

## The Dragon's Fated Bride Chapter 24 - TURNING PAGE - PART 1

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The ride into town had been pleasant, but chilly. Faye was underdressed for the Hertesk weather, and Sterling felt her body shiver against his. Noticing her discomfort with slumped shoulders and her arms wrapped around herself, trying to keep warm. He unclasped his fur-lined cloak and wrapped it over her shoulders.

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There was a sincerity in his voice, and his eyes had turned soft as he offered her his mantle. "Take it. It will keep you warm. I wasn't thinking. I should have borrowed a cloak from the old woman."

Sterling felt remorseful when he noticed Faye's body quivering and realized she had been enduring the cold without saying a word. He wasn't used to taking care of others. He knew Faye wouldn't ask for anything. Sterling assumed she always made do with what she had. Complaining probably resulted in beatings at the Wintershold estate.

5

Like this morning, when he found her with no shoes. If he had not noticed, she would not have told him. He shook his head. After seeing the condition of her body, he was acutely aware of the circumstances of her prior living situation. It wasn't a surprise to see her silently suffering.

There was a sudden thunderous noise of hooves coming from behind that shook the ground, causing Faye to divert her gaze from the picturesque town below. She pivoted, glancing beyond Sterling's sturdy silhouette to behold André racing towards them on a regal black stallion.

The sun glinted off the horse's coat, making it look almost like a living shadow. Andre firmly tugged on the reins, bringing the horse to an abrupt halt. Faye's nose wrinkled. She could smell the horse's sweat mixed with the dust kicked up by Andre's steed as it skidded to a stop beside her and Sterling. Faye noted Sterling made no sudden moves to see who was racing up to them.

She had observed the young Paladin's expression was innocent but mischievous as he waited intently on his commander to speak.

Sterling shot a piercing look at his subordinate. The energy between them was unexpectedly stifling. He cleared his throat and asked in a firm tone,

"What took you so long?"

Andre was out of breath. He rubbed the back of his neck as he spoke to the commander. "Sorry, I thought I saw some spritewigs. I chased them through the back of the old woman's woods, but I couldn't catch them."

Sterling's face grew steely as he narrowed his eyes, asking Andre, "Are you sure about what you saw? They normally don't travel outside of the steppes."

He gave a sharp nod to the commander as he replied, "I am confident about what I saw."

There was an edge to Sterling's voice as he addressed his concerns to Andre.

"We need to proceed with caution when we return to Everton. There's a lot more activity than usual for this time of year. Typically, monsters and demons aren't this active during Hertesk (the fall season). But in the last three days, we've encountered them almost every day."

1

"I'm curious about Merrick and my men. I wonder what challenges they're facing on the road home. We need to leave this hamlet and go back to the fortress soon. Damn it!" He cursed through clenched teeth. "I regret not going with them. This entire experience has been unpleasant."

2

Faye saw the stress on Sterling's face, and his brow was creased. She understood he was concerned for his men. Hearing the harsh words he used to describe the last few days made her heart feel heavy. Faye felt like she was a burden to him, and he had not acted or said otherwise. Her neck bowed as her shoulders slumped once more, knowing the Duke would not be delayed here if it weren't for her.

Faye heard Sterling tut at Helios and felt his thighs flex behind her ass as he nudged his roulettes into the side of his stallion, urging the steed forward. The trio began to make their way down into the heart of the town.

The village of Easthaven was nestled into a small valley. Numerous shops peppered the dirt streets. There was an inn and a gambling saloon visible near the center of the place. The vendors sold fresh fruits, vegetables, and various wares from carts or shabby stands. Only those with enough money could afford a storefront.

As they rode through the crowd, the villagers parted and made way for them. The men removed their hats and bowed. The women stopped whatever they were doing and paid their respects to Duke Thayer. Faye was amazed by how polite the townspeople were to her husband. A little girl appeared from the throng of people and dashed up to Sterling with a rose in her hands.

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He reached over to receive it. Faye heard the girl's tiny voice as she handed him the flower. "This is for the new Duchess."

3

He turned to Faye, handing her the vibrant red rose. The Duke leaned in close. His voice was low and conspiratorial. Faye felt the warmth of his breath tickling her ear as he whispered, "How does it feel to be treated like part of the royal court? I bet you never experienced this living at Wintershold. Isn't it nice to be lavished with attention?" his lips grazed her delicate skin, raising goosebumps along her arms.

5

Voicing her opinion intimidated Faye, and she tried to remain tight-lipped. However, she knew Sterling would soon demand an answer to his question. She stuttered, "It-it is pleasant."

The Duke snorted at her answer and looked to his side, and deadpanned to Andre, his lip slightly curled at one corner into a sneer. "Did you hear that? She said, it's pleasant."

There was a suppressed grin on Andre's face as he stayed quiet. He knew it was best to stay out of whatever was happening between the Duke and Faye. He had already been given a fair warning by Merrick.

4

To the young knights' relief, they had arrived at their first destination. The bustling noise of the street faded away as they stumbled upon a small dress boutique, tucked away in a cozy nook. Faye couldn't help but feel a sense of comfort as she realized it was a place where only the locals shopped. The display of dresses was humble, yet charming, with a variety of colors and designs that were both common and modest.

Sterling opened the door, and a small chime rang overhead. An older woman came from the back of the store and greeted them. She was about to open her mouth and speak. However, she halted—mid-sentence. Her eyes were wide with surprise upon seeing the Duke. She immediately gave a deep bow to the man politely.

The dressmaker tugged at her ear worriedly. "Welcome, Milord. How can I assist you today?"

Sterling tilted his head back and roared with laughter at the dressmaker's question.

"Hahahaha!"

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"It is not me that needs help. It is my Duchess. Please, see that she gets a couple of new dresses."

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Faye observed Sterling remove a leather pouch from his belt and toss it onto the counter. There was a loud jingling of coins as they struck the wood.

"This should cover the expenses. If not, let my man know. He is standing outside the shop to escort Duchess Thayer. He will get you whatever you require. I will be back with in the hour."

Faye frowned, creating deep lines on her forehead as she stared at Sterling. A wave of panic overtook her, and her heart began racing.

"You are leaving me here?"

He used his gloved thumb to smooth the horseshoe-shaped wrinkle from her brow. "Stop pouting. I have business with the church and will return for you shortly. Now be a good Duchess and buy some dresses. I do not want to take my bride home in a stranger's hand-me-downs." In a quick motion, he left a peck on the crown of her head, leaving Faye stunned and speechless at his display of affection. It had been most unexpected.

She watched as he spun on his heel and strode for the exit. She realized he was leaving without his cloak, and it was getting colder. Faye raced for the door to return the mantle to Sterling.

"Don't forget this," she said, handing him the cloak he had almost left behind. "The weather is too unpleasant to ride without it."

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Sterling was astounded at her behavior. The girl was scared he would be cold. She unselfishly worried for his comfort at the expense of her own. A warmth touched Sterling's stony heart as she attempted to return his cloak.

3

He pushed the plush black fur cape back at her. The softness of the wolf pelt lining brushed against her fingertips. The cloak emitted his musky scent as he clutched it to her, bringing it close to her face.

"I have no need for it," he said. "The armor and everything under it will keep me comfortable." She could feel the weight of his gaze on her as he stared at her with intensity, pointing his finger at the boutique, his command forceful.

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"Now get back in the store and buy some dresses, and please, get yourself some new shoes."

1

The\_Sweet\_Sparrow