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MY FAIR PRINCESS

By Nona King

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**My Fair Princess**  
**A Sweet & Spicy Romance**  
**By Nona Mae King**

The Proposal

Princess Nia adjusted her crossed arms. She stood on the open-air walkway of her castle home, soaking in the sights and smells of Alaera. Locks of blonde danced in the breeze, her blue eyes sparkling as she gazed up at the stars above. Wings the puff white of a passing cloud fluttered in the caress of the wind. She shifted her petite feet. It seemed only yesterday her father, King Thaedis, appointed her princess of the realm.

In actuality, four years had come and gone. Four long and fulfilling years of learning more about what it meant to be an involved princess of Alaera. Deeper aspects of the politics. A more intense understanding of the levels of diplomacy. Business tactics for the realm's growth, and of course a more personal involvement with her people. All had been, and continued to be, an adventure she never regretted.

Though she did miss the adventures with her friends traveling the countryside and solving what mysteries they could find. Nia's smile widened at the welcome bombardment of memories. I should have them over for dinner again. It's been ages. She inclined her head, the expectation causing another flutter of wing before she turned to make her way back into the castle.

Her father crested the stairs to her room just as she entered through the hall door. "Hello, Father. How did your meeting go?" She pressed a kiss upon his cheek. When her step-mother crested the stairs, the quiver of her smile gave Nia pause. "Mother? What is wrong?"

King Thaedis motioned to the chair and table of her room. "Nia, there are items we need to discuss."

"Certainly." Nia sat on the edge of the chair, her hands clasped in her lap. She kept her mind distant from creating stories to explain her mother's taut lips.

Her step-mother sat beside her and gathered Nia's hands into a warm clasp. "You are Alaera's treasure, my darling, which holds certain... responsibilities."

"Of course, mother, I understand."

King Thaedis cleared his throat, drawing her attention. Nia focused on keeping her breathing calm. "We have shared this conversation before, my dear, the expectation of arranging a union to benefit the realm."

Nia blinked, her smile faltering as her step-mother's hands tightened their clasp of hers. "O-of course I remember. I... did not know there was one to consider."

“One was not, until my meeting this evening.”

Her hands pulled from her step-mother’s touch, and her wings drew tightly back. “Should I... should I not have been at the meeting then, Father? I did not know Alaera was in need of an alliance.”

“It is not an alliance, my darling.” She offered a comforting smile, though her fingers trembled.

King Thaedis covered the Queen’s hands with his. “Nia, the joining will benefit Alaera, of course, but in the area of trade and not of power.”

“Trade?” Her rose lips twisted. “Am I to marry a merchant?”

“No, dear. A mayor.”

Images of a silver haired man, wrinkled and bent, sent Nia’s wings bristling. But she was Alaera’s only princess, and as such her responsibilities were great. “When do we meet?”

“Next month. The betrothal contracts shall be signed this evening via proxy, as the mayor has already journeyed home to make arrangements for the wedding. You and an entourage shall travel to O’Neill—”

“O’Neill? Why, Dray and Lee are from O’Neill.” The king raised an eyebrow. Nia flushed. “Please continue.”

“You shall travel to O’Neill to escort Mayor O’Neill back for the ceremony.”

Nia’s stomach lurched. The small farming community of O’Neill shuddered with the horrible rumors of Mayor Neil O’Neill. Dray and Lee witnessed many of them first-hand. How can I possibly...? Her duty as a princess opened before her much like the maw of a hungry dragon of legend. Only, this time, there would be no rescue.

“The wedding ceremony shall be held the morning following your arrival,” her father continued, “after the mayor and I have settled certain details.”

Nia inclined her head, her gaze unable to rise from a scrutiny of the signet ring weighing down her finger.

“You had best prepare your wardrobe. Your mother and I will begin preparations, including the guest list. Do you wish there to be a ball directly afterward?”

“Just a simple affair, Father. If you do not mind.”

King Thaedis nodded and gestured for his wife to stand. “We will see you this evening for dinner, dear.”

“Yes, Father.”

Her parents left the room, the door purring closed to leave Nia staring at her trembling fingers in stricken silence. Arranged marriages were a tradition within her family for generations, the pairings always in the best interest of Alaera and her people. Nia had known and expected the same since she could remember, but... Mayor O’Neill?

Nia covered her face with her hands, persuading herself that the sobs she heard were that of a servant down the hall.

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Nia climbed the stairs to her father’s office. “Father?”

King Thaedis glanced from the ledgers spread across the table. “Come in, my dear.”

“Father, I am curious.” Nia lowered herself into the chair across from him, unable to meet his gaze.

“About Mayor O’Neill, I imagine.”

“Yes. I...” Nia smoothed the pink silk chiffon. “I must sound so snobbish, but I wonder what small little O’Neill can offer. I am not refusing the match, Father. I only want to understand how I am helping Alaera.”

King Thaedis nodded as he leaned back in his chair. He rested his laced fingers upon his chest.

“What do you know of O’Neill?”

“It is a small farming community west of here, on the other side of Mt. Myrrh.”

“Indeed.” He rifled through the papers upon his desk. He drew out a specific collection of fastened documents and presented those to her. “A farming community, yes, though not so small as you would imagine.”

Nia began a careful scrutiny of the ledgers and reports. Over the last two to three years the community of O’Neill had steadily grown in crop size and production, dairy production, and especially population.

“The current mayor, Shamus O’Neill, approached me with a contract in order to access our eastern region and utilize our trade routes.”

Nia blinked. “Then... then it is not Neil O’Neill?”

“No. You should also know that the proposal of your hand was not his. It was mine.”

“But...why?”

“Mayor O’Neill has accomplished in three years what the previous mayors could not in their lifetime. He has raised communal health and wealth. He has earned their trust. This man would be an asset to Alaera, Nia, and he would be an asset to our family line.”

Nia lowered her gaze back to the ledgers and papers. She set them aside and stood, not speaking a word until she turned at the door to his office. "Thank you, Father." She pulled the office door closed, her eyes burning as she stared at her white knuckled grasp. A bubble of relief settled in the pit of her stomach, but the unknown was still offset by the memories of the previous O'Neill's.

An apple never fell far from the tree.

## Betrothed

“Dray!”

Nia rushed down the stairs of the main square just as a lithe young man with blue-black hair and brilliant eyes stepped from one of the shops. He turned and smiled, catching her as she threw herself into his arms.

“Whoa!” Dray laughed, stumbling backwards.

Nia held the handsome man out at arms length. “How are you?”

“Good. Studying at the Coliseum. It’s tough, but feels good.”

“Have you seen Ana yet? Is she doing well?”

“She is. But what about you?”

“I am fine. Wonderful now that you are here.” Nia urged him toward the castle, arm in arm. “You must say ‘hello’ to Father and Mother. They will be so happy to see you.”

“Nia.” Dray pulled her to a stop. “Nia, I heard about you and Mayor O’Neill.”

Nia’s bright smile wavered. “Oh?”

“Why?”

“Arranged marriages are common for Alaerian royalty, Dray.” Nia cleared her throat and lowered her gaze to an examination of her fingernails. “It is a necessary tradition for—”

“That’s not what I meant. Why didn’t you tell me before? Because it was O’Neill?”

Nia lifted her shoulders. “I...” She guided Dray to the tables in the square and sat across from him. How could she convince him the pairing would be fine when even she struggled with the fact? “I remember your stories, but the new mayor has made it possible for the community to flourish. Father believes Alaera would benefit—”

“I know. I’ve been staying with Lee up at the old cabin. Well, not for a long time because I’ve been traveling around, but I still know what’s going on.” Dray gave her hand a squeeze. “You could have told me.”

That Dray didn’t exhibit anger for the match settled Nia’s heart into a fitful irritation with a dash of relief. Dray would never have allowed her to marry someone evil. “I am sorry that I didn’t tell you. It... it came as a shock— Oh! I have a wonderful idea. You should come with me! Then you can see

all the wonderful things that have happened while you have been away. Please? It will be so nice to travel together again.”

Dray pushed his lips to one side before sending her a smile. “Sure.”

“Wonderful! This will be so much fun!”

He laughed.

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Nia’s wings fluttered as she breathed deep of the crisp, fresh air.

“Brings back memories, doesn’t it?” Dray asked.

“It certainly does.” Nia wrapped her arms around his. “Thank you for coming. It is comforting to have the support of a friend.”

“Sure, Nia. Only....” He shot her a glance. “Only, I don’t like the idea you being married against your will. It’s not supposed to be that way, is it?”

“Only Father can stop the marriage, and even then it would bring disgrace to our family. Agreements have been made. It is a matter of honor.” Emotions tumbled inside, each one battling against her desire to do the best for her people. She could not allow herself to dwell on the ‘it’s not fair....’ “I am certain the mayor is not a fiend. If he were, why would he take such great care with the town?” She could not help but feel she tried to convince herself more than her friend. After all, how many years had her parents reminded her that love could not be a deciding factor in a match for a princess?

“I’m not saying he’s bad, it’s just... well, I thought you were supposed to know each other before you get married. Isn’t that what you said?” He shook his head. “It’s all so confusing”

Nia laughed. “I know it is, Dray, and I’m sorry I can’t explain it better. Royalty has such different requirements than being a woodsman or adventurer.” She missed those days of freedom when the only expectation was to keep the snakes from her bedroll. “You had best be the gentleman I know you can be when I meet the mayor for the first time, Dray. I will not hesitate to rain flame upon your head.”

Dray chuckled. “Don’t worry about me, Nia.”

“Good—” One of the forward scouts arrived at a gallop and reined in a few feet from the pair. Concern flared, and she regretted not bringing her weaponry. “What is it?”

“The mayor approaches with a carriage for you and your guest. He wishes to give you a tour of O’Neill as the caravan continues on behind.”

“Oh.” Feeling very foolish, Nia smiled at Dray. “That would be lovely, don’t you think?” Dray shrugged. “Return to the mayor and give him my regards and my thanks.”

The scout bowed and galloped away.

“You went for your dagger,” Dray said, chuckling.

“I know.” She laughed. “Quite embarrassing, really, being always alert for danger when I am about to be a bride.” A reluctant one at that. She tried not to grimace.

“With you around, O’Neill won’t need Lee to keep the bandits away. Maybe he can come back with me to the Coliseum.”

She wagged a finger at her friend. “You promised to be on your best behavior.” Although the thought of a possible adventure of freeing the small community from danger set her heart pounding. She shook it off. “Dray, do not put such ideas into my head. Father expects me to act as an ambassador of sorts, and most definitely not a bandit-slaying huntress.”

“Can’t you be both?” Before Nia could respond, Dray motioned ahead. “Here he comes.”

Nia’s smile wavered. A pair of chestnut horses drew a simple, open black carriage with room for four. The driver was dressed in simple livery of black and burgundy. The reception brought with it the stark reminder of the expectations that awaited her, as a princess. She tried to staunch the ripple of her stomach. When the carriage pulled to a stop in front of them, Nia only just restrained a gasp of surprise.

A tall man with smiling green eyes and an unruly shock of auburn curls leaped from the carriage and bowed. “Princess? I’m Shamus O’Neill.” He produced a hand. “It’s a pleasure.”

Nia accepted his warm clasp, relief blossoming into a smile as she gazed up into his handsome face. Tall, ruggedly good looking, and broad of shoulders. He would have made an admirable showing as a swordsman on their adventures. “Good afternoon, Mayor O’Neill. Thank you so much for meeting us.”

“Please. Call me Shamus, or Sammy.”

“Of course. Shamus, this is a friend of mine. Dray.”

“A pleasure,” Shamus heartily shook Dray’s hand. “Aren’t you staying up near Annan?”

“Yes. How did you know that?”

“I make it a point to know about the people I’m responsible for. Anyhow, welcome back. I heard you were traveling.” Shamus gestured behind to the carriage. “After you, Princess.”

“Thank you.” Nia peeked at the young mayor as he fell into step beside her, his hands clasped behind his back. His cheeks and ears burned a shade of plum. She fought back a smile. He must

have only been a few years older than she herself, and he the mayor of a successful farming community? Intrigue fluttered.

“I hope your journey wasn’t too bad. The winds have been picking up again.”

“No, it was lovely. Thank you.” Nia cast Dray a glance over her shoulder. He smiled.

Shamus handed her up into the carriage to sit across from her, leaving Dray the space beside. Nia arched an eyebrow as Shamus directed the driver onward.

“I figure you’re both a little hungry after the hike from Alaera, so I’ve arranged a quick tour by carriage before heading over to the house.”

His grin was infectious, dancing in his eyes with such a bright twinkle that Nia found herself hard pressed to not start laughing. She scolded herself and offered a simple smile instead. “I appreciate it, Shamus. Thank you.”

“My pleasure, Princess. If you get at all thirsty, let me know. We can stop in at one of the farms and chat over some lemonade.”

“I am fine, but thank you.”

Shamus nodded. “My pleasure.”

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The tour was simple enough. Grain fields, dairy farms, and cattle ranches spread out on each side. Nia could tell they were all well cared for, and Shamus spoke of the families as if he knew them each personally. A portion of Red Woods, Dray’s old home, had been cleared to make room for more houses, but Shamus was quick to assure Nia and Dray both that he tried to harmonize with their surroundings as much as possible. Her friend Lee tended the woods, planting seedlings after trees were felled for building or equipment. Shamus didn’t want the natural resource depleted. The entire community bustled with activity in farm, ranch, and commercial quarter alike.

Shamus’ chest swelled as he spoke, and Nia appreciated the pride he felt at a job well done.

As the carriage approached the O’Neill house, Nia noticed a partially disassembled brick wall. Several hulks of men continued to work at tearing it down, organizing the bricks by size and material. Nia pointed. “What are you doing there?”

“Hm? Oh. I’m tearing it down. The wall doesn’t really do anyone any good as is. I’m having the bricks salvaged as best they can and making wells and whatnot. I felt caged in with it there before.”

“I think that was the point,” Dray offered.

Nia surreptitiously pinched him. He glowered at her in silent protest, which she ignored.

“I know it.” Shamus scrubbed at his scalp. “You should have seen the house. Took me nearly two years to get the floor plan straightened out. It didn’t make a bit of sense before.”

The carriage turned into the main entry of the grounds, halting just beyond a heavy, wrought iron gate. Shamus scrambled from the carriage and offered his hand to Nia. Before she could accept, a thunderous bray set her back on her heels, eyes wide when they focused on a black dog the size of a colt bounding toward them. Dray leapt down, positioning himself between Nia and the beast with the white teeth and flopping jowls.

“Rufus!”

Shamus shot Dray and Nia a wink as he crouched and slapped his knees. He greeted the monstrous dog with several vigorous wallops about the chest and rump before settling in to rub behind his drooping ears. The interaction between the two, a boy and his dog, brought a smile. Certainly the beast stood large enough to eat children, but he seemed more puppy than anything.

“No, no, Ruf. No leaping up. You aren’t a rabbit. You’ll knock me clean through the wall. Come on, boy. Calm yourself down and I’ll introduce you to some new friends.” Shamus turned toward Nia and Dray, his grip firm upon the dog’s collar.

“This is Rufus. Has a tendency to think he’s knee-high to a rabbit, leaping about like he does, but he’s getting better.” He knelt beside the massive black dog, draping an arm around his wide shoulders. “Rufus, this is Princess Nia and her friend Dray. Say hello.”

Rufus barked twice, loud and low, and then sat back on his haunches to blink up at them with brown eyes the size of marbles. To be honest, Nia thought of a large ocean fish and wondered at the beast’s level of intelligence.

Nia stepped down from the carriage, ignoring Dray’s hiss of warning. She presented her hand. “Nice to meet you, Rufus.”

The dog sniffed and snorted her fingers and palms for several moments before pressing his head against her touch and leaning so hard against her legs that she nearly stumbled backwards.

Shamus laughed. “He likes you, Princess.”

Nia scratched the black beast behind his ears. They felt like warm velvet, and she could not prevent her fingers from stroking the lush softness. “I like you, too.”

Shamus motioned forward. “Princess?”

Nia fell into step beside him. Dray and Rufus regarding one another for a long moment before trailing along behind. “You’ve done some marvelous things for O’Neill, Shamus.”

“Thank you, Princess, but most of it was just common sense. The people are really the ones who deserve the praise. They’ve been working hard.”

Shamus held the door for her and Dray both, urging Rufus to hurry when he lagged behind. The beast bounded indoors, tail lashing from side to side with such ferocity Nia felt certain he would topple a bookcase.

“Did you want a tour now, or after dinner?”

“Dray?”

Dray looked up from his staring contest with Rufus. “I’ll wait here.”

Nia focused on Shamus, meeting his gaze and wondering if she had ever seen a smile so contagiously genuine before. “Now would be fine.”

“All right then.” Shamus motioned ahead to a door across the front hall. “Dray, if you want to head out to the backyard and play with Rufus, just go through that door there. The door there,” Shamus added, motioning to a pair of double doors on the right wall, “leads to the banquet hall. We’ll meet you there in a bit.”

Dray looked again to the huge black beast beside him, whose ears immediately perked forward. His mouth closed with a near click of attention. Without a word, Dray motioned toward the doors leading to the backyard. Rufus barked and bounded around the young man as they made their way to the escape together.

Shamus chuckled. “Rufus plays hard.”

Nia’s memories drifted to visions of her friend’s many wrestling matches with bears and boars alike. “Dray will be fine.”

Shamus held the door for her. The room held a piano, a collection of game tables and chairs, bookshelves, couches, and a fireplace on the far wall. Live plants brightened the room with welcome just as the hand-loomed rugs on the floor.

“What a lovely room,” Nia exclaimed.

Shamus stood near the door with crossed arms and a small smile as Nia explored it more fully. “My sister helped with the decoration of the house. Wouldn’t set foot in the place otherwise. She felt sure I’d ruin the entire building.”

“I am certain you exaggerate.”

“Not according to Marianne.” Shamus motioned to a connecting door on the right. “She says I’m all oaf; don’t understand a thing about anything except animals and crops.” He opened the door to reveal an adjoining library. “I haven’t the heart to tell her I’m a good cook.”

Nia laughed.

“As you can see, this is a library. Most of the books are left over from Neil’s stay, so I plan on going through them and seeing what I want to keep and what gets donated somewhere, mostly the trash barrel I’m thinking.”

Nia absently nodded as she fought with the curiosity at his relation to the former mayor. Instead, she fingered a few of the leather volumes, noticed the positions of the overstuffed chairs throughout the room, as well as the window looking out on the backyard.

Shamus came to stand beside her as she watched Dray and Rufus tug-of-war and chase and tumble with each other around the yard. She smiled, fond memories strolling through her mind of their many adventures. She missed those days, and now they would never return.

“Princess?” The mayor scrubbed at the back of his neck.

“Is something wrong, Shamus?”

“Is Dray...” He picked at the trim of the window. “I won’t go through with this if you’re in love with someone, Princess.”

Nia’s smile felt like stretching a too small bit of fabric across a sewing ring. “I have known him since I was a little girl, Shamus. Dray and I are close friends.”

“Oh.” His ears reddened, and he cleared his throat as he gestured to the exit. “On with the tour?”

Because the staff quarters and the bedrooms were on the second floor, Shamus proposed to show them after dinner. Instead, he completed the tour of the lower level and then led her back to the banquet hall. Dray waited at the grand table, arms crossed and legs propped upon its surface.

He gestured to the pictures on the walls. “I like these faces a lot better than the other ones.”

“You—” Shamus raised an eyebrow. “You’ve been here before?”

“Long time ago.”

“Ah. Well, these are my immediate family. Neil O’Neill was my third cousin twice removed... or something.” Shamus smiled, shaving at least five years from his appearance. “The other faces gave me the creeps, too. I sent them back to Neil the first night I was here.”

“Good idea,” Dray agreed, chuckling.

Shamus pulled out a chair for her, motioning to another for Dray as he sat at the head. His cuff jostled a silver bell at his right hand. He grimaced. “I hate this thing. Cook won’t send the food without the blasted ring, but it makes me feel ridiculous.”

Nia laughed and reached out. “Allow me.”

“Go for the gusto, Princess.”

The bell sang with just enough volume to relay the message. She cast a smile to Shamus and Dray. “Definitely a lady’s realm of expertise.” Both men laughed. “You chuckle, but you didn’t protest when I offered.”

“Of course I laughed! I’ve seen you take down a bandit with barely a blink,” Dray said. “You can do whatever you want and whenever you want.”

Nia inclined her head, wishing that were indeed the case. “Thank you, Master Dray. And you, Mayor O’Neill?”

“Me?” His ears pinked. “What about me?”

“You laughed because...?”

“Oh. That. Well... uh...” Shamus scrubbed at his scalp, curls flopping this way and that.

Dray grinned. “Shamus, she won’t bite you... very hard.”

Nia tossed her napkin at him.

“I laughed because....” He tugged at the collar of his pale yellow shirt. “Because I agreed. You look a sight better holding that infernal bell than I do.”

“Thank you, sir.”

He held her gaze, a smile continuing to tickle his lips upward. “My pleasure, Princess.”

Warmth flushed Nia’s cheeks, and she was completely unprepared for the flutter of wing and heart.

“Hey, Shamus. I have a question for you.” Dray twirled the steak knife in his hand with ease, his attention not shifting from the mayor’s face. “How did you get Neil O’Neill out of here?”

“Neil didn’t really have a choice. Certain shady characters were looking for him, so my family helped him disappear. No one really had the time to dedicate to O’Neill because of their own farms, so I asked my father if I could. I’d just turned twenty, so I figured it was about time I had my own place.” Shamus grinned. “Obviously, he said yes.

“Twenty!” Nia’s attention diverted from her intended scold of Dray’s continued toying of the knife. “Mayor at twenty? My goodness.”

Shamus waved it aside as the staff entered with trays of their first course. “I’d already been foreman of my father’s ranch for ages. It wasn’t too much different to mayor a town. It just takes organization.”

Nia arched an eyebrow. Mayor Shamus O’Neill continued to astound and impress, and she began to wonder if these were the exact reasons for her father’s decision of an alliance.

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Dinner and dessert passed quickly with stories of Dray and Nia's adventures. Amidst the laughter and the suspense, Nia noticed Shamus didn't offer any tales from his own life. When pointedly asked, he would offer an amusing enough tale of childhood frolics, but then deftly guide the storytelling back to Dray. Nia found the fact intriguing.

Plates were gathered but the stories continued, prompted most often by a question from Shamus. Then a clock somewhere within a hall struck a late hour and Shamus guided them upstairs to their rooms, one on each side of the other.

"Good night, Dray. Princess. I'll see you in the morning for breakfast." Shamus clasped her hand for an extended moment before making his way downstairs.

"I can't believe he's an O'Neill." Dray watched him descend, arms crossed.

"Yes. A nice man." She pursed her lips, a frown drawing in her brows. Then she gave a slight shake of her head and focused on her friend beside her. She kissed his cheek. "Good night, Dray. Thank you for being here, and for playing so well with Rufus."

"Good night, Nia. See you in the morning."

Nia closed the door behind her, leaning against her hands with an absent flutter of her wings. She liked Shamus O'Neill, a reaction completely unexpected and swelling an emotion of relief from her very soul. An arranged partnership would be so much easier to accept with such a man, and yet.... Her brows furrowed for a mere moment before she set the thought aside and pushed from the door.

## Courtship

Shamus watched her with an absent smile as she walked ahead of the caravan with her friend. Dray and she laughed over a shared joke or “remember when.” Her wingtips flutter when she laughs. He adjusted his seat in the saddle, his gaze dropping to the reins held in a loose clasp.

During breakfast she insisted he call her Nia. Shamus respectfully declined, although he did promise to work up to it eventually. He just couldn’t imagine himself calling a princess by her first name. She’s a princess of the oldest family line ever documented. A popular legend being they descended from the faery folk from a distant land long since forgotten. Shamus considered himself nothing more than a farmer with good organization skills. A farmer! He grimaced. All I wanted was a trade contract. Why would the king marry me to his only daughter?

Her laughter drew his focus. With her bright eyes and smiling lips, looking at her made his insides tumble like a wall of hay bales. And the way she laughed? Fireworks went off in his head, making it impossible to rub two half thoughts together. Nia Alaera O’Neill. It was more than his mind could grapple at the moment.

Shamus intercepted a smile cast over her shoulder, his neck and face aflame as he returned it with what he felt sure was a silly grin. Any thoughts couldn’t survive the shock of his pleasant predicament as he looked away, his eyes seeking the dense forest that surrounded them.

A sudden, brief touch on his foot drew his glance.

Nia smiled up at him. “Why do you not come and walk with us the rest of the way, Shamus?”

“My pleasure, Princess.” He couldn’t get down from his horse fast enough. He secured the beast to the nearest wagon and fell into step beside her. To his surprise, instead of hurrying her pace to walk beside Dray, she slowed and matched his own.

“Father will likely wish to meet with us once we arrive.”

Shamus nodded, holding his hands behind his back as he glanced toward her. “I know,” he confessed. “We still need to settle a few things.” And I need to make sure he wasn’t joking when he offered your hand. Marrying into the royal line thrust an entirely different level of expectations and responsibilities onto his shoulders.

“Oh?” She blinked at him, eyes wide. “All arrangements have not been decided upon?”

“Uh, well, d-dowry for one. Alaerian involvement with O’Neill for another.”

“I doubt Father will opt to be too terribly involved. He is quite impressed with how you have managed to help the community flourish.”

He shot her a glance, which she met with her usual smile that sent thoughts scattering to the four winds.

“As for dowry, what were you going to suggest?”

What do I offer an Alaerian king for his only daughter when that daughter is Nia? ”I don’t rightly know. Normally I would offer whatever the father needed most. Your father doesn’t really need anything.”

Nia laughed, the flutter of her wingtips a caress against his shoulder. “That is not necessarily correct. Everyone needs something at some point in their lives. The hard part is discovering what that is.”

“Isn’t that the truth.”

“Did you have any ideas at all?”

On the dowry, or on how this could possibly be happening? “Actually, I’m expecting a few champion-blood foals this year. Is your father at all interested in horses?”

If possible, Nia’s expression brightened to an even lovelier version of herself. Her wings fluttered with excitement. “Father adores horses! He has tried – without success, the poor dear – to begin his own line of champion stock.”

“I’ll see about offering him his choice of mares. Maybe free studing for the first five years of our marriage?” Shamus thought his head would catch the forest on fire.

Nia smiled up at him, her eyes like stars and her touch on his arm a flare from the very sun. “He would love that!”

Too soon, the main road into Alaera proper came into view and Nia’s hand fell away. Shamus gulped as the trio halted just outside. The caravan continued on. Nia embraced her friend, the tenderness pressing a sharp stone in the middle of Shamus’s brain. He shifted his gaze to anywhere else.

“I wish you could stay,” she murmured. “Visit again soon. And if you see Ana, tell her ‘hello.’”

“I will.” Dray stretched out a hand. “It was good to meet you.”

“Likewise. Don’t be a stranger.”

Then Dray moved off toward east Alaera, Nia waving after him.

Shamus watched her with an absent smile. Friends meant a lot to her, and she seemed to make them easily. I guess that’s what comes from being a princess. Nia shifted her gaze to catch him in his new-found hobby. He smeared a smile on his lips and hoped it didn’t look goofy... much.

“Thank you for allowing him to stay.”

“My pleasure, Princess. It was great to finally meet Lee’s roommate.”

Nia tucked her hand into the nook of his elbow and motioned him forward. Shamus struck an easy pace into Alaera, oblivious to the hustle and bustle as he focused his attention solely on Nia beside him. Her lips glistened in the sunlight as she talked and teased his brain with a numbing desire to see if they tasted like honey and fruit.

“Father insists we have the ceremony inside the castle, but I so want it to be in the square. Do you mind an outdoor ceremony?”

Shamus tried to shake his head clear. “Outdoor? Uh, no, that’s fine.” Sammy boy... look at her chin instead! But the single, heart-shaped freckle didn’t help.

“I want flowers and doves and ribbons all over.”

“Of course.” Sammy boy, is this girl for real? Shamus reached around to cover her hand with his. She didn’t fade, and he was too embarrassed at the action to pull his hand away. “Flowers are always nice.” I’m marrying a princess? But I raise crops and breed horses. “Unless you have allergies.”

Nia laughed, and Shamus felt the tickle of her wings in the air between them. He gazed down at her, certain that the smile and ridiculous expression on his face screamed how crazy she made him feel.

“I suppose you are right. Perhaps I should create ribbon flowers instead?”

“It’s your wedding. If you want flowers, you should have flowers.” Shamus’ smile wavered. “Though I guess it would be bad to have someone sneezing the entire time.”

Nia giggled as they ascended the stairs of the square into the castle. “Father would be furious.”

“And I guess I shouldn’t make my future father-in-law angry before the wedding is over.”

“It would not be recommended, no.”

“Then I guess we stay with ribbons.”

“No doves?”

“Only if everyone brings an umbrella or a hat. It’s liable to get messy.”

Her laugh echoed through the halls. “Ribbons it is.”

Shamus examined her profile. There were so many different stories of the expectations from an arranged marriage: the condescension, the strained pleasantries, and the barely held tolerance to name but a few. Nia made an actual effort to become a friend.

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