

A Springtime Wedding

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The morning air through the Vardo window woke Holly like a splash of crystal cold water. She listened to the deep and careful breathing of her family and her friends, ringing off the wooden walls of the vardo as the sky started its break from gray.

Today was to be her wedding.

The light and the birds soon roused Vashta and Noni, who quickly saw the excitement in the bloom of Holly's cheeks. Such happiness was infectious, and soon they too were pink of face as they quietly gathered the few objects they would need to prepare Holly for this day. The most important piece was a soft, goldenrod-colored gown, Holly's favorite, made like new by a trim of lovely white ribbon hand-picked by Ysolt. The cotton fabric was shot with shimmering threads, magically woven in by Nikola's magic.

The cold water of Lake Elizabeth left Holly's skin feeling fresh and raw and tight around her near-bursting heart. Vashta gently took the girl's wet hair and divided it into parts, weaving a ribbon through to match the goldenrod dress. Next came delicate white flowers of baby's breath plaited in. Noni's clear voice lilted up and down as she laced Holly's boots and soon trace notes from the three women drifted towards camp, distant and dream-like to those just starting the day.

Their warmth made the cold of the day seem trivial. Holly's smile was brilliant. It almost didn't matter that today she would become a Bloodroot.

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Cale wiped his brow, narrowed his focus on the post he'd been practicing with, and steadied his blade once more. He made a swift cut towards the post, stopping it just before it

would have hit its mark. Cale had decided on precision drills rather than power drills of late, not wanting to take up the constant repairs of the pit. He continued thus, slicing and stopping, occasionally tapping the post and pulling the blade free of it.

Cale heard his name and turned. Falco stood at the edge of the pit, holding a nice doublet, his eyes wide. "Come now, Cale. It is your wedding day. The time for training is over. The true test now begins."

Cale sighed and walked over to his fellow council member, sword loose in his hand. "I know. That is the reason." Falco raised an eyebrow. "I keep thinking maybe I should have invited the rest of them. And what if they show up? What will they do to me? Worse, what will do to Holly? What if—"

Falco carefully set the doublet on one of the fight pit's posts and put a hand on Cale's shoulder. "Life is too short to wonder where one's path will take them. You make the decision, and then you stick with it. You deal with the consequences and live with them. It is as a wise bard who joined the Band once said, 'Love is like a Queen's Pillow. Try to devour it as quickly as possible and you'll get sick. Take your time, and you will be able to savor the moment. Life is the same.'"

"Who said that?"

"The greatest bard the world's ever seen. Just now. For you." Cale and Falco laughed a little. Falco's face grew serious. "Whatever happens, the Band has your back. Holly will have your back. I will have your back. We are a family."

Cale smiled and handed a bewildered Falco his sword. Falco opened his mouth to speak, but saw Cale smiling and putting on the doublet Ysolt had embroidered. Falco waved to Cale, and wondered what exactly he should do with the sword Cale had left in his hand. It was heavy. He wondered if, in some way, Cale considered it a weight of his new duties and his past.

Cale started off towards the Protestant church where they'd have the wedding, beaming with excitement over seeing Holly.

Before the sun had even started its way back down from the peak of the day, people had begun to filter into the small stone church that would house the union of Holly and Cale Bloodroot, at least in the eyes of the common folk of Bristol. Familiar faces quietly filled the pews. A great number of the band was present, as well as other people of Bristol who had come to know Holly and Cale during their time there. In the front row, Cale saw Holly's family for the first time and made an effort to nervously smile at each of them before the ceremony began. Surveying the gathering of people once more just before everything was about to begin, one familiar face caught Cale like a hawk catches a surprised rabbit. Liam Bloodroot, his cousin, sat silently in the back of the church -- watching. Cale double checked and could find no other Draco Disciples present, and he wasn't sure if this made him feel better or worse. As he started to spiral into an internal game of "What If..." the music he had previously drowned out with his own thoughts swelled, everyone stood, and Holly appeared at the end of the hallway. In that moment all of his worries melted away and were replaced with confidence and joy. Regardless of whether Liam and the Dracos had any treachery planned, he was surrounded by his family, and they would protect him and Holly with their lives.

The ceremony continued without disruption. Holly and Cale exchanged their vows, and while the moment felt like an eternity to Cale, nobody spoke up against their union at that pivotal point in their ceremony. Hands firmly clasped, Holly and Cale led the congregation out of the church and into the afternoon sunlight bringing their elation and applause with them. Holly's family, as well as members of the band and a few other close friends, followed the couple back to the training camp for a feast.

Holly's father stepped forward introducing himself as Giles Goldenseal and took Cale's hand in both of his and shook it with a warm enthusiasm. He had a tranquil glow about him that suggested that while he may have suffered under the hardships of poverty, he was content. Mayhaps too much so. Before Cale could dwell on it, Giles handed him a large basket of well crafted candles. Cale then recognized the subtle chemical smell he noticed earlier as he remembered that Holly's family were chandlers. As he fumbled to hold the basket, he caught the piercing gaze of his new mother-in-law. Introducing herself as Thomasina Goldenseal, her voice was softer than her demeanor, and while her complexion wasn't quite that of an English woman, he couldn't place his finger on where else she may have originated from. Without exchanging many words, she passed on a small time worn book to Holly. It had a certain mysticality about it that one could sense without even looking at it.

As the afternoon feast dwindled into the setting sun, and friends and family alike began to depart, Cale noticed somebody standing at the edge of the camp. It was Liam, once again. With a small gesture, he beckoned to Cale. Taking a quick survey of his surroundings, Cale hastily approached, hoping not to draw the attentions of any of his guests, and especially not his new wife. Liam spoke before Cale could question his presence. "Congratulations. Twas a beautiful ceremony, Cale."

Cale replied in a frustrated whisper, "Wherefore do you bring yourself lurking at the edges of my happiness?"

Liam was unphased and replied just as calmly as he did before. "I bring you newlyweds a gift, one befitting of a Bloodroot name." He deftly produced a small pouch and held it out to Cale. "Go on," Liam pressed, "Take it. You and Holly deserve something nice, something nobody in the Band can give you."

Cautiously, Cale accepted the pouch and felt its weight. It was clearly filled with heavy coins, a small wealth he was not prepared to guess the specificity of off hand. Before Cale could protest, or perhaps even thank him, Liam had left without another word.

Cale hastily stowed the unexpected present and returned to help set the camp up for their union under the Lord of Light. While similar to their wedding held during the day, this moonlit ceremony held a different and special kind of meaning to them as members of the Band of the Twisted Claw. The bonfire in the center of the camp seemed to glow more brightly as Falco blessed the couple's union in the name of the four Paragons and their Creator. Cale and Holly exchanged a glance and a grin. Suddenly, Mimsy gasped a little, quieting the light chatter that had risen amongst the Band. Falco turned, stepping aside just enough for the couple to see that another guest to their union had made herself known. Her staff, presence, and the flames' sudden resemblance to snarling dragons made it quite clear who she was. Cale wished that Nikola was there--as a Keeper she could perhaps counter Efah's magic should it lay in the same school--but she was still away, off on the Council's assignment. The Band scattered to the edges of the camp, reverencing quickly as they did so. They knew it would be better on everyone to let Lady Efah do what she'd come to do... perhaps it would be as simple and harmless as what Liam had done at the wedding earlier? Even so, the Band huddled together in groups; warriors and rogues with hands on the hilts of their blades, and mages and bards with spells on the tips of their tongues.

The newlyweds had been left alone, across the bonfire from Lady Efah, as they'd been separate from the group for the purposes of the ceremony. Holly squeezed Cale's hand and stood her ground without letting go. They shared a determined smile and walked to her as one.

Lady Efah shook her head and sighed. "Is all this running about quite necessary over a simple gift?"

“Cale and I have received more than enough gifts this day,” Holly began carefully, her voice wavering slightly. She took a breath and continued firmly. “He will have none from you.”

“Mistress Bloodroot, this is a gift for *you*.” The pair stood facing her in defiant silence. “It would be rather rude to refuse a gift after I have bothered to come all this way. I taught you better than this, Cale.”

Lady Efah produced a small pouch of black velvet, and from it drew a beautiful necklace. A single black pearl, nestled in a setting of twisted gold wire that looked like lace. Holly stiffened slightly as Lady Efah moved to place the necklace around her throat, and Cale moved protectively a step closer.

"This has been in Cale's family for generations; perhaps it may help you to remember the importance of family and family ties, which he is so eager to forget."

As she spoke, Cale's gaze was drawn to the necklace, which he remembered his mother wearing when he was a child. The black pearl shimmered, catching the light of the bonfire, and seemed almost to glow with its own inner light. He remembered happier days with his family, before he grew to reject everything they were. Family... yes, family was important. Perhaps he had rejected it too thoroughly....

At his side, Holly too was drawn to the beauty of the pendant. A warmth seemed to emanate from the pearl, and something tickled at her mind. Family, ties, belonging...

As they both relaxed, they began to feel the warmth together, and to hear the faintest strains of music, so quiet it might have been their imagination. They turned to each other, and for a moment, looked into each other's eyes, seeing the vulnerability there. A tingle of fear jolted Holly back to herself, and she pulled the pendant from her neck. At the same moment, Cale shook himself, glared at Lady Efah, and took the pendant from Holly's hand. With a curse he

flung it into the bonfire. "We will take no gift from you. Our family is here, with the Band and with each other!"

Lady Efah looked at them a moment longer, then looked around at those who were slowly drawing near again. With a slight smile she turned and said "You may put away your weapons and your spells, children. I will not overstay my welcome."

Turning back to Cale and Holly, she spoke once more, seeming to choose her words carefully. "You have chosen. Live with your choice." Without another word she left the camp. Their love had proven stronger than she had anticipated, and all those assembled knew in their hearts that Cale was a Draco Disciple no longer. He was a member of the Band, and a Corvitae through and through.



(Photo by Regina Evelyn)