



Her Dragon Defender (Fated Mates of Mirror Academy #1)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Eden expected to attend her first Mirror Academy Ball with her best friend, raising money for the animal sanctuary. She didn't expect to spend the night searching for her missing friend...or to wind up trapped in a tower.

Blaze gatecrashed the ball to search for his sister, but all he finds is her best friend, in trouble and at the mercy of his worst enemy.

He doesn't believe in fated mates, let alone that a human could be mated to a dragon. Yet Blaze might just have to believe that fairytales can come true.

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ONE

"You look amazing," Eden breathed as she stared at her best friend. Her silvery hair was lavender this week, to match her eyes, and the breathtaking gown that might have been made for her. From what Eden knew of Diana's family finances, it might have been. While Eden would have struggled to pay for a secondhand dress from a thrift store, if she could find one that fitted.

Diana frowned. "Then maybe I should change. I need the rich men at the ball to be tripping over themselves to talk to me, but not quite so busy staring at my boobs that they can't sign a sponsorship agreement. It's bad enough that some of them are so drunk they don't know what they're signing. Last time, one prick was so certain he'd signed a prenup, that he actually came hammering on the front gates of the Academy to insist they hand over his bride." She sniffed. "As if I want to marry anyone, let alone one of those overprivileged arsewipes."

"Surely there must be some nice men at these things. Or at least ones who look good, and are fun to dance with," Eden said. She'd never been invited to a ball, let alone attended one, so all she had to go on was what she'd seen on TV and in movies.

"Maybe balls held by other colleges, but Mirror Academy balls have this almost legendary reputation for matching business royalty with brides. So I feel a moral obligation to my fellow students to help the snotty man-children become slightly less objectionable, by giving them the opportunity to sponsor an animal shelter to prove they're not complete dicks. At least they have one redeeming feature – they're all fond of animals." Diana beamed at her reflection, then frowned again. "No, this is just too purple. I think I'll go with the green one." She stripped off the lavender gown, and

handed it to Eden. "Here. You try it on while I'm gone. You can wear it to the end of year ball, when we go there together. That one's supposed to have a fairytale theme, and I have the perfect gold Beauty and the Beast gown."

Eden looked longingly at the dress in her arms. She'd never worn anything so lovely, and it was hard to believe Diana was willing to loan it to her. "Which princess wears purple again? That's Rapunzel, isn't it?"

"That's the one. And she even has short hair at the end of the movie, so you won't have to change a thing." Diana zipped up the green gown, then regarded her reflection. "Which is more than I can say about my hair in this one. I'm useless at up-dos. They don't stay up for more than ten minutes, tops."

Eden carefully laid the dress down on the desk. "That is where I come in. of my foster families ran a dog grooming business, and all us kids were expected to work there for free, until Child Protection had them arrested under the child labour laws. I think that was my favourite foster family, actually. The main picture on their website was a poodle I made look like Marie Antoinette for Halloween."

Diana eyed her suspiciously. "And that's supposed to make me want to trust you with my hair? The headmistress will hardly let me go to the ball looking like a poodle."

Eden shrugged. "If I mess it up, you could always wear a wig. There's that blonde one in my room, left by the last girl who lived there before me."

"The curly one full of flowers? I think I'd prefer to be a poodle, thanks. I mean, I'll be looking for animal lovers. Maybe if I look like a dog, I'll get more money for our animal shelter, and we can put in a pamper room for the owls or something."

Eden burst out laughing. "So that's your goal tonight? To raise enough money for an owl day spa? I'm down with that. By the time I'm done with you, you'll put Marie

Antoinette the poodle to shame. No, scratch that. You'll put the real Marie Antoinette to shame. You're already more a queen than she ever was."

She set to work, and before long, even Diana couldn't deny she liked the reflection she was looking at. Mirror Academy certainly provided its students with enough mirrors to earn the name.

"You look like a princess," Eden said wistfully as she watched Diana twirl her skirts so they sat right, after sitting on them so long.

Diana smiled. "Well, next time, we'll be princesses together, and with two of us there, our shelter will be fully funded before summer break, a full year before we actually open the doors. Wouldn't that be wonderful?"

"A fairytale come true," Eden said.

"It absolutely will, you'll see," Diana said as she hugged Eden. "Wish me luck!"

She waved as she headed off for what Eden hoped would be a night to remember.

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TWO

Blaze squinted against the sunset light, trying to work out if he had enough to cover this last garden bed. He'd be spreading the mulch pretty thin, but the shrubs and trees had been here longer than he'd been alive, so their roots already ran deep. Unlike the roses, which always seemed to need more mulch than any other plant in the garden. The sun was sinking, but he thought he might just have enough time to finish the job before...

"Darling, I do hope you're coming in for dinner!"

"Yes, Mum!" Blaze called back over his shoulder as he pushed the wheelbarrow along the path. "I'm almost done here, so I'll have time for a shower before dinner."

"Good boy."

Blaze suppressed a snort. Mum might have gone back inside, but her hearing was as sharp as his. He was willing to bet she'd still be calling him a boy on his thirtieth, fortieth or even fiftieth birthday. Probably even after he'd had kids of his own, if that ever happened.

He grabbed a shovel and began to fill the wheelbarrow. Neither he nor Diana had ever really expected to find their mystical fated mate, but for Diana to find hers while he was still single...ha, fate must really have it in for him.

Of course, Diana's message hadn't said she'd found her fated mate, but Blaze was her brother. Of course he'd been able to read between the lines of her carefully crafted

message. Didn't want ordinary humans seeing anything strange that they could use as evidence that the supernatural world did exist.

How had she put it, exactly?

Blaze pulled out his phone. Yep, there it was, the picture of her and the pixie-like girl with the short hair, silver beside night-dark, and Diana's hastily typed:

You won't believe it. I finally found the perfect partner – someone willing to spend the rest of her life saving animals at the sanctuary with me. Can't wait for you to meet her.

Diana's fated mate – for she had to be her mate, as Diana wouldn't settle for anything less than the full fairytale – was gorgeous. In fact, she looked like exactly his type. Idly, he wondered what would have happened if he'd met the girl before Diana – would she have agreed to become his mate instead? Probably not, if she was only into girls. Damn, but his sister had good taste. He only hoped he'd be half as lucky – if there even was a fated mate out there for him.

Unless Diana's mate had a sister, maybe...

Blaze shook his head. No, fated mates were a fairytale, not something for him. He was too down to earth to believe in fairytales. His future and any legacy he might leave were in the gardens he planted and helped grow. Very few people throughout history had created gardens that survived for centuries, but that was what he intended to do at the Hea Sanctuary, when it was ready for him to start planning. He had so many plans...

He dumped the final load of mulch into the garden bed and raked it flat. There. Done. Now he could go inside and shower, once he'd put his tools away. The last time he'd forgotten to clean up after himself, the (now retired) head gardener had given him an

absolute earful about the importance of keeping your tools sharp, shiny and tidy. Blaze thought he might have been six or seven at the time, and by the time the gardener was finished with him, he'd reduced him to a snivelling mess, swearing six ways to Sunday that he'd always take care of his tools.

As Blaze hung up the shovel on its hook, he wondered which of the gardeners he'd put in charge when he inevitably left for Hea Sanctuary. Whoever it was would probably still defer to him on the big decisions, but someone would have to manage his parents' estate on a day to day basis.

Something to worry about tomorrow, or at least after dinner, he decided as he dusted off his hands. Shower. Then fresh clothes and down to the dining room. Because he'd never hear the end of it from his mother if he was late for dinner.

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THREE

"I opened one of your letters by mistake this morning. Here." Dad tossed the envelope onto Blaze's plate.

Mum frowned. "Is that what I think it is? Blaze, you'll never find your fated mate if you keep treating women so badly they take out restraining orders against you. That's the third one this year. Brando, you need to take your son aside and teach him how to properly treat a woman."

Blaze rolled his eyes. "I know exactly how to treat a woman, and the only reason I don't have a fated mate is because I haven't met this mystical paragon yet. I'd put money on it that this complaint was made by a man, and not only did I not lay a finger on him, I never even set foot on his property." Blaze unfolded the letter, and let out a whoop. "Yes! It's from Tremotino, the same as the other two. I'm now not allowed to set foot on his pretentious new development, Babylon Springs." He shrugged and tossed the letter across the table to his mother. "Read it for yourself."

Mum's frown only deepened. "What did you do to annoy this man so much?"

Blaze grinned. "I may have done a flyover of his site, which he was going to dig up for a housing development, without doing the proper archaeological investigations to determine whether or not it's a historic site. Then I posted a video of how the recent drought has exposed the underlying structure of something at the site, which looks a whole lot like the replica of the Hanging Gardens of Babylon that was reputedly built here, bankrupting the owner. I also may have done a follow-up video, when the archaeology team sent me samples of some of the plants they found on the buried

terraces, mixed with glass from the greenhouses that must have been built on the terraces to keep the plants alive, as they all appear to be species that would be more at home in Iraq than here." He shrugged. "It's not my fault he was hiding one of the Seven Ancient Wonders of the World on his construction site. If he'd only brought the archaeologists in at the beginning instead of trying to destroy an important historical site, he wouldn't be looking at a two-year delay on his project, if it even goes ahead at all. The National Trust asked for a copy of my report, and it looks like they might just start lobbying for responsibility for the site. They asked me to do some preliminary costings for restoration works. In truth, Tremotino should be thanking me. If the National Trust can drum up the funding to restore these gardens, the prices for their new estate next door will go through the roof. Even if they make him pay for the restoration, which might end up being one of the conditions for development approval. Either way, I saved a little bit more history for people to appreciate."

Dad lifted his wine glass. "Well done, son. What were the other two for? I forget."

"Cemeteries. Both of them. One was right next to the ruins of an old church, so of course there was going to be a churchyard...but the other was a whole bunch of war graves, buried there right after a battle. It's amazing all the things we're finding because of droughts lately." Blaze grabbed his own wine glass and drank deeply, before he said any more.

"Droughts, or someone flying overhead and searing the grass and soil beneath? It's one thing to keep the frost off your own vineyard, but another to risk setting fire to someone else's property." Mum shook her head.

"Now, Mum, you're the one who taught me how to defrost a vineyard before the vines are damaged. I've never set a grassfire in my life, least of all on Tremotino's land. The drought was going to dry out his grass anyway. He wasn't taking care of his lawns properly. I just helped things along a little, to reveal the secrets hiding underneath,

while I just happened to be flying over, that's all."

"You're lucky no one's seen you and captured it all on video. That's the last thing we need – for our secret to go public. Maybe you should lie low, and just stick to filming things for your own gardening show for the moment. Surely you have enough clients who want their gardens to go viral. All these restraining orders still won't make you look like a desirable mate. I'm not getting any younger, and I'd like to see my grandchildren before I'm too old to play with them!" Mum stabbed a piece of roast meat with the carving fork and transferred it to her plate, which she then engulfed in gravy.

"Isn't that why you sent Diana to Mirror Academy? I think you'll have a better chance of grandchildren with her than you will with me. At least she's going to the Mirror Academy social events. I've been so busy with work, plus next week I start the landscaping for Hea Sanctuary, so it'll be finished by the time we move in there. Between actually doing the work and videoing it all for my channel, I'm not going to have time for anything but work for months. Even if I was looking for love, which I'm not, my best chance would be to wait until we move into our new house at Hea Sanctuary, where I won't have to worry about keeping secrets, because everyone in the community will be like us. You wait. I bet Diana won't be settled in her animal sanctuary for a week before she's picked out someone perfect for me, because she'll know everyone in the village already. Better than anyone I might hook up with without her help, for sure."

Mum made a disapproving sound in her throat. "I thought we raised you better than to hook up with anyone. Ordinary humans might do that sort of thing, but as an Argyros, you have a responsibility..."

Blaze strongly suspected Dad hadn't told Mum about some of the hijinks their ancestors had gotten up to over the centuries, and Blaze wasn't about to enlighten her...or tell her about some of the things he'd done while he was university. Some

things you just didn't talk to your mother about, which was why he just smiled, nodded, and ate his dinner, until her lecture was done.

"Are you listening to me, Blaze Argyros?"

That was his cue. Blaze swallowed. "Yes, Mum."

Dad came to his rescue. "So, what's the plan for Hea Sanctuary? Landscaped gardens for aesthetics to help them sell the remaining blocks, hobby farming to sell the off the grid angle, or native plants to blend into the surrounding forest?"

Dad might not be a gardener himself, but he'd watched enough of Blaze's video channel to know the sorts of projects Blaze took on.

"Actually, the Sanctuary will be a mix of all three. The priority for the design has always been to plant species that are best suited to our soils and climate, in keeping with the sustainability of the project, so the buildings on the outskirts of the village will have landscaping that tends toward native vegetation, as they'll be closest to the forest. This will include the grounds at Diana's sanctuary, to make it easier for animals that can be rehabilitated and returned to the wild." Diana had insisted on doubling the size of the sanctuary grounds, to the developer's annoyance, but in the end, even Shaw had caved in to her. Diana was just that persuasive.

"Will residents be able to plant their own gardens, or are you doing that for them?"

Blaze smiled. "Both, actually. They get to choose which trees and shrubs get planted in the layout they decide, and we'll finish the rest of the garden and raised garden beds with a mix of perennials and herbs, which they can swap out as the seasons change. The common areas are all planned out, and will probably be the first sections we plant. Because there will be restrictions on which plants and pesticides and stuff residents can use in the Sanctuary, all the gardening supplies and services will be

provided by the same company. Mine for the first year, but after everything's established, we're looking at contracting it out to a gargoyle gardening company, if we can get them on board. Shaw said he'd speak to them, and maybe offer them something to sweeten the deal if they'll relocate to the Sanctuary permanently." A muffled chime came from his pocket. "I bet that's Shaw now."

Sure enough, the message was from Shaw – but it wasn't about the gargoyle gardeners. "It looks like I won't be starting work at the Sanctuary next week. There have been some delays, so they're not ready for me yet."

Dad didn't look happy, but Mum beamed. "So you're not busy, then? In that case, could you get in touch with Diana? I'm sure she's eager for an update on her animal sanctuary, and you know she'd love to hear from you. I know she's busy, but she always has time for you. You'll do it, won't you, Blaze?"

Do a favour for both Mum and Diana? Even if he'd wanted to refuse, he couldn't. Blaze sighed. "Of course I will, Mum."

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FOUR

Eden could hardly sleep that night, thinking of Diana dancing the night away at the castle on the hill, and that purple dress, shimmering in the starlight that shone through her window, didn't help matters, either. Sometime close to dawn, she fell into an uneasy doze, and by the time she woke, she was certain she'd missed breakfast, so instead of heading down to the dining hall, she wandered up to Diana's room to see if she was awake yet.

Only to find Lily in there instead, dumping armloads of dresses on the bed. Diana's dresses.

"What are you doing?" Eden burst out.

Lily turned. "Packing all of Diana's things to send home to her family. The headmistress wants it done now, so the room will be ready for the next student." She reached into the wardrobe for another dress, which she draped over her arm.

"What happened to her?" Because something bad had to have happened. No way would Diana leave the Academy before she'd finished her degree.

"She got married, and now she's on her honeymoon, too busy to come back. Just like all the other girls do. Once they get rich husbands, they don't come back." Lily lifted a box onto the bed and began folding Diana's dresses into it.

"But Diana wasn't dating anyone. How could she possibly get married in one night?"

Lily shrugged. "It happens more often than you'd think. In fact, there were three weddings last night alone, so I have another two rooms to pack up after this one. Headmistress's orders. So if you don't mind...I have a lot of work to do today."

"I'll help, then," Eden said, heading back to the wardrobe to fetch more dresses. For a girl who spent most of her time in practical clothing, Diana sure did have a lot of gorgeous gowns.

"You don't have to. It's not your job," Lily said.

"It should be. I mean, I was Diana's closest friend. Why did the headmistress ask you to do it?" Eden laid the last load of dresses on the bed. Oh, how she wished she owned a fraction of Diana's wardrobe. One day, maybe. Then again, what need would she have for ballgowns when she and Diana were running the animal sanctuary? If Diana came back...

Lily ducked her head. "Because I work here now. To cover the costs of my room and board. So I can stay until I finish my degree."

"The school has scholarships for that. I should know – I got one. Maybe if you talk to the headmistress..."

Lily just shook her head. "I'm not taking charity, especially when there are more deserving students who need it. I already spoke to the headmistress, and this is the arrangement we've made. Besides, packing people's things is much easier than serving in the cafeteria. Last week, someone cooked Candace's egg white omelette in olive oil instead of coconut oil, and I had to listen to her screeching about it for an hour. I had a headache all day. Still, it's better than going home, and trying to finish my degree via correspondence." She shuddered.

Eden realised she'd never heard Lily talk about home. "Is your home that bad? I

mean, I grew up in the foster system, so I never stayed anywhere for very long, but if you want to talk about it, I can definitely empathise."

Lily produced a watery smile. "Actually, I'd rather not even think about it. Home used to be just that...home. Even after my mum died and it was just my dad and me, it was still home. Then he got remarried, and for a while, it was all right, because while my stepmother and her daughters came to live with us, I was here, so it didn't really matter much, but then he got sick. I didn't even know until it was too late to go home to say goodbye." She sniffled, then taped the box shut and hefted it in her arms. "I need to stack these in the hall."

Leaving Eden in Diana's room with no idea what to say. What could she say?

When Lily came back, wiping her eyes, Eden knew she had to say something, even if it was the wrong thing.

"I'm sorry about your dad," Eden said. "I never knew mine, so I can't imagine what it's like to have parents you loved, only to lose them. I'd be gutted."

"Yeah, that pretty much describes it. Only there's more. Mum and Dad ran a company together, and the plan was that I'd get my degree, and then join them. But when Dad died, there was no one left with the right licences to run the company. I need to get my degree and qualify for my licence before the company's registration is up for renewal, or we lose everything. If my stepmother hasn't already sold the company assets, because she needed the money for one of my stepsisters." Lily rolled her eyes, before slamming the next box shut. "They make Candace look like a saint."

Eden had to laugh. "Not even the devil could do that."

"You haven't met them. When the pizza shop put coriander on their chili chicken and coriander pizza, they called the police to arrest the pizza guy for trying to poison

them. One of them even stuck her finger down her own throat so she could throw up on the floor as evidence." Lily grimaced. "I had to clean it up, because the housekeeper had left after they couldn't afford to pay her any more. A bit of food service and packing here is nothing compared to everything I'd have to do at home. I wouldn't have enough time to sleep, let alone finish my degree if I couldn't stay here." She taped another box shut. "Actually, I kind of envy the girls who've found themselves rich husbands. If I married some guy who had his own place with staff, I wouldn't have to go back home to that." She carried the next box out into the hall.

Eden backed up to let her through, her mind whirling. Sure, she could understand why Lily might have wanted to marry some rich guy she barely knew, but Diana wasn't like that. Diana loved her family and called them every week.

Diana couldn't have gotten married since she'd seen her last night. Diana didn't want a husband, any more than Eden did. None of this made any sense.

"Did the headmistress tell you the name of the guy Diana married?" Eden asked.

Lily shrugged. "Does it matter? She'll only stay married to him long enough for him to go back to his mistress, so she can catch him cheating on her and file for divorce. Once she's got half his assets, she won't need him any more. Then she can go looking for love...or just enjoy life, and live happily ever after. Wouldn't that be nice?"

Eden had to admit she wouldn't mind a bit of a fairytale ending for herself, though she suspected it would come with more complications than Lily's simple sounding plan. And while Eden herself might not have a happy home to go back to during the holidays, Diana was different. Her family were so supportive of her and her dreams, they were paying for the construction of the animal sanctuary. The only reason she collected donations at events like last night's ball were to cover the running costs, so she and Eden could be employed there full time.

"So you don't know who she married?" Eden pressed.

"Nope. Can you pass me that box? I may as well do her shoes next. Wow, her shoe collection probably cost more than a semester's tuition. I wish I'd thought of collecting designer shoes when I had the money for them. Designer dresses, too. Then maybe I could have sold them and saved myself the hassle of working in the cafeteria. Oh well. At least we only have until year's end, and we graduate, right? Not that much longer to go."

Indeed it wasn't. Eden could only hope Diana returned before then. Honeymoons didn't last that long, did they? After all, how much sex could one couple have?

Eden helped Lily pack all of Diana's things into boxes, before heading down to the cafeteria for breakfast.

It appeared to be too early for Candace to have made an appearance yet, but Eden recognised some of the other girls who'd gone to the ball last night.

But every girl she asked had no idea that Diana had gotten married last night, or who Diana's new husband was.

Diana wasn't even answering her phone – all of Eden's calls went straight through to the message service, and no one left voice messages any more. Text messages went ignored or unanswered...Diana had just disappeared.

And no one but Eden, Diana's best friend, seemed to care.

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FIVE

The void in Blaze's work schedule wasn't something he was used to. Financially, he knew he would be fine, as he'd already budgeted for the time off to work on Hea Sanctuary, but an increasing part of his regular income now came from his video channel, and his millions of fans expected at least two new videos a week. He'd planned to focus on the transformation of the village from construction site to sustainable paradise over the next month, but without any new projects, he'd have to fall back on filming the gardens on his family's estate.

He'd bet Diana would have some great ideas for new content. He sent her a quick message:

Any good gardens I should see near your college? I could drive down for a visit.

Then he flipped his phone over to video mode and got to work.

Several hours later, when he was certain he'd described every single plant on his family's estate in such minute detail, he was heartily sick of the place, Blaze's phone vibrated with an incoming message...no, an incoming call, and it wasn't from Diana.

"Hello?" Blaze ventured.

"Is this Blaze Argyros? It's Roger. I'd like to invite you to my house for a few days to do a small feature..."

Roger was the owner of a stately home whose gardens he'd restored a couple of years

back from a weed-choked wilderness to their full Regency glory.

The lord of the manor – Blaze thought the man might actually be a duke or an earl or something, not merely a lord, but as he insisted Blaze call him Roger, that was the name he remembered – wanted to open his home to tours, weddings and other events, so he was hoping for a follow-up feature on Blaze's gardening programme.

"Of course, Roger, I'd love to," Blaze said easily. "I can come up tomorrow, if you like, and we can spend a whole day showcasing how your garden's growing now."

Roger, bless the old boy, had taken all of Blaze's recommendations to heart, hiring a whole team of gardeners to make sure the garden bloomed at its best. So one day stretched into three and a half marathon days of carefully filming what even Blaze had to admit was some of his best restoration work. If only the rest of his clients were as conscientious as Roger.

As they headed into the house for lunch on that fourth day, Roger said, "I'll just call my wife from the greenhouse so she can join us."

"Lady Rose is helping your gardeners?"

Blaze had only met Roger's wife at meals in the house, when he'd first worked on the restoration. He remembered her as a stiff, formal sort of lady, who insisted that the garden was her husband's mid-life crisis project, wanting to bring back the gardens he remembered from his childhood. She'd laughed and said he'd picked something better than buying fast cars or a football team.

Roger looked smug. "When her friends saw our garden on your program, they all wanted cuttings from her Regency roses. Once she understood how easy it was to propagate roses, and how much everyone wanted them...well, we've turned one of the glasshouses into a gift shop, where she sells the roses in pretty little pots. We had a

whole room full of the things, from when she was going through her pottery phase, and we couldn't give them away. Now, she's selling them!" He led the way into the nursery. "Rose, you remember Blaze Argyros, don't you? He's the genius who bought our gardens back to life."

Blaze wouldn't have recognised Lady Rose if Roger hadn't confirmed she was the right woman. Between the sensible gumboots and the scarf tied around her hair, she looked every inch like the Queen about to drag a stubborn horse out of a ditch. She flashed a toothy grin that might have made most men take a step back, but not Blaze. Instead, he rushed forward to take her grubby gloved hand in his. Yes, he remembered that firm handshake.

"It's lovely to see you again, Lady Rose," Blaze said. Roger might not care about his title, but his wife had very different ideas.

"Roger tells me you've come to film my little plant nursery for your show." She looked expectant.

What else could Blaze do but whip out his camera and oblige the lady?

Lady Rose took him on a tour of the glasshouse, her commentary so thorough that Blaze suspected he'd leave most of it in, without needing to do a voiceover.

Blaze's boot caught on something under one of the benches, and he reached down to disentangle himself...only to get whacked by a striped paw.

"Oh, don't mind Mackerel. She follows me in here sometimes so she can sleep where it's warm, and then forgets to leave. We had to put in a cat door for her. She's become quite the queen of the castle, chasing away any creature that would dare eat my plants."

The feline queen yawned, then rolled over and presented her belly for rubbing.

Blaze dropped to his knees, camera in one hand, as he patted the cat. Luckily, she seemed to like the attention, purring loud enough for the sound to be picked up on the video, or at least he hoped so. Cute pets were catnip to his viewers, every time.

"At first, we wondered why she preferred to stay here instead of coming up to the house, and then we discovered her secret," Lady Rose continued, crossing the room to part a large planter box full of ferns. "See?" She held the fronds aside so Blaze could get a clear shot with his camera.

"Awww!" At first, he only saw one sleeping kitten, curled up into a tiny ball. Then two others tumbled past, roughhousing like all siblings the world over. They woke up a fourth kitten, who stretched out a paw to capture the twitching tail of the fifth, and...

Blaze could have watched the kittens all afternoon, or at least filmed them. He'd never seen anything so cute in his life. Like Diana, he was fond of animals, and they'd had a number of pets over the years, but never an entire litter of kittens, especially not ones so tiny.

"I'd let you take one home, but they're too young to leave their mother just yet. I could keep one for you, when they are old enough, if you'd like," Lady Rose said.

Blaze was sorely tempted. Diana would have agreed already, but he knew any cat in Hea Sanctuary had to be kept inside, to protect wildlife. Also, if he got a kitten, he'd never hear the end of it if he didn't get one for Diana, too.

He took a quick photo of the kittens on his phone, and sent it to Diana with the message: Want one?

Lady Rose rose to her full height. "We should return to the house for lunch. Any

more filming can wait until after we've eaten."

Blaze wasn't going to argue with that, so he followed the pair up to the house.

It wasn't until he was climbing into his car, ready for the long drive home, that he realised Diana hadn't responded to that or any of his messages at all this week. In fact, he couldn't remember the last time she'd said anything to him at all.

Very strange, and most unlike her. Even if she didn't want to speak to him, the kittens would have gotten a response for sure.

He'd intended to go home, but when he reached the highway, where he would have turned south, he headed for Mirror Academy instead. Something was definitely wrong with Diana, and if she wouldn't answer his messages, then he'd turn up in person. She could hardly refuse to speak to him if he was standing on her doorstep, refusing to move. Even if she just told him to go away, at least he'd know she was all right.

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SIX

Darkness had well and truly fallen by the time Blaze arrived at the Mirror Academy gates, which looked like the sort of thing you'd see in a movie about a school for young witches and wizards, not a modern university that tried to hide its links to the supernatural community, at least from normal humans.

At least these gate posts were topped by gargoyles instead of winged pigs, though these gargoyles were unusually lifelike. The way they glared down at Blaze, like they actually thought they stood a chance at keeping him out of the college grounds.

Blaze looked for an intercom, but there didn't seem to be one. Nor was there any sort of control panel for opening the gates. He peered through the bars, up the drive. The school building sat atop a hill, looking more like a castle than any university he'd attended. Oh, not the towers and turrets sort of medieval castle, but more like Buckingham Palace or Versailles. Now those places had gardens he'd love to work on...

He wouldn't mind seeing the grounds here in daylight. Perhaps if he came back to visit Diana tomorrow, she could show him the gardens.

"What's your business here?"

Blaze had to admit, he was impressed. It took a lot for someone to sneak up on him, and he hadn't seen the grey-clad man until he spoke. Almost like he'd appeared out of thin air.

Blaze cleared his throat. "I'm Blaze Argyros, and I'm here to visit my sister, Diana. She's a student at Mirror Academy."

"No men allowed on campus after dark. You'll have to come back in the morning," the man said. Perhaps it was the lack of light, but it almost looked like his face was as grey as his clothing.

"What about security?" Blaze asked pointedly.

The man grinned. "Ah, but we're not on campus, are we? We're outside the gate."

Blaze glanced at the gate in question, where one of the gateposts was now missing a gargoyle. Almost as if...

The man's gaze followed the same path as Blaze's and his grin widened. "If you're thinking of going over the wall, you'll be in for a nasty surprise. Mirror Academy has the strongest security measures of anywhere in the country. Buckingham Palace wishes they had half of what the headmistress has here to protect her students."

Blaze blew out a frustrated breath. So flying over the fence was out, then. Gargoyles were formidable fighters, and while there might only be two on the gate, there was no saying how many more there might be around the perimeter, or even in the sky above, keeping watch. Flying over the college wasn't setting foot on campus, after all. A loophole he wouldn't be able to use this time.

"Can I speak to the headmistress, then?" Blaze asked. "It's about my sister. I'm worried about her because she hasn't been returning my messages for over a week now, which isn't like her at all. I've driven all the way down here, and I won't leave until I know she's okay."

The man looked nervous. "You'd be better off coming back in the morning. Or, better

yet, not coming back here at all, and going to the next ball, if it's one of the girls you want to see. All the girls go to those, and if you're rich enough to afford a ticket, you'll have no problem talking to whoever you want there."

Blaze considered for a moment. "Maybe I will, but first I want to see that my sister's all right, and if that means speaking to the headmistress, so be it." Even if the woman was a veritable dragon, Blaze was willing to confront her and anyone else who tried to keep him from Diana.

"I'll call the headmistress, but she won't be happy," the man warned him. He pulled a phone out of his pocket and ambled off into the darkness to make the call.

A few minutes later, the sleek curves of a town car reflected the moonlight as it made its way smoothly down to the gates, where it stopped.

The driver got out, then opened the rear door. The small figure who got out walked up to the gate, folded her arms across her chest and said, "Well?"

Blaze wasn't sure what to say. "Well, what?"

She blew out an angry breath, then raised her arm and snapped her fingers. The ground around the gate blazed bright as day under the spotlights.

Blaze half expected to see some sulky teenager, but the woman behind the gate looked old enough to be his mother, or maybe even his grandmother. Except...she seemed to be an ordinary human. An angry one.

"You dragged me down here, away from my dinner, on what my security guard claimed was an emergency. Did you, or did you not want to speak to me?" she snapped.

"You're the headmistress here?" Blaze ventured, though he found it hard to believe. No ordinary human could be in charge of Mirror Academy.

"Headmistress Laima, and you have sixty seconds before I return to my car to head back up to my school."

Blaze didn't doubt it. "It's about one of your students. I think something might have happened to her," he blurted out.

"A lot of things happen to my students, boy. Most of them gain a first class tertiary education, and a number of them even meet their future life partner during their time here. Whoever you're here to see, I can assure you she's not yours, if she won't return your messages. In fact, it's quite likely she's ignoring you to pursue someone far more suitable. I suggest you get back into your car, turn it around, and go back to wherever you came from. Do your best to forget about her, possibly with the help of some alcohol, if you have difficulty doing it on your own, and by this time tomorrow, when you wake up with the mother of all hangovers, I suggest you vow to not only never drink again, but to not think about her again, either." She turned on her heel and headed back to the car.

The door had already clicked shut behind her when Blaze managed to say, "But I can't. She's my sister."

Too late, of course. The headmistress was already halfway up the hill, showing no sign of turning back.

He'd come back in the morning, and try again. Surely the gates would be open then, and gargoyles wouldn't be flying about in daylight.

"Don't," came a voice from behind him. The security guard who'd called the headmistress. "Whatever you're thinking, it's not worth it. You don't want to piss off

the headmistress any more than you have already."

"What is she?" Blaze asked.

The man hesitated, as if trying to decide whether to tell him or not. As if he thought Blaze was an ordinary human.

"For God's sake, gargoyle, just spit it out!" Blaze snapped.

"Nobody knows, and anyone who did find out, didn't survive to tell anyone about it," the gargoyle said. He shivered. "If you really want to speak to one of the girls, get a ticket to the next ball. The headmistress never goes to those, but the girls do. That's your only chance."

"When's the next one?"

"It'll be on the Mirror Academy website. The public part of it, so the girls' prospective suitors can find it. It'll be at Tremotino Castle, on the next hill, not here, though, because of the no men on campus rule."

Blaze nodded. He'd buy a ticket tonight, and book a motel room in the nearest town. Diana always went to the school social events, because those were the best place to fundraise for her animal sanctuary. Not that she needed the money, but she was determined to run the place as a proper not-for-profit enterprise, which meant seeking donations to keep the place running and pay its staff.

He pulled out his phone, searching for the website. Ah, there was the notice, advertising the Fairytale Masquerade Ball. At Tremotino Castle.

The home of the man who'd taken out three restraining orders against him, whose property Blaze wasn't allowed to set foot on.

Fuck.

SEVEN

Laima toed off her shoes and traded them for a pair of slippers. The rest of the castle might have under floor heating for the students, but her house had originally been the summerhouse, and the school's budget would never stretch to that sort of luxury for its headmistress. So slippers it was, for shuffling across the worn and broken tiles that were overdue for replacement fifty years ago, and would likely wait another fifty before a tiler darkened this doorway.

Mirror Academy and its students came first, as they always had. There were more and more scholarship girls these days, girls who had grown up in mundane families with no knowledge of their supernatural bloodlines, or the matches that awaited them in the supernatural community. Matches like the one that awaited that boy at the gate, whose fated mate was within the school walls even now.

Gone were the times when mated pairs were grateful for the matchmaking services the school provided, and they'd give the school generous donations at their mating ceremony. Now, even the regular contributions from the Lustro family were a thing of the past, as their line had died out, and the very lands beneath her feet had been sold to a bastard who carried neither the Lustro name nor their bloodline, however loudly he might claim otherwise.

But she would run this school until the walls crumbled around her, for what other purpose did she have in life?

Except for making the occasional cup of tea, of course, seeing as she no longer kept a cook in the house. Her meals were provided by the castle cafeteria, like everyone

else's, but Laima would brew her own tisanes, as she always had.

Chamomile tonight, she decided, with a touch of lavender. Sleep did not come easily to her these days, with so many worries, and when it finally did come, it arrived loaded down with dreams of which matches must be made next. For fate had designs so intricate, woe unto the witch who dared to meddle with what she could not possibly comprehend.

Or eternal servitude, carrying out the fates' wishes, like Laima's punishment. Ah, she'd long since made peace with her fate, such as it was. There were plenty of perks to leaven the disadvantages.

She spooned flowers into the teapot, then filled the kettle and set it to boil. She'd have preferred to hang an iron kettle over a roaring fire, full of water fresh from the spring, but fireplaces were a luxury these days, and fresh spring water even more so, so the small electric device heated tap water instead. How times had changed.

The door flew open, hitting the stone wall with an audible crack.

Laima hoped there wasn't a real crack in the door – that would cost a pretty penny to repair. Or worse, replace.

She glared at the disadvantage now standing in her open doorway, letting in the cold night air. "What are you doing here?"

Craig Tremotino sauntered into her house, as though he had every right to be there. "Why, just checking on my favourite tenant, of course!" He hooked his leg around one of her kitchen chairs and dragged it out from under the table, then sat down on it. "And to tell you I've changed my mind about hosting your Fairytale Masquerade Ball."

Laima saw red. "Now, see here, you delusional little man. Mirror Academy has a lifetime lease on these buildings, and one of the lease conditions is that all formal balls must be held at your castle. If you so much as think of weaselling your way out of it...oh!"

The sound that came out of her mouth had a lot more vowels than it was supposed to, but what else did one say when one's slipper caught on the edge of a broken tile, catapulting one forward into a chair, before crashing down, chair and all, on the tiles at Tremotino's feet, with another crack that Laima knew meant something had indeed broken. Her hip, this time, she was sure of it.

Tremotino rose slowly, his expression morphing from thunderous to delighted as he reached his full height, towering over her as she lay on the floor. Oh, he was definitely enjoying this. He gave rabid curs a bad name.

"Shut up and listen, you old bitch. I'll still hold your ball, to the letter of the lease agreement, but my price has changed. This time, I want one of your girls to be mine for the night. A beautiful blonde, who will obey my every whim."

"None of my girls would soil themselves by allowing you to touch them," Laima spat. She wished she could spit in his face, but gravity was against her, so she spat on his boot instead.

The boot he raised, before bringing it down hard on her broken hip.

Laima let out a howl of agony.

"You will give me what I want, you old bitch, or I'll take one of your girls for myself, and you won't get her back. What do you think the police will say when a second girl goes missing, when they haven't found the first? You'll have to close your school, and what a shame that would be."

"You...wouldn't!" Laima panted, wishing she sounded more authoritative, but all that came out was a sort of pained whisper.

"Oh, there's very little I wouldn't do, but if you give me the girl I want for the night, and she's properly obedient, I'll give her back to you in the morning. Not before I've broken her in, of course. And she won't remember a thing." He ambled over to the spice rack and pulled out a bottle. "This will do nicely," he said as he tucked it into his pocket. "Don't forget. Your most beautiful blonde, to do whatever I want with. Or I'll break her more thoroughly than I've broken you, and the police will never find her." He sauntered out of the house, without even a backward glance.

The kettle bubbled fiercely, giving voice to Laima's fury, before the timer clicked off and the water simmered down.

Just as the pain began to ebb, and Laima's hip knitted itself back together.

She pushed the fallen chair upright, then used it to help her stand. A roaring fire would be really nice right now, or maybe just a hot bath to ease the stiffness. For Tremotino was right about one thing.

She was an old bitch, older than he could imagine, and he had no idea who he was messing with. Not to mention stealing potions from her...he would regret all of this, but his theft most of all.

Laima poured hot water into the tea pot, and clinked the lid closed. She'd best start running her bath while it brewed, so she could drink it while she soaked her old bones.

She knew exactly which girl to send to him at the ball. Only a fool thought he could master fate, and Tremotino was the biggest fool she'd ever met.

Mirror Academy had been schooling girls for centuries, and no young upstart boy was going to close it, Laima swore. Not as long as she drew breath.

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EIGHT

"Let me guess...you're looking for a costume for the Fairytale Masquerade Ball at Tremotino Castle?"

Blaze blinked.as the door to the costume shop banged shut behind him. "How could you possibly know that?"

The woman behind the counter raised her eyebrows. "Because you're a lost-looking man who has obviously left it to the last minute, and you're the fifth one already today. On the plus side, you have broader shoulders than the previous four, so I might have more options to show you. So, let's start with the basics. Do you have any preferences? A favourite fairytale, perhaps?"

Blaze hadn't watched those since he was a kid, and even then, they hadn't been his favourites. He'd wanted to watch stuff where dragons were the heroes, not the villains, and those were few and far between. "Do you have any dragons?"

The woman frowned. "I do have a deluxe Toothless, but it's currently at the cleaners after a kids' birthday party this week. The guy who rented it swore some kid vomited on him, but if you ask me, that mess was self inflicted, with more beer than any kid should drink. Deluxe costumes come with an extra cleaning fee deposit, by the way, just in case you decide to take it to the pub. If you bring the suit back clean, you get your deposit back. Hmm...oh, I think we still have a Mushu out the back, but it might be a bit small for you. That's it for dragons for now. If you'd given me some warning, I might have been able to get something else in, but this close to the event, there's no chance. It's what I have here, or nothing. I'm afraid." She peered down at her tablet.

"If you like monsters with wings, though, I do have a Goliath the Gargoyle in stock. He's a bit old school, but it would fit you well."

She slipped out from behind the counter and scanned the racks of clothing. "Ah ha!" She dived into a corner that appeared to be stuffed full with a giant sheep and a monstrous mountain of yellow tulle, emerging with a bundle of grey material. "Here he is – perfect!"

Blaze folded his arms across his chest. "I'm not going as a gargoyle." He'd had enough of gargoyles at the school gates. Worse, he'd stick out like a sore thumb, which was the last thing he wanted to do at Tremotino Castle. "Do you have anything a little more discreet? Something fairytale-ish, so I won't look out of place, but normal enough that I won't stand out, either?"

She sighed, letting the gargoyle costume droop to the floor. "Well, I suppose you could always go as Prince Charming. We have those in a whole range of sizes and colours, to accommodate the really last minute customers. But you'd be wasting your time attending the ball at all in one of those. The girls at Mirror Academy won't look twice at some generic Prince Charming. Those girls are smart and talented and educated. They want a bit of danger, or at least adventure, and they won't wait around for some prince to save them. For a start, they all picked out their costumes months ago. If you're looking to attract one of those girls, you need to stand out. Ooh, I have the perfect costume for you. How about Tarzan?" She yanked out a hanger adorned with nothing but a brown scarf or shawl – a small one, at that.

"Where's the rest of it?" Blaze asked.

She laughed. "That's all he wears, silly. He was brought up by gorillas and he wears his old baby clothes as a sort of loincloth. You should try it on. All the Academy girls won't be able to keep their eyes off you if you wear that."

"I don't want to catch the eyes of all the girls at the ball. Just one," Blaze protested.

The woman smiled. "Of course, of course. You're after the one, your fated mate, or your soul mate. The one whose eyes meet yours across a crowded ballroom and in that instant, you just know...it's so romantic, just like in the movies. But what the movies don't show is that there will be a lot of people at the ball, and to get your eyes to meet, first she has to notice you. That's where having the perfect costume comes in. If you have all the goods on display, she can't help but look at you, and once she'd done checking out the goods, then you'll have all the eye contact you need to seal the deal. Tarzan's your man, I promise you." She shook the brown loincloth. "At least try it on."

Blaze sighed. He wasn't going to get out of here with a costume unless he cooperated with this strange woman. The things he did for his sister. Though he had to admit, wearing a nappy loincloth would be a new low for him. Diana would laugh her head off when he told her. All the more reason to wear something more dignified. "All right, but I want to try on the Prince Charming one, too. And I'll need a mask. It's a masquerade, after all."

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NINE

When the night of the Fairytale Ball arrived, there was still no sign of Diana. If it weren't for her violet gown in Eden's wardrobe, she'd almost wonder if she'd only imagined her.

Eden gazed in the mirror and sighed. She didn't look a thing like Rapunzel, even if Diana's ball gown fitted her just as perfectly as she'd promised. No matter what Diana had said, Eden knew her hair was absolutely wrong.

Even the headmistress had commented on it, when Eden had gone to ask her about Diana. Headmistress Laima had spun the same story as Lily – that Diana had met a man at the ball, fallen in love, and married him, that very night. If Eden wanted to follow her example, she'd added, she should take more care with her appearance. Apparently, young ladies who wanted to find good husbands had lovely, luscious locks.

She'd even suggested Eden wear a wig, if she wanted to have any hope of catching the eye of the King whose birthday ball this was.

Eden hadn't been able to get out of her office fast enough after that.

She didn't want to catch a husband, good or otherwise, let alone a royal one, who'd require her to look perfect in between popping out royal heirs. But she did want to go to the ball, and she didn't want to antagonise the headmistress into revoking the scholarship that allowed her to study at Mirror Academy.

She'd always wondered about her parents. What kind of parents would willingly surrender their child to the foster system as a newborn? When she was younger, she'd toyed with the idea that maybe she'd been stolen from her parents, who'd spent their whole lives looking for her. But as the years passed, she'd grown more cynical. More likely her parents hadn't been able to take care of themselves, let alone a child, and she'd been forcibly taken from them while they lay in an alcohol or other drug-induced stupor.

The foster system was far from perfect, but maybe it was better than what she would have known if she'd been stuck with her real parents. At least, that's what she'd told herself during her final years of high school, as she'd scraped up good enough grades to gain her entrance to a decent university...if she could only find a way to afford the fees and a place to live while studying, because once she turned eighteen, she'd be turfed out of her last foster home, and expected to fend for herself.

When the enigmatic letter from Mirror Academy arrived, by ordinary post instead of with the assistance of owls, giants or magic, desperation had almost set in. The only offer of work or accommodation she'd had was a live-in cleaning contract aboard a budget cruise ship that was currently short staffed because of repeated norovirus outbreaks.

If the letter had told her she was a wizard, it couldn't have surprised her more than Mirror Academy offering her a scholarship with full board for the duration of her degree. From the moment she'd arrived, her life had been like a fairytale.

With the added bonus of never having to wear a uniform, or clean vomit off a ship's deck.

Her foster family hadn't believed it was real, either – she'd seen it in their eyes – but they'd sent her off with half-hearted congratulations and a quick wave goodbye now she wasn't their responsibility any more.

That was the moment Eden had been determined to make her own way, no matter what Mirror Academy threw at her. If it had truly been terrible, she could still have boarded the spew cruise.

When she'd first arrived at the castle that housed the Academy, Eden had almost turned back – there'd been a sign in town, saying the local dog shelter was looking for a live-in caretaker, which she knew she could do with her eyes closed – but then she'd met Diana, who'd cautioned her against going anywhere near the shelter, as their last two caretakers had disappeared under suspicious circumstances. Town gossip said they'd been savaged by the dogs they cared for, and because no bodies had ever been found, no one knew which dogs had done the deed, so the killers were still living in the shelter.

"Some animals can be saved, and those that can, should be saved, even if they spend the rest of their lives in captivity instead of returning to the wild, but for some, it would be a kindness to end their suffering," Diana had said, shaking her head.

In the lively discussion that had followed – for Eden could not agree that any animal should be killed for simply behaving in accordance with their nature – Diana had revealed her dream to open an animal shelter of her own, and Eden had insisted on joining her, if only to make sure Diana didn't give up on hopeless cases too soon.

Because her life in the foster system had taught her that sometimes everyone needed a second or a third or sometimes even a whole heap of chances, before they could stand on their own feet, even if it was four feet instead of two.

Diana had also told her that while the Academy administration wasn't super particular about who they offered scholarships to, as long as you were mildly attractive and willing to put the time and effort into bettering yourself, with the hope of one day finding a suitable husband, you were pretty much guaranteed to keep your place. Making agreeable noises and nodding whenever the headmistress mentioned husband

hunting helped, too.

Eden still wasn't convinced that even Mirror Academy could find her a husband, suitable or otherwise, or whether she'd ever want one, but meeting Diana had been the kind of destiny that didn't come along very often, especially for a foster, so she was happy to go along with whatever Headmistress Laima said, for the moment.

But Diana's opinion on husbands and marriage mirrored her own. Which was why it was so hard to believe Diana had not only met her match, but married him and disappeared.

Eden sighed again. The men at the ball wouldn't even deign to speak to her looking like this. Even in Diana's elegant purple ballgown, Eden still didn't look right. It was the hair. She'd made a half-hearted attempt to let it grow out of her preferred fun and flirty pixie cut, but there was no changing the fact that it was still dark and drab. Nothing like Diana's shining silver mane.

There was nothing else for it. She'd have to wear the wig, flowers and all.

By the time she was done, she felt like a prize poodle. But not, thankfully, like Marie Antoinette. Eden did not intend to lose her head tonight.

With one final glance at the blonde stranger in the mirror, Eden turned to head downstairs to where the others would be waiting.

Only to find Headmistress Laima at the top of the stairs, directly in her path.

"Excuse me, headmistress," Eden said, hoping she'd just let her pass.

No such luck.

Instead, Headmistress Laima seemed intent on scrutinising every part of Eden's costume, from head to toe.

When she reached the wig, Eden thought she caught a small smile of satisfaction, but it was gone too fast to be sure. Headmistress Laima never smiled.

"Perhaps now you will have a chance at snaring a husband," she said with a sniff, before turning away. "Now, go downstairs and wait with the others. The coaches to take you all to the ball will be here soon."

Everyone else was already downstairs. Dressed to the nines and making Eden wish she could check her hair in the mirror again. Her fake hair, to make sure her real hair wasn't showing. The wig cap she'd stuffed her own hair into didn't feel right.

Then again, when did she ever feel like she fitted in with these girls? They were all around the same age, between eighteen and twenty-two, but some of these women were downright stunning.

At the front of the crowd, where she could admire her own reflection in the full length mirror, surrounded by sycophants and admirers, was Candace Tunder, Headmistress Laima's favourite student. Candace had evidently spared no expense on her costume for the event, but then she was like Diana, in that she came from a family with money.

She was dressed as Cinderella, in a beautiful blue ballgown with what looked like a million fairy lights sewn into the petticoats, so she actually glowed. Her golden blonde hair fell in cascades down her back, between two gossamer wings. Her mask was a sparkly butterfly painted on her face, which curled into a sneer as she saw Eden walking down the steps into the lobby. Then one of the girls beside her began gushing over her costume, and Candace turned away from Eden to accept the compliment.

Eden quietly slipped behind the girls at the back. Luckily, Rosalind's enormous gold gown hid her from sight.

Rosalind was the first to smile. "Eden, you look amazing. I love your hair!"

"Thank you," Eden murmured, ducking her head to hide her blush. "You can't tell it's a wig, can you?"

"Not at all. If I didn't know better, I never would have guessed," Arwen said.

"Where is the ball?" Eden asked, wishing she'd checked the invitation before coming down. "Should I go upstairs and grab some more hairpins, just in case?"

"It's at the Tremotino Castle, up on the hill, just like the last ball," Arwen said. "We'll only be in the coach for a few minutes, and then we'll be inside. Why, we could walk there, if we weren't all wearing heels." She kicked one of hers up, showing a hint of her frilly petticoat beneath her royal blue and gold gown, before smoothing everything down like the refined lady she was.

Eden bit back another sigh. Arwen's shoes cost more than she would've made in a month working on that cruise ship. Her own were a thrift store find that were slightly too small, and the moment no one was looking, she intended to take them off and go barefoot. As long as the headmistress wasn't at the ball, she'd never know.

"It's not so bad walking back, though, if you miss the last coach. Or if you decide to stay the night. Some of the guys at these things manage to secure a guest room in the castle, and I've heard rumours the beds make you feel like royalty. Not that I've seen them myself, but I've heard..." Arwen's usually snowy cheeks showed a faint blush.

Rosalind looked shocked. "But you know the rules – what if the headmistress finds out? She'd chuck you out of here quicker than you could blink!"

Arwen shrugged. "Not me, though if I did have a tryst in one of the guest rooms, I suspect she might insist on marriage. I heard Tremotino has a resident priest there to perform marriages, should the need arise. I bet he could tell some stories..."

Eden blinked. If Diana truly had married a man she'd just met, then this priest might be able to tell her. Someone must have seen something. Diana wasn't the kind of girl you forgot about.

"The coaches have arrived. Everyone aboard!"

Candace, of course, was the first one out the door, with her entourage trailing like ducklings behind her, and the rest of the girls followed.

When Eden boarded the coach, she found herself sitting behind Sienna and Auren, two other girls she'd seen in some of her classes. Sienna wore her signature colour, red, as always, with an actual cape across her shoulders.

Auren's blonde hair was pinned back, the complete opposite of Candace's, so it wouldn't get in the way of taking photos. As if on cue, she held up her phone. "C'mon, I need a picture of you all looking gorgeous. Say champagne!"

Dutifully, they repeated the word, as Auren snapped what even Eden had to admit were good pictures.

"Isn't Lily coming?" Auren asked, glancing around.

Sienna shook her head. "She wanted to, but she couldn't afford a dress."

Eden nodded. If it wasn't for Diana's generosity, she'd probably have had to stay at the Academy with Lily, too. But if Diana had been here, she probably would have loaned both of them a dress, if she'd had one that would have fitted Lily. Then again,

Lily had come from a rich family, even if she didn't have money now, so maybe she wouldn't have accepted charity. Not yet, anyway.

"So who are you supposed to be? Alice in Wonderland?" Sienna asked, nudging Auren.

"No, silly, she's Goldilocks. Because everyone knows she'll steal your breakfast if you're not looking!" Arwen said.

Laughter erupted from everyone, because that was the perfect choice for Auren. She never seemed to do it on purpose – but more than once, a bit of bacon or a particularly delicious pastry had vanished from Eden's plate, only for it to end up in Auren's hand or on her fork, as she chewed absentmindedly on her stolen bounty.

"I never mean to do it. I just don't know how it happens. I'm so sorry," Auren said, her cheeks turning pink.

Sienna threw her arms around Auren in a quick hug. "We know, and we still love you. We all ask for extra bacon now, just in case, that's all."

"Don't forget your masks, girls!" Headmistress Laima called out.

Everyone obediently whipped out their masks, only to realise none of them had brought a mirror. Fortunately, they managed to straighten each other out before the coach lurched into motion.

The coach set off up the hill, slowing as the incline got steeper. Then the road curved, and...

"Oh wow," Eden breathed.

While the Academy was more of a mansion or modernised castle that couldn't have been more than a couple hundred years old, Eden had heard that Tremotino Castle was the real deal, like something out of a fairytale, from its soaring towers right down to its dungeon.

The tallest tower appeared first, rising above the trees. It was so tall the top vanished into the clouds.

Then the full castle came into view: a magnificent, white marble palace with countless turrets and towers, with every roof shining like gold in the last rays of the sun.

Eden just sat there with her mouth hanging open until they passed through the gates, and an avenue of trees meeting in an arch overhead blocked out the view for a moment.

The coaches came to a halt inside the circular drive, surrounded by neatly trimmed hedges and topiaries. A long, red carpet led the way up to the castle entrance, where a pair of huge oak doors stood open, framing the warmth waiting for them inside.

And maybe her own Prince Charming...

Eden shook herself. She didn't want a husband, and none of the rich men there wanted a scholarship girl like her.

What she hoped awaited her were answers about Diana's disappearance, that's all. And maybe some donations for the animal sanctuary, because if they didn't remember Diana, then they hadn't supported the sanctuary yet, and when she did find Diana, she could say she'd done her part in fundraising, too. She checked to make sure she still had her phone, tucked it back into her bag, and carefully made her way down the steps onto the red carpet.

TEN

Inside, the castle was even more magnificent than it appeared from the outside. The large doors were gilded, as were the sconces on the wall beside it. Almost as if standing guard, on either side of the door were two enormous marble sculptures depicting handsome men with square jaws and aristocratic noses. The golden name plaques underneath proclaimed the one on the left was Mirror Academy's founder, Sir Reginald Lustro, and the one on his left was his son, Sir Reginald Lustro II. The two looked so similar they could have been twins, or maybe even the same person. Like a vampire living through the centuries, pretending to be his own descendant. If vampires actually existed, of course, though Eden knew very well that they didn't, at least not outside of books.

More likely, this was what happened when aristocrats married second cousins, and even first cousins, to keep the bloodline pure, like the Lustros likely had.

Eden followed the other girls through the large entrance chamber, and then to the right, and into the grand ballroom.

At the far end of the ballroom was a raised dais, where a man sat on a throne-like chair, overseeing everything. Someone must have had a word to his ancestors about the evils of inbreeding, because while he was the most likely candidate for the latest incarnation of Reginald Lustro Number X, he didn't look a thing like the statues out the front.

"Ugh, that's Craig Tremotino, the slimiest, sleaziest master this castle has ever known. If the tales are true, he's a bastard, too, born on the wrong side of the blanket

to get the Lustro name, but when the castle came up for sale, he managed to rustle up enough money to buy it. He was planning on moving into the Academy and turning the castle into a fancy hotel, only the headmistress signed a lifetime lease with the last Lustro to live here, and he couldn't evict her. I'm surprised he hasn't tried to poison her, or hire a hitman to take her out. He can certainly afford it. He bribed some magazine to name him bachelor of the year, would you believe. I sure can't," Arwen said with a flip of her dark hair.

Rosalind giggled. "Looks like Candace believes it, though. She's turning on all the charm for him tonight."

Eden wanted to laugh, too. Of course Candace would want to catch the richest man in the room. Now if Candace didn't return to the Academy tonight and everyone said she'd gotten married in a whirlwind romance, Eden would have no trouble believing it. In fact, she even wished Candace luck. The Academy without her would be a much pleasanter place for everyone.

As Eden watched, it looked like her wish was already coming true – the lord of the manor had risen from his throne to take Candace's hand, while she curtsied so low, her skirt puddled on the floor, making the puff of petticoats rise up like beer foam about to overflow. Luckily, Candace wasn't one to humble herself for more than a moment, and the skirt popped back into shape as she rose to her full height, before any damage was done.

Tremotino led her out into the centre of the ballroom, where couples spun on the dance floor like the mechanism of some intricate, enormous clock. Eden was dizzy just looking at them. Maybe if she'd attended more dance classes, she might remember or even recognise the steps, but right now, she was glad of her ignorance. If she wasn't dancing, she could spend her time canvassing the room for donations.

On the edges of the ballroom were small tables where those who shared her distaste

for dancing or simply couldn't get a partner clustered, looking bored or wistful. Between the tables, servants milled about with trays of champagne and canapes.

Just as Eden reached for a glass, she caught a glimpse of silver-blond hair. Diana's name formed on her lips, only a moment before the crowd parted and she realised the hair belonged to a man and not her friend at all.

He looked only a few years older than Eden, as he tucked that unusual hair under the crown of his costume. He was dressed like Prince Charming, in a sort of faux military uniform that emphasized his broad shoulders and narrow waist. His expression definitely wasn't charming, though – he looked more annoyed than anything. Nothing like Diana at all, whose perpetual smile lit up any room.

Wherever Diana was now, Eden sure hoped she had plenty to smile about. Because if whoever had taken her was making her miserable, Eden would make sure he had hell to pay for it.

She half wished Prince Less-Than-Charming was the man responsible. He was the most ridiculously handsome man she'd ever seen, even with a half-snarl on his face, and judging by the stares he was getting, every other woman in the room thought so too. Even Candace's gaze had been dragged away from the master of the house, which he didn't seem too pleased about, either.

Whoever he was, he was about to get mobbed by women wanting to dance with him, so Eden turned her attention to the men clustered around the tables. Men with more money than sense or social skills, who'd be so gratified to get any girl's attention, they'd jump at the chance to talk to her, even if it meant funding hers and Diana's animal sanctuary.

That's what she was here for, after all, she told herself. Not attaching herself to the hottest or even the richest guy in the room, like Candace.

ELEVEN

Blaze breezed through the gates with all the confidence of a king, even if he was only dressed as a prince. Between the crown, the costume and the mask, no one recognised him. Tremotino's security staff were bigger fools than the man himself.

And there he was, the king of this castle, making a spectacle of himself on the dance floor with some girl wearing a wedding dress and glitter all over her face.

Blaze debated whether he should tell Tremotino's bride that the man might seem rich, but all his ill-gotten gains were the result of dodgy dealings, and if Blaze had his way, Tremotino would lose it all and spend the rest of his life in prison, instead of sleeping in a palace.

No, he decided. The bride in her crystal-clad costume looked like the most ruthless kind of gold digger. Tremotino's perfect match. A greedy bride could bankrupt a man better than Blaze, when the divorce settlement came due.

Instead, he should be searching the crowd for Diana. He scanned the room, but her silver hair was nowhere to be seen. Maybe she'd coloured it again.

Yet he'd recognise her even if she dyed her hair every colour of the rainbow. She was his sister, after all.

No Diana on the dance floor.

Wait, he knew that lavender gown. He stopped and stared, as the crowd parted and

the girl wearing it came into view. It looked like the same gown, but it couldn't be, as the girl looked nothing like Diana, with a mane of bushy blonde hair that seemed to have picked up half the flowers in the garden when she'd taken a tumble out there, before coming back inside to seduce her next victim.

Anger roared up within him, startling him. What did he care how predatory these marriage-minded misses were? If she wanted to seduce everyone in the room, it meant nothing to him. Or it shouldn't have.

He didn't know her. He'd never met the girl, he was certain of it. Yet there was something familiar about her that he couldn't quite place...

He bumped into someone, hard enough to knock his crown clean off his head. Swearing, Blaze bent to retrieve it.

"Blaze, is that you? This is the last place I thought I'd see you!"

Blaze fixed his crown, only to come face to face with... "Leo! Happy birthday!"

Leo's smile was more of a grimace. "I wish it were. With development approvals stalled, who knows when we'll be able to finish off Hea Sanctuary. I didn't want a party, but Tremotino insisted. He wants me to finance one of his development projects. He even suggested he might be able to help with our stalled approvals..."

"Don't," Blaze blurted out. "No matter what he's trying to sell you, don't buy it. Every site he's tried to develop is land no one else would touch. Archaeological sites with centuries of history, habitat for endangered species, you name it...no one could build on the land he buys, yet somehow he gets development approvals instantly. It has to be bribery or something...I'm telling you, if you invest in any of his projects, you'll lose your money for certain. Don't do it."

"Are you sure? Because he's talking about building an ecovillage just like Hea, right here on his property. I can't help but think that while one ecovillage is good, having more than one sustainable community for supernaturals would be even better. Especially if ours is delayed..."

"He's not one of us. He doesn't have a single drop of supernatural blood in his veins, no matter how much he might want to. How he stumbled across our secrets, I don't know, but giving him power over any of us by letting him build our very homes? He shouldn't have been allowed to buy the Lustro lands as it is. No, Leo, don't do it. Whatever Tremotino wants, the only person it will benefit is him. I..."

Blaze broke off at the crawling sensation of eyes on him, as though Tremotino or one of his guards had heard the conversation.

"I need to find my sister. Have you seen her?" he asked.

Leo's eyes widened. "Diana's here? No, I haven't seen her. Quite the crush, though, with all the girls from Mirror Academy here tonight. I guess I can blame today's headlines for that."

Blaze hadn't seen any news – he'd been too busy sourcing this blasted costume. "What did they say?"

"Someone at the Times decided to make me their Bachelor of the Year. This being my birthday ball...it looks like every eligible girl in the country is here to try her luck." Leo sighed as he put his mask back on. "At least if Diana was here, I could dance with one girl who wasn't trying to seduce me. I think I've danced with everyone else, and every single girl has groped my arse, or worse. I'm going to have bruises tomorrow. Maybe even claw marks..."

Normally, Blaze would have laughed at Leo's plight, but dread had settled like a dead

weight in his gut, and it only seemed to be growing. If all the girls from Mirror Academy were here, and neither he nor Leo had seen Diana, then she must be missing.

If Diana had disappeared...he had to find her.

TWELVE

Three men clustered around the first table Eden approached, clutching their glasses in both hands as they devoured her with desperate eyes.

If they knew she wasn't some rich princess and just a scholarship student, they'd go back to staring into their beers, she was sure of it. Best she strike before they found out, then.

"Good evening, gentlemen," she began with her best winning smile. "Have you heard about the Hea Wildlife Sanctuary?"

When three heads shook, she allowed herself a tiny frown. "Are you sure? My roommate Diana said it was the talk of the masked ball here a few months back. Maybe you remember her? She wore an emerald green dress, with her hair all piled up like Marie Antoinette."

Blank looks and shaking heads were all the response she got. Maybe they hadn't been at the ball, either.

"Well, let me tell you about the sanctuary. Its primary mission is to return injured animals to the wild..."

Diana had been right, like she always was. This trio was only too happy to sign over a small donation from their weekly allowance (which was more money than Eden had owned in her entire life) for the animals. They all wanted to shake her hand, too, to wish her well in her rewilding endeavours, though they all seemed disappointed,

somehow. Like they'd expected her to throw herself at them, or at least ask one of them to dance.

But there were more tables to visit, filled with men who were all too eager to talk to her, and shake her hand.

The more the sanctuary's account balance grew, the more dissatisfied she became. Parting men from their money was mere child's play, but getting information about Diana from them proved impossible. No one seemed to remember her, which couldn't be right. She was the sort of person you didn't forget. And all this money she was raising would be for nothing if she didn't find Diana, because the sanctuary would be useless without its qualified veterinarian.

Eden began to believe that none of these men could have been present at the masked ball where Diana disappeared, which meant she needed to find someone who had. The only man she was certain had been there was Craig Tremotino, the host, who was probably too ensnared in Candace's web to even notice any other woman. Least of all a plain scholarship girl who wanted to ask him questions instead of sucking whatever he kept under his codpiece.

A polite tap on Eden's shoulder stopped her in her tracks. "Excuse me, princess, but might I have a word?"

She turned to tell the guy he'd made a mistake, only to find he was one of the castle's liveried waitstaff, all decked out with gold braid and more fancy buttons than any coat needed.

"Prince Charming wishes to meet Rapunzel in the tower, for a private tete-a-tete," the butler (or whatever he was) said.

"All right," Eden began, not sure if she should refuse or go along with this. "Are you

going to tell me who Prince Charming is?"

"If you wish to find out, princess, I suggest you meet him in the tower," the servant said.

Eden sighed. Well, she'd spoken to most of the men here already, and her hand ached from so many firm handshakes. Maybe this prince had information about Diana that he hadn't felt comfortable sharing in front of his friends. That alone was worth meeting him in private.

"Where's the tower?" she asked.

The servant bowed. "Allow me to show you the way, princess."

THIRTEEN

Blaze did three laps of the room, growing more desperate with each one, until he finally had to admit his gut was right: Diana had disappeared, and he had no idea how to find her.

But he knew someone who did.

Blaze pulled out his phone and flipped through the messages from Diana. There it was – the picture of her and her fated mate, who was also a student at Mirror Academy. She'd know where Diana was – that was how the mate bond worked, or so the stories said.

Blaze blinked. The girl in the photo had short, dark hair, but if he imagined her in a bushy blonde wig...shit, no wonder she'd looked familiar.

He should have grabbed her then and asked her where Diana was. Now...she was nowhere to be seen.

Maybe she'd left the ballroom and gone deeper into the castle. He'd search the whole place for her, then.

"The bathrooms are that way, sir," said a liveried servant at the base of the staircase, pointing down the corridor.

"What's upstairs?" Blaze asked.

"The family's private chambers, sir. No access to the public."

"I heard there were guest rooms upstairs. I need to know if a girl is in one of them," Blaze insisted. Diana wouldn't have gone into the private areas of the castle, but her mate might not have the same scruples. He wouldn't know for sure until he'd checked everywhere.

"No one is allowed upstairs without Mr Tremotino's permission," the servant said, visibly sweating.

Strong hands grabbed his arms. Two men, one on either side, with another two to box him in.

"Blaze Argyros?" one of the men growled.

Blaze considered denying it, but he couldn't for the life of him remember the false name he'd given when he bought his ticket. "Can I help you gentlemen?" he asked easily, though gentle was not a word he'd use for these bully boys.

"The Alpha wants you escorted off the premises, and to make sure you don't come back," the spokesman said.

Blaze snorted. Seriously, Tremotino considered himself an alpha male of this mundane pack of men? Blaze could wipe out the entire pack in less than ten seconds without breaking a sweat.

But not without revealing that he was more than just a man, something he couldn't do in front of ordinary humans like those present. Plus, this was technically Leo's birthday party. It was bad form to give a man corpses as a birthday gift.

Blaze sighed. "Fine, I'll leave." It wasn't like Diana or her mate were inside the

ballroom anyway. Maybe they'd gone outside to the garden, and he'd spot them better in his other form from the air. It wasn't like Tremotino had gargoyle guards, not if he employed these goons instead.

He sidestepped the bully squad and marched out to the gate, making the bully boys trot to keep up with him. He half expected them to follow him down the drive, to reinforce their master's message to not return, but instead, they lined up in the gap between the open gates, shoulder to shoulder, with their arms folded.

As though mere men could keep him out of anywhere he wanted to enter.

But if Diana and her mate weren't inside the castle, he had better places to be.

"Bye, boys. You can go back to babysitting your boss. Maybe you should be protecting him from his gold digger bride, instead of me." Blaze turned on his heel and marched into the darkness, where no one would see him transform into his true form.

He was going to find Diana and her mate if it killed him.

FOURTEEN

"Please enjoy some refreshments while you wait. The prince will be up shortly," the butler said, gesturing inside the chamber at the top of the tower.

Too breathless to reply after climbing all those stairs, Eden could only nod as she staggered into the room and collapsed onto the nearest chair. A chair sitting at a table set for two, with a bottle of champagne in a frosted ice bucket and two glasses, just waiting to be filled.

Eden would have preferred water, but any drink would do. She grabbed the bottle – thankfully, it was already open – and glugged a decent measure into the nearest glass, before tossing it back, followed by a second glass, before she forced herself to stop. She probably should have eaten something first to soak up all that alcohol, but she hadn't thought about bringing a plate of food up those stairs with her. Now...she needed to sit down for a moment to catch her breath.

Just in time to see the door click shut behind the butler.

Alarm bells clanged in Eden's head, as she lurched for the door, grabbing the handle, but it didn't budge. Even when she kicked at the door, it stayed shut. Locked, from the outside.

Fuck, she'd been stupid. She should have stayed downstairs in the ballroom, where at least there was food. Here, there was nothing but half a bottle of champagne, and...and...the most enormous canopied bed she'd ever seen. Fit for a princess. Or a prince. Or maybe both of them together...

No. She'd come here for donations for the sanctuary, and to find Diana. She was not hooking up with some guy who fancied he was her Prince Charming. Eden pounded on the door, and shouted for help.

No response. The butler was probably already halfway down the stairs by now, and no one else was near enough to hear her.

Fine. Eden poured herself another glass of champagne. When Prince Charming came through the door, she was going to brain him with the bottle unless he let her out of here. She might only be a scholarship girl at Mirror Academy, but no one grew up in the foster system and survived without learning some self defence skills.

FIFTEEN

Riding the air currents above the castle, without that silly, scratchy mock military costume, felt much better than squeezing through a crowded ballroom. It gave Blaze a far better view, too. Tremotino's grounds were a veritable Garden of Earthly Delights from this angle. He'd never seen so many naked people in his life. While he did want to find Diana, he definitely didn't want to see her getting hot and heavy with her mate in the castle gardens. But for all the people outside enjoying the night air...not a single one appeared to be Diana or her mate.

Blaze flew a search pattern across the property, praying he'd missed something on his first pass.

Still no Diana.

Could she still be in the castle?

Most of the upstairs windows were dark, compared to the well-lit public areas where the guests who'd kept their costumes on continued to enjoy the ball. The one exception was the tallest tower, where a light glowed behind the curtains.

No, two lights. One in the room at the top of the tower, and one slowly ascending the stairs, travelling upward from window to window. Blaze peered at the next window the stair climber would pass, and saw Tremotino's unmistakeable silhouette. Blaze snorted. Of course the man claimed the highest room in the castle for his own. It was like he'd read a guidebook for cartoon villains and followed it to the letter. The dude probably didn't even know what a cliché was.

Then a figure stepped out onto the balcony, leaned over the edge and called for help.

Blaze blinked. The blonde wig was gone, but she still wore Diana's purple gown. It was her – Diana's mate!

Locked in Tremotino's room, with Tremotino on the way, and no escape.

He arrowed for the tower, pulling up so quickly he almost took the roof off with him. Fuck. He managed to correct his course, grabbing onto the roof tiles with all his claws before wrapping his tail around the tower.

He drew in a deep breath, filled with the scent of her, and for a moment, he lost his mind. If anyone except Diana had claimed this girl for a mate, he would have challenged them to a duel to the death. Because he wanted her more than anyone or anything else in the universe, and when a dragon wanted something, they stopped at nothing to get it...and protect it until their dying breath.

She was Diana's mate, not his, Blaze told himself. That made her family, which he was honour bound to protect. That's all it was. He recognised her as Diana's mate, and as much his to protect as Diana herself, that's all.

And he wouldn't trust his worst enemy's dog with Craig Tremotino.

He could control himself. He would. He'd save Diana's mate with all the chivalry of a brother-in-law, and when she was safe, he could go back to trying to find Diana herself, with whatever knowledge her mate could provide. Diana would definitely owe him a favour for this.

Diana. He had to think of Diana. He was doing this for Diana.

Only then did he peer over the parapet, in search of the girl.

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SIXTEEN

The wig sat on the floor, like a haystack full of flowers, beside the shoes Eden couldn't remember kicking off, though she knew she definitely didn't want to put them back on. She'd be perfectly happy never to wear heels again. Actually, given how much money she'd raised for the sanctuary, she could probably look forward to only wearing gumboots for at least the next year or two, after she graduated. As long as she worked out how to get out of this room...

The door was as solid as the stone walls, even if it was wood. The bed and the table were too heavy for her to pick up and heave at the door, and the chairs were too spindly to do much.

Her only other hope was the window, hidden behind the curtains, but this high up, it was a faint hope. She could hardly climb all the way down the tower. She was probably in the one that pierced the clouds, knowing her luck.

She parted the curtains, to find they hid a door to a balcony, not a window at all.

Eden stepped out onto the balcony, which went right the way around the tower, but it was barely wide enough for her, and when she leaned over and shouted down at anyone down in the garden, nobody heard her. The few couples who'd braved the chill night air for some privacy were too caught up in each other to notice someone way up at the top of the tower in need of help.

Even if she tried to turn the wig and the bedclothes into a rope, there was no way it would reach all the way to the ground. Just like Rapunzel, she was trapped in this

tower until someone came to open the door.

Eden considered going back inside, where the empty champagne bottle on the table would be within easy reach for when Prince Charming finally turned up. She still wanted to clock him for luring her up here, locking her in this room and then making her wait so long.

Why couldn't Prince Charming have wanted to meet her in the garden? Unless he didn't want them to be seen together, but surely someone had seen her come up here, and would see him when he followed her.

She was still going to hit him, though. No matter who he was.

Well, maybe...

If he was that Prince Charming she'd thought was Diana, maybe she wouldn't hit him as hard as if he was...oh, Craig Tremotino, or even that butler. Though she should have asked the butler about Diana before he left...

Though, come to think of it, silver was an odd colour in a young person. Diana was the only person she knew with naturally silvery blonde hair. Maybe he was a relative of hers? If he was, then she should have asked Prince Charming what had happened to her. Surely her relatives would know who her supposed husband was...

What the ever loving fuck was THAT?

Flying over the forest was the biggest bird she'd ever seen. It could have been a plane, if she hadn't seen definite flapping going on.

How did something that big even get into the air? It looked like a giant swan or a pelican or a freaking pterodactyl. One of those extinct eagles that preyed on the giant

emu things that used to live in New Zealand. Only it kept coming closer, and the closer it got, the bigger it seemed.

If she didn't know better, she'd swear she was staring at a real, live dragon. Coming straight for her.

Eden squeezed her eyes shut and screamed.

Whump.

That...sounded like something landing on the roof. Something heavy, with big clodhopping feet in work boots, like the time a bunch of roof tiles had blown off the house during a storm, and her foster father had taken two of the bigger boys up there with him to cover the holes, to stop the rain pouring into the attic and doing any more damage.

The roof creaked ominously.

Eden dared to open her eyes.

All intelligent thought left her head as she stared into the unblinking reptilian eyes of what could only be described as a dragon.

SEVENTEEN

Had Eden hit her head on her way to the tower without noticing? Or maybe drunk just a little too much champagne? Perhaps this was just another part of the fairytale charade. Yes, that made much more sense. This thing was probably animatronic or something.

Feeling a little less freaked out, Eden took a tentative step forward, reaching out to stroke the dragon's snout. The scales were surprisingly warm, as was the breeze gusting out its nostrils, like it was actually breathing, instead of just venting heat from the mechanisms inside that made it move.

It looked so real, though. Craig Tremotino had really gone all out for his fairytale ball. Which meant all the guests would probably be trooping out of the ballroom right now to view the spectacle. All eyes on the tower.

This was her chance to get out.

Eden leaned over the balcony railing, waving her arms as she shouted for help.

A horrible thought occurred to her. What if everyone just thought this was part of a performance? Maiden in a tower, beset by a dragon...but it wouldn't be a fairytale unless someone arrived to rescue her from the dragon. It would have been nice of Prince Charming to clue her in on the whole plan beforehand, though.

A heavy hand landed on Eden's shoulder, and her breath caught in her throat.

"Where's Diana?" he demanded.

Eden whirled around. It was the silver-haired prince, devoid of his crown and the rest of his costume, all his muscles on full display in the moonlight. How did he even get up here?

Her eyes darted inside, but the door was still closed. He must have been driving the dragon. Naked, though?

Her gaze darted up to the tower roof. The very empty roof, with no dragon to be seen.

"Quickly, tell me where Diana is, and I'll make sure no harm comes to you. Before he reaches the top of the stairs!"

Panic welled up. "I don't know!"

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EIGHTEEN

"But you have to know! She's your mate. You should be able to sense her though the bond, no matter where she is. Don't lie to me. Where's Diana?"

Eden began to back away, hoping she could get inside and slam the balcony door shut before this strangely attractive but very naked and decidedly angry man followed her in. Clearly, he was delusional.

"I don't know where Diana is. None of what you just said makes any sense. Fated mates and mate bonds are the stuff of fiction, not real life. Magic and fairytales and..." Gulp. "Dragons."

She risked another glance at the roof, but there was no sign of the dragon she'd seen and touched only moments before. Just this hot, hard, shining...she tried to slam the door shut, but the rock hard bicep he wedged inside the frame wouldn't let her.

Fuck. Eden raced for the champagne bottle she'd left on the table, only to knock it onto the floor before she could grab it to use it as a weapon.

He sidled into the room, both hands up like he was trying to tell her he was unarmed. As if. With guns like that, the man was a living weapon.

Her gaze dipped lower. Talk about weapons – she didn't know real men could actually get that big. The man was massive. It would take some careful manoeuvring in order to ride that monster...oh, but what a ride it would be. The ultimate in happy endings...

He grabbed a sheet from the bed and wrapped it around his hips, hiding it from sight. "I'm not here to hurt you, I swear. I only want to find my sister."

"Diana? Diana is your sister?" That would certainly explain why his hair was the same colour. Now that she thought about it, there were other similarities, too – the sharp, chiselled lines of his face, the deep wells of his indigo eyes that seemed to draw you in, so you couldn't refuse him anything.

Refuse HER anything, Eden corrected her thoughts. She'd do anything for Diana, but she didn't owe her brother anything at all.

"Yes. I'm worried about her. She hasn't returned any of my messages, and I need to speak to her. Tell me where she is. Or tell her I need to see her. Diana knows I'd never hurt her."

Eden wet her lips. "But I don't know where she is. The school told me she'd gone off to get married. I haven't seen her since the last ball, the night she vanished. I came here looking for her. No one seems to know where she is. Well, except maybe the lord of the manor, Craig Tremotino, but I haven't been able to get close enough to him to ask, and I doubt he'd tell me, anyway."

"But aren't you her mate? How can you not know where she is?"

Eden let out a nervous giggle. "I'm not anyone's mate, even if that sounds like the best kind of fairytale. Fated mates are the stuff of books. Diana was...is...my best friend, and we were going to start an animal sanctuary together. I've been fundraising all night, when that's usually her job at these things, because she's so much better at it, but all that money will be for nothing unless I can find her, because there's no sanctuary without her."

"But she said you were her partner. She talked about you all the time..." the man

began.

"In starting the sanctuary, yeah. Business partners in running the place. Anything else...no. Diana isn't in love with me. I mean, everyone loves her, me included, but not the kind of love that results in marriage. I mean, the last time I saw her, she was adamant that marriage was the last thing on her mind that night. There's no way she could have met someone who could have changed her mind that quickly, all in one night."

The man smiled faintly. "Not unless they were her fated mate. The connection between mates is instant and unbreakable, or at least that's what I've been told."

A man who believed in fairytales. That was new. Then again, this man had appeared just as a dragon had disappeared. A dragon Eden wanted to say couldn't possibly have existed, but she'd seen it and heard and touched it, which meant it had definitely been real.

So if dragons were real...then maybe fated mates were, too. And a whole lot of other things. "What are you?" she whispered.

He managed an uncertain smile. "I'm Diana's brother, Blaze."

A name was nice. Made him seem more real, even if he was smoking hot and wearing a loincloth made out of a sheet. But that wasn't what she'd asked.

"No, what are you? Are you a werewolf?" she asked.

"No," he said, then sighed. "This is all going to sound crazy, but, well, you've heard of werewolves, and witches and vampires, right?"

Eden gave a curt nod.

Another sigh. "I'm a dragon shifter."

Eden backed away. "That dragon was you? I touched your nose. You breathed on me. Could've set fire to me..."

He held up his hand. "Please, keep your voice down. You're in danger."

"Yeah, from you. The man who was just a dragon. How is that even possible? Wait, if you're Diana's brother, does that mean she's a dragon, too?" Even as the words left her lips, Eden knew it was impossible. In books, animals automatically sensed shifters and avoided them, while animals adored Diana. Maybe even more than humans did.

He hung his head. "Not exactly. It happens sometimes, though it's usually only a problem for bitten shifters, instead of born ones. She can't shapeshift into anything except her human form. But she's still a full blooded shifter, even if she can't shift, so our parents let her come here in the hope she'd still be able to find her fated mate. They were overjoyed when they got her message, saying she'd gone on her honeymoon. But it's been months, and I need to find her. If you're not her mate...when did you last see her?"

Eden took a deep breath. "I helped her with her hair for the last ball here. The masquerade one. She went to the ball and never came back. The next day the porters collected her belongings, and told me she'd moved away with her new husband."

"Did she tell you where she was going?"

"I didn't see her. She said she was going to the ball to collect donations for our animal sanctuary, like I was doing tonight, and that she never wanted to get married. So when the school staff said she was on her honeymoon..."

The man's eyes narrowed, and in the light of the setting sun, they glowed like they were on fire. Remembering the monstrous beast he could transform into, Eden couldn't suppress a shudder.

"Are you cold?" he asked.

No. Just afraid she was going to be turned into a human torch by Diana's fire-breathing brother.

Almost as if he'd read her mind, he said, "I'm not here to hurt you. I know it's hard to believe, seeing as you saw me in my dragon form, but if dragons went around killing everyone they met, there'd be pictures all over the internet by now. Mostly, we stay hidden and don't reveal ourselves unless...well, you know. You're at Mirror Academy. One of your parents must be a shifter, too."

Eden shook her head. "I never met my parents. I was raised in foster homes."

His indigo eyes widened, reminding her painfully of Diana. "You mean I'm your first?"

Eden's cheeks grew hot. "Don't get ahead of yourself. The headmistress at Mirror Academy lectures us regularly on how our marriage prospects depend on our purity and chastity. So if you think luring me up here and locking me in this room will earn you a gratitude fuck, you're in for a nasty surprise, dragon or not. I'm sure a knee to the crotch hurts dragon sized balls as much as any other man's."

Never mind that she'd kinda been considering it. He was smoking hot naked and in a loincloth.

"I didn't mean...ah, shit. Diana would kick my arse if she was here, or laugh her head off. I meant I'm the first shifter you've seen. Nothing more, I swear."

Eden nodded slowly. "Well, yeah. And I understand why you keep your abilities hidden. I mean, if the whole world knew dragons and werewolves actually existed...wait, do werewolves exist, too?"

It was his turn to nod. "There are all kinds of shifters. In fact, there's a whole society of hidden beings who can do amazing things. I'm sure you understand why we have to keep quiet about our abilities."

He didn't need to explain. There was enough racism and sexism and ableism in the world already, and then there was the whole thing with Area 51. If the general public knew people could turn into dragons, and that werewolves, and all kinds of other fairytale creatures were real, the whole world would likely implode into anarchy.

As all these thoughts swirled around in Eden's mind, she realised how rude she must sound. And to think she'd been having etiquette lessons for almost a year. "Oh my god, I'm so sorry. I haven't even told you my name. I'm Eden, by the way."

"A pleasure to meet you, Eden," he said, offering his hand, while the other continued to hold up his loincloth. "Like I said, I'm Blaze."

Eden couldn't help laughing. "You're kidding, right? How do you hide being a dragon shifter with a name like Blaze? I mean, your parents might as well have named you Forest Fire! At least Diana got a normal name."

Blaze's eyes narrowed. "It's a family tradition," he said, making Eden feel terrible for laughing. "Diana is her middle name. Our parents actually called her Ember, but when she realised she couldn't shift, she refused to be known as Ember any more, and told us she preferred Diana, and she's been Diana ever since. That's why she came here, to find her mate, because she didn't have her dragon to guide her."

Now it was Eden's turn to narrow her eyes. "What do you mean? Her mate? Like, her

true love? And what does being able to turn into a dragon have to do with it?"

Blaze sighed and raked his free hand through his hair – the other one was still valiantly holding up his loincloth. "Some of us believe that all supernatural shifters have a mate – or as you put it, a true love – that they're fated to be with. They're two parts of one soul, and when they find each other, they instinctively know. Only, Diana never got that ability, and so, she thought the next best thing would be coming here."

Eden shook her head. "No. She was here to study business and accounting, so she'd be better at running the animal sanctuary. She wasn't looking for love." A sudden thought slammed into her mind, and she blurted out, "Do you have a fated mate?"

Blaze's pale skin flushed bright red, and he turned his head away, unable to meet her gaze. "I don't believe in that sort of thing."

He was lying, Eden knew. Why else would he have believed she was Diana's mate, if he didn't believe in fated mates?

But there was another thought under that, too. One that left her feeling warm and wet and like she wanted to step closer to Blaze. Like there was some sort of magnetic pull between them.

Or fate...

Eden let out an involuntary sigh of longing.

NINETEEN

Blaze thought being in human form would help him control himself, but now he knew the girl with her irresistible scent wasn't Diana's mate, he wanted to explode into dragon form and roar, "MINE!" to the skies.

Even as a man, he still barely kept control over himself. If he hadn't grabbed her sheet to use as a loincloth, she'd definitely be able to see how much he was attracted to her. How much he desperately wanted to grab her, rip Diana's dress off her, and have his way with her on the enormous bed behind him.

She was lovely, that was all. Lovely and irresistible and everything he could possibly want in a mate. She even had Diana's approval, for Diana would never go into a business partnership with someone she didn't trust implicitly.

But fated mates? Those were the things of fairytales. Diana had wanted to believe in them, because that was the only way she'd ever truly transform into a dragon – if she formed a mating bond with another dragon. Blaze had humoured her, for he couldn't deny he'd love to see her as a dragon, fulfilling the destiny of her bloodline, but he'd known in his heart that no fairytale awaited him.

Which was why Eden couldn't possibly be his fated mate, because they didn't exist. The scent that drew him in was just pheromones, stronger than a normal human's because of her shifter ancestry. It wasn't like he wanted to bite her, to initiate the bond...

At the thought, his already painful hard-on turned excruciating. All right, maybe he

did want to bite her, in an animalistic, at the peak of their pleasure kind of thing. A love bite, that's all, that would leave a hickey on her neck. Not something that would actually draw blood...

He should kiss her, he decided. Then he'd know for sure when he tasted her that she wasn't his fated mate, that fairytales didn't exist, and the attraction between them was purely lust on his part. Then he could concentrate on finding Diana.

She let out a small sigh, surely a sound of impatience that he was dithering so long when they should be helping Diana.

Yes. Kiss her, and be done with it.

TWENTY

Blaze turned to Eden, his eyes wide and full of fire, and then he crushed his lips against hers. As his tongue seared hers, she let out a small moan of longing.

His hands slid into her hair. But if his hands were on her, how was he holding up the sheet? Kissing a naked man...dragon...whatever he was...should have freaked her out, but all she wanted to do was keep kissing him. Maybe even more...

She tasted blood, salt burning her tongue. Oh shit...she'd kissed him so hard, she'd bitten him.

"I'm so sorry," she babbled. "I don't know what came over me. I just...it must have been all the champagne. I didn't mean to." Yet the crazy thing was, she wanted to do it again. What was wrong with her tonight?

Wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, where Eden could definitely see a streak of blood, Blaze backed away from her. "Someone's coming," he said in a low voice.

Eden's eyes widened. "You mean you're not my Prince Charming? The guy who lured me up here?"

"Of course not. I don't trap women in towers. Especially not in Tremotino's house. In fact, I'm sure the tower is off limits to guests, so you wouldn't be here if he didn't want you to be. If anyone lured you here, it would be him. In fact, I'm surprised he didn't drug your drink, too, while he was at it." Blaze reached for the champagne glass and sniffed. "Yep, enough to down an elephant...if you weren't part shifter. This

proves you must have shifter ancestry. If you didn't, you'd have passed out on the bed by now, helpless to resist him and whatever he wants from you." Blaze looked thoughtful. "Actually, that's exactly what you should do. Lie down on the bed and pretend to be passed out. I'll hide behind the door, so when he comes in, I'll grab him, and together we'll interrogate him to find out where Diana is."

This was crazy. Lying down on a bed with her eyes closed while a strange man she barely knew entered the room, expecting another strange man she didn't know much better to protect her?

He was Diana's brother, and a dragon. He was more than a match for any man.

Maybe he was a mind reader, too, as he said, "I promise no harm will come to you. I'll protect you."

More than ever, Eden wished Diana were here, to tell her whether her brother could be trusted or if he was the kind of asshole she should avoid.

Never mind that she wanted to get naked with him, and had been ready to get into bed with him before they'd been rudely interrupted by footsteps on the stairs.

"You'd better," she hissed as she climbed onto the bed, then stretched out in the centre. Any man who wanted to touch her would have to climb across an expanse of mattress to get to her. It would give her a few seconds' warning, if Blaze didn't keep his promise.

Scraping sounds at the door echoed through the tower room, as Eden held her breath. Then the lock clicked, and the door creaked open.

TWENTY-ONE

"Ah, once again, I have perfect timing. What a good little girl, drinking all that champagne. Now you're exactly where I want you, so I can start enjoying my night. Ah, but before I forget...I brought another drink for you. A little something that will go nicely with your hangover tomorrow, just in case you do remember any of this. This potion will ensure you don't remember a thing." He paused. "I should probably tie you up, first. Can't have you leaving that bed until I'm finished with you."

Something clinked – him setting the potion bottle on the table, Eden decided, peering through her lashes – before he turned to rake her reclining body with his calculating gaze.

Then Craig Tremotino, taking the fairytale theme to the ultimate extreme, began monologuing all the degrading things he intended to do to her body. Supervillain, much? Ugh. Eden hoped Candace married the man, then divorced him and took him to court for every penny he owned.

If Blaze didn't kill him first.

Where was Blaze? He'd promised to protect her, but Tremotino was getting closer and closer, reaching for her...

A growl ripped through the room, the sort of sound that couldn't have come from anything human.

"Who the fuck are you?"

"Where's my sister?" Blaze demanded.

"You? What are you doing in my house? I don't know how you got through my security, but I'll throw you out myself. Then, when I'm done with her, I'll find your sister and do exactly the same things to her. Only I'll take longer, and enjoy it more."

"Cut the bullshit," Blaze growled. "You had Eden locked in here like a prisoner, and my sister disappeared without a trace the night she attended a ball here at your castle. I know you're behind it."

"You don't know nearly as much as you think," Craig replied, thrusting out his hands. A cloud of stinging smoke billowed out, making Eden's eyes water. Then she inhaled a breath of the stuff, and once she started coughing, she couldn't stop.

Arms scooped her up and carried her out to the balcony, so she could fill her lungs with fresh air. The smoke apparently hadn't affected Blaze. Maybe dragons were immune to that, too.

"Are you all right?" Blaze asked.

Eden barely had time to nod once, before he set her on her feet and raced back inside.

TWENTY-TWO

Blaze was torn between his desire to take Eden far away from the man who wanted to hurt her...and the even stronger desire to rip Tremotino limb from limb for threatening her in the first place.

His lips burned from her bite – which shouldn't be possible. Something so tiny should have healed instantly.

Unless she truly was his mate, and that bite had been her initiating the bond when he was too busy dithering to do it.

Tremotino had threatened his mate. Which meant he could not suffer Tremotino to live.

Blaze left his mate on the balcony and raced inside, to find Tremotino almost out the door.

Not while he drew breath. He seized Tremotino around the throat and lifted him into the air.

"My men threw you out. You have no right to be here!" Tremotino wheezed. Like the man had any authority right now.

"I got bored and left. Your men had nothing to do with it," Blaze growled. "I only came back for her. Good thing, too. I thought you were trash when all I thought you did was develop land illegally. Now, it turns out you not only rape priceless historical

sites, but you're turning your villainy on people, too? What makes you think you have the right to hold women against their will in your castle, so you can have your way with them?"

"She's my price!" Tremotino coughed out. "My fee for hosting this ball for that bloody school that lives rent free on my property! They have their balls here, and I get one girl to do whatever I want to for the night!"

Mirror Academy was selling their students to trash like this? When he was done with Tremotino, Blaze was going to pay that so-called headmistress a visit. This time, a whole army of gargoyles wouldn't protect her.

Then his mind caught up. Not one ball, but multiple balls. Eden wasn't the first girl he'd taken. What if the last girl he'd tried to claim was Diana?

"What did you do to my sister?" Blaze hissed.

Tremotino grinned. "I fucked her senseless, while she begged and pleaded and screamed for more. Just like all the others. They love it, you know. Being showed who's boss by a real alpha male."

A man who had to drug women to get close to them.

"Coward!" Blaze bellowed. He slammed Tremotino into the floor, and felt considerable satisfaction when something cracked. He longed to smash the man's face, but he'd get no answers out of Tremotino if he had a broken jaw. So he aimed lower, breaking a couple of ribs instead.

Blaze took a deep breath. "Tell me where my sister is, or the next one will turn your head into pulp."

TWENTY-THREE

"Coward!" Blaze bellowed. A moment later, Eden heard a solid thump, followed by another. "Tell me where my sister is, or the next one will turn your head into pulp."

Eden knew she should have been horrified at the thought of such violence – of one man killing another, only metres away from her, so she'd be a witness to murder – but after all the things Craig said he intended to do to her while he had her tied to the bed, helpless to stop him...she wished she could ask Blaze to turn dragon, and use his claws to slice a few bits off Craig, before he killed him.

Did that make her a bad person? She already knew she wasn't a real fairytale princess. Sure, she wanted to spend the rest of her life talking to and taking care of animals, but...ah, hadn't the Disney Rapunzel hit people with a frying pan? And she'd had a lizard, not a dragon. She'd always related better to Flynn than Rapunzel in that movie, coming from the foster system and all. Not to mention her desire to raise money to start an animal sanctuary...not so different from Flynn's dream...

Yeah, but now she'd caught her breath, she wouldn't have said no to Rapunzel's frying pan so she could whack Craig with it.

"Where's my sister?" Blaze demanded.

"I don't know! I've never met your sister!" Craig sobbed. "But I'll make sure you're arrested for this. Maybe she'll come visit you in prison!"

No. Blaze might be a dragon, but he wasn't the villain here. Time Craig got a taste of

his own medicine.

Eden crossed the room and grabbed the vial on the table. She twisted off the lid. "Hold him down," she instructed as she knelt down next to Craig, and pinched his nose shut. A moment later, when he gasped for breath, she poured the contents of the vial down his throat.

Before he could spit it out, Blaze's uppercut closed his jaw. A second punch knocked him out cold.

"Is he dead?" Eden asked.

"No, but he will be if we stay here any longer. I'll pull down his castle on top of him, too. I'm not sure I can restrain myself, after what he said he'd do to you," Blaze growled. "I need to get you out of here."

Eden reached for the door. Once again, it was locked. "We'll have to go through his pockets for the key," she said, eyeing Craig with distaste.

"I have a better idea. If we fly out of here, no one will ever know I was here, and no one will see us leave. When he wakes up, not remembering anything, he won't be able to come after you. Or me."

Eden shook her head. She'd stood on that balcony, and looked at how far down it was. Too far to climb and... "I can't fly," she blurted out.

Blaze grinned. "But would you like to?"

Before she could answer, they were out on the balcony again, and Blaze was transforming before her eyes. Bigger and broader and scaliier and...in one mighty claw, he scooped her up, tossed her onto his back, and dived off the tower.

Eden screamed until she ran out of breath, then sucked in a lungful of air and screamed again.

TWENTY-FOUR

The feeling of his mate clinging to his back...bliss. Well, it would be, if she wasn't screaming. Her fear doused his desire like a bucket of icy water.

He couldn't speak to her in this form, not unless the mating bond was complete. Then, legend said they'd be able to speak into each other's minds in a form of telepathy unique to fated mates.

If he could talk to her, he'd tell her there was no way she'd fall off, that his power would hold her steady on his back no matter what, because he couldn't let her go, now he'd found his mate.

Even in dragon form, his lip still burned from her bite.

The legends said a mating bite was the one wound that never healed, that would scar even a dragon shifter's scaly hide. But those few drops of blood exchanged in a mating bite would transform them both forever. There was the mind link, of course, but the legends also talked about rare bonds between shifters and humans, where the bond transformed the human into a full-blooded shifter, the equal of their mate.

Diana had done some research into human-shifter pairings, and she'd discovered that this was actually quite rare, and usually only when the human had shifter ancestry, like herself or the other girls at Mirror Academy, because ordinary humans couldn't be fated mates.

So if Eden truly was his mate, it was no surprise that by the time she stopped

screaming, she'd also found a firm grip on his scales, perfectly positioned on his back to be sheltered from the worst of the wind, without fouling his wings or otherwise shifting his centre of gravity. Like she understood the mechanics of dragonflight perfectly, and was observing his technique so that she might emulate it, upon her own transformation.

A transformation Blaze could not deny her, for he'd give his fated mate everything. Blaze might not deserve a fairytale come true, but Eden did, and he was honour bound to give it to her.

The moment they landed.

TWENTY-FIVE

When they finally touched down on the ground, Eden was too lightheaded to see straight. Maybe the champagne had finally gone to her head – that, and the crazy flight from the top of the tower to wherever this was. Blaze's arms closed around her, carrying her inside out of the cold, and a door clicked shut behind them.

Her bare feet landed on the carpet of an upmarket motel room, all shades of grey and white that no one in reality ever would have chosen for themselves, because it was impossible to keep clean.

Her vision cleared, to find Blaze standing in front of her, gripping her arms.

"Are you okay?" he asked huskily.

She looked him up and down. A minute ago, he'd been a dragon, hot and massive and scaly between her thighs as they flew through the air, the wind whipping her hair. Now...

"You're naked!" It came out as a squeak. She instantly felt like a fool. "I'm sorry, it's just–"

She shook her head. God, this was so embarrassing. She was with the hottest – no pun intended – guy she'd ever met, who'd saved her from a sexual predator and an impossible situation. She should be thanking him, and more besides, when all she could do was stare at his...well, everything really.

One thing she did know for certain, though. Dragon or not, Blaze had saved her, and she was pretty sure that warranted another kiss.

"Can I kiss you again? I promise not to bite you this time," she said.

He laughed. "Eden, you can bite me all you want. The only problem is that the more you do, the more I'll want to bite you back. So you'd better be ready for that."

Eden wasn't sure if she was terrified or turned on. Maybe a bit of both, which made absolutely no sense.

She let out a nervous giggle. "I'm not sure what I'm ready for. This is all new to me."

He nodded slowly. "We can take things at your pace. I'd never push you to do anything you're not comfortable with."

Oh god, she was going to have to tell him. "That's the thing, I don't know what I'm comfortable with. I've never properly been with a man."

"Would you like to be with a man?" Blaze asked. He ducked his head. "Because if you allow me to, I'll worship you so thoroughly, you'll remember this night forever."

So sweet. Not the sort of thing you expected from a dragon, or any man, really. She'd only known him a few hours, but her heart was already melting. Possibly along with her underwear.

"Gods, yes." Eden took a deep breath and raised her eyes to his face. "That sounds wonderful, Blaze. If you really want..."

He grinned. "Oh I want you, Eden. And if you've never been with a man before, I need to make it special. You're beautiful, and deserve to be treated like a goddess."

Eden's cheeks grew hot. No one had ever called her beautiful before – she'd seen her own reflection, so she knew why. Even in the foster homes, there'd been guys who saw girls as little more than fresh meat, their own private property, with the kind of predatory expression Eden knew could only be wiped away with a well-placed punch or kick that told them she wasn't prey.

But the way Blaze was looking at Eden now – with longing and awe – ignited a fire within her that she didn't want to go out. Not ever.

"Let me pleasure you," Blaze said, reaching out to cup her face. He kissed her softly.
"Let me worship you, and we'll take things as slow as you want."

TWENTY-SIX

"Yes, please," she whispered, moving in closer as she lifted her lips for another kiss. A whole lot of kisses, and more besides.

His hands trailed down her throat to her breasts. God, she could feel the heat of him through all the layers of her dress and underthings. Her nipples puckered up, begging for some kisses of their own.

As if reading her mind, he reached around her to unzip her dress, easing it down until she was bare to the waist, except for her padded bra, which she'd needed to properly fill out Diana's dress.

"You really are amazing," Blaze whispered reverently, feathering kisses down her throat until he reached the valley between her breasts. With quick, deft hands, he unfastened her bra and tossed it to the floor.

Before she could cover herself, his hands were there, cupping her breasts and squeezing them together more firmly than any push-up bra, before he buried his face between them. Heat bloomed in her chest, radiating out from where his lips touched her, and she let out a moan.

"I'll make you moan like that all night, Eden. But we need to get you out of that gown so I can lie you down on the bed," he said, sliding his hands inside the dress, easing it down over her hips, until it pooled at the floor, leaving her wearing nothing more than her knickers.

Blaze's eyes drank her in, like she was a bottle of the finest champagne and not...well, herself. She'd never been so naked and exposed to anyone, and her hands itched to cover whatever they could, but as her eyes met his, she knew she didn't need to. The desire in his eyes sent tingles down her spine.

This was exactly what she wanted. He was everything she wanted.

She let her own eyes travel down his body. Down all those hard ridges of muscle she'd forced her gaze away from before, right down to...what she already knew was an impressive length. But now it was hard and ready for her, it looked even bigger.

What would he feel like inside her? Would he even fit?

Eden reached out and curled her hand around his shaft, stroking slowly. Like molten steel encased in silk, she wanted...

"Not yet," Blaze whispered huskily, tilting her chin up so she met his gaze. "Tonight is about you."

She released him, and he backed her toward the bed, until she tipped over against a mattress bigger than any bed she'd ever slept in. Maybe even as big as that monstrosity in the tower, but this one was better. Better because she was alone with Blaze, and no one else.

Then his lips descended on her body and there was no space in her mind for anyone or anything else but him. He crouched over her, like some enormous bird of prey, mantling without wings, as each kiss became a spark of fresh desire that set her whole body alight. Her breasts were on fire, then her belly, until he reached the waistband of her knickers.

Hungry eyes begged her, and she was helpless to refuse, even if she'd wanted to.

Light glimmered on claws, before he tore her knickers away. A moment later, his hand was back to normal again, stroking her thighs apart as his breath ignited a fire in her core.

She was naked in bed with a dragon. A tiny voice in the back of her head told her she should be afraid, terrified even, and she should run away. But she didn't want to. Instead, she spread her legs wider, and said, "Please, Blaze."

He laughed, his hot breath tingling inside her for a moment, before he began kissing his way down her leg, all the way to her ankle, before switching to her other leg, bestowing a torturously slow line of kisses upward, back to where she wanted him. Needed him.

This was insane. She'd never...and now she desperately craved...dragon.

He reached the apex of her inner thigh, and Eden let out a shaky sigh. Finally.

Only he paused to meet her eyes. "I want to taste you," he whispered reverently.

She was lost. Utterly lost in those dark indigo eyes. "Okay," she breathed.

His hands slid around her hips, cupping her arse as he lifted her to his mouth. Small, light kisses peppered the tops of her thighs, tantalising her as he got closer and closer to where she needed him.

Then a sharp sting, that raced through her veins like lightning, lighting her up from the inside.

"Did you just bite me?" she squealed, half sitting up to see.

Light glinted on fangs for a moment, before he grinned, looking as human as her.

"Just a little love bite. To be certain..."

Then he began kissing her again, more ardently this time, and Eden collapsed back on the bed, writhing beneath his touch as his tongue swirled against her sensitive skin.

She moaned again, her hips bucking upward of their own accord, greedy for more of his mouth.

"That's my girl," Blaze growled, before he sucked her clit into his mouth, his teeth grazing against it. Fangs or teeth? Eden didn't care any more, as he slid...was that one? No, it had to be more. At least two fingers speared inside her, curling to hit just the right angle as he pumped them inside her, while his mouth still worked his magic on her clit.

Between Blaze's fingers and his tongue, Eden's legs were shaking uncontrollably, as she crested the kind of peak she'd only read about in books. The stuff of fairytales.

"Oh gods!" she cried out.

But he didn't stop. If anything, he moved faster, until it wasn't just her legs trembling, but her core, too, clenching around his fingers so she could keep him inside her forever.

The orgasm crashed over her like a wave, leaving her floating blissfully in its wake. She felt Blaze moving and she mumbled a complaint, reaching for him, until his lips landed on hers, silencing her protests. When she finally managed to open her eyes, she found him staring at her, with the most blissful smile on his face. As though he'd just had the most incredible orgasm ever, instead of her.

"You really are the most beautiful woman I've ever seen," he whispered, before he kissed her again.

This time, it was no accident when she bit him. Again, lightning streaked through her veins, right down from her head to her core, and down to curl her toes, and she let out another moan.

Molten steel nudged her thighs. Oh gods, he was ready for her, and she couldn't believe how much she wanted him.

"We don't have to if you don't want to," he said, guiding her hand down to his shaft. He let her stroke him once, twice, before his hand closed over hers. "Tell me what you want."

She licked her lips. Her already sensitive pussy ached for him. "I know I want you, but I've never done this before," she admitted. Eyes begging him to give her what she wanted, when she didn't even know what it was.

"Don't worry. I can teach you," he said, kissing her gently before rolling onto his back beside her. "Climb on top of me."

Oh gods. What if she kneed him somewhere painful, and he decided this was a terrible idea?

He seemed to read her hesitation right out of her mind, before he fastened his hands around her hips and lifted her right into his lap. So that his enormous, hard cock was wedged between her thighs, so hot she dared not look down, in case her wet pussy was actually steaming.

He wrapped her fingers around his cock. "Guide me inside," he said.

She had to lift herself up off him, and wrap both hands around his length, positioning him so that his head burned against her clit, already starting to stretch her as she rubbed against him. Oh, but she wanted more. She lowered herself down onto him,

moaning at the blazing heat igniting her insides, until all she could feel was him, filling her completely. She rocked her hips, swearing she could feel sparks coming off her clit as he rubbed against her. "Oh gods, Blaze," she cried out.

"Are you all right?" he asked, as his hands rested lightly on her hips.

She swallowed. She didn't know the words for what she was right now. She'd taken every glorious inch of his massive cock, and yet... "I want more," she whispered.

His hands tightened around her hips, rocking her harder, as he began to thrust in perfect rhythm with her as she rose and fell, grinding her hips shamelessly against his as she rode him. Her hot dragon.

"Oh gods, you're amazing," he said, as his hands slid up to caress her breasts.

Ha! He thought she was amazing, when he was...like a fairytale come true. She'd never thought sex could be this good, especially not her first time. Oh gods, she was reaching another peak, she knew it. And she was going to...

"Blaze!" she screamed as her vision went white.

TWENTY-SEVEN

When Eden's vision cleared, she found herself draped across Blaze's muscled chest, the coppery taste of blood on her tongue. She blinked, only to see a shallow bite mark on his shoulder, at the base of his throat. Her hand flew to her mouth. "Did I do that?"

He grinned lazily. "Indeed you did. I marked you, too." He tapped her shoulder, which stung a bit. How had she not felt him bite her? "Don't worry. I didn't bite too deep. It will heal fast now the bond is complete."

"The...what?"

Gods, he was still inside her. Hot and hard, like he was ready to pound her into next week. Was it wrong that she wanted that?

"The fated mate bond. I didn't believe they existed until you bit me the first time. Then I tasted you, and you bit me again at the peak of your pleasure, and I knew. I probably didn't need to mark you a second time, but no one will see the mark so high up on your thigh. And if they do, I'll have to kill them for daring to look at my mate in such an intimate place. Tremotino's lucky to be alive. If we'd sealed the bond back in the tower...I would have torn him apart for just looking at you."

She sat up, so she could look him in the eye, then couldn't help moaning as his cock rubbed all the right places. "You think I'm your fated mate? I thought that was only a shifter thing."

"You are my fated mate. See? The bite marks have healed already." He brushed his

fingers against her thigh, where she could see the faint mark of where he'd bitten her earlier. Her shoulder looked a little red, but the skin didn't look broken. And his shoulder...despite the blood on his skin and on her tongue, it didn't look like she'd broken the skin there, either.

For a moment, her heart soared, then plummeted. "But I'm not a shifter. I can't possibly be your fated mate. I don't even know who my parents were!"

"It doesn't matter who they were. You're my fated mate now, and mine to protect for as long as I live. I would sooner die than let anything happen to you."

Eden allowed herself to hope. "So if I'm your fated mate, what does that mean, exactly? What do I have to do?" She hoped it involved more hot sex with him, though she was less enthusiastic about the flying.

"Well, there's a customary ritual among my kind, but I will only do it if you want to. Most girls come to Mirror Academy looking for love, but becoming a dragon is not something that happens very often. In fact, the only time I know of a dragon who successfully mated with someone who wasn't another full-blooded dragon, she was a very powerful witch. We believe the magic in her blood was as potent as a dragon's, which is the only reason the mating was possible. So unless you're secretly a witch, your parents must have been shifters of some kind." He reached up to cup her breasts. "Gods, but you're beautiful. I can't believe you're my fated mate. I want to make love to you all night, and into next week." He rocked his hips, making her moan with longing for more.

"What sort of ritual?" she asked, only half caring as his cock set off waves of sensation deep inside her.

He grinned. "I'll tell you about it in the morning. First, I want to see how many times I can make you scream my name before you need to sleep. Dragon stamina is

legendary, I'll have you know." He wrapped his arms around her and rolled, until her head hit the pillow and he was on top of her. He thrust deep into her pussy and she could think of nothing else except Blaze, his cock and her rapidly approaching orgasm.

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:49 pm

TWENTY-EIGHT

The first rays of dawn lanced into Eden's eyes, but she only closed them as she hung on tight to the desk Blaze had her bent over. He had one arm clamped across her breasts, tweaking her nipples with each thrust, while his other hand rubbed her clit in perfect time with his cock pounding her pussy. So close, she was so close...

"Please, Blaze," she begged. "Oh, please..."

Someone hammered on the door. "Room service!"

"Come for me, Eden," Blaze coaxed, not slowing his pace. If anything, he sped up.

But they had to answer the door. The maid would hear them...and...and...

"Come for me, Eden. I want to hear you scream my name!" he ordered.

She wasn't sure what he did. He shifted his hand on her clit, changed the angle of his thrusts, as the arm around her breasts tightened, and pure, undiluted bliss set all her nerve endings ablaze as she screamed for joy, not once, but over and over. Somewhere in there, she heard Blaze bellow her name, too.

An eternity passed, aftershocks rippling through her body like nothing she'd ever known before, as she felt the horrifying emptiness of Blaze withdrawing from her. She collapsed on the desk, spent. "Why did you stop?" she asked.

"It's time for breakfast," he said.

She pushed herself up. Trays of food were spread out across the table. Her eyes flew to the door, but it was closed. "How?"

"The maid came in with the trolley, I pointed at the table, she set everything out, and left. You might not have heard her, what with all the screaming." He grinned, wiped himself off with a towel, and reached for a piece of melon.

Horror froze Eden's breath. "The maid came in while we were...while we were..."

"Having mad, passionate sex in the throes of our mating frenzy. I'm sure she's seen it plenty of times. It's a shifter friendly motel, after all." He lifted the cover off one of the bowls. "Oh, look! They sent up extra whipped cream with the waffles. Come lie on the table, so I can pour cream and syrup over those perfect breasts, and lick it off. Or would you prefer me to eat it out of your pussy?"

Desire curled in Eden's belly, driving out all rational thought. All except one. "If I pour syrup over both of our private parts, and then we have sex, will you get stuck inside me?"

He raised his eyebrows. "You mean like knotting? That's more of a wolf thing, but I did see some cronuts. Let's see...syrup, cronuts and I guess we could use some of this butter for lube. For me and for you. Bend over that desk again. No, move your legs wider apart. You sure you can take all of this? I mean, you're my mate, I know you can take me, but..."

Just the thought of Blaze's cock, sheathed inside her until they were completely sated, had her core roaring like she had a dragon inside her. Which she would, if he'd just... "Shut up and fuck me, Blaze. Give me all you got."

Which of course he did, leaving her breathless as her body adjusted to the extra girth. Only..."What are you doing?" she gasped as it felt like he stretched her even more. It

shouldn't be possible. He was already balls deep inside her.

He leaned over and kissed her throat. "You're mated to a dragon, love. If you ask for it, you get all of me." He thrust deep, deeper than Eden thought possible, like he was actually lengthening inside her and thickening, too. She clenched around him and he groaned. "Oh, good girl. Just like that..."

She could barely believe he'd brought her to a climax so fast. Maybe it was the sheer size of him, rubbing all the right places all at once. "Oh gods, Blaze! Blaze!" she screamed.

TWENTY-NINE

It was late afternoon by the time they were done, and darkening into evening when they'd finished washing each other in the shower afterwards. Eden thought she'd be tired after so much sex, but only the thinnest veneer of self control kept her from tearing off her bathrobe, leaping into Blaze's lap, and riding him hard for another dozen orgasms.

From the heat in his dark eyes, she knew he felt the same.

"I'll see if I have a spare shirt or something you can wear. Or I can call motel reception and see if they have any suitable clothes for you."

And have to lock eyes with the maid who'd seen them having sex on the desk? Oh, gods, no.

"My dress will be fine," Eden said, lifting up the pile of lavender cloth that had been lying on the floor all night, only to find the skirt had been torn into strips all across the back so everyone would see her knickers. Knickers which were little more than a few shredded scraps of lace. He really had used his claws on them. And her bra? Yep, his claws had shredded the back of that, too.

"I'm sorry about your dress. It must have caught on my scales while we were flying," Blaze said. "You looked so beautiful in it. I'll buy you another one to replace it, I promise. As many gowns as you want."

Eden swallowed. "It wasn't mine. It was Diana's." The dress slipped to the floor

through her nerveless fingers. She'd been so busy banging Diana's brother she'd forgotten about her missing best friend.

"I'll find her. I promise I'll find her. Let's get you back to Mirror Academy, where you'll be safe, so I can start searching. Someone must know something."

Panic iced Eden's veins. "You can't leave me."

"I don't want to. In fact, I want nothing more than to tumble you back into that bed and not let you leave this room for the next week while we enjoy our mating frenzy, but I have to find my sister, and I can't go unless I know you're safe. You're my mate. Nothing's more important to me than you."

"So take me with you."

"If I'm with you, I won't be able to think about anything but you, and what I want to do to you."

Eden grinned. "Well, your brain might be in your dick, oh mighty dragon, but mine's definitely between my ears, and while I won't complain about all day and all night, hot dragon sex, I can still think. What I think is that Diana's my best friend, and I want to find her as much as you do. More, maybe, because my future depends on us starting an animal sanctuary together. So you can use your dragonly brawn to protect me, while I use my human brain to help you find her. Deal?"

He hesitated. "Well, there's just one problem with that. When we marked each other and sealed the bond, exchanging blood, it changed things. You're...not exactly human any more."

Eden laughed. "What, so I'm a dragon now? I can sprout wings, breathe fire, and fly?"

"Not to put too fine a point on it, but...yes."

Eden's mind went blank. Yesterday, she hadn't believed in dragons. Now, not only was she mated to one, but she'd also become one? She blinked.

"I'm sorry, I should have told you before you claimed me, but I didn't expect you to bite me, and by then, it was too late. If you're angry at me, I totally understand. I never thought there'd be a fated mate for me, as I've met all the unmated full-blooded female dragons, and none of them ever sparked my interest. Like I said, I should take you back to Mirror Academy, where I'm sure one of the teachers who has experience with this sort of thing can counsel you on your new...abilities..."

Eden's mind cleared. "No. I'm not going back to Mirror Academy. Not without Diana. I'm going with you. Who better to teach me about being a dragon than an actual dragon? I won't let you go without me. Especially not if I can fly, and follow you anyway."

"You're not angry at me?" He looked stunned.

It wasn't like he'd done this to her on purpose. She was the one who'd bitten him. "No. I'm glad things turned out the way they did. I want to be with you, Blaze. Being a dragon myself won't change that." She took a deep breath. "Now we can go find Diana together. If you're my mate, and she's your sister, that makes her family. More than ever, I need to find her. And it won't matter that you destroyed her dress. Dragons don't wear clothes, right?"

"No," he admitted. "They get shredded on our scales. It makes it easier to have sex, though. Some dragon pairings spend their entire mating frenzy in dragon form. Humans think they know about the mile high club, but there's nothing as thrilling as sharing an orgasm with your mate when you're flying above the clouds. So I've heard, anyway. I haven't done it yet."

"Are you saying it's possible for dragons to have sex while flying?" Eden marvelled.

Blaze coughed. "You know that ritual I mentioned last night? The mating flight is sort of a traditional dragon marriage ceremony."

"You're asking me to marry you now? We've barely known each other for...not even two days!" Yet even as she said the words, they didn't feel wrong. With Blaze, forever felt so, so right. Was that the mate bond talking?

"Fated mates are forever. Marriage is more of a formality. We can take it slow. Like I said, we don't have to do any rituals you aren't ready for." Blaze looked nervous. "Say the word, and I'll take you back to the Academy."

Eden grinned. "And what if the word is crazy airborne dragon sex? Is it better than knotting? I need to know."

Blaze coughed. "How much do you know about dragon anatomy?"

"I saw you on the roof in the dark, so not much," Blaze admitted.

"Well, dragons are...unusually gifted in the genital department..."

"Really? Like, ridges? Knots? Tentacles? C'mon, Blaze, I need to know!"

He opened the door to the motel room. "Come join me in the sky and I'll show you. No one will see us flying in the dark."

"And how am I supposed to see this gifted dragon peen of yours in the dark, genius?"

Blaze moved into the field behind the motel, and shifted. "With your dragon night vision, of course. Shift for me, my mate, and show me how fast you can fly."

"I've never done this before," Eden admitted.

"Don't worry, I can teach you that, too. Close your eyes. Reach deep inside your heart and see if you can find your dragon."

Eden remembered the roaring she'd felt inside, over breakfast that morning. That hadn't been her heart, but her core. Her dragon was a sex-crazed beast, who lusted after Blaze like there was no one else for her in the world. No, the whole universe.

"Gods, you're beautiful," Blaze breathed, leaking smoke out of his nostrils.

Eden flapped her wings, and rose several metres into the air. It was so easy. So natural, like she'd been waiting for this all her life. She hovered in the air beside Blaze. "Am I bigger than you?" she marvelled.

"Female dragons usually are. They need to be, to take everything their mates can give them." His mouth opened in a very toothy grin.

"Yeah, about that. Let's go find somewhere more private, so you can show me these unusual gifts of yours, and what you can do with them." Eden paused. "Then in the morning, we can go looking for Diana." She let out a sigh. "We have to find her, Blaze. We just have to."

He launched himself into the air. "We will, my mate. We will."