenings of the last four years had worn away much of my previous pride, but I still felt a swell of satisfaction at the sight of the crowd. Every royal family had come for the occasion, and even some royals from the new lands across the sea. The Marinense had arrived first, bearing both the initial and the follow-up delegations of newcomers with them. But the rest of the royals had been trickling in for the last two weeks. And only Palinar, the largest of the kingdoms, could host them on the scale required. Our light had grown dark and nearly died, but at last it shone brightly again.

Two figures stepped into the huge double doorway, and the rest of the room suddenly dimmed. Here was the source of our newfound brilliance. The beautiful girl who had saved

not only me but my entire kingdom as well.

A ragged breath sounded from Jon, but I couldn't tear my eyes from my bride to look at him. The sheerest of veils covered the twins' faces, but I knew Jon would have no more trouble recognizing his bride than I.

Together the two girls stepped onto the long carpet, their father having appeared between them to take one daughter on each arm. The details of their wedding gowns had been kept in absolute secrecy, known only by the seamstress and her team, along with Queen Eleanor and Princess Alyssa.

They had chosen identical dresses, and I could see the smallest hint of mischief on Sophie's face. She knew only Jon and I, and their family, would be able to tell them apart, and she seemed amused by it. A last show of solidarity, perhaps, before the twins took up their separate lives in Palinar and Marin.

Sophie would have looked radiant in anything, but the dress she wore now enhanced her beauty to the point where I could scarcely breathe. Or maybe that was the effect of seeing her again after our time apart. The white silk and lace fitted her perfectly, the full skirt moving softly around her as she stepped forward, a long train flowing behind.

But then her eyes found mine and the details of the dress fell away. Each step brought her closer to me and to the lifetime ahead of us. The lifetime that couldn't start soon enough as far as I was concerned.

My feet moved of their own volition, my mind hardly registering the need to walk in step with Prince Jonathan down the three steps to meet our brides. And then they had arrived, and her warm hand was gripping mine.

I wanted to lift her veil, not wishing even such a sheer barrier between her gaze and mine, but I remembered just in time that I had to wait for the right moment in the ceremony. Her smile deepened, and I wondered if my thoughts were obvious across my face. Carefully I helped her up the steps, unsure how she could move in so much material, and finally—finally—the ceremony began.

I wish I could say I savored every word, but in truth I barely heard any of them until the ones that bound us together. And only when it finally came time to lift her veil and press my lips to hers, did my body fully calm. For years I thought I had lost everything. My family, my honor, my kingdom, even my own body. And yet here I stood now with everything. And I knew that together Sophie and I could face anything. We would find my missing sister. We would track down the escaped criminal and any godmother objects he might possess. And together we would restore Palinar to even greater heights than its former glory.

I pulled back and met her beautiful blue eyes, and even those thoughts fled. Today we would leave for a wedding trip to my most secluded chateau. Just the two of us. And I found my mind had room only for one beautiful, glowing girl.

Of course, I had forgotten that we had a wedding banquet to host first. And it seemed that all of the guests—along with most of the capital—had come prepared to dance half the night away.

I had managed several dances with my bride, holding her as close as possible as we

whirled across the ballroom floor, but the endless stream of well-wishers determined to accost us made dancing difficult. At some point the crowd pulled us apart, and I might have been annoyed if I weren't so amused at watching the guests' attempts to congratulate her without revealing that they had no idea whether they spoke to the new Princess of Marin or Queen of Palinar. I had heard enough giggles from both girls to know that they had intended such an effect, and I didn't wish to spoil their fun by clinging to her side for the whole evening.

When Alyssa dragged both Sophie and Lily off for some sort of wardrobe refresh, I drifted back to the edge of the room. I wanted to observe the crowd for a few moments and take a break from the never-ending congratulations.

When my gaze skimmed a darkened corner, I stiffened. I blinked, and the apparition was gone. I shook my head, as if I could clear my sight, but the winged figure failed to reappear. And yet I was sure of what I had seen. Some of my guests had gray hair, but none had wings, of that I was sure.

Slowly my racing heart relaxed. Sophie had helped me see many things differently, and one of them was the High King and his godmothers. I understood their laws as I had not previously, and I had sworn to rule Palinar with the love they required from their rulers. I was even grateful for their intervention, since it had saved my kingdom from a threat I didn't even understand, and it had brought Sophie to me.

But, still, I hadn't yet grown entirely accustomed to the idea that a godmother might appear at any moment. And I certainly wasn't expecting one to be hiding in my potted shrubbery.

I blinked again, and a more familiar figure emerged from the same corner. This one didn't disappear but moved instead to join the crowd. I narrowed my eyes at Princess Celine as she walked slowly away from me.

So perhaps it hadn't been my godmother I had seen at all. Had Celine called her own godmother, now that the darkness that kept them away had been lifted from Palinar? If so, why?

She looked shocked and dazed, so perhaps she hadn't been expecting her, either. My curiosity burned, and I moved to intercept her before she was lost in the dancers. But before I could reach her, a soft hand on my arm brought me to a stop.

"I've just been informed our carriage is nearly at the door. One last dance before we leave?"

All other thoughts dissolved as I swept my bride into my arms.

"As many dances as you please. All I want is for you to have the perfect day."

Sophie smiled up at me, deep emotion spilling from her eyes. "Today I married you. How could it not be the perfect day?"

The smallest of growls slipped out as I gripped her closer, and she pulled a hand free to place it on my cheek.

"I love you, my Beast."

"And I love you, my queen."