

THE ROYAL  
MARRIAGE  
ALLIANCE

SCARLETT HAVEN

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**SCARLETT HAVEN**

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# ABOUT THIS BOOK:

**Could a marriage alliance meant for peace now bring about a war?**

When circumstances force the fae to relinquish their princess to the dragon shifters, they will do anything to get her back, even if it means starting a war.

Wisteria has spent her life locked away in a castle. She's considered too precious to risk—a deity too invaluable to release from her cage. Stellan has spent his life dreading this marriage, but his fate was decided long ago.

Falling in love was supposed to be impossible. But what if there could be a love more rare than even soulmates? And what if Wisteria was never meant to belong to the fae?

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# NOBODY IS GOOD ENOUGH

## Wisteria

I take deep, even breaths as I make my way to the fae council meeting room. A quick glance at my reflection in a window reveals purple eyes—my natural color. Good, there is no need for the council to know what I’m really feeling.

The council... my heart pounds a little faster as I pause outside the door.

A group of fae monarchs wait inside for me. Together, they are going to decide my future. As I hear them arguing with one another through the door, my stomach tightens. They can’t agree on *anything*. How are they possibly going to pick out a husband for me?

I twist the knob, only making it two steps inside when the fighting abruptly comes to a halt. The room grows silent and I watch as each monarch stands quickly from their seats and bow deeply to me.

I don’t acknowledge their bows as I make my way toward my father in the center of the room. He gives me a soft smile, but it’s the only greeting I get from him.

“Please, sit,” my father tells the monarchs.

I dare to glance at them once again. Even though I am familiar with every fae present—I see them at least once a week—I barely know them.

Queen Summer, ironically of the Winter Court, slightly bows her head in my direction. “Imperial Highness, we are honored to be graced with your presence.”

It’s nothing I haven’t heard before. Everybody is so formal with me. And as much as I wish I could insist they call me ‘Wisteria’, I can’t.

“Thank you, Queen Summer.” I don’t nod back. If I did, she would only bow deeper.

There are many fae monarchs. So many that not all of them can be at these meetings. Only the biggest and richest courts can have a say. Though, the council is more of a formality than anything. The true power lies with my father, Emperor Emrys. At least, in theory it does.

Father’s clear blue eyes land on me. “We’re discussing your future. Seeing as this meeting is about you, I thought it best if you were involved in the conversation.”

*My future.*

This day always felt so far off. But now that it’s here, it feels like it came all too soon.

In four weeks, I will be turning twenty two, which is the proper age for a fae to marry. And despite the fact that the council has weekly discussed the topic of my marriage since my birthday last year, so far they haven’t agreed on one single candidate.

I hold my head high, not wanting them to see the storm brewing inside of me. “Have there been any developments?”

“I’m afraid not,” Father says.

Queen Carina of the Fire Court stands to her feet, inclining her head toward me. “If I may speak, Emperor Emrys, Imperial Highness.”

I want to sigh at the titles. They can call my father Emperor Emrys, but they refuse to call me anything except Imperial Highness. You’d think I was Empress already from the way they act.

Father motions for Queen Carina to continue.



“My eldest son just turned twenty two and he is single.” Her face lights up as she speaks. “My Florian is so charming. Ladies of my court just adore him. I do believe he and our Imperial Highness would make a wonderful match.”

I want to snort at the suggestion.

Florian is well known among the fae, but not for being charming. The guy is a player. He uses his good looks and title to his advantage, but I’ve never been one to be swayed by a pretty face. As for his title, even though he’s firstborn, everybody from his court is pushing for his younger brother to be named heir.

I don’t care what the council says, I’m *not* marrying her son.

Thankfully, I’m not the only one aware of her son’s reputation.

King Olette, of the Autumn Court, snorts loudly. “Don’t think fae monarchs are above gossip, Queen Carina. We’ve *all* heard about your son Florian’s extracurricular activities.”

A laugh rings through the audience. If I hadn’t been schooled in how to hide my emotions, I might even crack a smile. But I stand there with a straight face, letting the other monarchs shoot down Queen Carina’s suggestion.

“The problem is,” King Alvar, of the Warrior Court, begins, “nobody is good enough. Our Imperial Highness is so far above anybody we could suggest.”

Therein lies the problem—not that I actually *am* above anybody, but they all think it. No matter who I marry, they will always revere me to a ridiculous level. I’ll never be equal with my spouse.

Another hour of the meeting goes by and it’s all the same thing.

Nobody is good enough, at least not in their eyes. If I weren’t required by ancient fae law to produce offspring to continue the royal line of succession, I’m sure they’d want me to remain single forever.

I'm not sure what's worse—spending the rest of my life alone or being with somebody who thinks of me as a deity who is too far above them to ever truly love me.

Later, as I head back to my living quarters, I try hard not to pounder on the meeting. The lack of decision isn't at all a surprise. In fact, I think I'd be more surprised if they ever do make up their minds. Their decision just makes me feel... alone. Nobody can understand, not even my family. Though, how could they when I'm the supposed 'hope' of the fae.

As I quicken my pace, I nearly run into my older sister, who is coming out of her own room.

*Great.* I pause, knowing it would be rude to just ignore her, but I'm not sure I can take her if she's in a foul mood like she usually is.

“Wisteria, sorry!” Poppy apologizes, but her voice sounds oddly... cheerful.

How strange.

She turns around to face me and I have to physically stop my jaw from dropping open when I see that her eyes are the brightest blue I've ever seen on her. Fae's eyes change color depending on our mood. Though her eyes are naturally blue, they're usually gray—for sadness, orange—for anxiousness, or red—for anger. But the shade of bright blue they are right now is happiness. A kind of happiness I didn't know Poppy was capable of feeling.

My older sister seems to think her entire life is unfair and horrible. From the way she acts, you'd think she was the only one who doesn't have options. Sure, her fate was decided ten generations ago, but that doesn't mean I have any more of a choice than she does.

“Are you all right?” Even I can hear the skepticism in my voice.

She nods, tucking a piece of strawberry blonde hair behind her ear. “Yes. I'm just... heading out.”

“Heading out?” I have a horrible pit in my stomach at her proclamation. My sister doesn't go out—she has no reason to.

She doesn't get along with any of the female fae nobles that are her age and she obviously isn't allowed to go out with males. It would be pointless for her to be romantically involved with somebody, considering she's betrothed.

"I've got three weeks of freedom left. I want to enjoy it before I'm locked away forever." Her voice sounds icy and her eye color changes from blue to red. I want to warn her not to be so open with her emotions—even if the dragon prince, her betrothed, doesn't know how to read her eyes, it wouldn't be hard for him to figure out. He's going to realize that his wife hates him, and that wouldn't do any of us good. As much as I hate to admit it, we need this alliance with the dragons, even if they only want royal fae blood mixed with the royal dragon blood because of power.

I cock an eyebrow at her. "The dragons live on a tropical island in a castle. You'll have the Atlantic Ocean as your backyard. I'd hardly call that a prison."

"Then you marry the dragon prince." She crosses her arms over her chest, giving me a look with her cold eyes.

"I would gladly trade you positions. You go listen to the fae monarchs argue over who you should marry and see how you feel." I don't bother hiding my scoff from Poppy. "Queen Carina offered up Florian as a potential candidate. I would gladly let you marry him."

She wrinkles her nose as her eyes fade from red to, strangely, green. Is she *jealous*? "Florian isn't your type. He'd be a horrible marriage candidate for you, but at least he is easy on the eyes. He's much better than the dragon prince."

I would argue that the dragon prince would be better than most fae, but I keep the thought to myself. Sure, the dragons are powerful and a little intimidating, but they seem nice. I've met King Basilicus plenty of times and he's always been kind to me. Though I've never officially met Prince Stellan, I've seen him from a distance. He's rather good looking. Poppy could do a lot worse. And no matter what she thinks, Florian is worse.

My stomach turns sour as I realize I could probably get stuck with worse than Florian. Sure, he would be arrogant and likely an unfaithful husband, but I don't see him pushing for political gain. He hardly even bothers to cling to his title as crown prince, he'd rather see his younger brother be king.

If only Poppy realized just how much I longed to switch places with her. If only I had been born first. Even though Poppy is only ten months older than me, it's an accident of birth that has given her freedom—the same freedom she calls a prison. Doesn't she realize that getting away from the fae court is a gift?

Poppy stands up straighter, jutting out her chest. "I won't be at dinner tonight. If Father asks, please tell him I decided to eat dinner in my room."

I nod as she turns and walks off without a backward glance.

Poppy has been eating in her room a lot lately. Father says it's because she's giving one last show of defiance before she leaves for her new life with the dragons. Now, I wonder if she's been eating in her room at all. Just what is my sneaky older sister doing?

Still, I can't bring myself to care enough to follow her. Poppy has always been dramatic and overemotional. She has three weeks left before her wedding and she's allowed to spend it however she wants.

A couple of hours later, I find myself sitting at the large dining room table with my younger brother, Cypress. The two of us wait for the rest of our family.

Cypress is seven years younger than I am—he'll turn fifteen a few days after I turn twenty two. Though he's young, I am close to him. Much closer than I have ever been to Poppy.

"I heard the council is considering Florian for your marriage alliance," Cypress says, carefully keeping his face straight. "Is it too early to congratulate you?"

Calling for my magic, I send a bolt of lightning his way. He barely gets his shield up in time—not that I used enough

magic to actually hurt him. He might be able to make a weak shield because of what I taught him, but it wouldn't be enough if I put my full strength behind it. As soon as the electricity fizzles out, he busts out laughing.

“Laugh all you want, but you'll be where I am soon enough.” I cross my arms over my chest, shooting him my best glare.

“You can pretend to be mad but your eyes give you away, sister.” His eyes glow blue as he looks at me.

I could never actually be mad at Cypress. I'm pretty sure my eyes are always pink or blue around my brother. If anybody in my family understands the pressure that I'm under, it's him. Though it's infinitely different—he's not expected to save the entire fae society.

“Where is our dear older sister?” Cypress asks with a mischievous gleam in his eyes.

I shrug. “She's protesting her unfair lot in life but refusing to be in the same room as Father.”

Cypress rolls his eyes. “Poppy doesn't understand her privilege.”

He's right, though I try not to judge her too harshly. We all have our duties—it's not her fault that her duty to the family is much lighter than mine or Cypress's.

The door to the dining room opens and I look over to see Ivy walk inside. She walks to Cypress's side to take a seat. She first greets her son, then me.

Ivy is technically my stepmother, but she's always just been Ivy to me. She's Cypress's mom and my father's pseudo wife.

I was just a baby when my birth mother passed away. Because my father had to have another child—a spare—the court forced him to marry. Though he never loved Ivy, he shared a room with her only long enough for her to fall pregnant. After that, he moved back into the room that he shared with my mother and proceeded to ignore his new wife.

Fifteen years later, he still ignores her except at court functions.

We all have our roles to play. It's just part of being a member of the royal family. Without us, fae society would be more chaotic than it already is. Monarchs would be at war with one another and the infighting would only grow worse.

As unhappy as our family may be, we do this for a reason. Complaining about it like Poppy does won't do anything except make everybody else miserable.

"I heard there was a council meeting today," Ivy says, her eyes glancing toward me. "Two in one week."

"They usually spend the entire day fighting over who my husband will be that they had to have a second meeting to discuss other important things." I shift in my seat, not making eye contact with her.

She scoffs. "I still don't see why they won't just let you choose. It's *your* marriage."

"Like they let you choose?" Cypress mutters under his breath.

Ivy stiffens but doesn't say anything.

My father's second marriage wasn't a choice he would've made if the council hadn't forced it on him. Ivy didn't want to marry my father any more than he wanted to marry her.

"I've accepted my fate." I sit up straighter. "Unless they try to force me to marry Florian. Then I might have to murder him and make it look like an accident."

Ivy gasps, but Cypress laughs, knowing I am joking. I'm not the murdering type.

The door opens and Cypress's laugh is cut short. I watch Ivy stiffen and Cypress clenches his jaw. I turn to face my father as he sits down. Moments later, servants come in with plates of food. Cypress and Ivy eat without saying a word.

"Are you okay?" My father turns his attention to me, not taking a bite of his food yet.

I shrug. “I guess.”

“I know it’s not ideal, but with your blood, we have to be careful with who you marry,” Father says. “If it wasn’t for that dragon alliance, the fae would be in trouble. If your sister were heir...” his voice trails off.

From what I understand, my father’s first wife—my mother—had really weak magic, like Poppy does. The fact that I have as much magic as I do is an anomaly. I have even more magic than Father, which is completely unheard of. They can’t make any mistakes when it comes to blood as strong as mine. The problem is, nobody can come close to my magic, not even Cypress, even though he does have strong magic.

I glance up and see Cypress’s eyes on me. They have a faint orange tint to them and I know he’s concerned about me.

“You want to trade titles?” I tease my younger brother. “You can be the heir and I’ll be the spare.”

He snorts. “No thanks. In seven years, I’m sure they’ll be picking out my wife too.”

True.

Cypress may not be the heir, but that doesn’t mean he gets any more choices than I do. Except his title will be more of an honorary one while mine is a title of expectations, pressures, and an entire species of people looking to me to save them.

“You will make an incredible empress,” Father tells me. “You will see, Wisteria. You were born for greatness.”

The smile slips from Cypress’s lips, but he quickly schools his features and remains neutral. His gray eyes give him away though.

My father would never tell Cypress anything like that. For the most part, Father ignores that he and Ivy even exist. My heart breaks for my brother and I wonder how my father can’t see how special Cypress is. He would make a far better emperor than I would an empress.

I try not to think of the future as I head to bed later that night. I’ve still got a few more weeks to worry about marriage,

and even then it will be a while before I am empress. My father is still the ruler of our people. A lot can change between now and then.

Just as I close my eyes, a loud scream echoes through the castle.



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## YOU WOULDN'T UNDERSTAND

### Wisteria

I jump out of bed and don't even bother changing out of my pajamas as I rush down the hallway, toward the sound of shouts. The first sharp scream I now recognize belonged to Poppy, and the shouts are a mix of her and my father. When I hear my father shout back, I pick up my pace.

Whatever is going on, it can't be good. My father has *never* shouted like this before, not even when we were children and would get into trouble.

"—can't control me anymore!" I hear the last of Poppy's words as I round the corner and find Poppy and Father standing in the middle of the corridor.

Father narrows his dark, dark eyes at my sister. "How could you do something so... so... witless?"

As I get closer, I realize that his eyes aren't just dark—they're *black*.

I've never seen my father's eyes black before. I've seen them red a few times when he's gotten angry, but this is beyond anger. This is pure rage. I stop abruptly, my breath getting caught in my throat.

What has Poppy done to upset Father this much?

"I should have known," Father growls out the words. "You've never been one to consider your actions. You're so much like your—" He abruptly cuts off his words, shaking his head. "Regardless, this doesn't change anything, Poppy."

She sucks in a sharp breath. “Of course, this changes things! It changes *everything!*”

Father shakes his head. “It does not. I will have the situation dealt with by morning.” He looks into her eyes. “And you will not defy me again. You will stay in this castle until I say you can leave.”

A wave of magic washes over me as I realize what Father has just done. Poppy realizes it at the same time as she lets out a roar of screams.

He compelled her.

My eyes widen as I look between the two. Compulsion doesn’t work on royals. I know that for a fact because Cypress and I used to practice on one another when we were younger. We’d try to get each other to do ridiculous things. But this isn’t something Poppy will be able to disobey.

Does my father’s compulsion work differently because he’s emperor?

“I HATE YOU!” Poppy’s voice turns into a growl at the end, her eyes nearly as black as Father’s.

Father doesn’t flinch at her words. He doesn’t even seem to care. He just looks at my older sister, shaking his head. “You have no idea how lucky you are, Poppy. And to think you would throw it away on a *fae*—a royal, no less.”

My father’s words hit me hard as I recognize the truth in them.

Poppy *is* lucky. She gets to get away from the fae. But then I comprehend the rest of his statement.

What is he talking about? What did Poppy throw away?

“What’s going on?” I hear Cypress ask from behind me.

Father turns to look at Cypress and me, his eyes still as black as obsidian. His gaze lingers for only a moment before he looks behind us.

“Give us a moment,” he commands.

I turn around and see a group of guards standing there. They turn at my father's command, leaving the room.

"What happened?" I ask once the guards are far enough away that they can't hear our conversation.

Father lets out a breath, but he doesn't say anything. He just looks from me to Poppy and shakes his head like he can't form words.

"Did you compel her?" I look between Father and Poppy.

My sister has tears streaming down her face and her eyes flicker between black and gray. When I look at Father again, his eyes are their natural color of blue. He—like Cypress and I—has good control of his emotions. The fact that he lost control, even for a few moments, must mean Poppy did something truly horrible.

"I did," Father answers after a moment of hesitation.

"How?" Cypress's eyes widen as he looks at Father. "You shouldn't be able to compel her."

"He's always been able to compel me." Poppy hiccups, her voice breaking. "I'm not strong enough to resist like the two of you."

"It doesn't matter your strength," Cypress says. "It's a blood thing—"

Father cuts him off. "This matters not. What's important is what Poppy did."

I look at him, waiting for him to explain. When he doesn't, I turn to Poppy. "What did you do?"

"I did what I had to." She crosses her arms over her chest, not backing down despite seeing our father's ire. "You wouldn't understand—you're the perfect one. Father *adores* you. It's me he hates."

Cypress shifts uncomfortably beside me. I want to scream at Poppy for being so callous. Out of the three of us, it's clear who the least favorite child is, and it's not Poppy.

Poppy continues, unaware of her harsh words. “I don’t want to marry the dragon crown prince. Everybody knows dragons are fearful, harsh creatures. Who would want to marry a monster?”

A monster? Really?

I want to roll my eyes at her dramatics.

Dragon shifters, while powerful, are *not* monsters. They are actually pretty tame compared to most supernaturals. They stay out of fights among the other supernaturals and keep to themselves. They’re known for being a peaceful bunch.

Father was right—Poppy *is* lucky to be marrying their crown prince. She gets to go live with them and get away from the fae.

To the outside world, the fae are beautiful and elegant supernaturals. But the reality is, fae are cunning and cutthroat. Their beauty is only skin deep. As much as I hate it, I’ll never be able to get away from the games.

“I’ve told you, Prince Stellan is a really nice—”

Poppy cuts Father off. “I don’t care! I’m not marrying him!”

“Yes, you are,” Father says, a note of finality in his voice.

“I can’t be married to two people! And you can’t force me to divorce Florian.”

“You *married* Florian?” I can barely hold back my disgust. “As in Florian of the Fire Court? The same guy who just last month caused a fistfight between Duchess Peony and Princess Helene?”

Cypress snorts. “Who knew Princess Helene had such a strong right hook?”

Poppy lowers her gaze. “We’ve been seeing each other for three weeks now. He’s who I’ve been sneaking out to see. He loves me. When he proposed marriage, it seemed like the answer I’ve been waiting for.”

I shake my head. “You’re so stupid. Even I would prefer the dragon prince over Florian. Heck, I’d marry a *human* before I’d marry Florian.”

Father’s eyes land on me. “You’re not seeing a human, are you?”

“Gross, no,” I say, assuring him. “Fret not, Father. I know my role. I would never date—or marry—without the council’s approval.”

His shoulders relax.

“Of course not.” Poppy’s black eyes land on me. “Perfect Wisteria could never do anything wrong.”

Her words nearly cause me to flinch until I realize that I can’t take anything she says to heart. She’s upset right now. So upset that she thought marrying *Florian* was a good idea.

“At least the council won’t bug you about marrying him anymore,” Cypress whispers to me.

Father clears his throat. “The council won’t know. Nobody will. I will send my guards to arrest Florian. I will quietly dissolve the marriage and nobody will be any wiser to what’s happened.”

“WHAT?” Poppy screams.

He ignores her, looking at me. “If the dragons find out, they’ll insist I send my second born daughter instead. That *cannot* happen.”

He’s right, of course. Because as much as Poppy wishes it were so, she could never be the heir. Her magic simply isn’t strong enough and the council would eat her alive. She doesn’t even possess the cunning attitude required—she’s way too passive. Though, maybe she’s not as passive as I once thought. If she were, she never would’ve run off and gotten married. However, her delivery of the news lacked sense. If she had been smart, she would’ve waited to tell Father of her marriage until she was in front of the dragon king. That’s the only way she could’ve stopped the marriage.

Father turns to Poppy again. “You will speak of this marriage to nobody.”

I stiffen as I feel the magic in his words.

He turns to Cypress and I. “That goes for the two of you as well.” He doesn’t bother with compulsion on us—it wouldn’t work. “I’m going to go talk to the guards and have them detain Florian.” He looks at Poppy one last time and shakes his head. Without a word, he turns and leaves the room.

Cypress lets out a low whistle. “Wow. He is furious.”

Poppy huffs and turns to leave.

I ignore her and glance at Cypress. His eyes are wide with shock—an expression I’m certain mirrors my own.

“How can somebody related to us lack so much intelligence?” he asks.

I laugh at his question, bumping him with my elbow. “That’s not a nice thing to say about our sister.”

“I’m serious. She’s got royal blood in her, blood that has been bred by design to be powerful and smart. Clearly, something went wrong with her,” Cypress says.

I don’t know what to say, so I keep my mouth shut. I’ve often wondered the same thing—not that I think my sister is unintelligent, but she is very different than Cypress and me. If I didn’t know any better, I’d question if she were adopted. But that can’t be so. The dragon shifters would figure out if she were. They’d be insulted if we offered them a bride lacking royal blood. And while the dragons aren’t dangerous they also aren’t passive.

“I’m going to go talk to her.”

Cypress cocks an eyebrow. “Are you sure you want to tonight?”

“No.” Especially not after what she said to me. “But she’s our sister. She needs somebody on her side. Father certainly isn’t going to ever take her side.”

“Of course not. You’re the heir and that is exactly how he and the rest of the fae want things.”

I study my brother carefully. His eyes stay blue, but there is bitterness in his words.

He puts a hand on my shoulder. “Good luck with Poppy. Just remember not to take the things she says to heart—she’s jealous.”

She’s jealous of me and I’m jealous of her.

How can she not see that she’s got it made? She’s so lucky not to be stuck in the fae court.

“I’ll be fine,” I promise him, though I doubt the words as I say them. Poppy is really upset and I don’t imagine she’ll be able to be consoled tonight.

Cypress lets his hand fall away, so I turn and head toward Poppy’s room. I can hear her sobs through the door. I knock lightly on it and twist the knob.

“Poppy, can I come in?”

“If you’re here to lecture me, save it.” She wipes under her eyes.

“I just want to talk,” I assure her.

She motions for me to enter, so I do. I take a seat beside her on the loveseat. I sit there for a moment, not saying anything. Poppy cries for a few more minutes until her sobs slowly cease.

“Go ahead and say what you want to say.” Poppy’s voice is rough and thick with tears.

I take a deep breath before speaking. “I just want to know why.”

“Why?” she asks.

“Why would you marry—” I cut my words off before saying Florian’s name with disdain. Clearly Poppy has strong feelings for him. I clear my throat. “Why would you run off and get married?”

“How could you understand?” Poppy wipes at her nose with a tissue. “You don’t understand because you’re not promised to somebody.”

I want to snort at her response.

I may not be ‘promised’ to anybody, but that doesn’t mean I have any more choice than she does.

“You think I get a say in who I marry?” I ask, raising my voice slightly. “Why do you think the council has been meeting twice a week? It’s because they argue over who I’m going to marry one day.”

“At least you get to marry a fae.” Her voice sounds bitter. “I have to marry a monster.”

I don’t bother saying she’s wrong. I’ve met King Basilicus and even seen Prince Stellan in passing. The royal dragon shifters are actually pretty nice.

“I know you don’t get it.” She sighs, turning to face me. “But, Wisteria, I’m in love. Florian and I *love* one another. And someday you will see the love is worth risking everything for.”

“Love?” I snort. “You’ve dated Florian for *three weeks*. That’s hardly enough time to fall in love with him.”

Poppy crosses her arms over her chest. “Of course, you wouldn’t get it. You’ll probably never truly fall in love.”

Her words make my chest ache, but only because she’s right.

I want love as much as the next person, but it’s not an option for me. I know better than to dream of ever finding love.

“Will you break Father’s compulsion?” Poppy asks.

I hesitate.

“Please. Not all of it. Just the compulsion where I have to stay in the castle?” She chews on her bottom lip as she watches me. Her eyes flicker between light blue—her natural



color—and a vibrant blue. It's the first happiness I've seen in her eyes all night.

I tuck a piece of hair behind my ear. “What do you want to do?”

“I promise I'm not going to run away,” she says, holding up both hands. “I just... I just have a few more weeks of freedom left. I want to be able to leave the castle.”

Fae can't lie, so I know Poppy isn't planning to run away.

Still, I'm not sure if I should break my father's compulsion.

“Please, Wisteria.” Poppy grabs onto my arm. “I can't stand being locked up in this castle. I'm not going to do anything stupid. I promise I won't even try to see Florian. I just want freedom for a few more weeks.”

I nod, letting out a breath. “Fine.” I pour my magic into my words. “You're free to leave the castle as you please.”

“Thank you.” She throws her arms around me and squeezes me. “You have no idea how much this means to me.”

Maybe I should feel guilty for breaking the compulsion, but I couldn't leave her to be miserable. Besides, she did promise. What harm could she really cause?

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## REPERCUSSIONS

### Wisteria

I roll my eyes when I see Poppy walk into the dining room for breakfast.

It's been a week since Father dissolved her and Florian's marriage—a marriage Florian had no problem with being dissolved. In fact, he almost looked relieved when my father worked the magic.

Fae don't have divorces—no supernaturals do. But since the marriage was less than twelve hours old, hadn't been consummated, and had been performed by a human officiant, it wasn't an 'official' marriage. Something my father seemed relieved by. If he hadn't been able to dissolve the marriage, I'd be the one betrothed to the dragon crown prince.

Despite this, Poppy is being very dramatic about it all. I shouldn't have expected anything less than that from my older sister, but even I think her attitude is a bit over the top.

Since she considers a life married to the dragon prince a 'fate worse than death'—her words, not mine—she is wearing all black. She's decided to mourn her old life. But a simple black dress wouldn't do. Everything she does is over the top, so she more resembles a moody teenager than a person in mourning. A black dress, big black boots, and even black lipstick. She tried to dye her hair black, but our father drew the line. He used magic to dissolve the color back to her natural shade of strawberry blonde.

Honestly, Poppy acts like she's the youngest in our family. Our fifteen-year-old brother has more emotional maturity than her.

"Two weeks until the end of my world," Poppy says in a monotone voice as she plops down hard in a chair. She makes sure to turn the chair away from our father so that she's not looking at him.

Father ignores her. The only show of his annoyance is the orange hue of his eyes.

Cypress and I share a look, but neither of us says a word. We know better than to get involved in an argument that isn't ours.

Nobody says anything for a good three minutes. At that point, Poppy gets up, huffs loudly, and stomps out of the room. The second the door slams shut after she leaves, I take in a deep breath.

Should I be this relieved that Poppy is gone? Does it make me a bad sister? Two weeks and then she'll be the dragon shifter's problem. Though, maybe that is a bad thing for our alliance with them. No doubt they'll be asking to give her back.

Cypress clears his throat. "I heard Florian has a new girlfriend. He brought her to some court function last night."

His words make me snort, which makes him start laughing. I soon join him and even our father cracks a smile. With us is the only place Father can shed his impassive mask and just be himself. Though, it doesn't last long—it never does.

Father sits up straighter. "I need the two of you at the council meeting tomorrow."

A groan slips past my lips. "Please tell me they're not discussing my marriage candidates again."

He shakes his head. "That's for Friday's meeting. Tomorrow we're discussing a potential alliance with the elementals."

I cock an eyebrow at that. “But they hate other supernaturals.”

He doesn’t deny it. “So do fae.”

Cypress smirks at that. “Except the dragons.”

Dragons are the only supernaturals that fae have ever made an alliance with, which is why we’re in this mess to begin with.

Of course fae like dragon shifters—they’re the only supernaturals on the planet that can match our strength. Or, at least, *could* match our strength. That was before our magic started to weaken. Now, I’m not sure where we stand on the supernatural hierarchy scale. It’s why we keep to ourselves so much.

What will the dragon shifters think when they realize how weak Poppy’s magic is? Then again, with her attitude, her level of magic will be the least of their worries.

That night, Poppy doesn’t show up for dinner. When Father sends for her, the guards can’t find her. The same thing happens the next night, and again the next.

Poppy is gone from the castle, though Father can’t figure out how she managed it. But I know. It’s all my fault. I was the one who broke his compulsion. I made her promise not to do anything stupid and fae can’t lie. I took that for it granted without considering that what Poppy and I consider ‘stupid’ are two very different things.

I take a deep breath, trying not to stress about it too much. She’ll show back up eventually and when she does, Father will make sure she can’t leave again.

It isn’t until the fourth day that Poppy finally shows up. And when she does show up, she is brought directly to Father’s office, where he and I are going over notes from our previous council meeting.

Poppy has a smug look on her face and each of her arms is held in place by a fae guard. Her black clothes are, thankfully, gone. But I don’t like the fact that her eyes are the brightest blue I’ve ever seen. Poppy doesn’t do happy.

“Where have you been?” Father clenches his jaw as he glances from the papers to Poppy. His entire body stiffens as he looks into her eyes. “What did you do?”

She lifts her shirt, showing a small bandage on her abdomen. “I found a solution to my problem.”

Father inhales slowly. “I don’t have time for your games, Poppy. Tell me what happened.”

A bit of his magic slips through his words. I’m not sure if he meant to, but I can feel the static from it in the air.

“I got my tubes tied,” she answers, her lips moving without permission.

My stomach sinks to my toes as her words register.

The alliance with the dragon shifters is all about *babies*—because mixing fae and dragon shifter blood makes the bloodline stronger. But without the ability to have children, Poppy can’t fulfill the alliance.

Which would mean the duty falls to the second eldest daughter. Meaning me.

Father slaps his hands down on his desk. “YOU DID *WHAT?*”

“I’m unable to have children,” Poppy says the words so casually, not even flinching at the harshness of our father’s voice. “I told you I didn’t want to marry the dragon prince. You should have listened to me and found a way out of the contract. Now your precious heir will have to marry him.”

My ears begin to ring, so I sit down in the closest chair.

“But...” my voice trails off as I glance up at my older sister. “Why would you do that, Poppy? You know what this means for the fae.”

“This is selfish beyond reasoning. You don’t know what you’ve done.” Father runs his hands over his face.

For the first time in my life, my father is scared. His eyes have never been this bright of an orange before. His hands tremble as he takes a shaky breath.

“Guards, cuff Poppy for me.” Father’s eyes quickly fade from orange to their natural color.

“Cuff me? What for?” Poppy shrieks as the guards hold her hands tightly together.

“You’re under arrest,” he says calmly.

“You would arrest your own daughter?” The fight goes out of her as the cuffs are tightened around her wrists. She stares at Father in disbelief.

“Do you not understand what you’ve done?” Father gives her a sharp look. “This is out of my hands. The council will now decide your fate.”

“The council?” Her face turns white as she gives him a horrified look.

“You’ll be lucky if they don’t demand your immediate execution.”

“Execution?” She falls backward, but the guards catch her and keep her from falling. “Father, please. Can’t you hide this? Fix it somehow?”

Father shakes his head. “I’m sorry.” He turns away from her and looks at me. “Go get Cypress and meet us in the council room. I will make sure everybody is there within the hour.”

I nod, jumping up from my spot on the couch. As I’m about to walk out the door, I lock eyes with Poppy. The blue of her eyes is long gone—now they flash between yellow and orange. She’s terrified, but she only has herself to blame.

When I get to Cypress’s room, I pound hard on his door, waiting for him to answer. When he opens it, he has a scowl on his face, but when he sees the look on my face he instantly takes a step closer.

“What’s wrong?” He puts his hand on my shoulder, like he’s trying to comfort me. It’s then that I wonder what I must look like. I don’t think I could hide my emotions from him right now if I tried.

“We’re wanted in the council room.” My voice shakes as I speak.

He stands there, waiting for an explanation.

I take a deep breath. “Poppy is in a lot of trouble.”

At my words, he gets moving quickly. He grabs ahold of my hand and together we march toward the council meeting room.

Poppy may be dramatic, moody, and impulsive, but she’s still our sister. We love her, no matter what her choices. Neither of us wants to see her executed, but I’m afraid that is exactly what the council will want.

My stomach clenches as we make our way inside. The room is already half full. I’m sure everybody teleported here the moment they got the alert from Father. Emergency meetings simply aren’t called—ever. There definitely hasn’t been one in my lifetime, possibly not even my father’s lifetime. Everybody is curious as they look at Cypress and me. My brother doesn’t let go of my hand, even under their scrutiny, and I’m glad. I need his support right now.

A few moments later, when my father walks in, the room falls completely silent. A few steps behind him, guards guide Poppy into the room. She’s in cuffs and she doesn’t try to fight as the guards herd her into the room. She keeps her head down, letting her hair curtain her face.

“What is this about, Emperor Emrys?” King Finn looks between Poppy and my father, trying to make sense of the situation.

Poppy has never been before the council before.

What a heck of an introduction.

“A few days ago, there was an incident,” Father begins.

My heart thrums in my ears.

Is he going to tell them *everything*?

I listen as my father tells them what transpired. Poppy’s marriage to Florian, the dissolution of the union, her

disappearing, and then what happened while she was away.

“I have brought Poppy before the council to decide on a proper punishment,” Father says, ending his long speech.

The room is completely silent for two seconds before everybody begins speaking at once. Their voices raise in outrage, some calling for her immediate execution. But one person brings silence to everybody.

“If Poppy is no longer eligible for the dragon fae alliance, that means our Imperial Highness will take her place, correct?” Queen Winnie, of the Wisdom Court, asks.

Everybody goes quiet at her words.

“That is correct,” Father says.

Queen Winnie looks from Father to me. She bows before addressing me. “How long until your birthday, Imperial Highness?”

I clear my throat. “Three weeks.”

She bows again, then turns toward my father. “That gives us three weeks to find a work around for the treaty. We’ve found a solution before, certainly we can do it again.”

What does she mean by *that*? What solution did they find?

I give a questioning look at my father, but he is looking at Queen Winnie. He nods thoughtfully.

“Yes, we will work to find a solution. But first, we must discuss a proper punishment for Poppy,” Father says, keeping his tone even.

I step up beside my father. “May I speak, Father?”

He nods.

I turn to the council members, making sure to make eye contact with each of the fae monarchs. “What my sister has done is wrong. She was incredibly selfish and only thought of herself, but I don’t believe that she has done anything worthy of death.”



“Imperial Highness, what do you suggest?” King Dash, of the Air Court, bows deeply to me.

I glance at my older sister for a moment. Her bright yellow eyes meet mine and I can see her body tremble. She truly didn’t consider the consequences of her actions. She just wanted to be free and I can’t fault her for that.

Turning my attention back to the monarchs, I straighten my shoulders. “My sister wanted to be free, so I think we should give her exactly what she wants. Freedom.”

They all stare at me, too frightened to argue against what I’ve said. The monarchs admonish me as something high above them, but if it had been my father who spoke, they would be fighting with him right now.

How am I supposed to rule the fae with fairness and equality when they can’t even tell me if they disagree with what I’m saying?

I fight to keep my posture straight. “What I mean is, Poppy’s magic should be taken away, as she has proved that she isn’t responsible enough for her gift. Poppy risked us *all* by going to a human doctor to have surgery.”

Magic is a gift. Fae, of all supernaturals, know this. As fae magic gets weaker and weaker with each generation, we know exactly how important it is to guard what’s been given to us.

Father nods. “I agree with my daughter.”

“Very well.” Queen Summer speaks, demanding the attention of the room. “But just to take away her magic isn’t punishment enough. Once her magic is taken away, she should be banished to live among the humans.”

My stomach sinks at the suggestion.

We all know what banishment means—she’ll be compelled. Though she won’t forget her life as a supernatural, she will be compelled to never speak about it. It would be too big of a risk otherwise. But not only will she be forced to be silent, she’ll never be allowed to talk to another supernatural again, and that includes our family.

I glance over at Poppy. Her eyes have changed from yellow to gray. She knows exactly what the council is asking for. Considering the only other option is death, there isn't anything I can do to help her.

"Let us vote," Father says.

I take a step back, standing beside Cypress.

As I am not twenty two yet, I don't have a vote on the council.

Just for three more weeks.

Then what? Will I be marrying the dragon crown prince? Or will I take my place at my father's side?

Cypress puts his arm around my middle and I lean into his side. As a fae, I'm not supposed to show emotion, but this is about my big sister. Even after everything she's done, I love her. And if the council sees that emotion as a weakness, so be it.

"You did well," Cypress whispers, as the council takes a couple of minutes to talk before voting. "You showed her a mercy that she wouldn't get any other way."

My eyes sting with unshed tears, but I blink them away. "Are you sure this was the right thing?"

"They were going to execute her." Cypress pulls back to look me in the eyes. "And you were right. Poppy wants freedom more than anything else—a freedom she'd never be allowed to have as a fae. Taking away her magic is a gift."

He's right, of course, but I still feel horrible.

In the end, the council decides to honor my wishes to take away Poppy's magic. Cypress and I aren't even allowed to say goodbye to her as the guards whisk her from the room. All I can do is hope that she'll be happy now—happier than she ever was as a fae.

Father dismisses Cypress and me as the rest of the council discusses what to do about the dragon fae alliance, but deep down I already know what will happen. If there truly was a way out of the alliance, the fae would've done it years ago.

I will be forced to fulfill the role. And Cypress will be forced to take my spot as heir. I only hope Cypress can handle it.

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## THERE ARE WORSE FATES

### Wisteria

One week later, Father and I arrive at King Basilicus's home.

Well, home is a bit of an understatement because the king of the dragons lives on an *island*. And his 'home' covers half the large island and it's as big as the castle I grew up in, if not slightly larger.

"Why isn't our castle on the beach?" I ask Father, as a driver pulls in front of the home-castle-mansion.

Father laughs. "Our castle is two thousand years old, Wisteria. So you'd have to go back in time and ask your many great grandparents that question."

My eyes are wide as I take in the surrounding landscape. There is a lot less stone here than back home. Instead of rolling hills and tall coniferous trees, there are palm trees and sand. The castle itself sits on top of a large mountain, but the grounds extend all the way to the beach.

I've never seen anything like this in my life—not that I've done any traveling. But maybe that will change now.

The council is still trying to find a way to get me out of this marriage, but my father couldn't put off this meeting any longer. The wedding is supposed to be in one week, but we have to let the dragons know that we need to put it off for another week—until my birthday. While the fae monarchs are confident they'll find a loophole, I doubt it. The contract was

written by fae and they will have thought of everything. Ten generations ago, they weren't worried about the lessening of magic. They only wanted to make sure the alliance held. And now... Now, the strongest fae to ever exist is marrying a dragon shifter.

I swallow hard as I realize what is about to happen. I'm going to be meeting my future *husband* today. And his father. Sure, I've met them both before, in passing. But I can't even remember what the prince looks like—I had never paid attention before. Before, he was betrothed to my older sister. I had no reason to give him more than a passing glance. I couldn't even remember his hair color. Dark, I think? But brown or black? And his eyes... I'm not sure I got close enough to see his eye color.

Does it matter?

If I'm being honest, maybe a little. I'm going to be married to the guy. What if I'm not attracted to him?

The thought nearly makes me laugh. The guy is a *prince* for crying out loud, and he's a dragon shifter. Dragon shifters, particularly their men, are very attractive. They're not short, like fae men. My father and brother both stand at about five feet and five inches tall—and they're *tall* for fae. Even my own five feet two inches is tall for a fae woman. But I'm pretty sure all dragon shifters are at least six feet tall.

Height aside, they're supernatural. All supernaturals are attractive. And I have a feeling this dragon prince is probably too gorgeous for my own good.

Which is the real problem—what if I'm attracted to him, but he's not attracted to me? Did he think Poppy was pretty? My sister and I look nothing alike. What if he's disappointed to be marrying me instead of her?

“Wisteria,” Father says, breaking me out of my mental breakdown.

I blink, slowly taking a breath. “Sorry. I was just... thinking.”

Overthinking is more like it.

His eyes soften as he grabs ahold of my hand. “I am sorry for the position that Poppy has put you in. You were born for greatness. It’s why the council is so set against this marriage. But I also know you’re going to handle this like you do everything else—with all you’ve got. You won’t run away from your duty.”

My heart softens. “You’re right. I won’t run away. I just wish the council could see that Cypress will do an amazing job. He’s going to be a great emperor.”

“He’s still young,” Father says, neither confirming nor denying what I’ve said. “And he’s going to have to work hard to convince the council that he’s good enough to rule the fae.”

Cypress will have a lot on him, but I know he can handle it.

“How are you?” Father asks as the car comes to a stop in front of a circle drive.

Somebody walks over to open the door for us. They stand by the door, waiting for us to get out. Neither Father or I move.

I lick my lips, which suddenly feel dry. “I’m okay. There are worse fates than marrying the dragon crown prince.”

Father cocks his head to the side, carefully studying my eyes. “You’re happy.”

I nod. “I am.”

He slowly shakes his head. “Nothing gets you down, does it?”

How do I tell him that I’m *excited* by the fact that I don’t have to be the empress? I don’t want the responsibility that he carries. As much as I hate leaving the burden to Cypress, I equally love that I am free.

Father climbs out first and holds his arm toward me. I link mine through his as a servant guides us up a stone staircase that leads to a large glass door. He opens it and bows to us as we walk inside. Once we’re in the foyer, the servant leads us through the large, open mansion, toward the back of the house.

I'm surprised when he opens the back door and motions us out onto a large courtyard.

The sound of waves crashing onto rocks instantly calms my racing heart. The smell of salt water is strong. I watch a teenage boy dive into a large swimming pool, and an older guy is sitting at a table, splitting his attention between some papers in front of him and the boy in the pool. The servant leads us right toward them.

The older guy at the table looks up and slides off his sunglasses, putting them onto the table. He stands up, slightly bowing. "Emperor Emrys, it's a nice surprise." His gaze flickers to me and he bows again, slightly deeper this time. "Imperial Highness."

"Just Emrys," my father tells him. "I've told you many times, there is no need for formalities between old friends."

"Of course."

"King Basilicus, you know my daughter, Wisteria," Father says.

"It is a surprise that you brought your daughter." King Basilicus looks curiously from me to my father. "I know the fae don't like to let her leave the castle very often."

It's a nice way of saying that I'm a prisoner. Because the fae are paranoid and think something horrible will happen to me if I leave the safety of the stone walls.

I glance out at the ocean below, my heart soaring. The sun reflects off the surface, making the teal blue shade of the water sparkle. I never thought I would see something like this in person.

"I'm surprised you didn't bring Poppy. The wedding is only a week away," King Basilicus says.

My stomach tightens at the mention of the wedding.

"That is what we are here to discuss. Where is your eldest son?" Father looks around the courtyard.

King Basilicus pulls his phone from the pocket of his shorts, which draws my attention to his outfit. He's got on a

pair of blue swimming trunks with flowers on them. His t-shirt is plain white and he's wearing a pair of flip flops. Surprisingly appropriate for the current setting, but it makes me feel very overdressed.

"Stellan is on his way here. His mother has him running an errand, but he should be back any moment." He locks his phone and stuffs it back into the pocket of his shorts.

An errand? The crown prince runs *errands*?

I try to imagine running to the store to get a gallon of milk or even just going to a coffee shop to get a latte. I don't even know how to drive.

What an interesting life. One that could possibly be mine.

"Interesting," King Basilicus says.

I look up and notice that he's studying me.

"What is interesting?" I ask.

"Your eyes." He knits his brows as he looks at me. "They're bright green."

Father turns his head sharply, narrowing his eyes at me.

I blink. "Sorry. I didn't realize."

"What does green mean?" King Basilicus asks.

"Jealousy." I glance down, clearing my throat.

I can feel my father's glare. He probably didn't want me telling the dragon king that bit of information.

"What are you jealous about?" King Basilicus crosses his arms over his chest and he looks back and forth between my father and me.

I chew on my lip and look at my father, wondering if I should answer or not. After considering for just a moment, I decide I should tell him. I don't want to hide anything from him if he's to be my father-in-law.

"You said Prince Stellan was running an errand. I've never done anything like that before. It kind of sounds fun." I dare to glance at my father and his face immediately softens.



King Basilicus moves his chair and it scrapes against the concrete as he sits down. He motions toward the other chairs around the table. “Take a seat.” He folds his hand on the table as Father and I take a seat. “I am wondering what this is about. You have me very curious.”

“A lot has happened, but I think it’s best if we wait for Prince Stellan,” Father says, not giving any hints as to the nature of our visit.

King Basilicus’s attention goes to something behind us. “Ah, Stellan, join us.”

I have to force myself not to turn around and gawk at the newcomer. I only get one chance to make a first impression and I want it to be a good one. So I wait until he stands right beside his father to look at him.

My mouth goes dry as I glance up at the man who has joined us. He, like his father, is extremely tall. He doesn’t have dark hair at all, like I thought. Instead, his hair is a sandy blond, with varying shades highlighted through his hair. His skin is tanned—most likely from spending a lot of time outdoors. It makes me very aware of the fact that I’ve spent most of my winter indoors and am pale.

The thing that stands out most about Stellan’s appearance is his eyes. They’re a bright, teal green. Or maybe blue. I can’t exactly tell because they seem to change colors, though not like a fae. His eye color depends on how the light hits them.

King Basilicus motions toward Father and me. “Stellan, this is Emperor Emrys and his younger daughter, Im—”

I cut him off. “Wisteria.” I clear my throat. “My name is Wisteria.”

Stellan bows to my father. “Hello, Emperor Emrys.” He gives me a half bow. “Princess Wisteria.”

Princess is better than Imperial Highness I suppose.

“It’s just Wisteria,” I tell him.

Prince Stellan looks at me for a long moment, his eyes looking more green in the light as he studies me. I should

probably look away, but I can't. I don't want to. I wonder for a moment what color my eyes are, but I suppose it doesn't matter. Prince Stellan won't know what the different colors mean for my mood—that is something he will find out later on, as he gets to know me.

“Emperor Emrys is here to talk about the wedding,” King Basilicus says.

It's impossible to miss the way the smile slips off of Prince Stellan's face. He turns away from me, looking at his father. It takes him a few seconds to force his smile back into place.

It seems that he's as excited about the wedding as Poppy was.

As soon as Prince Stellan sits down, King Basilicus turns to my father. “What's going on, Emrys? I know you wouldn't come if it wasn't urgent.”

“There have been some... developments,” Father begins.

I nearly snort at his wording. Developments? Fae may not be able to lie, but they can skirt dangerously around the truth.

Prince Stellan sits up straighter, watching my father more closely.

“Please, Emrys, don't do the fae thing where you soften the truth. Tell me everything.” King Basilicus leans forward, urging my father on.

My father stays quiet.

I clear my throat. “Poppy was stripped of her powers and sent to live with the humans.”

Father turns to glare at me. “Wisteria.”

“What? They deserve to know.” I turn to look at King Basilicus. “And since my older sister is no longer available for the marriage alliance, I am to take her place.”

Prince Stellan's eyes immediately land on me and he studies me even more carefully than before. I can't blame him for this—before, I was just the fae emperor's daughter. Now, he knows we are to be married.

Father sighs. “I was going to say it more delicately than that.”

My father’s words cause me to look away from Prince Stellan’s intense gaze. “You were going to soften the truth. King Basilicus asked for you not to. I just helped you.”

“You’ve never been one to speak your mind,” Father says.

I shrug. “Maybe because the council meetings are stuffy. That, and the fact that they take everything I say so seriously. I’m scared I’ll speak and accidentally start a war.”

“Being at the beach has loosened your tongue.” Father cocks an eyebrow at me, shaking his head. “You’re more like your mother than I gave you credit for.”

Father *never* talks about my mother. She’s been a taboo topic for as long as I can remember. To hear him speak about her has my heart racing.

“Your eyes...” King Basilicus stares at me, like he can read my very soul. “Whenever Poppy is around, her eyes are usually orange, yellow, or red. But I’ve watched you, and since you’ve arrived, your eyes have stayed purple and blue, aside from when they flashed green for a moment. This means you’re comfortable around us, yes?”

I lick my lips. “Purple is my natural eye color. Blue can mean a few different things, though it typically means I’m happy or relaxed. I am comfortable around you. Why would I have a reason not to be?”

His grin widens as he turns to my father. “I’m not sure what happened with Poppy, not that it matters to me, but I will say I am pleased with this change. Wisteria will make a fine queen one day.”

Father frowns. “She is meant to be a lot more than a *mere* queen.”

I kick his leg beneath the table, reminding him to mind his temper, and then I smile at King Basilicus. “Excuse my father. He is still adjusting to the change in my status.”

Father takes a deep breath. “Since Wisteria is to marry Prince Stellan, we do need to change the date of the wedding.”

Prince Stellan shifts in his seat. I turn to glance at him. The moment I make eye contact, he looks away from me.

“Why the change of date?” King Basilicus asks.

“Because Wisteria doesn’t turn twenty two for two more weeks,” Father explains. “Fae are not permitted to get married before their twenty second birthday.”

King Basilicus nods, turning to look at Prince Stellan. “Why don’t you and Imp—”

“Wisteria,” I say, once again cutting him off.

He nods. “Why don’t you and Wisteria go somewhere and talk while I speak to Emperor Emrys?”

Prince Stellan gives him a curt nod and stands from the table. He offers a hand to me and I accept it, allowing him to pull me up. My fingers tingle where our skin makes contact and my stomach tightens.

Am I... *attracted* to Prince Stellan?

Okay, big deal. I’ve met lots of attractive supernaturals. Fae are known for being beautiful. Even Florian, my sister’s six hour husband, is gorgeous. But none of that could make up for his horrible personality. For all I know, Prince Stellan is as arrogant as Florian.

Prince Stellan leads me away from the house and onto a pathway that leads to the ocean. As we walk down the stairs, my eyes are on the horizon. He twists around to look at me and I hesitantly pull my gaze away from the blue water to look at him.

His lips turn up in the corner on one side. “You act as if you’ve never seen the ocean before.”

My gaze leaves his eyes as I focus back on the water. “I haven’t.”

He abruptly stops, but I’m not watching him so I don’t notice until I walk into his back. He puts his hands out to help

steady me, but he abruptly drops his hands as I gain my balance.

“We’ve met before,” Prince Stellan says. “Once. When my father brought me to fae court.”

“I remember.” It’s very vivid in my memories because Poppy threw a fit about having to see him. I remember thinking that the dragon prince seemed really nice, but my sister just scoffed at me for even mentioning it. But I can’t even remember if we spoke or not.

“Why haven’t you seen the ocean before?” he asks.

I put a hand to the base of my throat. “I wasn’t allowed to leave the castle.”

He cocks an eyebrow. “Why?”

Not wanting to tell him the truth, I simply shrug and give a basic response. “Because I have no control over my life.”

My response must have been more than what he expected because he flinches, his eyes abruptly snapping to mine as if he is searching for something. But I know the game well enough. I keep my emotions tampered down, focusing only on taking a breath.

“Were you named after your eye color?”

“I believe so. My father doesn’t speak about my mother—she died shortly after I was born. She’s the one who named me.”

He furrows his brows, then turns back around and begins walking down the long staircase again. I follow behind him, wondering what he’s thinking. I don’t dare ask. The last thing I want to do is scare this dragon prince. Even if the contract is magically binding, I don’t want him to find a way out of it, not when I’m so close to freedom.

“This way, Princess Wisteria,” he motions for me as we reach the end of the staircase.

“Please, it’s just Wisteria.” I tuck a piece of hair behind my ear, not that it does any good. The wind blows the strand right back into my face. “There is no need for titles, Prince Stellan.”

He nods curtly. “Fine. In that case, I’m just Stellan.”

When we get to the sand, I kick off my shoes and walk closer to the water. The sand feels soft on my feet. A wave washes up over my feet and I’m surprised by how warm the water is. I walk further into the water, wishing I could go for a swim.

My heart feels so full when I think about living here. Poppy doesn’t even know the gift she’s given me—a gift that she thought was a curse.

“You are very unlike your sister,” Stellan says.

His voice makes me jump. I had nearly forgotten he was there.

“Is that a good thing?” I ask.

He stuffs his hands into the pockets of his shorts. “She was very anxious.”

He’s right—Poppy is anxious. “My sister thought her life was unfair.”

“Why are you not anxious?” he asks. “Are you not scared of marrying a dragon shifter?”

“There are fates far worse than this, Stellan.” His eyes widen in surprise as I say his name. “My older sister was too selfish to see that.”

But Poppy’s loss is my gain. Because even if Prince Stellan turns out to be a complete loser, living here and having freedom is all I need. No matter how bad he is, he can’t be worse than the monarchs.

I feel Prince Stellan’s gaze on me for a long time after that, but I keep my attention on the water.

“Do you not feel like you’re missing out by not being allowed to marry a fae?” he asks, after a long moment.

His question is so absurd that I can’t help but laugh. But when I look at his face, his eyebrows are turned down, like he’s confused by my reaction.

I clear my throat. “The monarchs were going to choose my husband. They didn’t care about anything except power. They want my bloodline to be strong. The strength of magic is all that matters to them. I can only imagine that marrying you will be better than whoever they would have chosen.”

“But you don’t even know me,” he argues.

“Even if you lock me in a tower, at least I’ve got a good view. It’s more than I can say about the castle I grew up in.” I turn my attention back to the water, not wanting to see his reaction.

After that, Prince Stellan stays quiet. I close my eyes and lift my head to soak up as much sun as possible.

Hopefully being married to a stranger won’t be worse than how I grew up.

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## ODD TRADITIONS

### Wisteria

**W**isteria

I look at myself in the large mirror, noting how the white dress makes the purple of my eyes look brighter. My blonde—though is more white than blonde—hair is pulled back into a half up, half down style. My blonde curls get lost in the white of my dress, but I'm told wearing white is tradition for the dragons.

A *white* wedding dress—how odd. Dragon shifters have strange traditions.

Though, I suppose the really odd thing about today is the fact that I'm going to be marrying a stranger whom I've had exactly one conversation with.

Father and I left the dragon shifter's island the same day we arrived. From that day forward, the council spent day and night going over the magical contract, trying to find a way out. They only allowed me to leave late last night, though they are still searching for a way to 'free' me.

I wonder what they'd think if they knew I don't want to be free from this. As nervous as I am about marrying a stranger, I'll happily take this over the life they want for me.

I don't want to be the fae empress.

So, here I am, about to marry a stranger. And my heart feels happier than it ever has before.

A knock on the door has me looking away from the mirror.



“Come in.” I turn toward the door as it opens.

My younger brother walks inside, shutting the door behind him. He cocks an eyebrow as he eyes the dress. “A *white* wedding dress?”

I shrug. “It’s tradition for the dragons.”

“Weird.” He rubs a hand at the base of his neck. “White is so plain and boring.”

He’s right—white *is* boring. If it were up to me, I’d choose a colorful dress—maybe purple to match my eyes or bright blue, to match the water surrounding the island.

“But you look beautiful.” He stops looking at my dress and looks me in the eyes. “You’re surprisingly chill considering the fact that Poppy was so scared to marry this guy that she got exiled on purpose.”

I shrug. “He seems nice.” On the *one* occasion I met the guy, that is. “He’s quiet.”

“Mom said he’s good looking.”

My cheeks grow warm as I admit, “He’s easy on the eyes.”

Cypress smirks. “Considering you’re unmoved by fae beauty, that means something. At least producing an heir for the guy won’t be a chore.”

I groan, resisting the urge to cover my face with my hands. “Cypress!”

He chuckles. “What? Isn’t that what the marriage is about? Making sure that the fae and dragon shifters remain strong? Your child with him will be the king one day.”

He’s not wrong, but he doesn’t have to say it like *that*. Besides, I’m trying desperately hard not to think about what is expected after the marriage.

“Just be glad you’re only fifteen.” I bump him with my elbow. “You’ve got seven more years before you’re forced to marry.”

“And since you’re not there, the council will probably decide for me.” He frowns, shaking his head. “You made

being the heir look so easy. I don't know how I'm going to do this."

I take a step closer, putting my hands on his arms. "You are a lot stronger than the council gives you credit for. You're going to make an amazing leader. And if you ever need me, I'll be there. I promise you, I'll help you in any way that I can."

His eyes widen. "Wisteria, you shouldn't make promises like that."

"I only make them to *you* because I know that you won't take advantage of it."

"I am going to miss you."

"I'll miss you too." My eyes sting with unshed tears. I back away from him, taking a deep breath. "I know that our family isn't big on emotional gestures, but I'm not sure when I'll see you again. I just want you to know that I love you, little brother."

He looks at me for several heartbeats, his eyes glowing a brighter blue than I've ever seen. "I love you too, big sister." He pauses before adding, "If this dragon shifter doesn't treat you well, let me know. I don't care if it starts a war, I will kill him."

My heart swells at his words—not that I want Cypress to murder for me, but I love that he's willing.

Cypress's smile widens. "I'm glad to see you smiling. You really do look beautiful, Wisteria."

There is another knock on the door. Cypress walks over and pulls it open. My breath gets caught in my throat as I realize the person on the other side is a dragon shifter, one that I don't recognize.

"I'll just..." Cypress's words trail off as he sneaks out the door right after the lady dragon shifter walks inside. The door shuts firmly behind him, leaving me alone with the woman.

The dragon shifter is, of course, tall. She's at least ten inches taller than me. She has on a bright red dress and her

dark brown hair is pulled back into an elaborate style that makes her high cheekbones more pronounced. Her eyes are a familiar blue-green color which makes me think she must be related to Prince Stellan.

“You’re shorter than I thought you would be,” the girl says, not bothering with introductions.

“Hello.” I stand up straighter. “I’m Wisteria.”

She raises an eyebrow. “I know who you are. You’re marrying my brother.”

I lick my lips, which suddenly feel dry. Actually, my whole mouth does. “I don’t know your name, I’m sorry.”

She cocks her head to the side, studying me. “You didn’t read about our family?”

“I didn’t have the chance,” I admit. “This was supposed to be my older sister’s wedding, not mine. And I’ve spent the last three weeks in non-stop council meetings with the fae.”

What I don’t mention is that the meetings were about getting me out of this marriage. She doesn’t need to know that. If the dragon shifters knew how much the fae are dead set against this alliance, they’d surely be offended.

The brunette takes a step closer to me. “I’m Natalia, Stellan’s older sister.”

“Older?” I furrow my brows. “Doesn’t that make you the heir?”

“The heir?” She tilts her head to the side, pursing her lips.

“Why aren’t you the future queen?” I ask.

Her head flinches back slightly. “I don’t understand—females aren’t heirs.”

“Why not?” Now it’s my turn to be confused.

“Because male dragons are stronger. Males are the ones who carry the royal gene.” She studies me. “Is it not like that with the fae?”

“No.” I go to tuck a strand of hair behind my ear, but remember at the last second that my hair is styled and I don’t want to mess it up so I let my hand drop. “The strength of fae magic isn’t dependent upon gender.”

“Well, dragon shifter magic *is* dependent on gender...” She studies me, her expression giving none of her feelings away. “I thought fae’s eyes changed colors depending on their emotions.”

I raise an eyebrow. “They do.”

“Yours have stayed purple, I think. Maybe slightly blue.” She looks carefully at my eyes, like she’s trying to force them to change. “Aren’t you nervous?”

I shake my head back and forth. “Why would I be nervous?”

“I was nervous when I got married and I was marrying my soulmate.” She lets out a long breath. “I wanted to meet you because my brother is being forced to marry you. But if I were you, I wouldn’t get too attached.”

Wouldn’t get too attached?

To my husband?

Before I can ask her any questions, there is a knock on the door. My almost sister-in-law stomps over to the door and throws it open. Her body immediately relaxes when she sees who is on the other side, which puts me on edge.

The woman who walks in looks very similar to Natalia, only instead of dark hair, she has sandy blonde hair—similar in color to a certain prince. She’s also older, which makes me wonder if she’s Prince Stellan’s mother. It’s hard to tell with supernaturals because we age well.

When the woman sees me looking at her, she smiles warmly. “Hello, Wisteria. I am Dove, Stellan’s mother.”

A dragon shifter named Dove? I don’t comment on the irony.

I curtsy. “It’s lovely to meet you, Queen Basilicus.”

“It’s just Dove,” she insists. “We’re about to be family, after all.”

Natalia snorts, like she’s not convinced I’ll be family. Or maybe she doesn’t *want* to consider me as family.

It seems as if the dragons want out of this alliance as much as the fae do. In fact, I might be the only person who doesn’t dread this marriage. But it makes me wonder... does Prince Stellan dread this? Does he hate it as much as Poppy did? Does it matter? Because our fates were sealed ten generations ago—long before we were born. The only thing I can hope for is that we don’t have a completely miserable marriage.

STELLAN

As I straighten my tie, my mind is on purple eyes. Purple eyes that belong to the fae woman that I’m about to marry. And for some reason, I don’t feel the familiar dread in my stomach at the thought.

My whole life, I’ve known that it’s my duty to marry a fae. It’s for the strength of my people. It’s not something I’ve looked forward to, but I accepted my circumstance a long time ago, even if the idea of this marriage turns my stomach.

I’ve also known that I’ll meet my soulmate—a soulmate that I can’t be with. I will have to reject her. My fate is to be in a marriage without love. But Wisteria... she’s beautiful, and so different than what I expected. I try to imagine her older sister—she was pretty enough, I guess, but I was never truly attracted to her. She never made my heart race.

Instead of feeling sick at the day I’ve dreaded my whole life, I find myself excited. Because somehow being married to Wisteria doesn’t seem all that bad.

Wisteria doesn’t look anything like her older sister. I try to remember what the older fae looks like, from the few times I met her. But I know for a fact she didn’t have purple eyes. I would never forget eyes like Wisteria’s. Her hair was blonde too, but it was a different shade. Wisteria’s hair is so blonde it’s almost white and it hangs down past her waist.

I swallow hard as I try to remind myself of my soulmate. I don't know her yet, but someday I will meet her. It feels an awful lot like betrayal to think about Wisteria like this. Then again, what could betray her more than the fact that I'm going to have to reject her? Wisteria is my future.

Yet, the thought of hurting Wisteria sends a sharp pain stabbing through my chest. No matter what happens, both my soulmate and wife will be hurt. And I'll be in the middle, loving a woman I can't be with, and married to a fae that I won't love. After all, I know it's impossible to love a woman who isn't my soulmate. My own father has told me that many times.

I rub my hands over my face, wishing the day were over. Part of me wants to run out of here and disappear, but I know better than that. If I ran—if I abdicated the throne—the burden of this marriage would fall on my younger brother. And I would *never* do that to him.

This is for the good of my people, yes. But this is also for my family. This magical contract was signed many generations ago and my family has spent the last twenty three years trying to find a way out of it. If there were a way to be free, they would've found it by now.

A knock on my door disturbs my thoughts and I turn in time to see my older sister poke her head in.

“Can I come in?” Natalia asks.

“Yeah.” I let out a long breath, dreading seeing my older sister.

It's not that I don't love Natalia—I do. She's just overbearing. She has been since she met her soulmate four years ago. Since the moment she met him, she's started giving me these pitying looks like she feels sorry for me. Today, I would rather avoid those looks.

“I went to see your bride,” she says, as she steps inside. She closes the door behind her. “She's beautiful.”

I shrug, trying not to let my emotions show. “Fae are known for their beauty.”

She nods. “The other sister wasn’t as pretty.”

If I agree with her aloud, Natalia will use it to her advantage, so I say nothing at all. Though, she is right. Wisteria is gorgeous—even by fae standards. There is something almost ethereal about her, though I get the feeling that she has no idea how stunning she is.

“I know you.” Natalia takes a step closer to me. “You love deeply and you’re marrying this girl. You won’t take the vows lightly.”

“This is my duty,” I remind her.

“Duty or not, it doesn’t change the fact that you will meet your soulmate someday. And since you’re already twenty three, it will likely be any day now. You know most dragon shifters are mated long before now.” She raises an eyebrow at me. “When you meet her, anything you feel for this fae girl will go away.”

“I know,” I say through gritted teeth.

She puts her hand on my shoulders. “Listen, Stellan, I’m not scolding you. I’m just reminding you. Your feelings for her *will* go away, but it won’t take away her feelings for you. Fae don’t have soulmates. And if you care for this girl at all, don’t make her fall in love with you. It will only break her heart.”

My eyes widen at her words.

Does Natalia *like* her? She wouldn’t be saying this to me otherwise. She would be telling me to guard my heart for *my* sake and the sake of my future soulmate. Instead, she’s warning me for the fae.

“As much as it pains me to admit it, I like her.” Natalia sighs, letting her hand drop from my shoulder. “I want to hate her, but she’s got something about her. She’s really sweet, though maybe a little naive. She knows nothing about dragon shifters. And she really is beautiful. My nieces and nephews are going to be adorable.”

I swallow hard at her words.

Nieces and nephews.

Right, that's what this alliance is about—heirs. It's about making sure that dragons stay as strong as they possibly can. Because it's fae blood that makes us strong. Even now, ten generations later, we're stronger than we ever were before fae blood mingled with ours. Still, our magic weakens with each generation. This alliance is to ensure that royal blood remains strong.

This is about all dragon shifters, not just me.

And no matter what happens, even when I meet my soulmate, my life and future is with Wisteria. And heartbreak is inevitable for both of us. I'm better off accepting it now.

## WISTERIA

Due to the need to follow both fae *and* dragon shifter customs, the wedding is long and—dare I say—boring. It's a lot of standing and listening. The vows are... intense. Though, I suspect they're more intense for me, being a fae. I don't know a lot about dragon shifters, but I do know that no other supernatural race is bound to their vows the way fae are.

As I finish my vows, I realize that there is no getting out of this. I will be faithful to Prince Stellan for as long as I live. Even if the fae were able to somehow find a way to get out of the contract, my vows are unbreakable.

My eyes widen as I hear the officiant declare that we must kiss to make the marriage official.

“We have to *kiss*?” I whisper to Prince Stellan.

He stares at me with wide eyes. “You didn't research a dragon shifter wedding ceremony?”

“I didn't know I was going to marry you until three weeks ago. So, no. I didn't.” When was I supposed to research? During the council meetings, that lasted sometimes twenty hours a day? Or maybe in between the council meetings, where I would fall asleep while standing in the shower because I was so tired.

Still, I should have researched. Maybe then I would be better prepared.



The officiant clears his throat and gives us a look that says we better get on with the kissing.

I can't believe my first kiss is about to happen in a room full of strangers who are all staring at us.

This is an odd new world I'm entering, though I suppose I should get used to it.

It's embarrassing how far Prince Stellan has to bend over to reach me. I've never felt short in my life, not being surrounded by fae. We're all on the short side, but it's normal to me. But next to Prince Stellan, I feel like a bug—a bug that's about to get squashed.

I've *really* got to research dragon shifters if I don't want to be surprised by their customs.

Stellan's lips touch mine for the briefest moment before it's over.

Well, I was nervous for nothing. Because that kiss—if it can even be called that—wasn't at all what I expected.

What did I expect? Romance and butterflies? I married a stranger.

Still, as Prince Stellan holds my hand as we make our way down the aisle, which is just another way that our customs are different, I wonder what to expect next. A fae would *never* hold hands with their significant other, at least not in public. Ironically, the moment we're away from prying eyes, Stellan drops my hand, putting at least three feet of space between us.

We go to a private room a little ways from where the ceremony took place. I'm pretty sure we're supposed to get ready for some kind of celebration.

"Sorry about that." Prince Stellan stuffs his hands into the pockets of his pants. "About the kiss."

"It's fine," I say.

"I didn't know that fae don't kiss at their weddings." His eyebrows scrunch together as he looks at me.

“Fae aren’t big on public displays of affection,” I admit. “But it’s okay. It was too short to be a proper kiss, so it’s fine. Besides, we had to follow both of our traditions for the marriage to be legal.”

His lip turns up in one corner slightly, like he’s amused by something I said. I want to question him, but a knock on the door has us both turning. Stellan’s older sister, Natalia, pokes her head through.

Great.

The girl *loathes* me. She’s probably trying to make sure I’m not seducing my husband.

My husband—so weird. Prince Stellan and I are *married*.

“Sorry to interrupt, but I figured Wisteria could use help getting out of her dress,” Natalia offers.

Wow. She’s actually being nice.

I let out a breath. “That would be great. This dress is...” I move my hands around the fluffy skirt, “a lot.”

She grins, stepping further inside.

Stellan clears his throat, rubbing a hand at the back of his neck. “I’ll give you some privacy and meet you out there.”

“Thanks.” I chew on my bottom lip as I watch him leave the room.

It’s strange to think that I know hardly anything about my husband. At least he seems like a nice guy. I don’t think he’d do anything to purposefully hurt me.

Natalia steps closer and pushes my hair to the side. She begins unbuttoning the endless buttons at the back of my dress.

“You look really beautiful in your dress,” Natalia says, once again using a kind tone. After our conversation before the wedding, I’m surprised she’s being so nice.

“Thank you,” I mumble, not sure what to make of her attitude. It makes me wonder how Cypress is acting toward

Prince Stellan. Have they even met one another yet? Knowing Cypress, he's avoiding everybody that he possibly can.

Natalia stays quiet behind me as she unbuttons the back of my dress. It's not until the dress falls to the ground that I realize how heavy the thing was. As I slip on the purple dress I picked out for the celebrations, I breathe a sigh of relief at how light and airy it is.

I turn to face Natalia. "Do you know where we're going next?"

She nods and leads me from the room.

Okay... maybe she hasn't changed her mind about hating me, but she's trying. It's all I can ask—it's not like any of us chose this path. It was decided by our long dead ancestors and they're not around to deal with the consequences.

The celebration is full of people. It makes sense—everybody wants to see their crown prince and his new bride. But as I walk into the room, every single person turns to look at me. Natalia, of course, runs off. I stand there awkwardly, not knowing what to do or what is expected of me.

"You look scared," somebody whispers to me.

I jump slightly, turning to face Prince Stellan.

He grins, his eyes going from my dress to my face. "Your dress is the exact same shade as your eyes."

I'm not sure what to say to his observation—it's not a compliment to say thank you to. But what should I say? He's wearing a suit and it looks good on him, but I have a feeling Prince Stellan looks good no matter what he wears.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spot Cypress. He's, as I predicted, standing in a corner as far away from everybody that he can possibly get.

"Have you met my younger brother yet?" I ask.

To my surprise, Prince Stellan nods. "He came to speak to me before the wedding."

“What?” My voice comes out as a loud squeak, so I clear my throat.

“He was just doing his duty as your brother—basically vowing to me that if I hurt you, he’ll kill me.” He waves a hand, like it isn’t a big deal. “I’m pretty sure my older sister came to do the exact same thing to you.”

*My brother* said that? To the crown prince of the dragons?

Before I can question him further—or remind him that a fae can’t break their vows—a group of dragon shifters walk up to Stellan and me to offer their congratulations on our wedding. Once the first group arrives, everybody is quick to line up, all wanting their opportunity to congratulate us.

As I stand there and smile so much that my cheeks begin to ache, I mull over what Cypress said to Prince Stellan. I guess I should have seen it coming. For as long as I can remember, it’s always been Cypress and me against the world. Even though it would’ve made sense for me to be close to Poppy, given that we’re only ten months apart in age, my sister and I have vastly different personalities and interests. But from the moment Cypress was born, I knew there was something about my younger brother. Even when he was a toddler, he would sneak into my room at night to sleep in my bed with me. Eventually, his mom stopped trying to make him sleep in his own room.

Though we both outgrew staying in each other’s rooms, we’ve stayed close. I tell Cypress everything. And now, he’s going to be all alone.

My chest aches, as I wish my father would’ve had a fourth child. Though, I suppose to do that he’d have to stop hating my stepmom.

Eventually, Prince Stellan and I greet more people than I’ll ever remember. I go through the motions of everything, trying to pretend like I’m not overwhelmed. But the truth is, I just want to go home. I want to my bed.

My breath gets caught in my throat as I remember that I’m not going home. When this celebration is over, I’ll be staying

here, with the dragon shifters. And suddenly, the one place that always felt like a prison doesn't sound so bad anymore. It's home—my home. And I've never felt so sick at the thought of not being there.

Stellan, who has barely spoken a word to me all evening, leans over and whispers to me. "Are you ready to get out of here?"

I nod, wordlessly getting to my feet. They're aching from my shoes. Though they're cute and give me quite a bit of height, they weren't made for long hours of standing. If we weren't in a room full of people, I'd be taking my shoes off right now.

On our way out, we're stopped by five different groups, each conversation lasting way too long. By the time we make it out of the room, I'm over it. I reach down to take off my shoes. I nearly lose my balance and fall over, but Prince Stellan captures me by the elbow and holds me steady.

"Thanks." I grin up at him as I get my shoe all the way off.

He tilts his head to the side. "The shoes don't look very comfortable."

"They're not."

"So why wear..." His voice trails off as he studies me carefully. "You're short."

I chuckle at the statement. "Nah, you're just tall."

He looks at me with narrowed eyes. "I guess I am tall, compared to fae."

I put one hand on my hip. "Please, I saw you in there. You're even tall compared to the other dragon shifters." I frown. "And I *am* short. I met a ten-year-old who is taller than me."

He chuckles, leading me down the hallway. Before we make it too far, I hear somebody call my name.

"Wisteria."

I turn around when I hear my brother's voice. He runs toward us and I meet him halfway. He wraps me in a tight hug, lifting me from the ground.

"I'm going to miss you," he says.

Tears sting the back of my eyes as he lets me go from his embrace. "I know you probably won't be able to visit often, but promise you will."

"I will." He doesn't break eye contact. "I vow it, Wisteria."

"I'll come see you too," I promise him. I put my hand on his arm. "Don't let the monarchs walk all over you. You're going to make an amazing emperor."

His eyes flash orange for a moment, but they quickly turn blue again, masking his anxiety. "We all know I'm their back up choice."

I don't bother responding because he's right. The fae do want me as their empress and they aren't going to take losing me to the dragons very well.

Cypress gives me one last tight squeeze. "Go. Enjoy your freedom."

My heart flutters again. Cypress is right, I should be enjoying this freedom. It's not my bed or the castle that I'm truly going to miss. It's my brother.

"I love you," I tell him, as I back away.

His eyes soften. "I love you too. I hope you can be happy here. You deserve it."

I turn before I start crying again and am surprised to see that Prince Stellan is waiting for me quite a ways back. I'm sure he could hear us with his dragon hearing, but at least he was giving us the semblance of privacy.

Prince Stellan offers me his arm. "Are you ready?"

I put my hand on his arm, not bothering with words. My voice would quiver if I tried to speak right now anyway.

"Are you sad?" He asks, watching my eyes carefully.

“I’m just going to miss my brother, that’s all.” I wipe under my eyes with my free hand, hating that I’m crying in front of a stranger.

A stranger who happens to be my *husband*.

He moves his arm, slinking it around my shoulders as he pulls me closer to his side in a half embrace. It’s oddly comforting and I have to fight the urge to bury myself deeper in his embrace.

“We can go see him anytime you want,” Prince Stellan says.

Even though he, as a dragon shifter, can easily break promises, I don’t think he’s lying. I really do think he’ll let me see my brother whenever I wish.

“Thank you.” I back up from him. “I’m sorry for crying.”

“You don’t have to apologize for crying.” He lifts an eyebrow as he watches me. “I have known about this marriage alliance my whole life, but I’ve only ever thought of how it would affect me. You’re the one leaving your entire life and family behind. I’m sorry that you have to do that.”

“I don’t mind leaving my life behind,” I admit. “But I do mind leaving Cypress. He’s all alone now.”

At least he still has his mom. I know she’ll look out for him. She won’t let my dad treat Cypress poorly. But there isn’t much she can do about how the fae monarchs are going to treat him.

They really *will* treat Cypress like a second choice. They think I’m the one who can save them from the lessening of fae magic. But my brother is strong too, if a little young. Someday, if given the chance, he could do a lot of good for fae society.

It isn’t until Prince Stellan opens the door to a room that I remember that I’m *married* now. And this marriage—the alliance—has stipulations. Like the fact that we’re supposed to have children together, which I’ve been trying desperately hard not to think about. But right now, I know that I’m not

ready for any of *that*. I need to get to know him first, and I don't know anything about him.

The room that we're in is a sitting room, likely attached to a bedroom and bathroom. I had my own sitting room attached to my bedroom in the castle back home, though my room wasn't this big.

The room is nice. There are windows at the back, giving us a glimpse of the gardens. There are a lot of palm trees that are illuminated by lights. I can't see anything past the garden in the night time. I wonder if we'll be able to see the ocean from here.

The sound of Stellan clearing his throat has me turning to face him. It's clear from the look on his face that he finds all of this just as awkward as I do.

"Your eyes are steadily purple, so I can't get a read on your emotions." Stellan won't look away from my eyes as he says it, like he's hoping I'll show him something.

"My father has dragged me to fae council meetings and other events multiple times a week since I was a child. By necessity, I've learned to mask what I'm feeling," I admit, taking a deep breath. "But I will be honest with you and tell you. I know that this—" I motion between us, "is about having powerful heirs. I know what is expected of us. And you do seem really nice, but I don't know you. I'm not ready for everything that comes with marriage yet. And I'm really hoping that while we get to know one another, we can try being friends first."

Please know what I'm saying because I really don't want to say anything more than what I already have. As it is, I can feel my cheeks growing warm with embarrassment.

Prince Stellan's shoulders slump forward. "Yes, that sounds good. I didn't want to be presumptuous, so I had your things brought to the room on the left. I'll stay in the room on the right."

I chew on my bottom lip. "Thanks."



“Do you want to change and then we can meet out here and maybe talk?” he asks. “I’m not ready to sleep yet, but I’d like the opportunity to know more about you than just your name.”

My heart feels lighter at his words. “I would like that. Thank you, Prince Stellan.”

“We’re married—it’s just Stellan,” he says, then disappears into the room on the right. I take a few moments longer before heading to the other room.

*We’re married.*

I have a husband.

This is so, so, so, so weird.

I take a moment to breathe before changing out of my formal dress. Feeling gross from the long day, I opt to take a quick shower. I rush through it, very aware of the fact that Prince Stellan will be waiting.

No, not Prince Stellan—just Stellan.

Stellan. The dragon prince. And... my husband.

Just thinking about it has my pulse skyrocketing. Unsure of how good dragon shifter hearing is, I force myself to take a deep breath.

Everything is fine. I may be married, but my husband seems like a nice guy. And he seems okay with us trying to become friends before, er, anything else. He is even making sure I have my own accommodations.

I get to live on an island. That is a big bonus. I can go to the beach anytime I want. I don’t have to wake up early tomorrow and go to a stuffy council meeting where they fight over who I’m going to marry. And, it seems there will be significantly less bowing and hero worship. Because the dragons have no idea what I mean to the fae, nor do they care.

Once I’m out of the shower, I use magic to dry myself. I do note the towels in the cabinet—I guess it makes sense that dragons would need them. They don’t have magic like fae do. Their magic is all in their strength and their ability to shift. I

think they're also skilled with fire, but I suppose I'll learn more about them while I'm here.

As soon as I'm dressed in comfy, but still really cute, pajamas, I head into the sitting area where Prince Stellan, no, just Stellan, is waiting for me.

He's sitting on the large sectional couch, in front of a fireplace. It's lit, though there is no heat coming from it. I study it for a moment before realizing that it's just an illusion. It's then I also feel the air conditioning blast through the room. I shiver slightly as I make my way toward Stellan. I wonder for a moment where I should sit, but it would be silly for us to talk from far away. Instead, I square my shoulders and take the seat directly next to him. Still, I leave plenty of space. I may be brave, but he's still a *stranger*.

Stellan's hair is wet from his shower, which confirms my suspicion about dragon shifters not having magic. His hair looks slightly darker when it's wet. His eyes look blue in the darkened lights—I wish his eyes would give away his mood, though I suppose I'll learn to read him eventually. Right now, his face is neutral, giving away nothing.

“I heard your shower, so I thought I would get one too.” He tilts his head to the side. “But your hair isn't wet.”

“Magic.” I flick my fingers toward him, using my magic to dry his hair.

His eyes widen as the purple particles of my magic race toward him, but they're gone before he even gets a chance to react. His hair is now completely dry.

“I didn't realize fae had magic like that.” His Adam's apple bobs up and down. “I get the feeling I don't know a lot about fae magic. I thought it was all to do with emotions.”

I pull my feet up from the floor and sit criss cross on the couch. I angle my body toward his. “That's dark fae—they can manipulate and feel emotions. I can't feel anybody's emotions, not unless it's extreme. I can't feel anger, but I can feel if somebody is irate. I can't feel happiness, but if somebody is exuberant I could.”

He nods slowly. “Okay, so what else can you do? I don’t imagine your only power is the ability to dry yourself.”

I shake my head, a smile tugging at my lips. “It depends on the fae, but I have pretty strong magic. And don’t worry, manipulating emotions is strictly a dark fae thing.”

Pretty strong magic... yep, we’ll go with that. I don’t want to freak him out on our wedding night.

He lets out a long breath, his shoulders slumping forward slightly.

Was he really worried I was messing with his emotions? Does he not trust me? My chest aches at the thought of him distrusting me, but I remind myself that we’re strangers. Of course he doesn’t trust me.

And the wedding vows won’t mean as much to him as a dragon shifter.

“The only thing that fae have in common with dark fae is our shifting eye colors. I’ve heard theirs change colors with their emotions too, though not as vividly as ours. And even if I could, I vow I would never manipulate your emotions.” I worry my bottom lip between my teeth, scared to meet Stellan’s gaze.

Well, we’re having a stellar start to our marriage. He already hates me.

“What is with the vowing thing?” Stellan asks. “I heard your brother make a vow earlier too. Is it a fae thing?”

“You know that fae can’t lie, right?” I ask.

He blinks. “What?”

I sit up straighter. “Fae can’t tell lies. It’s physically impossible. If I even tried, I wouldn’t be able to get the words out of my mouth.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“Oh. Well, we can’t lie.” I tuck a piece of hair behind my ear. “When we make a vow, we can’t break it. It’s physically impossible.”

Stellan stares at me with wide eyes. “I’m beginning to realize I don’t know a lot about fae.”

“It’s okay.” I put a hand on his arm, trying to reassure him. “I don’t know a lot about dragon shifters, so we will just have to teach one another about our cultures.”

He tenses, his gaze moving from my eyes to the hand on his arm. I quickly pull my hand back, wondering if I’ve offended him by touching him. But that would be silly. We were touching earlier and he didn’t seem to mind. Though maybe it’s because we’re alone in his—our—sitting room.

No big deal. I’m married now.

This is going to take a long time to get used to.

I fold my hands together, like I’m trying to force myself not to touch him. “Sorry. I’m, uh, not usually the touching type. I don’t know why I touched you.”

“You’re allowed to touch me.” His voice sounds thick and I’d give anything to know what he’s thinking. “I’m sure you’ve gathered by now that dragons like touch.”

I nod. “I was wondering. Everybody seemed to be very open with their significant others. A fae would *never* kiss in public, or even hold hands. That hug you saw between me and my brother is even taboo, but I didn’t care in that moment.”

“It’s because of the mate bond.” Stellan looks away, but it’s impossible to see the way his entire body stiffens.

I don’t know a lot about soulmates, as fae don’t have them, but it’s clear that this isn’t something Stellan wants to discuss. I’ll just have to do my own research later on the matter and see if I can figure out exactly what has made him so upset.

Stellan clears his throat. “I think I’ll go to bed now—it’s been a long day.”

“Sure.” My stomach muscles tighten at his obvious dismissal, but I know better than to let Stellan see my reaction, not that I needed to. He doesn’t even glance at me as he jumps up from the couch and basically runs away from me.

What a stellar first day of marriage. I've already frightened my husband into running away.

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## THE IN-LAWS

### Wisteria

**W**hen I wake up the day after my wedding, I have to blink a few times to clear my head as I look around the room. Light spills through the large windows and the day is bright. I must've been more tired than I thought if the light didn't wake me. I stretch and then force myself to get out of bed. I can't just hide in here all day, I should just face whatever is waiting for me.

I get ready quickly before stopping by my door. I try to listen for any movement on the other side, but there is nothing. Maybe Stellan is still sleeping? But a glance at the clock reveals it's already after eight in the morning. He doesn't strike me as the kind of guy who sleeps in.

I square my shoulders, pushing the door open. When I walk out, I find... nothing. Stellan is nowhere to be seen.

Huh, maybe he really is still asleep.

But as I edge into the room, I find a piece of folded paper on the coffee table. Upon closer inspection, I see my name written on the outside.

WISTERIA,

*I will be gone for a few days. My father and I have some business to attend to. If you need anything, you can ask one of the servants for assistance. The keys to my car are on the hook by the door, you can take it anywhere. When I get back, I will buy you a car.*

*Stellan*

THAT'S IT? Just a goodbye note?

I spot the keys by the door, just like he said. But what am I going to do with those? I don't know how to drive.

My stomach sinks as I read the note a second time. It's the day after our wedding and he's leaving me here with no warning. Is this going to be my life now? Him, gone all the time, and me, waiting dutifully at home?

Forget that. I'm not going to stay in this sitting room all day. I'm going to enjoy this gift that I've been given.

All my life, all I've ever wanted is freedom. I didn't want this marriage any more than Stellan did. And I refuse to feel disappointed over the fact that he's left me here, all by myself. Instead, I will enjoy this time. I'll do all the things I never had time for back home.

With no real direction, I head out of the sitting room and into the long hallway. I have no idea where it leads, but I start walking aimlessly. Hopefully somebody can direct me to the kitchen because I could use some breakfast. Then, maybe I'll go to the beach.

Yes, this is fine. I don't need my new husband to entertain me. And I refuse to be sad just because my husband ditched me when we haven't even been married twenty four hours yet.

When I find the kitchen, there are staff inside who seem very anxious at my arrival. When I tell them I just want to grab a bite to eat, they insist that they'll bring me something. I tell them that I'll eat by the pool and head outside to wait for food.

I sigh as I slip past a maid, who curtsies.

At least they only refer to me as 'Princess.' I can handle being the dragon's princess. What I can't handle is being the only hope of overcoming fae's failing magic.

When I get outside, I spot Stellan's younger brother walking with a surfboard in hand. He gazes curiously at me as he walks past, but he doesn't say a word.

Evander, I *think*, is his name. He's a quiet boy who has never spoken a word to me. I'd say he's about the same age as Cypress, maybe a little older. I can feel a difference between him and all the other dragons, which I think means he must have never shifted. Dragon shifters shift for the first time when they're eighteen.

A few moments later, a woman carrying a tray comes rushing out of the back of the house. She sits down the food and curtsies to me.

"If you need anything, Princess, please let me know." She keeps her head down, like she's afraid to look at me.

"Thank you."

Her entire body stiffens, then she rushes off, leaving me alone. I wonder what has her, and all the other staff, so on edge. What do they think of the fae that they have reason to fear me?

After eating some food, I make my way down the same path that Stellan took me on the day I met him, the one that leads to the beach.

The sky is bright blue today, without a cloud in sight. The temperature is perfect, though maybe a little cool for swimming. I think back to Evander, who was only wearing swimming shorts and no shirt. He was sopping wet and didn't look cold. Then again, shifters don't get cold like fae do.

I stare out at the ocean for a long time, just watching the waves crash onto the shore. Birds fly over the water and occasionally I'll see a boat on the horizon. Otherwise, it's really peaceful. This beach must be a private one, for the royal family only.

After a while, I sit down on the sand. As the tiny grains stick to my feet and legs, I make a mental note to bring a blanket next time I come down here. Which will likely be tomorrow, because now that I've seen beauty like this, I plan to experience it daily.

The sound of feet shuffling in the sand has me turning my head. I spot Natalia making her way onto the beach with her



son, Jason, in her arms.

I'm not sure how old Jason is, but judging by his size I'd guess he's around a year old. He's got a head full of dark hair, a similar color to his mother's. Natalia doesn't glance my way as she sits up a lawn chair. She plunks Jason down onto the sand, scattering toys out in front of him. But Jason doesn't even look at his toys. Instead, his focus is on me.

I haven't officially met him. I suppose he is my nephew. He stands up on wobbly legs and begins to tot over to me. Natalia watches him carefully, her eyebrow furrowed.

"Jason," she calls.

But he ignores her and walks right over to me. I wonder what he's doing when he plops down in my lap.

Is this *normal*? Do children typically walk up to strangers and sit on their lap? Judging by Natalia's agape jaw, I wouldn't think so. I open my mouth, to attempt to make small talk, when a large shadow passes over the top of me. I look up in time to see a dragon swooping toward me. I have just enough time to throw up a shield before fire shoots out of its mouth.

All I can hear is the whooshing sound of fire and possibly the sound of Natalia screaming. Everything is too bright for me to see anything past the fire. Jason is completely unaffected by what's going on around us, he just looks wide eyed at the bright flame. A large bubble of my magic protects us from the force of the flames.

The flames suddenly vanish. I keep my shield going as I look up and see that another dragon is fighting the first dragon. It nearly knocks the dragon from the sky. I look around, desperate to make sure Natalia is all right, but she's gone. I look up again and realize the smaller dragon must be her.

Didn't they say female dragons are weaker? Sure enough, the first dragon bats the smaller one away, turning its attention to Jason and me once more.

Am I the target or Jason? Does it matter? This dragon is dead set on attacking, possibly killing, both of us. And I'm not

going to let anybody hurt me or my nephew. I just met him and I'm already too attached to the little guy.

I strengthen my shield as I shift through my magic. Natalia starts to fly toward the dragon again, but I know she isn't strong enough to fight this guy off. Surely help is coming, but will they get here in time before the dragon hurts Natalia—or worse.

I gather my magic tightly around me, making sure to keep the shield in place, and then I direct it at the attacking dragon. I'm careful to keep it tight so I don't accidentally hit Natalia with it. As my magic is unleashed, the entire beach lights up so bright that I can hardly see anything. The next moment, I hear a loud splash in the water as a large wave comes around Jason and me. The only thing that keeps us dry is the shield around us.

In an instant, I hear a dragon land and feet run toward us. I glance up in time to see Natalia. She nearly barrels into my shield, but I lower it just in time. She runs over to us and grabs Jason, looking him over from head to toe for any sign of injury.

“Is he dead?” I ask, motioning toward the water where a large dragon now lies in water that would go well over my head but barely covers the dragon's enormous body.

“No,” she answers. “He's just knocked unconscious.”

“Should we—” Before I can finish asking her, I hear shouts from up the stairs. More dragons descend on the beach. From Natalia's relaxed posture, I know whoever they are must be familiar to her. I try to keep my own body relaxed, but I keep my magic close, ready to call up a shield at any moment.

“Natalia!”

I turn and see Evander running our way. His face pales when he sees Jason.

“Are you hurt?” Evander asks, looking at his older sister and nephew.

Natalia shakes her head as tears roll down her cheeks. “He was coming after Jason and Wisteria. I couldn't get to Jason in

time, but..." she turns to face me. "You did something. How did the fire not burn you and Jason?"

"Fire?" Evander's face pales even more as he turns to look at me for an answer.

"I... used a shield." I realize, as the words leave my mouth, that most fae aren't capable of using a shield. The magic is beyond most of their magical abilities. But the defensive magic I used I won't be able to explain because fae don't have defensive magic.

"She also took him down." Natalia points toward where the dragon, who is still unconscious, is being detained. I watch as the guy shrinks from a large dragon to a still large, but much smaller, human.

"I didn't realize fae were so strong." Evander eyes me.

I clear my throat. "I'm particularly strong for a fae."

Natalia and Evander both look at me with similar wide eyed expressions. Jason holds his arms out toward me. Natalia ignores him until he starts fussing before she passes him to me.

"If we're attacked again, you can protect him better than I can," she says. "All I could do is try to shield him with my body. But you... you saved my son's life. Thank you."

I adjust Jason higher on my hip. For being so young, he's a chunk.

Natalia takes a step closer to me. I wonder what she's doing until she throws her arms around me and squeezes me tightly in her embrace. Poor Jason is squished between us. Natalia doesn't let go until Jason finally cries out a protest. When she pulls back, I see the terror that still lingers on her face.

For me, that attack was unsettling, but I could easily protect myself. But it looks like Natalia doesn't have the same defensive abilities. Even giving it her all, that dragon was able to fling her off easily. I can't imagine how scary it must have been for her, as she was unable to protect her son.

“Will you come to dinner tonight?” Natalia asks. “With the family. I know that Stellan is gone, but I want you there. You’re our sister now, so you belong there. And you can officially meet my mate, Andrew.”

Evander’s eyebrows knit together, but his features soften as he looks from Natalia to Jason to me. He pushes hair out of his eyes as he nods. “Yes, we’d like you to come. You’re family now.”

My heart swells at their acceptance. After the not so warm welcome I got at the wedding, I wasn’t sure Stellan’s family would ever accept me.

“Okay, thanks.”

Evander holds his arms out for Jason and Jason eagerly goes to his uncle. “I’ll take Jason back to the house. Mom will put him down for his nap. I imagine Andrew is almost here, so you’ll want to reassure him.”

Natalia looks longingly at her son, then nods.

“Come on.” Evander nods his head at me. “Trust me, you don’t want to be here for their reunion.”

I start to ask him what he means when a dragon swoops onto the beach. Instantly, the figure changes. A male—presumably Andrew—runs up to Natalia and crushes her into an embrace. When the two start kissing, I run to catch up with Evander.

Evander chuckles. “I told you.”

“Dragons are so affectionate.” I climb a little faster, wanting to put as much distance as I can between the mated couple and myself.

“We are.” Evander easily paces beside me as we jog up the long staircase. “But especially mated couples. You should’ve seen them when they first met one another.” He scrunches up his nose. “Are fae not affectionate with their mates?”

“Fae don’t have mates,” I tell him. “Married couples don’t show affection in public. My own mother passed away shortly after I was born. And my father’s second marriage was forced

on him, so he and my stepmother definitely aren't affectionate."

If anything, they could be described as cold, but I won't tell Evander that. There is no need to spill all my family secrets—not that it's that much of a secret. I'm pretty sure most of the fae know, considering my father fought the marriage, even on the day of the wedding. But they needed a spare. Turns out, maybe they were right.

Just as Evander and I make it to the court yard, Stellan's mother comes running out the back door.

"I heard what happened." She grabs Jason from Evander's arms and squeezes him against her. "Is everybody okay?" She pulls Evander into her embrace. The teenager dutifully takes the embrace for a few seconds before pushing her away.

"Mom, I'm fine," Evander says. "I wasn't even there."

Dove turns her attention to me. "You were unharmed?"

I nod.

"Wisteria is the one who saved Jason and took down a male dragon." Evander gives me a look that I can't quite read—bewilderment, maybe.

Is it really that big of a deal? Then again, if Natalia, a member of the royal family, couldn't take him down, maybe female dragons really are a lot weaker than male dragons.

Dove looks at me with tears in her eyes. "Thank you for protecting my grandson." She, unsurprisingly, gives me a hug. She keeps her embrace short, likely thinking of my comfort. "I'm glad everybody is unharmed."

Evander slings an arm over my shoulder and guides me toward the large glass door that leads inside the... *castle? Mansion?* I'm still not sure what to call this place. It doesn't look like a typical castle, but it's bigger than the castle I grew up in. It's like one of those modern beach houses I've seen on TV shows, but much larger. I still haven't seen the entire place yet, I just wander around until somebody gives me directions.

"Wisteria is coming to dinner," Evander informs Dove.

Dove grins warmly, her eyes seeming to soften as she looks between her youngest son and me. “Good. I imagine Warrick and Stellan will be back as soon as they hear what happened.”

Warrick, I recognize, is King Basilicus’s name, though I’ve never heard him called that before. Everybody, even the fae, respects the dragon king’s power.

“Wisteria,” Dove says.

Evander drops his arm that he has slung over me, turns to wave, and keeps walking. I turn to face my mother-in-law, curious about what she is going to say.

“Whenever Stellan gets back, he’ll be upset. Just be patient with him.”

I want to question her about it. What could Stellan possibly be upset about? But before I can get the words out, she walks in the opposite direction of the rooms I share with Stellan.

Okay, that was weird and I have a lot of questions for Stellan. First, why did that dragon attack us? Second, how did they attack us on a royal beach—shouldn’t there have been wards, guards, or something? And third, most importantly, who attacked us? From what I understand, dragons are loyal, like wolf shifters. They’re unable to go against their alpha, or in the case of dragons, their king. But clearly, I was mistaken.

I have no idea what to expect for dinner. At home, we’re always expected to dress nicely for the occasion, and it’s always awkward. With my father sitting on one side of the long table and my stepmother on the opposite side, my siblings and I always sat in the middle, not willing to pick a side in their squabbles. Do all families have strange dynamics, or is it just mine? I suppose I’ll just have to wait to find out.

From what I’ve seen so far, dragon shifters are a lot more chill than fae. Even my wedding, which was nice, wasn’t near the level a fae wedding would be. So I decide to risk it and dress a little more casually. I still wear a dress, a purple one that matches the color of my eyes. When I walk into the dining room, I am happy to see that Evander is wearing a pair of

bright colored shorts and a t-shirt. He stands when he sees me come in and he pulls out a chair, motioning for me to sit.

“Thanks,” I say, as he helps push my chair up to the table.

He sits down directly beside me. “Natalia will be late. She always is. She’ll blame it on Jason, but the truth is, she’s been late for everything since we were kids. So we’re likely to be waiting a while.”

I smile, loving the sibling dynamics between Natalia and Evander, but it makes me miss Cypress. He would love it here. I hope he can come to visit soon—he’ll need a break from the toxic monarchs.

“What about Stellan?” I try to ask casually, but I’m desperate to know more about the man I married.

Evander snorts. “If Stellan isn’t, at least, fifteen minutes early for something, he’ll throw a fit. He *hates* being late.”

I try to imagine Stellan ‘throwing a fit,’ but I can’t quite picture it. Though, maybe Evander is right.

“Let me guess.” I turn in my chair to face him. “Natalia is the bossy one. Stellan is the virtuous one. And you’re the chill one.”

Evander nods, a smirk playing on his lips. “Absolutely, but don’t tell Natalia about the bossy thing—she’ll hate it.”

I can’t help but grin back.

“As for Stellan, he is virtuous. He has a great sense of duty—it comes with the territory of being heir.” Evander frowns, looking down. “As bad as it sounds, I’m glad I’m not the oldest.” But he looks up again, grinning. “Though I do have to say, you’re not as stuffy as I thought you’d be. Fae are usually more...” he pauses as if searching for a word.

“Haughty,” I suggest.

“I was going to say boring, but haughty works.” He chuckles. “I’m glad Stellan married you. You’re going to be good for him. He doesn’t know it yet, but you’re exactly what he needs.”

Evander's words warm my heart.

Maybe this will work after all. I just wish I could have the opportunity to get to know my husband. Hopefully once he returns he will stay longer.

I want to ask Evander about where Stellan went, but somebody else enters the room and disrupts me. I turn to spot Dove walking inside. She sits on the opposite side, directly across from Evander. She's dressed nicer than Evander, wearing a nice skirt and top, but I can see I made the right decision about not dressing up too much.

"Natalia texted and said she's going to be a little late," Dove informs us.

Evander smirks, giving me a look. "Told you."

I can't help but giggle.

Dove glances up at the sound. "Evander, are you being mischievous?"

He feigns a shocked look. "Mother, would I dare misbehave in front of my sister-in-law?"

She raises an eyebrow at her youngest son, but she smiles widely.

"I've decided I like Wisteria," Evander declares. "She's a good addition to the family."

Family.

It's strange, but even though I haven't been here long at all and this is my first 'family dinner,' I'm already comfortable around Stellan's family. Too bad the feeling of comfort doesn't yet extend to my husband, but I'm sure we'll get there—especially if his family is anything to go by. I already adore them.

"Good," Dove says, nodding her head almost like she's feeling resolved. "That will make things easier for Stellan."

When I look questioningly at Dove, she just smiles. Her comment makes me wonder what's going on. All of Stellan's



family keeps making cryptic comments like that, but nobody will explain it.

I decide not to ask—if they want me to know, they'll tell me. Just as I'm definitely not going to tell them what Poppy did to get her magic taken away. Every supernatural species has their own secrets that they don't share with others and I'm not going to try and make anybody uncomfortable.

About ten minutes later, Natalia, Andrew, and Jason show up—though Jason is asleep in Andrew's arms. We eat our meal, with Dove insisting we wait for Stellan and King Basilicus to get home before telling the story of what happened on the beach.

I can't help but notice the differences in the meal compared to at home. There is a lot more meat—which I expected. Shifters eat a *lot*. But it's a lot more calm and there is a lot of teasing involved. Of course Evander teases Natalia, but he equally teases Andrew and me, making me think he's already treating me like family—like a sister. I appreciate it because it helps me relax. Every time he makes a joke at my expense, my muscles grow less and less tense until I'm laughing along with the rest of the family.

Natalia just finishes an embarrassing story about Evander when footsteps enter the dining room. I turn in time to see King Basilicus, looking as calm as ever, and Stellan, who frantically scans the table until his eyes land on me.

He couldn't possibly be worried about me, could he?

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## STRANGE MAGIC

### Wisteria

**W**isteria Stellan doesn't stop walking until he's right behind my chair. I wonder if I should say something to reassure him that I'm all right when Evander jumps up from his seat.

"You can sit here." He moves over one spot, leaving the chair beside me empty.

Stellan doesn't hesitate to sit, his eyes still on me. "Are you okay?"

Is he actually worried about me? I should reassure him that I'm fine—that I can more than take care of myself, but Natalia beats me to it.

"Wisteria was awesome. She took down a male dragon all on her own." Natalia grins as she sits up straighter. "All while protecting herself and Jason. I tried to help her, but I was useless against his strength."

"I would've protected you too," I say, turning to face Natalia. "I wanted to, I just couldn't see you past the fire. By the time I got sight of you, you were already shifted and I figured you could protect yourself then."

"Wait, *you* took down a dragon?" Stellan stares at me with wide eyes.

King Basilicus clears his throat, taking a seat at the head of the table. "I would like to hear the whole story from the

beginning.”

Natalia tells him everything, leaving out no detail of the experience. It all happened so fast that even I missed details that she caught. Though, she wasn't having blinding white fire shot at her so she was able to see more than I was. My focus was on protecting Jason and myself.

At the end of the story, King Basilicus looks thoughtfully at me, and I wonder what he thinks about what happened. He's spent a lot of time with Father over the years, so he probably knows more about fae than anybody at the table. I shift my attention to Stellan. He remains quiet as he looks between Jason, Natalia, and me. I wish I knew him better so I could read the expression on his face.

“I didn't know fae had defensive or offensive magic,” King Basilicus finally says, breaking the silence. “I thought most of your magic was more... nature related.”

“It depends on the fae.” I give him a vague answer because I'm not sure if he knows the truth about me. I keep it to myself, not wanting the dragon shifters to see me differently. I don't think I could handle it if they started hero worshiping me like the fae do.

Stellan stands from his chair and holds his hand out to me. I accept it, letting him pull me to my feet. Once I'm standing, he doesn't let go like I expect. Instead, he just keeps a firm grip on my hand.

“Wisteria and I are heading to our room,” Stellan says, his tone final, not leaving any space for argument. He tugs me toward the exit.

I turn, waving to his family with my free hand. “I'll see you later.”

“Next time Stellan ditches you, I'll teach you how to surf,” Evander yells, but Stellan pulls me from the room before I can respond.

He cocks an eyebrow at me in question. “Did Evander seriously just offer to teach you how to surf?”

“Uh, yes. We’re friends,” I say, sounding more confident than I feel. Evander did admit that he likes me, so I assume that means we’re friends.

“My brother doesn’t really have friends.” Stellan slows down his quick pace. “He’s a bit of a loner. I kind of assumed he’d spend the next few months, maybe even years, completely ignoring you.”

“Really?” My eyes widen. “Because he’s hilarious. I find it hard to believe he doesn’t have a ton of friends.”

Stellan opens his mouth, closes it, and opens it again. “Strange,” is all he says, then tugs me along faster again.

The way we go to his—our—rooms is a different path than I’ve been taking today, but it’s a lot quicker. I’ll have to remember the way we came. This house is like a maze that I haven’t yet figured out.

As soon as we get into our sitting room, Stellan drops my hand and runs his fingers through his hair. He lets out a long breath as he looks at me. “I’ve been worried about you since I found out what happened. I thought—” his voice breaks as he shakes his head. “It’s my job to protect you.”

Protect me? The thought is so absurd I almost laugh until I see his serious expression.

Of course he would be worried. Our marriage may just be for an alliance, but alliance is important. If something happened to me, the fae would be outraged.

I take a step closer to him, hoping to reassure him. “It’s okay. You didn’t know a dragon shifter would try to attack. I’m still unsure if they were after me or Jason. It all happened so fast.”

Stellan cocks his head to the side. “Didn’t the dragon come directly at you?”

“Yes.” I nod. “But Jason was with me.”

He watches me, like he’s waiting for me to explain further, but I’m not sure what he expects me to say, so I just stare back at him.

“Where was my sister during the attack?” he asks.

“We were on the beach together,” I answer. “She was sitting maybe six feet away from me, but Jason came and sat in my lap.”

“My nephew let you hold him?” His eyebrows knit together in confusion.

“Yes.”

He sucks in a sharp breath. “You don’t get it. Jason doesn’t let *anybody* hold him, other than our family. Sometimes he won’t even let *me* hold him. He typically only stays with Natalia, Andrew, or my mother.”

“Oh.” I chew on my bottom lip. “He sort of just walked over and plopped down in my lap. I just figured he was friendly.”

Stellan shakes his head, almost like he can’t believe what I’m saying, and then he runs his fingers through his hair again. “My family likes you.” His voice sounds odd, like he can’t quite believe the words he’s saying. I almost can’t believe it either.

Yesterday, I could’ve sworn Natalia hated me. And I didn’t even meet Evander at the wedding, I’m pretty sure he was trying to avoid me. But today, I feel like I’m suddenly part of the family. Though maybe they’re just trying to be nice. This whole marriage alliance thing doesn’t just affect Stellan and me, but our families as well.

Stellan walks over to the couch and takes a seat. He motions for me to take the spot beside him. Hesitantly, I walk over, sitting down next to him. I hope that tonight’s conversation goes better than last night. I don’t want him running away from me again.

“Will you be here when I wake up tomorrow?” I want the words back as soon as they’re out of my mouth. I don’t want Stellan to think I’m being overbearing, but I also don’t like being surprised like I was this morning. And I am curious.

“I will be here.” His voice sounds thick as he looks at me with wide, blue-green eyes. “I’m not going to leave your side

for a while, not until I know for sure you're safe."

I want to point out that I can protect myself, but I decide to keep the thought to myself. The last thing I want is for him to start asking questions about my magic. I don't want him to realize that I'm not like a normal fae.

"Next time you leave, can you tell me that you'll be gone?" I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. "I don't like waking up to a note like that."

He nods. "I promise, I'll tell you next time. It was last minute thing and I didn't want to wake you."

I take a deep breath, meeting his eyes. "Your father asked you to go on a work trip the day after your wedding?"

Stellan hesitates, then shakes his head. "I knew my father was going. I just couldn't sleep last night. I was kind of freaking out about the whole being married thing. I asked him if I could go."

"You wanted to get away from me." It's not a question, but I still hope he'll answer.

"No. Yes. I don't know." He lowers his head, no longer making eye contact. "I got scared."

"And you think I can't relate? Because, if you didn't realize, I'm the other half of this alliance. Nobody can understand better than I do," I point out.

"I'm sorry." He looks at me again, his eyes holding something that I can't quite read. "I will be around more. I'll make a point to hang out with you."

"I don't need you to entertain me." I pull my knees up to my chest and hug them against me. "I always thought Poppy was so lucky and she spent her entire life dreading this marriage. I would've given anything to be in her place. I guess now I am."

He raises an eyebrow at me. "You wanted to be forced into a marriage?"

I shrug, wondering how I can possibly explain it to him. "She was free. I was the one stuck in meetings all day with

dramatic monarchs. Fae may not be able to lie, but they can manipulate and twist their words. They get around lying by telling half truths. And the last year, they've spent hours fighting over who I was going to marry. Every monarch wanted their son to be in the running. Marrying you is, truthfully, the best outcome I could've hoped for. At least you won't use me for a political advantage."

"But the fae are so..." His voice trails off as he tilts his head to the side. "Your race is known for being peaceful—to the point where the rest of the supernaturals think you're kind of hippies. I mean, you're wearing a flower crown."

I touch my hair, pulling the floral circlet off my head. I had forgotten I was even wearing it. "Looks can be deceiving, Stellan." I throw my flower crown onto the coffee table, not knowing what else to say. Of course he doesn't get it. To the outside world, fae are perfect. Nobody knows about the backstabbing and infighting and no fae would dare tell anybody because we don't want to ruin the facade.

Stellan purses his lips as he watches me with an expression that is all too easy to read. He doesn't believe me. And why would he? He doesn't know or trust me. How am I supposed to change his mind about something he's thought to be true his whole life?

I push myself up from the couch, looking anywhere but at my new husband. "I'm going to go to bed early tonight. I'll, uh, see you tomorrow."

I rush from the room before Stellan can say anything else.

Last night, he was the one to run. But tonight, I'm the one running.

Today was such a good day—amazing, even. I loved hanging out with Stellan's family and getting to know them. But now, knowing that Stellan couldn't wait to ditch me this morning, it makes me feel sick to my stomach.

My husband hates me.

*Don't think about it*, I tell myself, trying to blink away the tears that are threatening to fall.

I was kidding myself even thinking we could become friends. Because right now... I can't see anything past this stupid, awkward stage.

That night, I cry myself to sleep.

STELLAN

My chest feels like it's been ripped in half.

What am I supposed to do? And why did my family suddenly change their mind about my wife?

Yesterday, and even in the weeks leading up to the wedding, my family reminded me every day that I shouldn't fall in love with my wife. They said if I did, it would only end up hurting her. Because no matter how much I love her, the mate bond will erase any warm feelings I have for her.

I've never so badly in my life wished that I didn't have a soulmate. I don't want to meet her. This marriage is my duty as crown prince. But I want to make the most of it. I want to get to know Wisteria without any barriers.

Last night, I could hear Wisteria crying. I think she thought I couldn't hear her—I pretended I couldn't. But not even the soundproof rooms block everything. She eventually ended up crying herself to sleep, but I couldn't sleep after that.

I don't want to hurt her. That's the last thing I want. But what alternative do I have? Why did my ancestors put me in this position?

I rub my hands over my face, wishing for the thousandth time that things could be different. But this isn't just about *me*—it's not even about my future mate. It's about all the dragon shifters. It's about ensuring that we have a future where dragon shifters stay strong.

I hear Wisteria in her bedroom. I heard her take a shower about an hour ago, but she still hasn't come out. She's avoiding me and I can't even be upset about it. Yesterday, I was the one avoiding her.

I turn when I hear a knock on the door. I was so focused on listening for Wisteria that I didn't even notice anybody



walking down the hallway. I listen at the door for noises and hear Natalia and Jason on the other side. When I open the door, Jason has a huge grin on his face.

“Hey, little guy.” I reach for him, hoping he’ll come to me. He ignores me.

Natalia scoffs. “No hello for your big sister?”

“Hello, Natalia,” I say. “All my greetings have to go to Jason—he’s cuter than you are.”

She frowns but nods. “You’re right. He is cuter.” She shifts Jason higher up on her hip and holds out a bag toward me. “Do you have a couple hours free so you can babysit for me?”

I hesitate—not because I don’t want to help my sister out, I do, it’s just last time I babysat for her, Jason spent the entire time crying.

“Please,” she says. “Your wife can help. She’s surprisingly good with kids.”

“Fine.” I sigh, grabbing the bag from her. I sit it down on a side table and then take Jason from her arms. “If he starts crying, I’m not going to let you leave him this time.”

“He’ll be fine,” Natalia says.

But his lower lip pokes out as he reaches for his mom. I try to bounce him a little to distract him.

“It’s just two hours,” Natalia promises. She kisses Jason on the head. “Bye.” She turns and runs out the door.

Two seconds after she leaves, Jason starts wailing.

Great.

I bounce him in my arms. “It’s okay. Mommy will be back soon.”

But he doesn’t care. He just keeps crying.

The sound of a door opening has me turning around. Wisteria walks out of her bedroom looking absolutely adorable. Her white blonde hair is down, showing off her natural waves. The flower crown is back, which I secretly like.

I'm not even sure where she got the flowers, though maybe it's part of her fae magic. I still need to research fae magic. Her purple eyes look curiously from me to Jason. She smiles as she walks over.

“Hey, Jason,” she says, cooing at him.

Okay, now I get why my sister was upset over the fact that I greeted my nephew before her. I've never been so jealous of a thirteen month old, but right now I am.

Jason stops crying when he sees her. He, like a complete traitor, reaches his arms out for her. She goes to reach for him but pauses to look at me. I pass him over with a sigh.

Of course my nephew likes her more than me.

As soon as Jason is in her arms, he smiles up at her, and then puts his head against her chest. It's almost like he's taunting me by snuggling with my wife.

“Unbelievable.” I shake my head at my nephew, but he's closing his eyes, falling fast asleep. I flick my gaze up to Wisteria, my *wife*, who is watching Jason with soft eyes. It's easy to see why my family has welcomed her so quickly. But what I want to know is WHY my family, after warning me not to, went and fell in love with her.

Wisteria slowly looks from Jason to me. Her eyes fade from purple to gray but flash back so fast that if I blinked I would've missed it. She smiles, though I can tell that it's forced, and then she walks over to the couch, taking a seat.

She's upset with me. I mentally go through our conversation last night, but I can't figure out what I said to make her so perturbed. I'm failing epically at the whole being married thing.

I take a seat next to Wisteria, pretending I don't notice how her body stiffens when I do. She keeps her eyes on Jason, like she's trying not to look at me.

Maybe she really was upset that I left without saying anything. It was the day after our wedding, I just thought she would appreciate the time to herself. Clearly, I was wrong.

“Good morning,” I say to her.

“Morning,” she says back, but her purple eyes don’t even glance my way.

Ouch. That icy tone.

I clear my throat, trying to think of something else, but when I look at her and see her holding my nephew, my words get caught in my throat. Why does she have to look so freaking adorable?

I’ve been around plenty of attractive supernaturals in my life, but never has anybody affected me like this. Maybe it’s because she’s holding my nephew, or maybe it’s her purple eyes that seem to flash with her changing emotions. It would be so easy for fall for her. Only to feel absolutely nothing for her when I meet my mate.

That is why I’m keeping walls between us. Because I can’t fall in love with her, it would only hurt her in the end.

But... for the sake of our marriage, I should try to be her friend. Long after I meet my mate, and am forced to reject her, Wisteria will be here. And someday we’ll have to have children, which is the point of the alliance. I have to try and befriend her.

“My sister should be back in a couple of hours. Maybe then we could do something,” I suggest. “Do you want to see the island?”

That has her perking up. “You’d show me the rest of the island?”

I chuckle at her enthusiasm. “It’s a big island, so I couldn’t show it to you all in one day, but I’ll take you to some of my favorite spots.”

“Okay.” She grins widely, her eyes changing from purple to blue. They don’t flash back like they normally do, instead they stay blue. I study the color—a bright, cerulean blue—wondering what it means.

My heart beats a little faster as I realize that this color *must* mean happiness. From the way she’s smiling and her entire

body is relaxed, it's clear to see.

My wife is absolutely beautiful. And I realize, as she watches me with bright blue eyes, I'd do anything she asked, anything that would make her happy.

"Jason is so cute." Wisteria gently runs her hand over his head, moving the short strands of his dark hair.

I swallow hard. "You're really good with kids. Do you have young cousins or something?"

"I haven't been around a baby since Cypress was little." A smile tugs at her lips, but it quickly falls. "I don't have any cousins. My father's only family passed away before I was born."

I want to ask her questions. Supernaturals don't naturally die young, so there had to be something to cause their untimely death. But from her closed off expression, I can tell she doesn't want me to ask.

"Thank you, Stellan."

His words are completely out of context, so I give her a questioning look. "What for?"

She looks down, not meeting my gaze. "For offering to show me around the island."

As I watch Wisteria holding my nephew, I think back to the conversation we had the day she and her father showed up. She told me that she wasn't allowed to leave the castle she grew up in. At the time, I thought it was strange, but now that I think about it, her wording was very sure.

"When you say you weren't able to leave the fae castle, what do you mean by that?" I ask.

"I mean exactly that—I wasn't allowed to leave. The first time I've ever left my home was when my father and I flew here." She chews on my bottom lip, still keeping her purple eyes down.

"What about going to town? Were you ever allowed to go out to eat or go shopping, anything?"

She shakes her head. “No.”

Something in my gut twists at her admission. She really has been a prisoner, locked away. No wonder she was so excited about marrying me—because marrying a stranger who is offering freedom is better than being a prisoner.

“We don’t have to stop with just our island. Anywhere in the world that you want to go, I will take you,” I promise her.

I scoot closer to Wisteria and she finally looks up at me, a grin tugging at her lips.

She’s even more beautiful when she smiles.

I’m in so much trouble.

## WISTERIA

A couple hours later, Natalia shows up to pick up Jason. She seems surprised when Stellan informs her how good he was. He stayed asleep for most of the time and only woke up for the last thirty minutes. He ate some snacks and played with toys.

After she leaves, I get changed to head out with Stellan. He tells me to wear comfortable shoes. I quickly change into something fit for being outdoors. When I come back into the sitting room, Stellan is standing at the door, talking with somebody. I walk closer and find his father standing there.

“Hello, Wisteria,” King Basilicus greets me.

“Hello, King Basilicus.”

“Dad,” Stellan says, his voice sounding tight. “Can’t this wait until tomorrow? Or next week? I just got married.”

“I’m afraid not,” King Basilicus—Warrick—says, frowning at his son. “I’m sorry, Stellan. I need you to be ready in thirty minutes.”

Stellan sighs, backing away from the door. “Fine.” He shuts the door with his father still standing there and groans as he turns to face me. “I’ve got to go.”

My heart sinks. “Oh.” I try to force myself to smile, but I’m certain the color of my eyes give away my

disappointment. “It’s okay. You can’t help it. You’re the crown prince—you’ve got duties. I understand that.”

He takes a step closer to me. “I’m sorry, Wisteria. When I get back—”

I cut him off. “Don’t make any promises that you can’t keep.” I take a step back, putting some distance between us. “I’ll see you when you get back.”

He sighs, then nods. “Okay. I’ll talk to Natalia and Mom—they’ll take you out to see the island. I’m sure my sister would love to take you shopping.”

“Okay.” I do my best to look fine, though I’m not *fine*. I’m disappointed. And I hate how much it stings that Stellan isn’t keeping his word. Even if this isn’t his fault, I wonder if he’s secretly happy about leaving. Maybe he dreaded spending time with me.

Stellan looks at me for a moment longer, then he steps toward his room. As soon as his door shuts behind him, my shoulders sag in—*relief? disappointment?*—I’m not sure. When I feel a warm tear roll down my cheek, I quickly wipe it away.

Whatever this is, it’s for the best.

At least I’m free here. He did say I could check out the island. Even if my husband hates me, this is better than the alternative, right?

Stellan comes out of his room a few minutes later with a duffle bag slung over his shoulder. I relax my posture, putting on my best smile. If there is one thing I’ve learned living among the fae, it’s how to hide my true feelings. This should be easy.

He stops in front of me, dropping his bag to the floor. “I meant what I said earlier. You are free here, Wisteria. You can live your life how you want. Right now, things are tense. The dragons, now more than ever, need this alliance with the fae. We need to be strong.”

I tense at his words. “What’s going on?”

He hesitates.

“Somebody attacked us on the beach, but I’m beginning to think it wasn’t a random attack,” I say.

Stellan shakes his head. “It wasn’t random, but I also don’t want you to worry. Your protection is my priority.”

Only I don’t need him to protect me.

Still, I don’t want to remind him. The last thing I need is for him to start asking questions. It wouldn’t be fair for me to expect him to tell me everything when I’m not willing to do the same with him.

“Will you be okay?” He studies my eyes carefully, like he’s waiting for my true emotions to show.

I shift my weight, uncomfortable having him looking at me like this. It makes me feel... “It’s fine, Stellan.”

He still doesn’t look away.

Finally, I look into his eyes—they look green today.

“Would you even tell me the truth if you weren’t okay?” he asks.

“Fae can’t lie,” I remind him.

He raises one eyebrow. “But you already admitted you can manipulate your words. It didn’t escape my notice that you haven’t told me if you’re okay or not.”

I shouldn’t have explained all of that to him.

He looks at me, waiting for me to say something.

“I don’t know what you want me to say,” I admit. “Truthfully, I don’t know you very well. You and I have barely spent time together and when we do, I feel like you keep walls between us, like you’re scared to get to know me. Maybe when you get back, we can make the most of our time together, even if it is short. But it will only work if you decide you want it.”

This time, Stellan is the one to look away. He picks up his duffle bag from the floor, slinging it over his shoulder. He

finally looks into my eyes.

“You’re right, and I’m sorry.” With that, he turns and walks out of our sitting room without even saying goodbye.

Well... he was the one who asked for honesty. I guess he just didn’t like what I had to say.



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## MY LIFE BEFORE

### Wisteria

I stand in a dressing room, waiting as Natalia throws clothes over the door for me to try on.

I try not to be disappointed about Stellan leaving yesterday, and I still have no idea when he'll be back. But true to his word, he asked his mom and sister to take me out for a day. I have a feeling he told them that life before living with the dragons wasn't great because Natalia has taken the task to heart. It's only noon and my feet are already hurting from all the shopping we've been doing. She's made it her mission in life to get me out of—her words, not mine—stuffy fae clothes. She says I'm a dragon princess now, and dragon princesses apparently dress like they're on vacation all the time. She throws yet another flower print sundress over the door. As much as I hate to admit it, it's kind of cute, even if Natalia goes way overboard on the flower print thing.

I put on the dress, careful not to mess up my hair or flower crown. The only reason my hair isn't a frizzing mess is because I've been using fae magic to keep it neat, but magic can only do so much.

“Step out,” she demands.

I can't help but grin at her bossy attitude. I had her pegged as bossy from the beginning and I was right. Somehow, it works for Natalia. I imagine she was worse with her brothers growing up.

When I walk out of the dressing room, Natalia has me do a spin.

“Perfect. Keep that one on.” She rips the tag off. “I’ll go pay.”

I sigh, not bothering to stop her. The saleswoman already has about ten bags stuffed full of clothes. I grab my phone from the dressing room and meet Natalia at the counter. She swipes her card before I can even attempt to offer to pay.

“That’s too much,” I tell her. “And I *do* have my own money.”

Her grin widens. “It’s Stellan’s card.”

Ah, that explains why she’s so smug about it. I’m sure she’s enjoying spending her brother’s money. As such as I want to protest, my anger at Stellan has me silent.

“Next, we’re going out to eat. I’m thinking something fancy—the kind of restaurant where kids aren’t allowed,” she says, then sighs. “I don’t get to go to places like that since Jason was born.”

I laugh, thinking she only wants to go there because Stellan is apparently paying for our entire outing. I’m sure he thinks it makes up for him ditching me every single day since our wedding. Maybe it *should*. Neither of us wanted this marriage. I shouldn’t hold him to unfair standards. Our relationship will take time—more time than even I imagined.

Natalia left Jason with Evander. Apparently the two of them are spending a fun day at the pool. I can only imagine what mischief those two can get into. Evander is a troublemaker and no doubt he’s going to try and corrupt his nephew.

The door to the shop opens and Dove walks in just in time to help Natalia and me carry our bags to the car.

“It’s too much,” I say, once I see how loaded the back of the large SUV is. She won’t even be able to see out of the rearview mirror.

“I’m certain my brother would disagree.” Natalia’s voice doesn’t leave any room for argument.

“But I already have plenty of clothes,” I protest.

Natalia ignores me as she goes to get in the driver’s seat.

Dove pats me on the back. “When Natalia gets something in her head, it’s best to let her have free rein. Besides, she’s right. Stellan will not mind.”

The horn of the SUV blares. Dove chuckles, heading to get in the passenger side. I get in the backseat behind her. Natalia just keeps smiling as she heads off toward whatever restaurant she has in mind. And I have a feeling that it’s going to be a *long* day.

I look out the window as we head down streets that are unfamiliar to me. I try to memorize everything I can, but I wonder if I need to. Was Stellan being serious when he said I was free to do as I want? Can I really come into town? Certainly I must be able to—Dove is queen and she’s with us.

I glance behind us, seeing an SUV a short distance back. Guards came with us, of course. It was the only way we could come, especially after what happened on the beach. But having guards is a small price to pay. I’ve hardly even noticed them. They stood outside the shop we were at and they’ll probably do the same at the restaurant.

Dove and Natalia talk as we drive—Natalia is informing her mother about some new milestone for Jason. I listen passively, mostly watching our surroundings. It hits me that this is *normal* for them—they’re not freaking out about being outside their castle... or mansion? I’m still not sure what the dragons call it. But it’s easy to imagine this as my future—going shopping with the in-laws and exploring the island. I try to picture going to visit other places, but I can’t get the image in my head. Maybe because the only other place I know is inside stone walls.

When Natalia pulls in front of a restaurant, I’m surprised to see it’s not the fancy place she boasted of wanting to go. Instead, it’s a local diner. I follow the two dragon shifters

inside, where a plump young human woman escorts us to a booth.

Once we're seated, I take a quick glance around the diner, noting that about half the restaurant is dragon shifters, but the other half is human.

Come to think of it, there have been a significant amount of humans on this island. It surprises me, given that most of the dragon shifter population lives here. I assumed they'd have their own island, apart from humans.

I glance at my mother and sister-in-law over my menu. "How do dragons stay hidden on an island with humans?"

Natalia is typing something on her phone, not paying attention to me at all. After knowing her for a short amount of time, I imagine she's either checking up on Evander and Jason or texting her mate.

"Magic," Dove answers, giving me a wide grin. "We have water elementals put magic into the local water supply which makes them look past anything supernatural that they see."

I lift an eyebrow. "But what if the locals don't drink the tap water?"

"Even if they don't drink it, they still shower and wash their clothes in it," she answers.

Wow. They've gone through a lot of trouble to make this work. "What about visitors?"

"There aren't a lot of visitors," Dove says. "There is only one hotel—for supernaturals only—and no resorts on the island, and only one small plane comes in a week. The airport has its own magic—it goes through the air conditioner."

"You guys have thought of everything." I put my menu down, having already decided what I want.

"We did consider making this a dragon-only island, but we need humans. Without them, there wouldn't be many shops or restaurants. And even I am not ashamed to admit I'm addicted to those expensive coffee drinks." Dove puts down her own menu, looking at me. "I do hope you like the island."

I nod enthusiastically. “It’s beautiful.”

Her posture relaxes. “Good. I was worried you’d hate it.”

Natalia looks up from her phone as the waitress approaches our table. She takes our order, not batting an eye when Dove and Natalia order enough food to feed a large family and leaves.

Huh... their magical showers must really work.

“That’s all you’re going to eat?” Natalia wrinkles her nose at me. “Will a single plate of pasta really fill you up?”

Is she worried for my health or just worried I’ll try to steal some of her food? Knowing Natalia, it’s probably a little of both.

“Fae have much smaller appetites,” I remind her. “Since we don’t shift, we don’t burn nearly as many calories.”

Still, she cocks her head to the side as she looks at me. Her not quite blue, not quite green eyes make my chest tighten.

Do I *miss* Stellan?

“You and Stellan have the same eye color,” I comment.

She grins. “We do, though most people don’t notice. They always comment how I look nothing like my brother.”

It’s true that Stellan and Natalia do look quite different—from the shade of their hair, and even their skin. Stellan’s is more olive toned while Natalia has a more pink hue.

“Speaking of my brother,” Natalia grins, playing with the paper straw of her drink, “how are the two of you getting along?”

Dove scoffs. “Natalia, you can’t ask her that.”

“Why not?” Natalia gives her mom her best innocent expression. She even goes as far as to flutter her eyelashes. “I’m only asking for the sake of my family.”

“It’s fine.” I wave a hand, letting them know I don’t mind the personal question, then I sigh. “Stellan is a very dutiful prince.” Unfortunately, he’s not quite as dutiful of a husband.

In his defense, he's been a prince a lot longer than he's been a husband, but he's still not the easiest guy to be married to.

Natalia snorts. "That's such a fae answer. You guys certainly know how to word things so you don't lie."

"It's impossible for a fae to lie," I tell her.

She nods. "Yes, but that doesn't mean you haven't found ways around telling the truth."

"What do you want me to say?" I ask.

She leans closer. "Have you two kissed yet?"

"Natalia!" Dove scolds her daughter.

My cheeks grow warm. "We're still getting to know one another."

"That's a no." She sighs, leaning back. "I was hoping for a niece or nephew soon."

If I were bold, I'd tell her that we're a *long* way off from that. For us to get there, Stellan would have to spend more than a few hours with me. So far, he's mostly avoided me, and the time we have spent together hasn't been great. I'm starting to wonder if we even have any chemistry, but then I think about his blue green eyes and the way he smiled at me yesterday morning and I get butterflies.

Well, I'm *definitely* attracted to him. But I don't think he's attracted to me.

"I'm surprised you know that fae can't lie," I say, changing the subjects away from babies.

"It's... common knowledge..." She gives me a look like she's questioning if I'm all right.

"Stellan didn't know." I shrug, like it's not a big deal. "So I figured if he didn't know, you wouldn't either."

She scoffs. "Stellan is an idiot."

"Natalia," Dove says, once again scolding her.

"What?" She gives her mom a look. "He's the one who was going to *marry* a fae—he's known it his whole life. Why

wouldn't he learn about his future wife's species?"

Dove doesn't say anything to that, though what could she say? Natalia is right. All of it makes me suspect that Stellan was avoiding thinking about it. He obviously wanted this marriage as much as Poppy did, which is to say not at all.

I'll have to be more lenient when it comes to him. He was foisted into an unwanted marriage, so it's going to take him a little while to adjust. I shouldn't be so hard on him.

When he gets back, I promise myself that I'll make the most of our time. I won't hold a grudge against him, even if I'm upset with him.

"It's okay." I sit up straighter. "I didn't know much about dragon shifters before I got here."

"You knew you were going to marry him for three weeks—of course you didn't have time to research dragon shifters," Natalia says, in my defense.

I'm surprised that she's defending me. When I first got here, I was convinced that she hated me. I want to ask her about it, but I don't want to offend her. Maybe once I get to know her better I'll be brave enough to ask why she was so rude when we first met.

"Imperial Highness."

I look up at the familiar title in time to see two fae bend themselves in a low bow.

"You don't have to bow," I tell them, hoping they'll stand up straight. They stay low.

Natalia clears her throat. "Her title is Princess Wisteria—she's the crown princess of the dragon shifters."

That causes the fae to stand. The male and female give each other a look, like they don't quite know what to make of Natalia's words. They back up slightly when they see the person who talked to them is a dragon shifter.

The female laughs mechanically and looks in my direction. "We'll just leave you to your lunch, Imperial Highness."

The two turn and practically run off. I look from their fleeting forms toward Natalia and Dove, who are watching me with interest.

Well, Natalia is. Dove's expression is something closer to... concern?

"Imperial Highness?" Natalia cocks an eyebrow.

I shrug. "You know my father is the emperor. As I got older, and the fae realized—" *how powerful I am*. I clear my throat. "Anyway, the fae decided princess wasn't a good enough title." I cringe, realizing how that sounds. "I've always hated it."

Dove looks from me to Natalia. "Have you ever seen fae on the island before?"

Natalia shakes her head. "No."

I want to tell them it's because fae are scared of them. Ironic, considering it's fae blood that made dragon shifters so strong.

"They're here for you. They have to be." Natalia turns to study me, her eyebrow furrowed. "You and your brother are both very difficult to learn about. Fae are protective of you guys, but especially you."

My stomach churns.

Right. Of course they don't know a lot about me. That makes sense. But I don't want to explain to her *why*, so I decide to change the subject. I hope I'm subtle with my actions, but Natalia and Dove are smart.

"Do you know when Stellan will be back?" I glance at Dove, knowing she's the one to ask. I'm sure she's been in contact with her husband.

"Tonight." Dove sets her drink down on the table.

Natalia scoots out of her booth seat. "I'm going to go to the bathroom."

I watch her stroll off, but my attention goes back to Dove. I tilt my head to the side as I study her expression.



“You weren’t surprised,” I comment. “When the fae called me by my fae title.”

“Because I wasn’t. My husband has visited your father enough times to know your title. He mentioned it when you were to marry Stellan.” She furrows her brows. “We thought perhaps the fae would try to find a way out of the marriage alliance because he knows you’re important to them.”

“They tried,” I admit, not bothering to hide it from my mother-in-law.

“We tried as well,” Dove says, though I already knew.

Stellan’s family wasn’t exactly excited by our marriage, though they have been very accepting of me since that first day.

“Do you resent the fact that you’re not going to be an empress?” Dove asks.

I shake my head. “No. I didn’t want anything to do with fae politics. I would’ve gladly traded places with Poppy if I could have.”

She nods and takes a long sip from her drink. Natalia comes back to the table, sliding back into her seat beside Dove.

“So, where are we going to next?” Natalia is practically beaming.

Dove grins, shaking her head.

“Are you wanting to spend more of Stellan’s money?” I question.

She nods. “Of course.”

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## CAN I TRUST YOU?

### Wisteria

**W**isteria

I am nervous.

Late last night, Stellan got home, but it was so late that I was already asleep. I know that when I leave my room, he's going to be there... waiting for me.

I take my time getting a long shower, trying to delay seeing him.

How long will Stellan be here? An hour or two? Then he'll be off doing his princely duties, and I can't even be upset about it because it's his *job*. The worst part is that I understand it. I used to be the heir. I remember all the meetings and hours spent working.

I stand in front of the door that leads into the sitting room, trying to convince myself to turn the knob. Yes, Stellan is sort of a stranger, but he's also my husband. And I've spent the last few days getting to know his family. I adore them all. I know that if I give myself a chance to get to know my husband, it would be so easy to fall in love with him.

But he's trying to push me away. I *know* this. He wants to keep distance between us. He's scared to get too close. It's almost like he's scared to fall in love with me.

Why would he be scared of that? This marriage is a done deal—there is no getting out of it. Fae and dragons both don't divorce. Even what my father did for Poppy was barely

allowed and probably wouldn't have been allowed at all if my father hadn't been so desperate. No, Stellan and I are well and truly stuck together.

Is he just not attracted to me?

A knock on my door interrupts my thoughts.

I take a deep breath, straighten my shoulders, and open the door. I'm not surprised to see Stellan on the other side, but I am surprised by how cute he looks.

His dirty blond hair is a little messed up, which only adds to his charms. But it's his expression that has me—I think it's uncertainty.

Is he just as unsure as I am?

His Adam's apple bobs up and down as he slowly looks up. My stomach tightens as his eyes—which look *so* blue today—finally make contact with mine.

“I, uh,” he stumbles over his words.

“Hi,” I say, for lack of anything better to say.

Fae are beautiful, well spoken creatures. Clearly something went wrong with me on that one.

“Hi.” He rubs a hand on the back of his neck. “I heard you standing at the door. It's been five minutes, so I thought maybe you were scared.”

Great. So much for trying to look more confident than I feel.

“Sorry.” I chew on my bottom lip.

“Are you frightened of me?” Stellan watches me carefully, like he's waiting for me to flinch away from him.

“I'm scared of a lot of things when it comes to you, but no—I'm not frightened of you, Stellan.”

His posture relaxes at my words.

Did he really think I was scared of him? It's so absurd I can't even fathom it.

If I were braver, I would take a step closer to him. I would grab onto his hand to reassure him. But just the thought of touching him has my cheeks growing warm.

Stellan clears his throat, taking a step back. “My sister said you hung out with her and my mom yesterday.”

I cringe. “Yes. Natalia *really* likes to shop.”

He chuckles, rubbing at the scruff on his jaw. “And she said you don’t like shopping.”

“Not for clothes,” I admit. “But if we had gone to a bookstore, I might’ve been more excited.”

“Books?” He raises an eyebrow.

“I like to read.” I pull my cardigan tighter around me as I feel the cold air coming out of the vent. “There wasn’t much else to do when I was growing up, so I would read books and pretend I was anywhere else in the world.”

His entire posture stiffens. “You preferred fiction over being in a castle?”

Surprised by his reaction, I just shrug, trying to show him it’s not a big deal. “Are you hungry? I haven’t had breakfast yet.”

Stellan grins. “I’m starving. Do you want to have breakfast with me? I want to take you somewhere.”

My eyes widen, but I quickly nod, not wanting him to see my surprise.

“I would like that,” I say, trying hard to sound nonchalant.

His lips twist slightly and he nods his head, indicating that I should follow him. I start to grab my phone from my room but decide to leave it. I don’t want there to be any distractions today.

As we walk down the corridor, Stellan rests his hand on my lower back, making my stomach twist.

Big deal. My husband is casually touching me. This should be normal, right?

Except... he's spent every day since we got married either avoiding me entirely or avoiding physical contact. Even the kiss we shared at our wedding was so chaste it could hardly be called a kiss.

Still, it's too early for *that*. Even if I do wonder if his lips would be as warm as they were on our wedding day.

Everything about Stellan is warm. Well, other than his personality, but I decide not to focus on that. Instead, I think of his warm blue green eyes, his kind smile, and the way he is with his family. It's easy to see that they love him and he loves them just as much.

"Is your dress one you picked out with Natalia?" Stellan asks, interrupting my thoughts.

I glance down at the dress in question. "Yes. She said all my clothes were too warm for the island."

He grins. "And so you put on a sweater over the dress?"

"Because I'm not hot like a dragon shifter. It may be a tropical island, but it's still winter." I shiver, trying to prove my point. It's not my fault they blast the AC in this place. I passed a thermostat that was set to sixty degrees—*sixty*.

Stellan doesn't say anything, but when I glance over at him I see that he's watching me out of the corner of his eye.

"What?" I ask, wondering if I have something on my face.

He shakes his head. "Nothing."

But he still doesn't look away. Part of me wishes I did have powers like a dark fae so I could read his emotions, but maybe it's better I don't know. Maybe he's watching me, regretting our marriage. Maybe he thinks it sucks he got saddled with me as his bride. Maybe he preferred Poppy.

Nobody told me that being married would be so complicated. *Men* are complicated—at least Stellan is.

When I feel Stellan move his hand away from my lower back, my stomach sinks a little. At least until I feel him slide his hand against mine. He laces our fingers together and I try desperately hard not to react, but I can't help it. I've never held

hands with a guy before. My heart gallops weirdly in my chest and I'm *very* aware that Stellan can hear it with his dragon shifter hearing.

"Where did my mom and sister take you yesterday?" Stellan asks.

I'm glad for his question because it distracts me from my mortification. Once again, I want to know where my fae grace and elegance went, because I have *none* of it.

I tell him about my previous day with Dove and Natalia. He laughs at the parts where I tell him about his sister bossing me around—I can only imagine how fun she was to grow up with. Though, to be fair, Poppy was too busy being melodramatic about her life to ever pay attention to me. So it was just Cypress and me.

"Wait, Natalia left Jason with Evander?" Stellan opens the passenger side door of the car for me.

I glance up at him. "Yeah, it surprised me too. I can only imagine the trouble Evander can get into."

One corner of Stellan's lips lifts into a smirk. "You already know my brother so well."

He waits until I'm inside and then he shuts the door for me.

"Don't tell Natalia, but I think I'd rather have Evander teach me how to surf than go shopping with her," I admit to him, once he's in the driver's seat.

He chuckles, shaking his head. "You know, you're a lot different than I thought a fae would be."

"What?" I ask, hoping he can hear the teasing note in my voice. "You thought we were all noble creatures who spent our days lavishly shopping and sipping tea?"

"No," he pauses, then says, "well, maybe."

I laugh hard. "I don't blame you. It's the way fae want to be portrayed—elegant, beautiful, and flawless. You'd never know fae love to gossip and backstab."

He goes quiet and I wonder if I've frightened him.

"I'm not like that," I quickly add, wondering if I should've told him the truth about fae.

"But you are." He focuses his attention forward as he pulls out on the road.

My stomach sinks.

Does he *really* think I like to gossip and backstab?

"Elegant, I mean," he says. "Beautiful and flawless."

Oh.

My mouth goes dry.

I guess that answers my question to if my husband is attracted to me.

"I'm far from flawless or elegant." My voice comes out quieter than I intended, but I need him to know. I don't want him to be disappointed once he gets to know me.

"That's just how I see you," he says, after a long pause.

I press my lips together, not sure how to respond.

Is it a good thing or a bad thing that he sees me like that?

"You can tell me at the end of the day if you still feel that way about me." I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear as I turn to face him. "Because anybody who knows me would never think that about me."

"And what do you consider flaws about yourself?" Stellan asks.

"I've spent my entire life hiding away in a castle, so I'm not great at making conversation. I don't even know how to talk to you. I've never done this before." I point between us.

"What? Been married?" He smirks at me.

My cheeks grow warm. "You know what I mean. I've never had a boyfriend or dated anybody. Even at fae socials, the other fae avoided me."

"Why would they avoid you?"

For reasons I'd rather not tell Stellan because I don't want him to see me differently. I like that he treats me normally.

I clear my throat. "So I don't know how to act with you. I'm not even sure how to be your friend because, other than Cypress, I've never had a friend."

Does my little brother even count as a friend? He was the only one I was close to.

"You're good with my family. I know you are," he says. "My sister and mom both texted me throughout the day yesterday, telling me how wonderful you are. And even Evander asked when it would be his turn to hang out with you."

"They did that?" I put a hand to the base of my throat, wondering why they would do that. "I like your family. They make it easy to hang out with them. They're just so easy to like."

"Are you saying I'm not easy to like?"

I snap my head up, looking at him. When I see the smile playing at the corner of his lips, I relax.

He's just teasing me.

"It's different with you." I try to put it into words, but I know anything I say won't truly convey what I'm feeling. "I wish I could've gotten to know you before we got married. I feel like we got put into a strange situation and I'm not sure what to do or say. I *like* you and I think you're attractive, but I haven't spent very much time with you. I don't even know what your favorite food is."

He raises an eyebrow. "You've hung out with my family—we're dragon shifters. My favorite food is anything. I like food."

I should've guessed that.

"But I am glad you think I'm attractive. I was curious," he says.

I glance out the window, wanting to look anywhere but at him. "Where are we going?"



“I thought we could eat breakfast at my favorite cafe. They have a deck that hangs over the cliffside and there are epic views of the island. I think you’ll like it.” He reaches over the center console and casually grabs my hand. He is so calm with his movements, like he’s done it hundreds of times before. “After, I thought I could take you to a local bookstore.”

I turn to look at him. “Really?”

“You just told me you prefer books over clothes.” His thumb gently traces the side of my hand, making my stomach flip. “The bookstore is in an old church. It’s three stories tall and has these awesome stained glass windows. There is even a coffee shop inside, if you like coffee. Or tea. They have tea too. I know fae are really into their tea.”

“I prefer coffee,” I admit. I might enjoy tea more if it didn’t remind me of all the fae socials I was forced to attend back home.

When we arrive at the restaurant, my breath gets caught in my throat as I look around.

This island is absolutely beautiful. From this peak, I can see all sides of the island and the water surrounding it. I spot a large boat off in the distance and I watch it, wondering what it’s like the be on the open sea.

“I’ve never been on a boat,” I tell Stellan when he steps up beside me.

“That is another thing we’ll have to change,” he says.

I hope he means it, but even if he doesn’t, this life is already more than I ever imagined for myself. I have so much freedom here—freedom that I didn’t dare dream of back home.

I hear a loud whooshing sound and I look up and see a dragon shifter flying toward us. Before I can blink, Stellan shifts and takes off to meet the dragon in the air. He’s so fast I don’t even have to throw up a shield to protect myself.

Stellan is... powerful. I’ve always felt it, but when he’s shifted, I can feel it all the way to my bones. I get why the other supernaturals went to war against the dragons. Nobody can match their strength or speed.

I'm watching the fight, so I don't hear anybody sneak up behind me. I don't know anybody is there until I feel a sharp pain on the left side of my back. I throw up a shield, knocking the person away from me. Before the person—definitely a dragon shifter—has a chance to run, I shoot my magic at him, knocking him out.

When I blink, Stellan is instantly at my side. “My father and our guards are on their way.”

I look behind me, seeing the dragon he was battling lying on the ground. Instantly I can tell that he didn't fair as well as the guy who attacked me. I'm not even sure if the guy is still breathing. I look away, not wanting to know.

Stellan gasps. “Your back.”

“It's fine.” I try to reach for the knife, but it's at an awkward angle that I can't reach. “Can you pull it out?”

“No,” he practically hisses at me. “Wisteria, it's iron. How are you even still standing? If I pull it out, you'll bleed to death. At this angle, it may have nicked your heart.”

“Stellan.” I use a firm voice, shooting him a look that hopefully says I mean business. “Pull the knife out. Now.”

He huffs but does as I say. He's really careful with his movements, though I personally wish he'd just yank it out quickly. Him taking his sweet time only makes it worse. I try not to wince, but it hurts. Once the knife is out, he presses his hand to my back, like he's trying to stop the bleeding. I can already feel the wound healing.

“How are you okay?” Stellan asks.

I turn around and see that his eyes are wide—with shock or panic, I'm not sure.

“Iron doesn't affect me,” I calmly explain, then groan as I look at my blood stained dress. “Natalia is going to be so *mad* when she sees my new dress is ruined.”

“You were just stabbed and you're worried about your dress?”

Okay, it sounds bad when he puts it like *that*.

He shakes his head back and forth as he once again walks behind me to look at my back. “What do you mean iron doesn’t affect you? I can *see* that it doesn’t, but why? Doesn’t it affect all fae?”

I turn around to face him. “Stellan, can I trust you?”

Something flashes in his eyes that I can’t quite read. He rubs his hands over his face, sighing heavily.

My entire body goes numb as I wait for Stellan to answer, but the longer he hesitates, the more my chest aches.

Is he trying to say that I *can’t* trust him? And if I can’t, what does that mean for our marriage? And what about his family?

“Wisteria, I—”

He is cut off when I hear another loud whooshing sound. This time, I don’t hesitate to throw up a shield.

Stellan waves a hand at me. “It’s okay. It’s my dad.” But he looks at my shield, tilting his head to the side.

I let my shield drop, not wanting him to see any more of my power. I’m still not sure if I can trust him or not.

STELLAN.

*Stellan, can I trust you?*

Those words feel like a knife to the gut.

So bad, I wanted to tell her yes. But how can I promise that when I know that she *can’t* trust me, at least not with her heart.

My very soul feels like it’s being ripped in half as I glance over at Wisteria. My father and his men arrived to take care of the dragons that tried to attack us. I killed the first one, but Wisteria took care of the second man. With her magic... her strange magic that I’ve never heard of any fae having before.

“What happened to this one?” Dad asks, pointing to the still unconscious dragon. “There are no marks on him. It looks like he just passed out.”

“It was Wisteria.”

Dad turns his gaze to my wife, giving her a thoughtful look. “I’m beginning to understand why the fae revere her so.”

“What?” My eyes widen.

The fae *revere* her?

Why is this the first I’m hearing of it?

He turns to look at me, raising an eyebrow. “You didn’t know? Wisteria is the one fae we can’t get *any* information on. She’s always been closely guarded. The only things I knew about her were things I observed at court. They refer to her as Imperial Highness. They hold her in an even higher esteem than her father.”

Maybe Natalia is right—maybe I should have learned more about the fae before marrying one. If I had, I wouldn’t feel so lost right now.

“What am I supposed to tell her about the dragons that attacked us?” I ask, knowing now isn’t the time to question my dad about Wisteria and the fae.

I glance over at Wisteria and see her talking to one of the guards. From here, I can hear that he’s asking her about the attack. I tune them out, focusing again on Dad.

He sighs. “Whatever you want to tell her, but I don’t recommend you tell her the truth. If word gets back to the fae, they may take advantage of our weakness.”

I don’t like the idea of keeping this from her. If I ask her not to tell, she won’t. I don’t mention it to my dad because I know he won’t feel the same about her.

Dragon shifters keep to themselves. People think we choose not to associate with other supernaturals because of the Dragon War, but the truth is, dragon shifters are scared. Even though the war happened ten generations ago, there are fewer dragons alive today than there were before the war started. We may be stronger, but it wouldn’t take much for supernaturals to turn against us. If they did, we might not survive a second war. And if supernaturals knew how vulnerable we were right now, they might take advantage of the situation. It’s why my father

joined the Alpha Council—to hopefully gain allies, should we ever need them.

The Alpha Council is a council full of the most powerful alphas—wolves, tigers, bears, ravens, and other shifters make up the council. When my father decided to join, the vampires also joined, making the council even more powerful than ever. Other supernaturals are now joining, wanting a lasting peace.

I run my fingers through my hair, glancing again at my wife. She's smiling at something the guard said and my gut twists.

She's absurdly beautiful. I meant it when I said she was flawless. Nobody should be as perfect as she is—it's unfair.

Dad puts his hand on my shoulder. "Your mother really likes her. So does Natalia and Evander."

"Jason, too," I glumly add.

"It's not a bad thing."

Not a bad thing unless you're trying not to fall in love with your wife—something even my dad told me not to do before the wedding.

"I don't want to hurt her." I voice the words aloud, wishing I could explain this to my wife. But how can I admit the truth when I know it will only make her pull away from me?

Isn't that exactly *why* I should do it?

Still, I can't stomach the thought of it.

"I am sorry you are in this position." Dad frowns. "I did everything I could to get you out of it. But your life doesn't have to be all bad. She's a good person, Stellan."

"I know," I groan. That makes it so much worse.

Wisteria glances my way and our eyes meet. Her grin widens and she says something to the guard before making her way toward us. My dad slips away, allowing some semblance of privacy.

"Do we have more questions to answer?" She looks up at me, chewing on her bottom lip. "Because we still haven't had

breakfast and I'm hungry.”

“We're done,” I tell her. “Let's go get some food.”

Wisteria glances down, her eyebrows furrowing as an uncertain look crosses her face. Her eyes flash so fast I can't even comprehend the color before they are purple again. She takes a deep breath, squares her shoulders, and then grabs my hand. And it's the most adorable thing I've ever seen in my life.

I officially have a crush on my wife.

I'm in so much trouble.

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## CAN YOU KEEP A SECRET?

### Wisteria

**W**hen Stellan leads me *away* from the restaurant, I'm not surprised. However, when he drives toward home, I can't help but feel disappointed.

Is this it? Is he now going to tell me it's not safe enough for me to leave the beach castle-mansion? Am I going to become a prisoner here too? Too precious to be allowed outside of the safety of the castle walls. Too 'important' to risk like that. Too stifled to live. The thought turns my stomach sour. Even as we drive toward home, my mind races.

"Since it's practically lunch now, I thought you'd enjoy eating on the beach. There is a place my family loves to go." Stellan keeps his eyes on the road, but he does squeeze my fingers gently. "I figured you wouldn't want to eat at the place we were attacked. We can go home so you can get cleaned up, but then we'll go."

My heart soars.

He doesn't intend to lock me away. Everything is okay.

I let out a breath. "That sounds perfect. I'm not picky."

To be picky, I'd have to actually *try* anything other than what the chef made me back home.

When we get home, I rush through a shower, drying myself with magic, and I throw on another new dress that Natalia picked out for me. I leave the ruined dress on the bathroom floor, but I'll worry about that later.

“I like this dress too,” Stellan says when I finally come out of my bedroom. “You look beautiful.”

My breath gets caught in my throat. “Thank you.”

Stellan leads me to a different vehicle and I wonder if I got blood in the other car. Once we’re inside, Stellan grabs ahold of my hand once again as he takes off toward whatever restaurant he’s taking me.

I glance at my hand, which is currently being held by Stellan. I’m still not sure what us holding hands means, but I know that I like it. I like the way he makes me feel.

But, I can’t help but think about what happened before his father interrupted. I asked him if I could trust him and he seemed so taken back by the question. There was something almost like regret in his eyes.

Can I trust my husband? I’m almost scared to ask him now. And since he’s not asking me about my—as he called it—*strange* magic, I see no point in bringing it up. I’ll just pretend it never happened, which is probably a horrible idea.

A lot of fae marriages are built on half truths and deceit. Maybe I’m not so different than the rest of my kind.

“There are things that we need to talk about,” Stellan says, startling me from my thoughts.

I glance over at him, noticing just how tight his shoulders are. “Is everything okay?”

“No, but it will be.” He slowly brings the back of my hand up to his lips and *kisses* it. My face grows warm, but Stellan seems oddly unaffected by it. In fact, he seems almost distracted.

Of course it doesn’t mean as much to him. Because I don’t mean anything to him. But since when did Stellan become so important to me?

I know the answer without thinking. He became important to me the moment we said our vows to one another. I didn’t make them half-heartedly. As a fae, I can’t lie. But Stellan isn’t a fae. He’s a dragon shifter and I can’t hold him to the



same standards as I would hold a fae. I have to give him time to get used to the idea of us. Maybe he'll eventually grow to like, possibly even care, for me. I don't dare hope for anything like love, only because I don't want to be disappointed.

Stellan pulls into a half-full parking lot. I glance at the sign when I hear him speak.

"There are things that I'm going to tell you," he says. "Things that you can't tell anybody else—not even your dad or your brother. Can you keep a secret?"

I turn away from the sign, my eyes not even registering the name of the restaurant, as I look into Stellan's blue green eyes. "If there is one thing that I'm good at, it's keeping secrets. Fae excel at it."

His lips turn down in the corners, as if he's just now realizing how screwed up fae society is. The more he learns, the more I'm certain he would love to find a way *out* of our marriage.

I squeeze his hand, hoping to reassure him. "Whatever you have to tell me, I vow not to tell anybody else. I *will* keep your secret." Magic pours out of my hand and into Stellan. I feel it settle into his chest.

He sucks in a sharp breath. "What was that?"

"Magic—it happens when we vow something."

"I felt that on our wedding day. I thought I was just nervous." He furrows his brows, like he's trying to think back to our vows. If he's anything like me, that day was a complete blur. I hardly remember anything.

I chew on my bottom lip, anxiously waiting for him to say whatever secret he needs me to keep.

He glances at me, confusion on his face. "So you *really* can't break a vow?"

"Really." I tuck a piece of hair behind my ear.

"What happens if you do? Do you die or something?" He frowns.

I laugh. “Well... when I say I can’t break a vow, I mean I physically can’t break a vow. It’s like if I try to lie, my lips won’t form the words.”

His shoulders relax. “Okay, good. I don’t want you to die to keep my secrets.”

I grin at his concern. “But if I did find a way to break my vow, as some have done, I would die.”

His face twists up. “You don’t have to use magic like that to reassure me. I don’t need you to vow anything to me. I trust you.”

He *trusts* me.

Me. A fae.

I swallow hard, not knowing how to respond.

He opens his car door. “I’ll tell you about it while we wait for our food. I’m starved.”

I open my door as Stellan comes around to my side. He holds out his hand to me and I put my hand in his. He swings our arms between us and I relax at his playfulness.

I was reading too much into earlier. Of course I can trust Stellan. I’m just too used to the fae—with a fae, I would need words to reassure me. But my husband isn’t like that. And if I want this to work between us, I’m going to have to go outside of my comfort zone. I need to trust him.

Stellan leads me through the restaurant and out the back door, onto a patio. We take a seat at a table outside. There is a small umbrella blocking the sun, but I sit on the unshaded side.

“Do you want me to scoot your chair into the shade?” Stellan asks.

I shake my head. “It’s warmer in the sun.”

He rubs at the scruff on his jaw. “Huh.”

“Do dragon shifters not get cold?” I inquire.

“Not really,” he answers.

I sigh. “It’s so unfair. Fae—who get very cold, by the way—live where it’s practically always cold. And dragon shifters—who apparently aren’t affected by the cold whatsoever—live on a tropical island.”

He chuckles. “Yes, ironic, but it worked out well for you.”

“True.” I grin at him. “Maybe that’s the secret—all the fae should marry outside of fae society. Except most supernaturals have soulmates, so I suppose that wouldn’t work after all.”

His face pales and I wonder what I’ve said to upset him. Before I can ponder it, the waitress walks over to take our order. She chats with Stellan, asking him where the rest of his family is, and she seems surprised when he introduces me as his wife.

Huh, I guess his family really does come here a lot. She’s human, so it’s not like she knew about the marriage alliance like a supernatural would. She seems friendly enough—she smiles at me as she takes my order.

I wonder what she’d think if she knew that we skipped the whole dating stage of our relationship and went straight into marriage. Though, ours definitely isn’t a traditional marriage—married women don’t blush when their husbands look at them.

What must it be like to be a human, living on this island? To see strange things every day, but just never comprehend them. Do they feel confused? Or is it just normal? I’ve personally never been compelled. Being a royal has its perks—one of them being that I can’t be compelled, not even by my emperor father.

When the waitress walks away, Stellan gets a serious look on his face as he turns his attention toward me. I guess now is when he’s going to tell me whatever it is I vowed to keep secret for him.

“Did you know that my dad wasn’t the first born son in his family?” Stellan asks.

I shake my head, wondering why that’s important. But then I remember only *males* take the dragon throne and it’s always

the first born son. “What happened to his older brother?”

I expect Stellan to tell me a tragic tale of how his uncle passed away young, but that is not at all what I get.

“He met his mate young—when he was only eighteen. They got married, but a few weeks later, she died. It was a tragedy—a fire.”

I furrow my brows. “Aren’t dragons fireproof?”

He nods. “Yes. But she wasn’t a dragon. She was a wolf shifter.”

“It seems cruel, for fate to give your uncle a mate who isn’t fireproof.” My heart aches for this uncle that I haven’t met.

Stellan sighs. “Yeah. And here I am, married to you. Fae aren’t fireproof, are they?”

“No.”

The waitress comes back with our drinks. I take a sip from my latte before I turn my attention to Stellan again. He’s looking down at his hands, which he has folded on top of the table.

I reach over, grabbing his hand and he looks up. “Stellan, I may not be fireproof, but I am an exceptionally strong fae. Fire isn’t going to kill me.”

He frowns. “You don’t know that.”

“Summon some fire.”

“No.” His eyes widen, like he’s frantic. “I’m not going to hurt you.”

“Do you trust me?” I raise an eyebrow, daring him to say no after he just told me he does.

He takes a deep breath and summons a flame in his hand. Nobody in the restaurant reacts at all—they don’t even look our way, it’s like they don’t *notice* that Stellan has a huge flame in his hand. Calling for my own magic, I demand a shield to cover my body. I put my hand into his flame and Stellan panics, instantly putting out his flame. He grabs my

hand, turning it over as he looks for any sign of a burn, but there is none. I let my shield drop.

Stellan looks at me with wide eyes. “How?”

“Magic.” I shrug, hoping he doesn’t think it’s a big deal.

His shoulders slump forward, almost like he’s relieved that I can protect myself against fire. I wonder if it was something he was truly worried about.

“I protected myself and Jason that first day with my shield,” I remind him.

“Yeah, but hearing about it and seeing it with my own eyes are two different things. It’s nice to see,” he says, then takes a deep breath. “It’s especially nice because I’m afraid the attacks are going to keep happening.”

“Does it have something to do with your uncle?” I ask.

He takes a sip from his drink before he responds. “My uncle was the heir. But after his mate died, he kind of lost it. At first, everybody was lenient with him because of what happened, but then he killed my grandfather, who was king at the time.”

My stomach churns. Any sorrow I felt for this uncle is long gone. “That’s horrible! So then he was king?”

“He was supposed to be, but dragon shifters didn’t want him on the throne. Dragon shifters rejected him. Which he didn’t take well. He went on a killing spree and started murdering the mates of members of the Dragon Council who decided to reject him. Somehow, my dad and his younger brother managed to capture my uncle. And they stripped him of his magic and erased his memory. It was considered a mercy, after everything he did,” Stellan says.

Suddenly, my sister getting the same punishment doesn’t seem fair. But Stellan’s uncle definitely deserved a worse fate.

“Shouldn’t that be the end of it?” I worry my bottom lip between my teeth.

He nods. “It *should* be. And it was for a while. My uncle ended up getting married. He had forgotten about his previous

mate. And it shouldn't have been an issue, except his wife wasn't human. She was an elemental—her mate had died young too. She decided to leave their community and marry someone she thought was a human. She had no idea until their first child was born a hybrid.”

“Hybrid...” my jaw drops open. “Because he still had his shifter genes, even if his magic wasn't active.”

“Yes.” Stellan turns his head away for a moment, taking a deep breath before he looks at me again. “My uncle has five sons—all of them are exceptionally strong hybrids. He was able to find out about his past and now he wants revenge for what the dragon shifters did. He wants to take the throne by force.”

“But he's basically human. He can't be king.”

“No, but his sons can. And he thinks his oldest son is the rightful heir. Unfortunately, a few people in the dragon shifter community want a change. And they're backing my uncle.”

I blink, not sure what to say.

The dragon shifter community may be fierce, but they've always been peaceful. Since the war, they've tried their best to stay away from other supernaturals and keep to themselves—fae being the only exception. If the dragon shifters want change, that must mean...

“They want to finish the war the supernaturals started against them,” I guess.

Stellan nods. “They think other supernaturals should pay for the war. But most dragon shifters don't agree with this. We know that war is pointless. If the other supernaturals decided to band together, they could wipe us all out—permanently this time. My father has tried his best to make ties with other supernaturals. He's even on the Alpha Council now.”

I know about the Alpha Council—my father wanted to join, but the monarchs wouldn't let him. They feel like shifters and other supernatural beings are, naturally, beneath us. It's such an elitist mindset and I hate it.

“So your cousins are really strong—because they’re hybrids,” I say, realizing the full weight of what he’s telling me.

Stellan nods.

“Then it’s a good thing you married me. Our children will be a lot stronger than them.” I offer him a reassuring smile.

There is something about the mix of dragon shifter and fae blood that makes dragon shifters exceptionally strong. It’s the whole reason for the alliance. Our ancestors thought it was so important that there needed to be a magical contract.

Stellan cocks his head to the side as he looks at me. “Our children will be really strong, won’t they?”

I nod, but my cheeks grow warm when I realize what I’ve said.

Our children.

We still have a *long* way to go before we get there.

The waitress brings our food over, but Stellan keeps his eyes on me as she puts his plate in front of him. She asks a question—one he completely ignores.

“We’re fine,” I tell her, hoping that Stellan will get the hint and stop staring at me.

She mumbles something before turning away and heading toward another table. I tear my eyes away from our waitress and look at Stellan again. He’s still watching me. Finally, he gets a determined look on his face, nods, and then picks up his fork and begins eating. I watch him, wondering what caused him to act like that.

I will *never* understand what goes through Stellan’s head.

“Do you think our children will have purple eyes?” Stellan asks.

I stop with a bite halfway to my mouth and I stare at him with wide eyes. “What?”

“Our kids,” he says. “Do you think they’ll get your eye color? Because your eyes are gorgeous.”

My cheeks grow warm.

Stellan's grin widens. "Don't mask your emotions when you're around me—I like seeing your eyes change colors."

I look down, no longer wanting to look into Stellan's intense gaze.

"Is that all you're going to eat?" he asks, his eyes suddenly dropping to my plate.

I can't help but laugh at his question. "Your mom and sister asked the same thing, and I will tell you what I told them—fae do *not* have as big of an appetite as shifters. So, yes. This will be more than enough."

"Huh." He frowns. "How do you get enough nutrients? That doesn't seem very... filling."

He's actually worried about me. That's kind of cute. Maybe he's starting to actually like me.

I stuff a bite into my mouth and Stellan continues to watch me. I wonder what he's thinking, but I'm not brave enough to ask. All I know is, if Stellan keeps looking at me like that, he would be far too easy to fall in love with.

He keeps watching me, and I realize he's waiting for me to answer him.

"I promise, it's filling." I grin, shaking my head. "I'm not a shifter, so I don't burn calories shifting."

"Do you not burn calories when you use your magic?"

The genuine concern on his face warms my chest in a strange way. "No. I don't know how it is for other magic users, but for me, my magic comes out of my very soul."

Stellan nods, I guess satisfied with my response. Though, as I only eat about half of the very large portion on my plate, he frowns. I can tell he wants to say something, but he doesn't. Instead, he pays our bill and then leads me out to his car. Once inside, he checks something on his phone and he sighs, annoyance on his face.



“Do you have to leave again?” I ask, motioning toward his phone.

“No, but my dad needs to see me.” He starts the car. “He probably wants to keep me updated on the attack today.”

“It’s okay.” I put my hand on his arm, hoping to reassure him. “I understand the duty that comes along with being heir.”

“Because of your brother?” Stellan asks.

“My brother?” I shake my head. “No. Because, up until the day I married you, I filled that role.”

The car jerks to a stop in the middle of the parking lot. The only thing that keeps me from going forward is my magic—like instinct, it kicks in, protecting me.

“What do you mean you were the heir?”

“I thought you knew—I told Natalia. With fae, the strength of our magic isn’t dependent on our gender. So, the first born is always heir. Or, in my case, the second born, because Poppy was supposed to be for the alliance. It’s why, after my mother died, my father was forced to marry and produce one more child. There has to be a spare.” I chew on my bottom lip, not knowing what to make of his reaction. I assumed by now that he knew. It’s not like I was trying to hide it. Then again, Natalia did tell me how ‘protective’ the fae are of me.

Stellan grunts, pulling his phone out of his pocket. It must be on vibrate because I didn’t hear it. But he angrily ignores whatever call is coming through and turns to me.

“We’re going home so I can talk to my father, but I’m *not* leaving again,” he promises, then pauses. “And if my father tries to force me, I’ll just bring you with me.” He nods, like it’s the answer to all of his problems.

He takes off, heading toward home. But I don’t feel dread at heading that way.

Could Stellan really be serious about taking me with him? I think of all the places in the world I’d love to go but haven’t been to yet and my mind races with the possibilities.

This life may not be the one I was born for, but it's so much better than anything the fae had planned for me. I would've been born, lived, and died in that stupid castle. But here, I am free. I have a life. And even if Stellan never loves me, I could never regret any of this.

STELLAN

"What did you tell her about the attack?" Dad asks before I even have to chance to shut the door behind me.

"The truth," I answer, taking a seat in the chair across from his desk.

His eyes widen. "Why would you do that?"

"Because I trust her."

"Stellan—"

I cut him off. "She also vowed not to tell anybody."

His shoulders slump, like he's relieved. I guess *he* knows about fae vows, something I had no clue about until today when I felt her magic.

"Did you know that the vows she took at our wedding are binding for her in a way they aren't for me?" I sit forward as I question him, carefully watching his face.

Dad nods. "Of course I knew. I've made it a priority to learn as much about fae as I can. If I had known you were going to be marrying Wisteria instead of her older sister, I would've had more time to find out about your wife. She's a difficult person to get information on."

I stand abruptly. "Don't look into her. She's fine, Dad. I trust her."

His eyes widen as he looks at me. I realize I've probably overreacted, so I scoot my chair back into position and sit down.

"You like her." Dad sits back in his chair.

"I didn't expect to like her." I look away from my dad, not wanting to see his scolding expression. "But she's really easy to like. There is just something about her that I can't explain."

Dad nods, like he's not surprised. "I've been thinking about that—about her charisma. Whatever it is, it's not just fae magic."

That has me looking up again. "What do you mean?"

"The magic that she uses is strange—different than even her father. And while I don't know much about Wisteria, I do know that she has to be the strongest fae that has ever existed. Fae don't want anybody to know, but their magic has been lessening over the years. They revere Wisteria as a kind of deity—a savior, of sorts."

My jaw drops open at his words. "What? How? Why?"

"That is what I can't figure out," Dad says, shaking his head. "I'm trying to find information, but it's nearly impossible. Even Emperor Emrys is tightlipped about it. I suspect it has something to do with her mother, though she is a mystery." He taps his fingers on his desk. "Which is what I'm hoping you can help me with."

"Help you how?" I ask warily.

"Find out whatever you can about Wisteria's mom. Whatever you can learn from her." Dad leans forward. "I'm still trying to find a way out of the contract so you will be free to marry your soulmate when you meet her. This may be the key."

I shake my head. "No."

"Excuse me?" Dad's eyes snap to mine and I can see anger flash through them.

"No, I won't help you get out of the contract—not now. Wisteria made unbreakable vows to me and it wouldn't be fair if I broke mine to her. I don't care what happens, it's too late now. I'm married to her and that is that. When I meet my soulmate, you'll just have to send her away. Because Wisteria is it for me."

"You don't mean that," Dad says. "You haven't met your mate yet. The bond... it's not going to be something you can walk away from."

“I don’t care.” I stand from my seat, giving my dad one last look through narrowed eyes. “I will *not* do that to Wisteria. And if you try to break the contract, then you can raise Evander to be the next heir. I won’t stay here and listen to this.”

Dad looks at me with his mouth open, but he doesn’t say anything. He probably doesn’t know what to say.

I’m the one who always listens—Natalia is the rebellious one who always does the opposite of what is ordered. And Evander is so chill, he’d never make it as the heir. No, my father needs me. But if he thinks I’d go along with this... with *hurting* Wisteria...

Just, no.

I turn and walk out of his office, shutting the door firmly behind me. I walk straight from there, to our rooms, where I know Wisteria will be waiting for me.

Wisteria. My wife. Albeit, the wife I never wanted, but I’m glad that I have her.

I try hard *not* to think about the soulmate that I’m going to meet someday. The same soulmate that I will have to send away.

It doesn’t matter. Wisteria is my wife and we will make things work.

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## WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO TELL HIM?

### **Wisteria**

**I** look down from the third story balcony of the bookstore Stellan brought me to. The sun shines through the stained glass window, making a beautiful pattern of colors on the wall.

The store has a mixture of new and old books, which matches the architecture of the structure perfectly. The stone walls and old wood floors tell a tale of the past, but the lighting and contemporary design make it modern.

Stellan grabs the stack of books from my arms, handing me a paper cup with coffee inside. I take a sip of the vanilla latte.

“You weren’t kidding about liking books.” His eyes scan the books in his arms, like he’s looking for a title he recognizes.

The first two floors of this bookstore have human books, but the third floor is for supernaturals only. I find myself gravitating toward the fictional stories of dragons—stories I’ve never read before. The library in the fae castle was pretty limited on the subject of dragons.

“You like reading romance books?” he asks, holding up a book that has the couple kissing on the front.

I grab it from him and stick it in the middle of the pile so he can’t look at the cover anymore. To my dismay, the cover under it isn’t giving any less ‘romance-y’ vibes.

My cheeks grow warm. “So what if I do like romance?”

“You can like whatever you want to. It’s just, as your husband, it’s good for me to know what you like,” he says casually. A little *too* casually.

I raise an eyebrow at him. “Why do I get the feeling you’re going to somehow use this information to your advantage? If you’re going to try and sway me with romance books, it’s...” I pause, “probably going to work.”

He grins. “I would never.”

I don’t believe him for one second.

“And I thought fae were supposed to be the sneaky ones,” I tease.

His grin grows wider. “I have to use whatever I can to my advantage when it comes to you, since you’re the one with all the natural advantages.”

Natural advantages? Before I can ask him what he means, he continues talking.

“Are you ready to head out? Maybe we can hang out on the beach and you can read one of these books. Though, be prepared for Evander to make fun of your book choices.” He eyes the pile of books. “I haven’t read a book since I graduated from Dragon Academy.”

Dragon Academy is a high school for dragon shifters—there are multiple campuses around the world, though the best one is here on the island. Fae have similar schools, though I wasn’t allowed to attend. I was homeschooled by the best teachers fae could provide.

“Then maybe you can borrow some of my books.” I struggle to keep up with his long strides as we head toward the staircase.

“I read plenty.” He slows down a little, squinting as he looks at my short legs. “Don’t you know that half of what I do as crown prince is read boring documents? By the end of the day, words start blurring together.”

“Don’t you have minions to read for you?” I ask.

He chuckles. “Minions?”

“Stewards, courtiers, assistants, or whatever.” I take a sip of my coffee as we make it to the first floor, heading toward the checkout. “Even my father has people like that. He just signs where they tell him to.”

Not that he has that much of a choice. The emperor may be the leader of all fae, but the monarchs are very opinionated. Though my father gets the final say, it doesn’t mean he always gets what he wants.

“I’m not the one signing—my dad is. If anything, I’m his assistant.” Stellan puts the stack of books on the counter.

The idea of Stellan—the crown prince of the dragon shifters—being a mere ‘assistant’ is laughable. I’m sure his father has his reasons for having Stellan read through all the boring paperwork that crosses his desk, but it does seem rather cruel.

As the cashier rings up the books, she talks with Stellan. I study the woman, realizing that she’s a dragon shifter. It makes sense, considering the majority of the residents here are dragon shifters. But the girl, who looks about my age, bats her eyelashes at Stellan, completely ignoring me. I’d be jealous if Stellan wasn’t so adorably clueless to her advances.

Stellan slips an arm around me, pulling me closer to his side. The girl glares at me for a second before smiling again at Stellan.

Okay, maybe he’s not *that* clueless.

“Have you met my wife?” Stellan asks, his tone completely casual.

The woman doesn’t respond to his question. Instead, she tells him his total. He pays, grabs the bag from her, and we leave together with his arm still draped over my shoulders. I wait until we’re outside to laugh.

“What?” Stellan glances down at me.

“Nothing, nothing.” I wave a hand.

He moves his arm from my shoulder and stuffs his hand into his pocket, pulling out the keys to his car. Stellan walks with me to my side of the car and opens the passenger side door for me. Before I can move to get in, his hand gently traces my cheek. He tucks a strand of hair behind my ear and cups my jaw with his calloused hands. My heart beats faster at the move, which makes Stellan grin widely.

“I’m sorry about her.”

I blink. “Her?”

He nods his head toward the bookshop. “The girl that checked us out.”

Checked *us* out? More like she checked *him* out.

“Oh. I, uh, wasn’t bothered.” I lick my lips, which suddenly feel very dry.

Stellan’s eyes lock onto my lips and I wonder for a moment if he’s going to kiss me. Just as I’m about to take a step closer and lean into him, he backs away, letting his hand fall from my face. My stomach sinks with disappointment and I know I’m not able to mask the emotion in my eyes. Stellan must notice because he frowns. I quickly force the emotion away and get into the car. He shuts the door, but he doesn’t move to walk around the vehicle just yet. Instead, he stands there, putting his hands on the side of the car. From inside, I am hit with a strong emotion—my throat closes up and my heart pounds loudly in my head. It takes me a moment to realize it’s coming from Stellan.

He’s *frustrated*. And I’d give anything to know why he’s frustrated, but it feels like I’m invading his privacy right now. I can’t ask him.

His chest rises and falls a little slower and the sensation lessens until I can’t feel it any longer. Only then does he walk around the car and get in the driver’s seat. He doesn’t look at me as he starts the car and neither one of us speak a word the entire drive home.

...



Being married to a complete stranger is significantly more awkward than I could've ever imagined. And while I *think* Stellan and I are making progress at—*friendship? A relationship?*—we are still a very long way off from being *married* comfortable. So when I walk out of my bedroom that morning and find Stellan in the sitting room wearing nothing but a *towel*, I let out an undignified yelp and quickly turn my head away. I cover my eyes, even though I'm looking away.

“Sorry,” I choke out an apology.

Stellan *laughs*. “I’m covered, Wisteria.”

Clearly Stellan’s idea of modesty is vastly different than my own.

“We’re married.” His voice is much closer to me than before.

I stiffen, daring to turn around. I keep my eyes *up*, not wanting to see anything that I shouldn’t. When I do turn, I see that Stellan is much, much closer than I even realized. I nearly bump into him.

“Good morning,” he says, a smirk playing on his lips. He’s *clearly* amused by my reaction.

“Uh, hi, hey.” I clear my throat. “Good... morning?” My voice raises at the end, making the greeting sound more like a question.

Stellan, like it’s the most natural thing in the world, puts his arms around me and pulls me closer to him.

I freeze, not sure what to make of this Stellan. Wasn’t it just yesterday that he iced me out? After we got home from our trip to the bookstore, he retreated into his bedroom where he stayed the entire night. He didn’t even come to dinner with his family.

“What does hot pink mean?” Stellan asks.

His question is so random that I look at him for several seconds, trying to figure out what he’s asking.

“I just want to know what all the colors mean.” He points to my eyes.

“Oh. Hot pink can mean a few things—attraction, lust, or...” my voice trails off as I realize *why* he was asking. I am praying that my eyes weren’t just hot pink, but judging by the way his smile grows wider, I’m going to assume they must have been.

Right now would be a really great time for a sinkhole to swallow me whole. Why couldn’t the dragons live in Florida, where this could be an actual possibility?

I shut my eyes tightly. Maybe if I think hard enough, I can will myself out of existence. But then I feel Stellan’s thumb gently cup my chin and my heart races at the contact.

Well, if my eyes didn’t tell him the truth, the increased rhythm of my heart will do it.

I groan. “It’s too early for you to be asking me questions like this.”

He chuckles. “Open your eyes.”

I take a deep breath and do as he’s asked. “Please tell me they’re purple now.”

He hesitates. “Do you want me to lie?”

“No. That would be worse. Tell me the truth.”

“They’re still hot pink.”

I have to force myself to keep my eyes open.

I am twenty two years old. I can be bold. I’m not some hopeless teenager with her first crush.

No, instead I’m a woman who is married to a stranger who is supernaturally attractive.

I’ve been surrounded by fae beauty my entire life and I’ve never once been as smitten as I am now. It doesn’t seem fair that a dragon shifter should be so... good looking.

I stand up straighter. “I’m obviously attracted to you.”

His blue-green eyes have lost any humor. Instead, the way his eyes are smoldering, I find myself wondering what he’s feeling right now.

The longer I stand there, Stellan staring deeply into my eyes, the more I wish he would say something. Anything. But he doesn't. He just stares into my eyes, and I know they're still hot pink. There is no possible way I could mask my emotions right now. My blood feels like it's on fire.

"Is this going to be a thing?" I ask, breaking the silence.

"What?"

"You. In a towel." I can't help myself. My eyes glance downward. I quickly snap my eyes back to his, but from the smile on his lips, I know he noticed.

"If I get this reaction out of you every time, yes. I might even drop the towel to see if I can get your cheeks to turn even redder."

My eyes widen and I stare at Stellan, unsure of what to say.

"My dad stopped by while I was getting out of the shower. I didn't have time to put clothes on," he says, finally explaining. The smile slowly fades, making his eyes darken. "The Dragon Council is going to be meeting to discuss the attacks."

I look at him, trying to figure out what the frown means. His shoulders are tense, like he doesn't want to tell me any of this.

"Does that mean you have to leave the island again?" I inquire, knowing he promised to bring me with him next time he leaves, but doubting I'll actually be able to go with him.

He shakes his head. "No. The Dragon Council all live here, on the island."

But he's still not smiling and his hand has dropped away from me. He rubs a hand at the back of his neck, like he's trying to rub away an oncoming headache. I want to see him smile again, so I reach out my hand, putting it on his bicep. It works because he grins and slips an arm around my waist, pulling me closer to him. The heat from his body envelops me, reminding me just how warm shifters are.

My husband is stupidly attractive and it's so unfair.

"The council meetings last all day, and usually go on for a week or more," Stellan says. "I'll be leaving before you wake up and coming back after you've gone to sleep. I'd take you with me to the council meetings, but they're dead boring and women aren't allowed to go."

I lift an eyebrow at that.

He chuckles. "Yeah, I know, it's different than what you're used to. Females aren't as strong as males are in my world."

"And that means they shouldn't have a voice?" I ask.

"No. But women *do* have a voice. I always talk with Natalia and my mother, to ask their opinion about things. And a lot of the council members take their wife's and daughter's opinions into consideration. It might seem strange, but female dragon shifters are revered, not mistreated," he says, to assure me.

I don't doubt that. I've seen how they are with their soulmates. They'd lay down their life in a second to protect the other half of their soul. And part of me wonders how different things would be if fae had the same rule about female monarchs. As much as I never would admit it to a fae, I'm relieved not to be the next empress.

When I look at Stellan, I see a wrinkle on his forehead and he looks just past me. He's probably thinking about the upcoming council meeting. Apparently, they're just as fun as the meetings I've been forced to go to with the monarchs. Without giving it another thought, I wrap my arms around him, giving him a hug. I want to distract him, though admittedly, I want to feel more of his warmth. It isn't until I feel him go rigid that I remember he's in a towel—*nothing* but a towel.

I start to pull away, but before I can Stellan wraps his arms around me, squeezing me against him. And if I thought his hug felt warm before, it's nothing to the inferno that I feel now.

Safe. Protected. Wanted. And dare I say cherished? It's all the things I've always wanted, but have been too afraid to

hope for.

I feel his lips at the top of my head as he gives me the softest kiss. I melt even further into him and his arms tighten even more. I rest my head against his bare chest, no longer embarrassed by his near nakedness.

“Are you going to be okay while I’m gone?” Stellan’s voice rumbles.

I pull back a little so I can look up at him, but he doesn’t let go of me just yet.

“I’ll be fine,” I promise him. “Evander promised to teach me how to surf. And I have lots of romance books to read.”

“Good.” He gets a serious look in his eye. “Do me a favor and don’t go anywhere without Evander or Natalia. I can’t bear the thought of something happening to you. And until we figure out this situation with my uncle, I need to know you’re safe.”

“I won’t,” I promise him. “I don’t even know how to drive, so there is no threat of that.”

His eyes widen. “You can’t drive?”

“I never learned,” I admit, chewing on my bottom lip.

“Don’t tell Evander you said that—I don’t want my teenage brother teaching you how to drive while I’m gone. He’s a terrible driver. I will teach you once this council meeting is finished.” Stellan, with his arms still around me, looks into my eyes. “I am going to miss you more than I thought possible.”

My heart swells at the proclamation. “I will miss you too.”

“I’ll find a way to see you,” he declares.

“I know you will.” I can’t help but smile.

“I have to get ready and head out now.” He lets his arms drop from me, but he gives me a kiss on my forehead. Without another look, he turns and walks toward his room. Tears press against the back of my eyes, but I refuse to let them fall.

I can handle a few days with Stellan gone to these council meetings. We've hardly spent any time together since we got married anyway.

So why does my chest feel so heavy at the thought of not seeing him?

Stellan pauses before going into his room and glances at me over his shoulder. I see his smirk right before the towel falls.

"Stellan!" I squeak.

He just laughs and shuts the door behind him.

I put my hands to my cheeks, trying to cool them off.

A few minutes later, when Stellan comes out of his room—fully dressed—I'm pretty sure my cheeks are still crimson. He makes a beeline toward me, once again enveloping me in his embrace.

"You're adorable." He rests his chin against the top of my head.

"And you're mischievous."

He chuckles and pulls back to look at me. "I have to go. My father is walking down the hallway now, probably coming to see what's taking so long."

My eyes widen. "What are you going to tell him?"

"That my wife couldn't keep her hands off of me." He begins to walk toward the door.

I blink, unsure if he's being serious or not. It's hard to tell. "Stellan, you... I mean... you wouldn't. Right?"

He only laughs his response.

"Stellan," I say again, hoping he will say something to reassure me. I do *not* want him saying that to the king of the dragons.

"Don't worry. I'm the one who can't keep my hands off of you." He smirks. "Goodbye, wife."

"Yeah, yeah. Bye."

He opens the door, stepping outside just as his father arrives. He shuts the door quickly, but not before I lock eyes with King Basilicus. I swallow hard once the door is shut.

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## PROTECTION

### Wisteria

“**W**hy was my dad annoyed this morning, while Stellan looked awfully smug?” Evander asks as he swims up beside me.

I sit on the side of the pool with my feet dipped into the water, reading a book. I hold the book higher, trying to cover my face from Evander. Just thinking about this morning with Stellan has my blush coming back with full force.

“I, uh, don’t know why your father looked annoyed,” I say, unable to tell a lie. I can’t even lie to myself. I *know* Stellan looked smug because of my reaction to him this morning.

Evander’s grin widens. “But you know why Stellan looked smug.”

“I... I...” I try to come up with something to say, but my words are cut off as I’m unable to tell a lie.

He chuckles, his eyes lighting up in a way that reminds me of Stellan. “I shouldn’t be surprised that Stellan warmed up to you so fast, but I am. I really thought he’d last longer than a few days since he was so against this marriage alliance. He’s pretty stubborn. You’ll figure that out quickly, I’m sure.”

“I don’t know that I’d say he’s warmed up to me.” Still, my throat closes up when I remember how it felt to have Stellan’s arms around me. I can’t believe I embraced him while he was wearing a freaking towel. What was I thinking? How will I ever face him again without blushing?



Evander pushes himself out of the pool, sitting in a wet puddle beside me. I feel some of the water run off from him and soak my dress beneath me. I shoot him a glare and he grins back.

“Sorry,” he says, though he doesn’t look sorry at all.

I groan. “You’re so much like Stellan.”

“Me?” He puts a hand on his chest. “I’m nothing like my older brother. He’s stuffy. Austere. And I’m pretty much the opposite.”

“I meant mischievous,” I say, though I ponder his words. I’d never use the words stuffy, or austere to describe Stellan. Though I do understand how he could come off that way to others. It’s his duty, as crown prince, to be seen a certain way. I, of all people, understand. I’m just glad he feels comfortable enough around me to drop the princely act. But it makes me wonder—does he not drop the act around his younger brother?

“What are you reading?” Evander leans over me, dripping more water on me, to look at the front of my book. “Rescued by the Dragon Knight.” He narrows his eyes. “You know dragon shifters don’t have knights, right?”

I let out an exasperated sigh. “It’s *fiction*—it doesn’t have to match reality perfectly.”

Evander looks at me with an eyebrow cocked. “So... you like reading romances about dragon shifters?”

Uh, Stellan was right. Evander *is* going to make fun of me for my book choices.

He chuckles. “It’s kinda cute. You like dragon shifter romances and now you’re married to a dragon shifter. I’m sure Stellan would consider himself noble like a knight.”

I push at his shoulder, trying to shove him into the pool. It’s no use, of course. Evander is a lot stronger than me. Still, he allows me to push him. As he goes in, he grabs onto my arm and yanks me in with him. I just manage to toss my book onto the grass as I go in. I immediately go under the water, but before I can swim to the surface, a strong arm pulls me up.

“Sorry. I didn’t ask if you could swim. Can you swim?” Evander asks.

“I can swim,” I assure him.

“Good,” he says, then pushes me back under the water before I can protest. By the time I swim back up, he’s on the other side of the pool. He starts laughing, so of course I do too.

A gentle breeze blows ripples over the water, making me shiver. It’s relatively warm today and the pool is heated, but it’s definitely not hot enough for me to consider it swimming weather.

“Did Stellan ask you to babysit me today?” I tread water, deciding not to climb out right away.

“Think of me more as a bodyguard,” Evander pauses, then adds, “a hot bodyguard.”

I splash water at him. “You’re a child, Evander.”

“I’ll be seventeen next month,” he protests, like him being a year older makes him any less of a child. “I can’t wait to turn eighteen so I can finally shift.”

“Does that mean, for the time being, that you’re basically human?” I ask, curious how it works.

“No.” He runs his hand along the surface of the water. “I can still use fire magic—”

I cut him off. “Fire magic?”

He holds up his palm and a flame appears. The water in his hand sizzles as it dries up from the heat.

“Wow. That’s cool.”

He grins, letting the flame extinguish in the water. “I can also sense other supernaturals and my eyes change to black when I’m upset about something—it’s like my dragon wants out. And I can hear and smell like any other shifter.”

“What do fae smell like?”

Evander swims a little closer. “Sweet—like candy. But you’re different. You do have the sweet smell, like other fae,

but there is something else too. It's subtle and I can't quite put my finger on it. But you're definitely different than other fae."

"Maybe because my father is the emperor," I offer.

He shakes his head. "No. Your father and brother do not smell like you do. If I didn't know any better, I'd say you're a hybrid. But I smelt your older sister and she smells fully fae. You two have the same mother, right?"

"We do." I nod. "I'm definitely not a hybrid."

Hybrids are typically stronger than a full blooded supernatural, but fae don't mix our bloodlines with anybody—the exception being dragon shifters, for the alliance. Since my father has royal blood, it was especially important for him to have a fae spouse.

Though, maybe I smell different because of my powerful and unusual magic. I don't mention it to Evander, knowing I should talk to Stellan about it first.

"It's strange that more species don't mix their blood, since hybrids are so much stronger," Evander muses.

"Supernaturals are scared of too much power. I think they fear another war." The last war didn't end well for anybody, and it nearly wiped out the dragon shifters. "I don't know about other supernaturals, but fae think mixing blood is an abomination."

"Yet you're married to a dragon shifter."

"Because of a magical contract signed ten generations ago." I shiver as a strong gust of wind blows.

"Let's get out of here. You can dry and change your clothes, then we can go get coffee if you want," Evander offers.

"Sure."

Evander pushes himself off the side of the pool. I swim over to the ladder to get up. He extends a hand, offering to help me up. I grab it and he effortlessly pulls me from the water. The wind gusts again, so I use my magic to dry myself, not wanting to feel the cold anymore.

“What? How?” Evander’s eyes are wide as they look at me.

“Magic,” I answer, sending my magic toward him. He dries instantly.

“Okay, that’s it. We need a second marriage alliance. I need a fae wife too.” He turns to march toward the house, like he’s going to go demand it to happen now. He stops half way there and turns toward me. “Are you coming? I was serious about the coffee.”

“Coming.” I run to catch up with him. He gives me a smile that reminds me so much of Stellan, which has me wondering what my husband was like as a teenager. Then again, I imagine Stellan has always had a strong sense of duty to his kingdom. He was raised to be a king, just like I was raised to be an empress.

My heart feels even lighter as I think about my old title. I may be a princess now, to be a queen someday, but somehow it feels less heavy.

Maybe because the dragons aren’t expecting me to save them...

When I catch up to Evander, he slips his arm around my shoulders. He may be five years younger than me, but he’s a good foot taller.

“I’ve never felt short in my life until I came here,” I comment.

Evander laughs. “You *are* short, but isn’t that a fae thing?”

“Unfortunately,” I mumble.

“Thankfully that trait never passed on to dragon shifters when our people first made this alliance.”

Long ago, after the Supernatural War ended, the dragon shifters were nearly wiped out of existence. To preserve the dragons, fae made an alliance of sorts. I can’t even imagine a world where the fae would do something like that, but it was so long ago. Things were different then. So, dragon shifters and fae married. There were so few dragon shifters that there

was no way they could've preserved their bloodline without mixing. And it turned out, mixing dragon shifter blood with fae blood made the dragon shifters stronger than they ever were before. That is why I now find myself married to a dragon prince—because my ancestors deemed it so.

“Isn't it strange that dragon shifters don't have the same magic as fae, even though your ancestors were fae?” I ask.

“Not really.” Evander shakes his head. “After a couple of generations, the mate bond came back, and dragon shifters typically only have mates that are dragon shifters. The magic passed to us by fae was, naturally, bred out, even if our greater strength remained.”

“Do you think Stellan and I will have children who *can't* shift? What happens if our oldest son is more fae than dragon shifter?” I ask.

Evander wiggles his eyebrows at me. “Already thinking about my future nieces and nephews? Should I be expecting good news soon?”

I roll my eyes at him, but can feel the heat crawl up my neck and cheeks. “Stellan and I are still getting to know one another.”

Evander opens the backdoor of the house, motioning for me to walk in first. “If my brother is as smart as I know him to be, it won't take him long to figure out that you're perfect for him.”

Perfect for Stellan?

I walk inside and turn as Evander follows me. “I don't know about all that. I think your brother would prefer a dragon shifter.”

Evander shrugs, not bothering with a response. He likely knows that I'm right. The thought stings a little.

He stops, right in front of the door that leads to the massive garage and turns to face me. “Stellan might not realize that you're perfect for him, but he will someday soon. He has a lot on him, and he still has to face a lot. Just be patient with him.”

His family keeps saying that, but I don't understand *why*. There must be something that I'm missing. Maybe I *do* need to be patient and wait for Stellan to open up to me.

"Do you want to take one of Stellan's cars?" Evander opens the door, turning the light on.

Inside the massive garage are rows of cars. Everything is so clean, the cars are parked in a perfect line.

"Stellan lets you drive his cars?" I raise an eyebrow at Evander. Didn't Stellan tell me that his younger brother was a terrible driver? Certainly he doesn't lend his expensive cars to him.

"No, but you can drive. He wouldn't dare say no to you."

I clear my throat. "He told me not to tell you, but I can't drive. I don't know how. We can take one of Stellan's cars though. I'll tell him it was my idea if he asks."

Evander frowns. "You can't drive?"

"Correct."

"Aren't you twenty two?"

I tuck a piece of hair behind my ear. "Uh, yeah."

He blinks slowly. "So why don't you know how to drive? Have you ever tried?"

I shake my head. "Well, back home I wasn't allowed to leave the castle."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that before I came here, I had never left the castle. Not even once," I admit.

His frown deepens. "You were a prisoner?"

I shrug. "Not a prisoner, but a well guarded heir."

"But your father used to come here all the time," Evander says.

"Yeah, but it's different with him."

"Different how?"

I press my lips together in a thin line, wondering how to answer his question. I haven't told Stellan the truth about me yet, so I definitely don't want to tell his younger brother. Instead, I just stand there, looking at him.

"I could teach you how to drive." Evander grabs a set of keys off a hook and leads me down the aisle of cars.

"Stellan said you're a bad driver."

He throws his head back and laughs hard. He doesn't object, so I wonder if he *is* a bad driver.

Evander opens the passenger side door of a nice car, motioning me inside.

"Is this your car?" I ask.

"Nah, it's Stellan's." He smirks. "Your idea, remember?"

I have a feeling I'm going to regret that comment.

Still, I get inside. Evander looks much too happy about driving his brother's car. But Stellan did tell me I could use any of his cars. Sure, he told me that when he thought I could drive.

"If you wreck this car—"

Evander cuts me off as he starts the engine. "You won't have to kill me because Stellan will."

"I wouldn't *kill* you. I might just torture you a little," I tease.

"You're too sweet to ever torture somebody," Evander says.

"Me? Sweet?"

He puts the car into reverse but gives me a look before starting to back out. "Wisteria, you literally smell like cotton candy. You have eyes that change colors like a mood ring, and I have no idea what color your eyes are when you're mad or annoyed. So, yes. You're sweet."

I wasn't expecting him to be so open and honest, but his words are surprisingly sweet. How is Evander not the most

popular kid at Dragon Academy?

“Why aren’t you at school?” I ask him, realizing that I’ve never seen him go to school.

“I’m homeschooled,” he answers.

“But what about friends? Don’t you want to go to school and hang out with your friends?”

He takes a few seconds to respond. “I may not be the heir, but I’m still a prince of the dragons. The people at school didn’t really want to be my friend because they liked me, they only liked my title. School was miserable, so I talked my parents into homeschooling.”

My heart goes out to him. “I was homeschooled too.”

“Right. I guess it makes sense since you weren’t allowed to leave the castle.” He keeps his attention on the road, surprisingly driving cautiously. “What about friends?”

“Does Cypress count?”

“That’s your younger brother, right?”

“Yes.”

“Then no. He doesn’t count.”

“No friends,” I admit. “But I don’t have your personality.”

Anybody who takes the time to get to know Evander would like him because of who he is and not because of his title.

Evander’s shoulders relax at my words. “I used to have friends, but then I found out they only wanted to use me for what I could give them. Though, I am glad you like me. Don’t worry. I won’t tell Stellan. We don’t want him to be jealous.”

I laugh, knowing he’s only teasing me. I relax into my seat, feeling more at ease than I was before.

Stellan and I may come from different worlds, but we’re more alike than I gave him credit for. Maybe my marriage will work out—I already adore his family.



“We’re friends,” I tell Evander. “And we’re also family, so that means you’re stuck with me.”

He smiles, keeping his eyes firmly on the road and both hands on the wheel. He opens his mouth to say something, but the sound of metal crunching and glass shattering cuts him off. The car swerves as he tries to regain control of the wheel. I look behind us, wondering what happened, and I see a large SUV with a smashed grill speeding as it comes at us. Not having enough time to react, I wrap Evander in a shield, knowing he’s not old enough to shift into a dragon yet. Does that mean he doesn’t heal as quick? I have to protect him.

The SUV makes contact with the side of our car this time and my head hits the window with a loud thump. My vision blurs, but I force myself to stay alert. It’s all I can do to keep my protective shield wrapped around Evander.

Somehow, Evander manages to keep the car on the road. I wonder why he isn’t pulling over, but these men must be chasing us. My head hurts, but I send a burst of magic, feeling the other driver out.

“There are three dragon shifters in that car,” I tell Evander, though my words sound slurred, even to me.

“Are you okay?” he asks, still keeping his eyes on the road.

“I’m fine,” I reply, though I’m not sure if it’s the truth. My vision is still a little blurry. I hit my head pretty hard, but I know it won’t take long to heal. I can already feel my magic at work, lessening the pain.

The SUV hits again and my head once again hits the window. My vision goes dark around the edges and I know the only reason I’m still awake is because of my magic. Our car spins out of control and I think I feel another hit from the SUV, but it all happens so fast that I can’t be sure. I’m too focused on keeping my shield around Evander to notice anything else. I have a vague thought that I should shield myself too, but I can’t get my brain to work properly to put a shield around myself.

When our car comes to a stop, Evander's door is ripped open by a tall man and I watch him be yanked out of the car. I put all my energy into the shield around him, knowing the man won't be able to hurt him as long as the shield is in place.

A second later, my own door is open. It creaks loudly. My side of the car has the most damage. The only reason the guy can open the door is because of his dragon shifter strength. He uses a knife to cut my seatbelt and then pulls me out of the car. My head hits the side of the car once again and everything spins. I try to gain my balance, but the guy loses patience and ends up throwing me over his shoulder and carrying me.

I call for my magic, but it's slow to respond. It's taking everything I've got just to keep the shield around Evander. I do manage a spark. The guy carrying me lets out a yelp and drops me in a heap onto the concrete road. My head hits first with a loud thump and my ears begin to ring. I know I've only got seconds to do something. With everything I've got, I call for my magic, aiming it at our three attackers. I don't know if it's enough to knock them out, but I pray it is. I can't open my eyes to see what happened, but I force myself to stay conscious enough to make sure Evander's shield is still in place. No matter what, I have to protect my brother-in-law.

STELLAN

"We've got to go." Dad stands abruptly from the long, conference table. He even cuts off one of the council members who is speaking.

I stand when I see the look of terror on my dad's face. I've never seen him look so pale before. I don't have time to question him before he rushes toward the doors that lead outside. I follow him and the moment he's out, he shifts to his dragon form and takes to the sky. I follow him, doing the same thing.

"*What's going on?*" I ask through the telepathic link that dragon shifters share.

But he doesn't respond. Instead, his eyes are scanning below, like he's looking for something. He must find whatever it is because he dives down. I follow him, getting a good look

at whatever is below. That's when I see my car, or at least what's left of my car.

We both land on the road, shifting back to our human form in an instant. Evander is sitting on the concrete, three unconscious men around him, and he's cradling Wisteria's head in his lap. I feel a hum of magic around him—Wisteria's magic.

I run over to Wisteria. I hear my dad saying something, but I can't make it out over the erratic beat of my heart.

"She's okay," Evander says.

I watch her chest and see it rise and fall. When I focus, I can hear her heart beating strong.

"Why isn't she awake?" I ask.

"I think it's because her magic is split." Evander holds out his arms, showing me the purple shimmer. I can feel the magic from Wisteria. "She put a shield around me and fought those guys off." He pulls at the roots of his hair, speaking so fast that his words nearly run together. "Why would she do that? Why didn't she protect herself instead of me?"

After knowing Wisteria for a short time, I already know the answer. She will always protect others above herself. But even feeling her magic working, my stomach twists at the sight of her unconscious body.

I lift Wisteria from the ground and cradle her in my arms. "I need to take her to a healer."

Evander nods, jumping to his feet.

Dad puts his hand on Evander's shoulder. "You take Wisteria, Evander will stay here with me. We need to figure out what happened and get these three into custody."

I wonder how I'm supposed to fly Wisteria back to the estate with her unconscious, but as I ponder the thought, two SUVs arrive. Natalia and Mom get out of one and Andrew gets out of the other. Mom and Natalia both run up to me while Andrew converses with Dad and Evander.

“Is she okay?” Mom runs her hand along Wisteria’s bloody scalp.

“I need to get her to a healer.”

“I’ll take you,” Natalia says, leaving no room for argument. She runs to the SUV and gets in the driver’s seat.

“Take care of her,” Mom orders.

I take off after Natalia, getting in the passenger seat. I cradle Wisteria’s small form to my chest, willing for her to wake up.

“How is she?” Natalia asks as she races toward the estate.

“She’s breathing and her heart rate is steady.” I squeeze my eyes shut tight. “She’s splitting her magic because she’s protecting Evander. He doesn’t have a scratch on him.”

Natalia is quiet, so I open my eyes and glance over at her. My gut twists when I see my older sister—the same tough girl who used to beat me up when we were kids—with tears rolling down her cheeks.

“She’s special, Stellan.” Her voice is low, barely a whisper.

She *is* special. More than I could’ve ever imagined when I married her. Part of me has already fallen for her, but I have to keep my feelings to myself. If Wisteria knew how I felt, it would only hurt her more when I inevitably do meet my soulmate. The last thing I want to do is hurt her.

I can’t imagine ever loving anybody else. The mate bond is said to be magic and all consuming, but *how* could any girl measure up to Wisteria? She’s perfect in so many ways. The fact that she shielded my brother instead of herself, while maddening, only makes me love her more.

Doesn’t she understand that Evander didn’t need a shield? He’s a dragon shifter. Even though he hasn’t shifted yet, he would still heal faster than a fae.

I hug Wisteria closer to my chest, wishing I would’ve been there today. If only it wasn’t for that stupid council meeting—the same meeting where absolutely nothing got accomplished.

I'll have to keep going because it's my duty. But if I could, I'd give up everything for Wisteria.

I don't need a mate bond. I don't *want* one. I just want my wife.

"I was hoping that getting her away from Evander would make her drop the shield she has around him, but I can still feel the magic leaking out of her." I frown, wishing there was a way to force her magic to stop. All of her energy should be going to healing, not protecting my brother. He doesn't even need the protection.

When Natalia pulls in front of the estate, the healer rushes out to meet us. He walks by my side as I carry my unconscious wife inside. I lay her down on the first soft surface that I come across. I move slightly to make room for the healer, but I hold onto her hand, willing her to wake.

The healer furrows his brows. "Her magic feels split."

I huff. "Because she's got a shield around Evander—they were together when she was attacked. Even passed out, her magic is still protecting him."

The healer nods. "She's okay. It'll take her a little longer to wake up, due to her magic being split, but she'll be healed completely within a few hours. She's got strong magic, despite it not being at full power. I've never been around fae magic like this, but even the lessened strength of her magic is nearly overwhelming." He looks at me. "Your sacrifice in marrying a fae will make the royal bloodline of the dragons strong."

I ignore him, drawing closer to Wisteria. "Is it safe to take her to our room?"

"Yes."

I swoop her into my arms again, carrying her to the rooms we share. Natalia follows close behind, now carrying Jason in her arms.

"Do you need me?" Natalia asks. "The others are on their way back now and should be home soon. I was going to go meet with Dad and see if he learned anything."

“Go. I’ll be fine.”

I shift Wisteria’s weight so I can open the door to our room. I kick the door shut behind me and head toward her room. It’s slightly cracked open, so I push it open, not bothering to turn on the lights. I lay her down on the bed, covering her with a throw that is draped across the end of the bed.

She won’t wake for a few hours.

I pull up a chair, sitting at the side of her bed. I take her hand in mine.

They’ve gone after Wisteria before, but today it was clear that she was their target. Getting Evander would’ve just been a bonus. They now realize that Wisteria is strong and they won’t stop coming after her.

I will protect her, no matter what.

WISTERIA

I wake up with my head pounding. I rub at it, wincing when I touch a tender spot at the back of my head.

“Wisteria.”

I slowly open my eyes, taking in my surroundings. It only takes a moment to realize I’m in my bedroom, in the middle of the extremely large bed. A purple throw is covering me, but I’m lying on top of the duvet. I feel the bed dip down beside me and I look over to see Stellan. His worried blue green eyes meet mine.

“How are you feeling?” He pushes my hair out of my face gently.

“Headache.” I try to push myself up, but before I can, Stellan is there. He puts pillows behind me, helping me sit up. He grabs a bottle of water, putting it up to my lips. I take it from him—I’m not completely helpless—and take a couple of sips.

“The healer said you’d feel better soon. If you stop shielding Evander, you will heal quicker,” Stellan says.

I gasp, sitting up straight. My head hurts worse from the move. “Evander! We were attacked!” I try to push myself off the bed, but Stellan gently nudges me back down.

“Evander is fine. You can drop your shield now.”

My shield?

As soon as he mentions it, I feel my magic still spread out over Evander. I can feel him on the other side of the estate. Knowing that he’s safe, I drop my shield. As soon as I do, the magic snaps back to me, and the headache lessens.

Stellan’s shoulders relax when he sees that I’m doing better.

“How long have I been out?” I ask, then blink. “Wait, how did I even get here?”

“It’s been *three* hours.” He runs his fingers through his hair, letting out a long breath.

“Are you mad at Evander? It really wasn’t his fault.” I chew on my bottom lip, trying to gauge his reaction.

“Why would I be mad at my brother?”

“Because he—*we*—wrecked your favorite car.”

Stellan cracks a smile, but it quickly fades. “I don’t care about the car, I just care about you.”

“Evander wasn’t hurt at all?” I ask, trying to ignore the butterflies in my stomach at his concern for me.

“No. Because you shielded him—nobody could touch him.” He narrows his eyes. “In all that time, you couldn’t put a shield around yourself?”

I shrug, wincing at the pain in my shoulder. “It all happened so fast. My first instinct was to protect Evander—he hasn’t shifted yet, so I figured he wouldn’t heal as quickly as me. By the time I thought to put a shield around myself, I had already hit my head and couldn’t summon the power to do it. I put everything I could into my attack and then everything went blank after that.”

“We caught the guys, thanks to you.” Stellan scoots closer to me. “My brother may not be old enough to shift yet, but he’s still supernatural. He heals quick. Next time, protect yourself.”

I nod, but I don’t say anything. If it came down to it, I’d still choose to protect my family before myself.

“What time is it?” I ask, noticing that it’s dark out the window.

“Just after eight,” he answers. “Are you hungry?”

I shake my head, my stomach churning at the mention of food. “No. I just want sleep.”

“Okay. I guess I’ll go so you can rest.” Stellan starts to push himself up.

I grab his hand to stop him. “Will you stay?”

“You want me to stay? Tonight? With you? In... your... bed?” His eyes widen.

My cheeks grow warm. “Please. I don’t want to be alone right now. I know we’re not...” I clear my throat, “uh, *there* yet. I just...” I shake my head, letting go of his hand. “Never mind. You can go. I feel better now.”

“No, no. I’ll stay.” He lets out a long breath. “I don’t want you to be alone. I was going to sleep on the couch in the sitting room so I could be closer to you in case you needed me.”

Stellan slides onto the bed, settling next to me. I move before I have time to think, resting my head against his chest. His arm goes around me and he pulls me closer. It’s so effortless it’s like we’ve always been like this.

“You’re so warm.” I scoot over until my entire body is pressed against his. “I’ve been cold since I came here. Did you know they have the air conditioner set on sixty?”

He chuckles and the sound rumbles against my ear. “You know each room has its own thermostat controls, right?”

I try to lift my head, to get up and find the thermostat, but my head is too heavy. “I’ll be okay tonight. I’ll just steal your



warmth.”

His chest rumbles again. “You’re cuddly when you’ve got a head injury.”

If I weren’t so tired, maybe I would feel embarrassed, but I’m enjoying this. Being wrapped in Stellan’s warmth is a comfort I didn’t expect.

I think I’m falling for my husband, which isn’t something I would’ve thought would happen. After our disaster of a wedding night and the few days that followed, I figured I’d be lucky if we even became friends. But what’s happening right now feels a lot more than friendship, even if we haven’t kissed yet.

Stellan brushes my hair away from my face and I sigh at the feel of his touch. “Wisteria?”

“Hmm?” I ask, not lifting my head.

“What color are your eyes right now?”

Slowly, I glance up at him, forcing my eyes open. “What?”

His grin widens, but he shakes his head. “Never mind.”

I should definitely question him, but my eyes are just too heavy and Stellan is too comfortable and warm. And even though I spent three hours passed out, I still can’t keep my eyes open. I drift off to sleep, feeling safe in my husband’s arms.

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## SO MUCH MORE

### Wisteria

I wake up with my face pressed against a chest.

A very *naked* chest.

“Good morning,” a much too cheerful voice says.

I glance up into my husband’s blue green eyes. “What happened to your shirt?”

“I got hot.” He traces a finger along my cheek. “How are you this adorable when you first wake up? This hardly seems fair.”

I raise an eyebrow at him. “And you being shirtless—for the *second* morning in a row—is fair?”

“You’re really hung up on the shirtless thing,” he comments. “Do you really want me to put on a shirt that bad?”

I look away but give a small shake of my head.

No, I really don’t want him to put on a shirt.

I put my head back down on his chest, feeling more content than I have in a long time. It’s only been a week since our wedding. Should I feel this comfortable with him already?

“Do you not have a council meeting?” I ask him, wanting to break the silence.

“I’m not going,” he says.

I glance up. “Won’t you get in trouble?”

“Maybe.” He runs his fingers through the ends of my hair. “When a dragon shifter gets married, they’re usually given time off. I guess the council thinks that, since we’re not soulmates, I don’t deserve any time off. If the council or my father has a problem with it, I might just take you and leave the island for a little while. We could go on a proper honeymoon.”

“Don’t get in trouble for me.” I move my head into the crook of his arm so I can look at him. “You forget, I was the heir too. I know all about duty. I want time to get to know you, but I won’t hold your job against you.”

His face softens. “Stop being so perfect, Wisteria.”

“I’m not.” I shake my head. “Not even close. The fae may think so, but I’m really just... normal. I’m flawed. And I can’t save anybody, no matter how much they want me to.”

“What do you mean?” Stellan holds my hand with his, gently tracing his thumb along my knuckle.

“I trust you.” I chew on my bottom lip as I look into his eyes. “For the past few generations, fae magic has been dying. My generation is about half as powerful as my father’s generation. If things keep going like they are, there won’t be any fae magic by the time I’m old enough for grandchildren.”

He furrows his brows. “But I’ve felt your magic—it’s not weak.”

“I know. My magic is strong—stronger than any fae that has ever existed,” I admit, looking away from his eyes. I don’t want him to see me differently because of what I’m telling him and I’m scared of what his reaction will be. “My brother is strong too, though not as strong as I am. The fae seemed to think that I was their savior—that I was the answer to the fae’s lessening of magic.”

“And now they’ve lost you to us,” Stellan says.

I nod, finally looking into his eyes. “I never wanted to be empress. I just wanted to be free. I know that this marriage alliance probably sucked for you, but it’s the best thing that’s

ever happened to me. It makes me feel bad to think it, knowing how miserable you probably are.”

He shakes his head. “I’m not miserable—not with you. I did dread this marriage, but marrying you is the best thing that’s ever happened to me too.”

“Were you disappointed it was me and not Poppy?” I ask.

“No.” He grins. “Your sister was scared of me. In some ways, I thought being married to her would be easy. We would avoid one another. But then I met you, and I had never seen anybody so beautiful. Avoiding you is out of the question”

“Fae are *all* beautiful—it’s what we’re known for.” I look away.

“Yes. But you’re not just beautiful because of how you look—it’s just *you*. Your personality—the way you adore my family. I seriously think my brother has a crush on you. He’s texted me ten times this morning alone, asking if you’re okay.”

I grin. “I like Evander. I think he’s hoping he’ll have a fae for a soulmate.”

Stellan frowns, his entire posture stiffening.

“What’s wrong?” I squeeze his hand, hoping to encourage him.

“Nothing.” He shifts a little in the bed. “Do you want to go get breakfast and coffee maybe?”

“Sure.” I push myself up, sad to be leaving Stellan’s embrace.

“Maybe you can drive.”

I freeze at his words. “Uh, one car accident this week is enough, thanks.”

“I’m serious.” Stellan puts his hand on my shoulder. “I will be there with you. I won’t let you crash.”

I chew on my bottom lip, wondering how to get out of this.

But *should* I get out of it? I’m twenty two years old and I can’t even drive. I should learn, that way when Stellan is busy

with council meetings, I can still leave the estate. That is... if he'll still let me leave without a chaperone. Something tells me he won't let me be alone by myself for a long time after getting hurt yesterday.

“Okay, fine.”

Stellan grins widely at me, making me glad I said yes to him. If he keeps grinning like that, I have a feeling it'd be impossible to say no to anything he suggests.

When Stellan gets out of bed, I see that he also took his pants off last night and is only wearing a pair of boxers.

“Stellan! Where are your pants?” I squeal, covering my eyes.

He laughs. “I told you, I got hot.”

I groan, which only makes him laugh harder.

When he doesn't move to open the door, I peek through my fingers at him. He's got a smirk on his face, clearly amused with my discomfort.

“Thank you for telling me what you did... about the fae,” he says. “I know it can't be easy to tell me stuff like that. I'm sure you were given strict instructions to keep it quiet. You can trust me with anything. I know my promises and vows don't have magic binding them, but I do promise to keep your secrets.”

My heart swells at his promise. “Thank you. I don't need magic to know I can trust you.”

His grin widens and he gives me one last look before leaving my room to head to his own. I allow myself one minute to just breathe and work through my feelings for Stellan before I get up to get my shower.

Stellan wasn't supposed to be this likable. He was just supposed to be a key to my freedom. I didn't expect to find such comfort in him. Somehow, the two of us just make sense.

STELLAN

I ignore the call from my dad as I get into the passenger side of the small car. Wisteria's eyes are wide as she gets in the driver's seat. Her eyes, which have never so much as shown even a twinge of anxiety, now flash between yellow and orange. The sight makes me grin—not that she's anxious, but because at our wedding, they were steadily blue and purple, despite the fact that she was marrying a stranger.

She's brave and I like that about her. It's just another reason why Wisteria is perfect for me. If fate had any clue at all, it would make her my soulmate. I can't imagine how any other woman could mean as much to me as Wisteria does.

“Push the brake in and then push this button.” I point to the push start.

“Which one is the brake?” she asks, her voice sounding shaky.

My eyes widen in surprise. “Please tell me you're joking.”

She unbuckles her seatbelt. “This is a bad idea.” Then she gets out of the car, shutting the door behind her. She leans against the side of the car, covering her face with her hands. I get out of my side, circling around to where she's standing. From here, I can see that her hands are visibly shaking and her heart is racing so fast I would be worried for her if she wasn't supernatural.

I grab her hands, pulling them away from her face. “Hey, it's okay.”

She shakes her head. “I can't, Stellan. I know that it's pathetic that I can't drive, but...” her voice trails off as she lets out a long, shaky breath.

“Okay. Then we will wait until you're ready.” I pull her into my arms and she comes readily. She puts her head on my chest and I envelop her small frame in my embrace. She sighs, like she's content, and her heart rate slows back to its normal pace.

How is it that a girl I was forced to marry has become so important to me in such a short amount of time? It's like she was always made for me.

I rest my chin on the top of her head, memorizing her sweet scent. She has that cotton candy scent that most fae carry, but there is another scent that lingers underneath—something sharp that I can't quite place.

My phone vibrates again. I free one hand from around Wisteria and slip it into my pocket. It's *another* call from my dad. Whatever it is, it must be important or he wouldn't call twice in a row like this.

I huff my annoyance as I lift my phone to my ear. "What?"

Wisteria glances up, her purple eyes curiously looking from me to my phone. She starts to back up, but I tighten my grip around her, encouraging her to stay. She doesn't fight. Instead, she melts into my arms, making me almost miss my dad's words.

"—Emperor Emrys would like to talk with Wisteria." I only catch the end of his sentence.

"Sorry, what?" I ask.

Dad sighs into the phone, clearly upset about having to repeat himself. "Where is Wisteria?"

"She's with me. We're in the back. I was about to give her a driving lesson."

"Driving lesson?" Another voice asks.

The second voice has me paying greater attention. "What's going on?"

"Emperor Emrys is here and he needs to speak to us," Dad explains. "Can the two of you come to my office?"

"Yeah, we'll be right there." I end the call, my stomach churning as I wonder what Wisteria's dad could possibly be doing here.

Wisteria's purple eyes look up at me. "Where are we going?"

"Emperor Emrys is here. He wants to talk to us."

"F-f-father is here?" She stutters over her words in a way that only makes her that much more adorable. "What does he

want?”

“I don’t know.” I lace her fingers through mine. “Come on, let’s go find out.”

I tug Wisteria with me. I slow my pace when I realize she’s having to run to keep up with me. I glance down at her, seeing purple eyes. She’s back to hiding her emotions, though I don’t think it’s because of me. Does she want to hide the fact that she’s anxious from her dad? The thought makes my stomach tighten.

I stop, right before we walk into the hallway that leads to my dad’s office—far enough away that I know my dad can’t hear us.

“I don’t know why your dad is here, but I’m not going to let him take you away,” I promise her. “You’re never going back to your old life. I will protect you.”

Her eyes flash so fast, I can barely register the color. It’s a light shade of pink, but before I can think to ask about it, they flash back to purple. I look at her, hoping to see the color again, but they stay purple. As we begin walking forward, I wonder about the color. If hot pink means attraction, then what could light pink possibly mean? Still, I don’t dare question her when I’m this close to my dad’s office. I don’t want him to overhear our conversation.

Before I can knock on the door, my dad throws it open, motioning for the two of us to come inside.

Emperor Emrys sits in one of Dad’s oversized chairs, sipping a cup of hot tea—something our staff started stocking when Emperor Emrys started visiting regularly. I tug Wisteria with me toward the couch, ignoring the way my dad’s gaze lingers on our intertwined fingers.

Emperor Emrys looks at us and he chokes on his tea.

Dad makes his way to his chair behind the desk. “Maybe now you can enlighten us on what the point of your mysterious visit is.”

Quicker than I thought possible, Emperor Emrys straightens his face, putting a mask in place. I recognize it



because I can see that my wife has done the exact same thing.

If this is what Wisteria's life was like before, no wonder she was excited to marry a complete stranger. Her entire demeanor and attitude makes so much sense now.

"You two seem to be getting along." Emperor Emrys looks from Wisteria to our hands and back at her again. "You look happy."

I can feel her tense at his words, but she doesn't let go of my hand. "I always thought Poppy had the better lot in life, so I don't know why you're surprised I'm happy. Anything is nicer than being at court, though Stellan is better than I ever imagined he would be."

Knowing that she can't lie, her words hit me hard.

I think my wife likes me... maybe even loves me.

Is that what light pink means?

Even if she loves me, it doesn't mean it's a romantic kind of love. I'm pretty sure her eyes were pink the night of our wedding when she was saying goodbye to her younger brother.

"That is what I am here to talk to you about." Emperor Emrys puts his cup of tea down and turns his attention toward my dad. "There is news that will likely get out soon and I thought I should be the one to tell you. I hope this won't cause a rift between our people." He turns to Wisteria again. "I am afraid the news will hurt you."

I squeeze her hand, hoping to convey that she's not alone. Whatever this is, I will be here.

Wisteria glances at me, her face softening. She scoots the tiniest bit closer to me, a move I'm certain both of our dads have noticed. She then turns to look at Emperor Emrys again, sitting up straighter.

"Poppy is not my biological daughter," Emperor Emrys begins.

"WHAT?" My dad shouts.

Wisteria just stares at her dad, like she's not sure what to think.

I relax further back on the couch, contemplating what he's said. I feel like it was fate for Wisteria and me to end up married. Now, I realize it really *was* fate. She was always supposed to be the one I was to marry.

Emperor Emrys ignores my dad and just looks at Wisteria. "You know that I wasn't supposed to be emperor."

She tucks a piece of hair behind her ear. "Right. You were third born."

He nods. "I haven't told you everything."

"I think I remember hearing about this," Dad says. "The entire fae royal family was killed, right?"

Emperor Emrys nods. "Yes. Every single member of my family was slaughtered. No doubt I would have been too if I hadn't been away when the murders happened."

"I didn't know that," Wisteria says, her voice barely above a whisper. "Why weren't you there when it happened?"

"Because I was living with the elves," he answers plainly.

"Elves?" I ask the question, but it's echoed by Wisteria and my dad.

Elves are so rarely talked about among supernaturals. The only thing I do know about them is that, long before the Dragon War, there was a war against elves. Much like dragons, they were targeted for their strength. They barely made it out unscathed and they've never fully been able to recover their numbers. Unlike dragons, they were unwilling to mix their blood with any other supernatural. Due to there not being any elf sightings in centuries, it was believed they were completely wiped out. Then again, elves are not the first supernatural species thought to be extinct only to come back.

Emperor Emrys ignores the question. "When I heard what happened to my family, I knew I had to come back to rule. My wife had just passed away, so I brought my daughter back to the fae court to try to rule through the deviation. The monarchs

didn't want me as their emperor—I wasn't raised as the heir or even the spare. My parents and I thought there could be no possible way that I would ever rule, especially considering my oldest brother had four children of his own.”

I let go of Wisteria's hand and slip my arm around her back. I pull her closer to me and she relaxes slightly as she leans into my side.

“The day the monarchs were going to vote on whether to keep me as emperor or choose somebody else, Wisteria was particularly fussy. I think she missed her mother. Her nanny couldn't console her, so she brought her to me,” Emperor Emrys says, continuing his story. He has a glassy look in his eye that I can't quite read, but it's the most emotion I've ever seen from the fae emperor. “When the monarchs realized just how powerful Wisteria was, they decided that they couldn't get rid of me, only because they wanted her to be their empress. At the time, they didn't realize why she was so powerful.”

“How does Poppy come into this?” Wisteria asks.

He frowns. “When they realized how powerful you were, and then they realized that you're the first born daughter of the tenth generation since the dragon alliance was signed, they wanted to make sure that you would become their ruler. You were, after all, their savior.”

Wisteria rolls her eyes but keeps her mouth shut.

“Poppy's mother and father had both passed away in a tragic accident, leaving her alone. The monarchs insisted that I adopt her, so she could become the one sacrificed to the alliance. At the time, you were all I had. I didn't want you to be forced to marry a dragon shifter. So I went along with it.”

My dad huffs his annoyance. “Is this your true feelings about my people?”

“No, no, no.” Emperor Emrys shakes his head, turning to my dad. “I don't hate dragon shifters. In fact, I have a lot of respect for your species. I just didn't want to be parted from

my only child. She is the only piece I have left from my life with the woman I loved.”

“What about Cypress and his mom? Don’t you love her?” I ask.

“I was forced to marry her.” Emperor Emrys’s eyes flash red for a split second, then back again. “It wasn’t my choice. It is not a marriage of love, but one of politics—nothing more.”

The fae *forced* him to remarry after his wife’s death? The more I learn about them, the more glad I am that Wisteria is free from that life.

“So this is the news that you came to tell us? That you tried to force a non-royal fae off as your daughter?” Dad’s voice is low, a sure sign of his temper.

“While it is part of it, it’s not all.” Emperor Emrys clears his throat, turning to look at Wisteria again. “There is something you don’t know about your mother—something nobody knew until very recently. After you were sent here, the monarchs started looking into your origins. They wanted to know how you are so strong. And they found out the truth.”

“The truth?” Wisteria sits up straight.

“Your mother was an elf. Which means that you, my daughter, are so much more than just a mere fae. You are a hybrid of both elf and fae blood.”

WISTERIA

A hybrid.

I am a hybrid.

A hybrid *elf*.

The only thing that keeps me grounded is Stellan’s hand around my waist. He never falters. He just sits there, silently taking in my father’s words.

“A *hybrid*?” King Basilicus stands from his chair. “You have no idea what the blood of a hybrid will do to the royal line of dragons.”

“Dad,” Stellan says sharply, giving a quick shake of his head.

King Basilicus immediately backs down, sitting in his chair. He turns his attention to my father. He masks his anger, though I doubt he tampered it down that quick. “So this is what you came to tell us?”

Father nods. “Yes. And I wanted to warn you that the fae monarchs are still looking for a way to free Wisteria from the contract. Her mixed blood is of no consequence to them. They want Wisteria as their empress.”

I stiffen at his words.

“That’s not happening.” Stellan’s voice is low and menacing. When I glance up at him, I see that his eyes are solid black, which means his dragon is close to the surface. Considering how much control he normally has, it’s a true testament to how much my father’s words upset him.

“Father, I’m not going back there,” I tell him, hoping to reassure Stellan. “When I said my vows to Stellan, it bound me to him. I know you can feel the magic that links me to him. Even if they were to nullify the agreement, I won’t ever be empress. My place is here now.”

“They are determined,” Father warns.

“What about Cypress?” I lean forward. “His magic is strong too. And he’s fully fae. He *should* be their ruler.”

Father shakes his head slowly. “We all know that his magic isn’t near the level of yours. He may be strong—for a full blooded fae—but your hybrid blood exceeds the limits of normalcy. The monarchs are determined to make the fae strong again. And they think you are the key to everything.”

To them, it’s all about strength and power. The fae crave it like a newly turned vampire craves blood.

“Regardless,” I say, taking a deep breath, “I’m not interested in being their weapon.”

“And I’m not going to let Wisteria go.” Stellan once again laces our fingers together, in a show of solidarity.

We're in this together. Stellan isn't going to make me face this alone.

I scoot closer to him until the sides of our thighs are touching. My father looks carefully between Stellan and me, his gaze eventually settling on me.

"Interesting," is all he says, then he flicks his attention to King Basilicus as he stands from his chair. "I need to get back to my court, but I thought I should warn you. If the fae do manage to find a way to break the magic on the contract, they will do everything they can to free Wisteria."

"Even if it means war?" King Basilicus asks, his voice low and menacing.

Father nods. "Yes. Let's hope it doesn't come to that."

My father turns to leave the office. He pauses with his hand on the doorknob and turns toward me once again.

"I'm sorry you had to find out like this. I always wanted to tell you, but you look so much like your mother. It's difficult for me to talk about." His eyes fade from blue to gray. "Once word gets out, your grandparents will likely come looking for you. The elves are... fierce."

Without any more explanation, he opens the door and walks out of King Basilicus's office.

My grandparents? Is he talking about my *elf* grandparents? He has to be, seeing as my fae grandparents are dead. Will they really come for me?

I turn to look at Stellan, not knowing what to say. I eventually settle with, "I'm sorry. I had no idea about any of this. I promise I would have told you the truth if I had known."

"I know. You don't need to make promises or vows—I trust you." Stellan gently cups my chin with his free hand. "Are you okay?"

He studies my eyes like he's looking for my true emotions. It's then that I realized I had been masking them. It was an instinct, drilled into me by my father. I allow Stellan to see what I'm truly feeling, but I wonder what my eyes portray.

Mostly, I'm hurt by my father's words and *confused*. I'm so, so confused.

How did I not know that I'm a hybrid? And nobody ever suspected that I was part elf because, as far as I know, nobody knows what an elf is like. They've been believed to be extinct for many centuries now.

Stellan, with his hand still holding mine, turns to look at his father. "What are we going to do about the fae?"

King Basilicus sighs. "Forget the fae—they're a nuisance, but I'm more worried about what we'll do about the elves."

I swallow hard.

That's right... the elves aren't the passive race the fae are. Even if the fae monarchs wanted a war against the dragons, they would be easily defeated. Fae don't have magic for fighting, at least not for a long time. I was—am—their strongest warrior, but they'd never risk me like that, not that I would aid them against the dragons.

King Basilicus stands from his desk. "I will address the council—I left them to come meet with Emperor Emrys."

"Do you need me?" Stellan asks, but he doesn't even attempt to move from my side.

King Basilicus looks between Stellan and me and he shakes his head. "You stay with Wisteria. I know you won't leave her side anyway. Though, now that I know she's an elf, I imagine she can protect you better than you can protect her."

The thought makes me laugh.

He can't be serious.

But Stellan doesn't argue. He just nods thoughtfully as King Basilicus leaves the office to head to the Dragon Council meeting.

I glance at Stellan, wishing I had the ability to read his thoughts. I'd give anything to know what he's thinking right now. Does he hate me for what I am? Does he think I deceived him? But Stellan watches me with an expression that I can't

read—a reminder that we still don't know one another that well.

“You never answered my question earlier,” Stellan says, breaking the silence.

“Question?”

“Are you okay?” He looks into my eyes like he's trying to read my soul. I should warn him that knowing what eye color represents which mood won't help him truly decipher what I'm feeling. Emotions can be tricky.

“I am okay. That was just a lot.” I worry my bottom lip between my teeth as I look into his eyes, wishing they conveyed something to me about what he's feeling. “I guess I'm a hybrid.”

Stellan furrows his brows. “You know that dragon shifters don't have the same negative connotations towards hybrids that most of the supernatural community does, right? Because, if you want to get technical, *all* dragon shifters are hybrids.”

At his words, I feel the tension ease from my muscles.

I should've known that the news wouldn't change what Stellan thinks about me.

“You were worried?”

I nod, unable to hide the truth from him.

He gently traces his thumb along my cheek. “I knew there was something special about you. You're not like other fae.”

I want to lean into his touch, but I'm too shocked to do anything but gape up at him. He's just accepting my mixed blood with no negativity whatsoever. He's accepting *everything*.

“Do you want to go get breakfast now? I'm starving.” He looks at the time on his phone. “Though, it's closer to lunch now. We seem to always have breakfast interrupted.”

Stellan pushes to his feet and I try to do the same, but my legs refuse to work. He effortlessly tugs me up. Upon seeing the look on my face, he pulls me closer to him.



“This changes nothing between us, Wisteria. You’re still my wife and nobody can take you away from me,” he vows.

I *am* his wife, but only in title and name. We haven’t even kissed. We’re practically still strangers.

Yet, when he looks at me like this, I want to believe him.

He wraps his arms around me and pulls me into his embrace. I don’t relax until I feel him gently kiss the top of my head.

I have no idea how I feel about what my father told me, but at least I know that I’m not alone.

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## THE SOULMATE THING

### Wisteria

Stellan holds my hand as he leads me toward the library. The estate, which I now know is what they refer to this massive home as, has its own library. A fact that I was surprised to learn. But the library is, apparently, huge. The dragon shifters have history books going back thousands of years. If there is a book about elves, it will be in the library.

Stellan swings our hands back and forth as we walk. I glance over at him and he grins widely at me.

He's stayed true to his word so far and hasn't left my side. His dad tried to get him to come to the council meeting, but he's been very stern in his refusal.

"What does it mean if your eyes are light pink?" Stellan asks.

My eyes widen. "What color are they now?"

He furrows his brows. "Purple."

I let out a breath of relief. "You're asking hypothetically?"

He nods. "Yes. I was just curious because they were hot pink a few times. But I remember they were light pink when you were talking to your brother after our wedding."

"Oh." I grin, thankful that my eyes haven't been light pink around him. Though, I'm certain my eyes will show exactly

when I do fall in love with Stellan, even if I don't know it yet. "Light pink is love."

"Is there a difference between romantic love and family love?" he asks.

I shake my head. "Not in the shade of my eyes, no. Light pink is love in general. It can be either familial love or romantic love."

"What if you really love swimming? Would your eyes ever be pink if you're swimming?" he asks.

I laugh. "No. I might be able to love an activity, but it wouldn't produce the kind of magic needed for my eyes to be light pink. It would only change for a person. If I really loved swimming, my eyes might turn blue because the activity would make me happy."

He nods. "Interesting."

"You know it's unfair that you can know what I'm feeling by just looking into my eyes." My stomach tightens as I realize I just told him how to know when I do fall in love with him. "What color are my eyes now?" I ask, suddenly feeling a little paranoid.

"Purple." He pauses. "Orange. No, purple again."

Oh, thank goodness.

Stellan pauses to open up a large door, motioning for me to walk inside first. My jaw drops open as I look at the largest personal library I've ever seen in my life. Even the library at the castle I grew up in isn't this vast. There are rows upon rows of books, and even a second story balcony where I can see bookshelves stuffed completely full.

"They're blue now," Stellan says.

I blink, confused what he's talking about.

He points to my eyes. "I see what you mean now—just because you love books and you *clearly* love this library, your eyes aren't light pink."

I groan. "This is completely unfair, you know."

“Unfair?” He cocks an eyebrow.

“Just that you’ll know when I fall in love with you probably before I even know it myself.” I press my lips firmly together, wanting the words back.

Is that what we’re doing? Falling in love? What if love wasn’t even a consideration for Stellan? What if he always planned to keep distance between us in the romantic sense.

Okay, maybe not considering how cuddly he’s been. For goodness sake, he’s holding my hand right now.

And laughing.

I look up at him. “Why are you laughing?”

“I’m just laughing because you’re clearly panicking,” he teases, shaking his head again. He pulls me to a stop in the middle of the massive room and puts his hands on my shoulders. “You’re my wife. We’re *married*. You have nothing to be embarrassed or ashamed about.”

Heat floods my cheeks. “Does that mean my eyes have been light pink and you’re just not telling me to spare me from horrible embarrassment?”

Stellan grabs my hand and tugs me toward a bookshelf. “I think the books on elves are over here.”

“Stellan!” I squeak.

He grabs a book off the shelf, scanning the cover before passing it to me. “This book was translated recently. The old elf language is dead and extremely difficult to understand, so everything might not be one hundred percent accurate, but it should help.”

I take the book from him, wanting something to do with my hands. I keep my eyes down, not wanting to look my husband in the eye. “Thanks.”

Stellan pulls his phone from his pocket, sighing. “My brother wants to see you. He hasn’t seen you since the accident yesterday, so he’s worried.”

That has me looking up. “Evander is sweet.”

Stellan nods, typing something on his phone. “Do you want to have dinner with the family tonight?”

“Will King Basilicus be there?” I chew on my bottom lip while I wait for his response.

“You don’t have to call my dad by his title—Warrick is fine, trust me. And I’m not sure if he will be there. The council meetings can last forever, but it depends on how persnickety they’re feeling.” A smile plays on his lips while he watches me. “Do you not like my dad?”

“He’s very...” I pause searching for the right word and eventually decide on, “intimidating. And I don’t think he cares for me very much.”

The smile slips from his lips. “My dad is just upset about the whole soulmate thing.” He waves a hand like it’s not a big deal.

The ‘soulmate’ thing?

Stellan grabs my hand. “Come on. Let’s head back to our rooms. You have a couple of hours to look over the book before dinner if you’d like.”

I nod, allowing him to pull me after him. And I am left feeling more confused than ever.

STELLAN

I watch Evander shove Wisteria into the pool and let out an exasperated sigh.

My teenage brother is *smitten* with my wife. It’s hard to believe he’s the same brother who is so shy he won’t talk to any female outside of our family. And yet, he’s comfortable with Wisteria. Though, maybe he considers her family. I hope that’s what it is.

We were going to head back to our room for Wisteria to read the book on elves that I picked out for her, but we got stopped by my brother along the way who begged us to come hang out with him. And, of course, Wisteria said yes before I could deny the request.

She likes my family. I didn't expect her to integrate with us so seamlessly, but it's like she's always been part of our family. Even Andrew, Natalia's mate, didn't fit in with the rest of us for a long time. It wasn't until after my nephew was born that I started to like him.

My mind goes back to the meeting we had earlier with Wisteria's father, the news rushing back to me.

It makes so much sense, now that I know. From the way she carries herself, the way she behaves, and even the way she smells. She might be fae, but she's not like any other fae I've ever met. And, now that I know more about the fae, I realize my wife isn't nearly as cunning as the rest of them. Even her father is a master wordsmith, never lying, but also never really telling the truth. But Wisteria is too kind and way too sweet for the scheming race. If she had become empress, they would've eaten her alive.

Wisteria swims over to me, putting her wet hands on my calves. "Are you coming in?"

"Are you going to pull me in?" I raise an eyebrow, daring her to try. "We both know you're not stronger than me."

Her grin widens and she backs up. I wonder what she's doing when I feel something shove me from behind and I go in the pool. When I come up from underneath the water, I hear Wisteria and Evander laughing.

"What was that?" I ask.

"Magic," Wisteria says, her grin widening. "I may not be as physically strong as a dragon, but I'm not completely helpless."

No, she's not. In fact, she's far stronger than any female dragon. And to think, I thought having a wife who wasn't a dragon would mean more work for me because I'd have to protect her. If anything, Wisteria can protect herself *and* me. As the crown prince and future king of the dragons, I knew my wife would be a huge target. It's comforting to know that I don't have to worry when it comes to Wisteria's safety.

I swim closer to her.

She eyes me warily. “What are you up to?”

I stop directly in front of her, a smirk playing on my lips. “Am I not allowed to be close to my wife?”

She raises an eyebrow.

Evander makes a loud, gagging noise. “Can you two not *flirt* in front of me?”

I laugh, but Wisteria’s face turns red with embarrassment. I pull her closer and her eyes widen, but she doesn’t try to fight against me.

Evander groans. “You two are worse than Natalia and Andrew.”

That makes me smile. My sister and her mate were disgustingly in love when they first met. Dad declared that she couldn’t go out on dates alone with Andrew until they were married, despite the fact that they were both twenty three years old at the time. Evander and I were both forced to spend the two weeks until their wedding babysitting them. Not that having us there discouraged them.

“At least I’m not kissing her in front of you,” I tease my younger brother.

Wisteria’s face turns even redder.

I’m *very* aware of the fact that I haven’t kissed her yet. It’s not that I don’t want to—I do. I just know that if we take the next step in our relationship, I’m only going to fall more in love. And, if I do that, it will only hurt her more once I do meet my soulmate.

When I think about meeting my soulmate, I feel like my heart is being ripped in half. I know my dad said any love I feel for Wisteria will simply go away, but how could it? And how would my dad even know? He didn’t date anybody before he met my mother.

A wall of water hits me, going up my nose and burning my eyes. I turn to glare at my little brother.

“You were the one that wanted to hang out with us,” I complain.

“No. I wanted to hang out with Wisteria. You’re free to go.” Evander flicks his hands, making a shooing motion. “She’s nicer than you.”

I glance at Wisteria, her eyes a bright blue that matches the color of the sky. “My brother likes you more than me.”

“No he doesn’t,” she argues.

“Yes, I do,” Evander says, confirming.

I raise an eyebrow at her, daring her to argue now that Evander has confirmed. She just grins at me.

“Maybe you should be nicer to your brother,” she says.

Evander laughs loudly. “Yes, Stellan. Maybe you should be nicer to your brother.”

I roll my eyes at him.

“What was that meeting about earlier?” Evander asks, changing the subject. “I heard some of the guards talking about Emperor Emrys coming.”

I don’t say anything, I just watch Wisteria, looking for any signs that she’s upset about the meeting we were just in.

Wisteria turns away from me and looks at Evander. “Would you think any less of me if you found out I was only half fae?”

“Why would I care?” Evander asks.

She shrugs. “Maybe because all supernaturals hate hybrids.”

“All supernaturals except for dragon shifters,” he says. “Besides, my brother is married to you, which means my nieces and nephews will be hybrids. So, no. I don’t care if you’re only half fae.”

Her lips slowly tilt upward. “I’m half elf.”

“WHAT?” Evander practically shouts the words.

Wisteria’s eyes widen as she looks from Evander to me and back to him again. I notice the color of her eyes flick between yellow and orange. “Are elves evil or something?”



“No, no.” He shakes his head, water flinging from his hair with the vigorous movement. “Of course they’re not evil. They’re just really powerful. And, you know, believed to be *extinct!*”

Wisteria’s entire body relaxes, her eyes fading back to their natural color of purple. “Oh. That. Yes, well, I don’t know anything about elves. I think my father only told me because he knew the news was going to be breaking soon and he thought I should hear it from him.”

With her response, I realize that Wisteria said yes so quickly to Evander so she could gauge how he feels about her being a hybrid. She’s gotten close to my family and their opinion matters to her. It’s why she seems so disheartened by my dad’s dismissal of her. I know the only reason he’s been like that toward her is because he doesn’t want me to get too attached to her. He’s trying to protect me. But I don’t like the thought of him alienating my wife. I’m going to have to talk to him about it if he keeps it up. Regardless of when I meet my soulmate, I will stay married to Wisteria. She’s my *wife*. And that means she’s part of the family. And my soulmate, whoever she is, will be sent far away from me.

## WISTERIA

After dinner with Stellan’s family, Stellan and I head back to our shared rooms. He holds my hand as we walk the hallway, but neither of us speaks. My mind is still reeling with the way Stellan’s family reacted to the news of me being a hybrid.

They didn’t care.

At all.

Their non-reaction, though baffling, makes me feel so much better about everything. It also makes me excited to read the book about elves that Stellan and I got in the library. I had been avoiding looking at it, afraid to accept the elf side of myself.

Stellan opens the door, motioning for me to walk in first. I walk inside, prepared to say goodnight to him, but when I see

the crease between his brows, I just look at him.

“I, uh...” he clears his throat. “Goodnight, Wisteria.”

“Goodnight.” I look up at him, wishing I knew what he was thinking. He’s definitely got something on his mind. But do I dare ask him?

Before I get up the courage to say anything, Stellan turns and goes to his bedroom. With a sigh, I head to my own. I eye my bed on the way to the bathroom. Was it really just last night that Stellan stayed in here with me? And how is it, after only one night, that I can’t imagine what it will be like to sleep alone? I don’t *want* to sleep without him. But do I dare ask him to sleep with me again? Would that be crossing a line that neither of us are ready for?

I contemplate it while I brush my teeth and go through my nightly routine. Once in my pajamas, my gaze flicks between my closed bedroom door and my large, empty bed. Am I brave enough to go knock on Stellan’s door?

Taking a deep breath, I decide to just be brave. I go to my door and throw it open before I can chicken out. I nearly scream when I see a figure standing outside my door. I call forth my magic but abruptly release it. I let out a breath when I see that it’s just Stellan.

“You scared me.” I put a hand over my racing heart.

“Sorry.” He smirks, not at all looking apologetic. But the smirk slips from his lips and he looks at me. “Were you heading somewhere?”

I rub a hand on the back of my neck. “I, was, uh, just...” Words. Why can’t I speak elegantly like a fae? I stand up straighter, trying to be bold. “I don’t want to sleep alone.”

He looks into my eyes and I wonder for a moment what color they are. Considering how anxious I’m feeling, they’re probably orange. His eyes, however, give away nothing.

I chew on my bottom lip, waiting for a response.

A glimmer in his eyes and a small smile tells me that whatever he’s about to say, he’s likely about to tease me. But I

can handle his teasing.

“You just want to see me shirtless again.”

“Maybe I just want to steal your body heat.” I try to keep my voice nonchalant, but surely he knows I neatly worded that so I wouldn’t be technically lying.

His grin tells me he definitely noticed. “I will gladly cuddle with you any time you want.”

As hard as I try not to smile, I can’t help it. I’m elated by his words. I want to respond and tell him we should cuddle every single night, but I can’t get the words out. I have a feeling he already knows anyway.

I clear my throat. “So, uh, what were you doing outside my door?”

Now it’s his turn to be flustered. His cheeks turn slightly pink as he looks away from me. But after a moment he makes eye contact with me again, a determined look on his face. “I want to give you a goodnight kiss.”

My heart thumps a little faster.

He raises an eyebrow. “Does your increased heart rate mean you won’t smite me with your magic if I attempt it?”

“Smite you?” I chuckle. “No, Stellan. I’ve actually been growing impatient, wondering if you would ever make the first move and kiss me. I was—”

He cuts off my speech by slamming his lips into mine.

This kiss is nothing like the chaste peck that we shared at our wedding in front of a room full of people. It’s powerful and full of passion. And I hope that my kiss conveys what I’m feeling to him—all the longing I’ve felt, and all the happiness I’ve experienced since marrying him.

I know that it’s far too soon for love, but I feel so much for Stellan. I never expected this.

Stellan keeps one hand on my lower back like he’s making sure that I don’t move away from him—as if I would. The

other hand, he tangles in my hair. He has to bend over to reach me, but I stand on the tips of my toes trying to get closer.

My heart feels effervescent in my chest as it races embarrassingly fast considering my husband can hear it. He knows exactly how my body is reacting and it feels unfair considering I can't do the same when it comes to him. But when I feel him growl against my lips and pull me tighter against him, I think he must be feeling the same way.

It's too much, but not nearly enough.

Stellan pulls his lips away from mine first and he breathes heavily as his eyes study me carefully.

"That was..." his voice trails off.

I nod my agreement.

"As much as I want to keep kissing you, I think we should stop now," he says.

My stomach sinks a little with disappointment, but I know he's right. I'm not ready for anything except kissing and if he kissed me like that again, I might forget all the reasons why it would be a bad idea for more. We may be married, but our marriage is far from traditional. We're still getting to know one another and the last thing I want to do is rush things.

I look into Stellan's eyes and his teal blue ones still haven't looked away from mine. He just watches me like he's trying to memorize something. I'm afraid to ask him what color my eyes are—I'm not sure I want to know the answer right now.

"My room or yours?" I ask.

My words seem to pull him out of his stumper and he slowly grins. He laces our fingers together and tugs me away from my room and toward his. My stomach is still doing flips from our kiss as he tugs me inside, shutting the door behind us.

Stellan's room is roughly the same as mine—the same layout, only mirrored, except his room is *his*. My room is bare and still feels like a guest room. But Stellan has his personalized with little things—like pictures of his family

pinned up on a corkboard. His duvet is a shimmering midnight blue with matching curtains covering the windows. The desk in his corner is covered in papers, though the rest of the room is neat and organized. I have a suspicion Stellan doesn't actually clean it himself. He may not even have the time to, with all of his princely duties.

We come to a stop at the end of his bed. He still hasn't let go of my hand, so I look up at him. When I do, he leans over and presses a gentle kiss to my lips—not a short kiss, but also not a heated one like before. When he pulls back, I look at him, wondering why he kissed me again, not that I'm complaining. He had said he didn't want to kiss me in our rooms.

“Sorry.” He grins like he's not at all apologetic. “I couldn't resist.”

His words cause my stomach to do another flip. We each walk to our own side of the bed, and climb on. Neither of us stays on our own side though, and we meet in the middle. Stellan pauses long enough to take his shirt off. He tosses it right onto the floor.

I raise an eyebrow at him.

“Do you really want me to wear a shirt that bad?”

I give him a fake stern look. “We both know the answer to that.”

His grin widens. “If you really want, I could walk around without a shirt on all the time. Though, I'm pretty sure the way you drool over me would really scandalize my little brother.”

Stellan slips his arm around me and pulls me against his side. Hesitantly, I put my head on his chest. He grabs ahold of my hand and laces our fingers together. I glance up at him, feeling oddly shy.

“If you keep looking at me like that, I'm not going to be able to resist kissing you,” he warns.

“Looking at you like what?” I ask, almost afraid of his answer.

He doesn't answer though. He just watches me with those blue green eyes that take my breath away.

I think... I might be fully in love with my husband.

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## THE DRAGON COUNCIL

### Stellan

**S**tellan  
The soft sound of a door clicking shut wakes me up. I glance down at my wife, who is sleeping soundly. Her blonde hair spills around her, half covering both of us. She looks so peaceful, with her head resting against my chest. One of her arms is hung loosely around my waist.

I hear another noise from the other room—footsteps. I stiffen, letting my senses search out the intruder. I relax when I realize it's only my dad, but then tense again, wondering why he's coming to my room this early in the morning. He wouldn't come unless it were important.

There is a soft knock on my door moments before it swings open. Dad freezes in the doorway when he sees me in bed with my still sleeping wife. I shoot him a glare.

"I need to speak to both of you. I'll just wait in the sitting room," Dad says, his voice low, barely above a whisper. He then retreats out the door swiftly.

I want to laugh at my dad's awkwardness. He's the one who barged in here without waiting for me to respond. Then again, he probably wasn't expecting me and Wisteria to be in the same bed together. Our marriage wasn't exactly traditional, though if I had spent time with her before the wedding, no doubt I would've been excited to marry her.

I run my fingers down Wisteria's cheek, trying to gently rouse her awake. My action only makes her snuggle closer to my chest. I can't help but grin at her movement.

"Wisteria." I caress her cheek again.

This time, her eyes open. She looks up at me with her big, purple eyes. She smiles at me, like she's happy to see me, and her eyes change to a light color of pink that I now know means love. She loves so readily and easily—it's a love that I'm unworthy of. If only she knew that one day I will break her heart.

"Good morning," she says softly.

I brush her blonde hair out of her face and lean my head over so I can kiss her forehead. "You are unbelievably gorgeous first thing in the morning."

Her cheeks turn a light shade of red, but her eyes are still pink as they watch me.

"My dad is waiting for us in the sitting room. He needs to talk to us," I tell her, though I wish I didn't have to yet. I want to keep her in here a little longer and enjoy having her in my arms.

Her eyes widen. "Your *dad*? But I'm wearing pajamas. And my clothes are in my room."

"It's fine." I untangle myself from her arms and push out of bed. I grab my sweats from the floor, not bothering to put on a shirt. "I'm not dressed either. Besides, you look gorgeous in everything, including your pajamas."

She narrows her eyes at me, like she doesn't believe me. If only she could see herself through my eyes, she'd never have a reason to ever feel self-conscious.

"You could always move your stuff into my closet. I have plenty of room," I say, trying to keep my tone casual.

She gasps, her lips parting in surprise. She doesn't say anything for a long moment, she just watches me with eyes that are, once again, light pink. Eventually, she nods. "Okay."



Did I just ask my wife to move in with me? My heart is somewhere between elated and panicked. While it's true I've fallen for her, I'm being unfair to her. She doesn't know everything. Even though I've subtly tried to mention soulmates to her, she doesn't get it. And why would she? Fae don't have soulmates. She hasn't been taught about the mate bond her entire life.

I have to tell her, but right now isn't the time. Dad is waiting for us and I shouldn't keep him waiting any longer than I already have.

Wisteria gets out of bed and cringes as she looks at her pajamas. She runs her fingers through her hair, grimacing the entire time.

I grab her hand to stop her fidgeting and lean down to kiss her on the forehead again. She calms down at my touch, her shoulders finally relaxing. I don't ask her if she's ready before I open the door, pulling Wisteria with me. I keep a firm hold of her hand. If Dad notices our clasped hands, he doesn't react to it. Though, us holding hands is nothing after he saw us in bed together—a mistake he won't be making again.

“The council has requested that the both of you make an appearance this morning,” Dad says, his gaze only lingering on Wisteria for a moment before he looks at me. “This is not an option, Stellan. I will give the two of you some time to get ready, but I expect you to be there within the hour.”

I pull Wisteria closer to me. “Why do they need to see Wisteria?”

Dad cocks an eyebrow at me. “Because they've heard that your wife is a hybrid *elf*. They are curious.”

Wisteria stiffens. “Do they hate me?”

Dad simply shakes his head. “I believe they're simply curious—and possibly elated that their crown prince is going to have children with elf blood.”

I relax at his words.

So the council isn't going to berate her—which is something I was worried about. The council has always been

for the alliance with the fae, considering fae blood made dragon shifters so much stronger. But now that they know she's a hybrid—a mix of fae and elf, I thought they'd resent her or think she deceived us. I'm glad to know that, instead of rejecting her, they are accepting her.

"I'll leave you two to get dressed. You can eat breakfast after you meet with the council," Dad says.

Another morning we have to skip breakfast. Since Wisteria is a fae, she might be okay with skipping breakfast, but as a shifter, it's difficult to skip a meal.

Wisteria turns to me as my father escapes out the door. "Please tell me the Dragon Council isn't as stuck up as the fae monarchs are."

I shrug. "I don't know, I've never met the fae monarchs before. But if what my dad said is true, they'll likely adore you."

She wrinkles her nose. "Adoration I am used to."

Ah, right. She told me as much. The fae have always referred to her as some kind of deity because of her strong magic. Little did they know, her magic isn't even fae magic—it's elf magic.

"You'll be fine." I kiss her quickly on the lips. "Meet me out here in ten minutes."

"Ten minutes?" She squeaks, then runs toward her room to get ready. I watch her until she disappears, my heart racing fast in my chest.

I will tell Wisteria the truth about soulmates. Today. After this meeting with the council. She deserves to know the truth.

I close my eyes, trying to imagine her light pink eyes looking at me with such love in them. After she knows, she's going to hate me. But I can't keep it from her—not anymore.

Ten minutes later, Wisteria and I meet back in the sitting room. I'm in a black suit, ready to meet with the council. Wisteria wears a mint green dress—one I recognize from her

shopping trip with my sister. Natalia did good, picking out dresses for my wife.

I pull my wife into my arms. I have to fight off the desire to skip the council meeting and just keep her here.

“You are beautiful,” I say softly.

Her smile widens as she looks up at me. “I know that fae are known for being classically beautiful, but fae men have never been my type. Now I understand, dragon shifters are what I’m attracted to.”

“*All* dragon shifters?” I ask.

She laughs. “Maybe just you.”

I kiss her again, this one less chaste. When I feel Wisteria melt into me, I know I’m going to have to be the one to pull away. I allow myself a few more seconds to revel in her before I back up. “Are you ready to go?”

“I’m ready to get this over with.” She worries her bottom lip between her teeth, her pink eyes flashing orange for a moment before they turn purple.

“You’ll do great,” I say, knowing the truth behind my words. Everybody who has met Wisteria loves her. She won my family over within a day of our wedding and they were determined not to like her for my sake.

I lace our fingers together as we walk toward the garage. I won’t be trying to get her to drive today, but it’s still a priority. Remembering that she can’t drive only makes me feel anger toward Emperor Emrys. How could he not teach his adult daughter how to drive?

I open the passenger side door of the car for her. She smiles shyly at me before getting in. My gut twists as I watch her.

How could I ever feel like this for somebody else? Magic soul bond or not, nobody could ever compare to my wife.

WISTERIA

I take a deep, calming breath as Stellan leads me to the room where the council meeting is being held.

I have no idea what to expect with the Dragon Council. I can only hope that whatever this is will be more pleasant than meeting with the monarchs. If I survived that, I can survive this.

I gulp.

Admittedly, the monarchs aren't anywhere near as powerful as these dragon shifters. And while fighting off three dragon shifters I handled easily enough, this is a council full of them. The council, no doubt, represents the best and strongest of them all. If they really wanted to turn against me, there isn't a lot I could do to fight them off.

Stellan grabs ahold of my hand as he leads me inside. His touch gives me the strength to hold my head high. Using my training, I mask every emotion. I don't want them to see my fear or anxiety. I want them all to see just how powerful of an ally I really am.

We pause by a door. I look up at Stellan and find him watching me.

"What?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "Nothing. I just... you look completely calm. I realize that you're the perfect wife because you were born for this life. You can handle a room full of council members. It's kind of hot."

His words make me snort out a laugh. Any remaining tension leaves my body. I square my shoulders, taking a deep breath.

"Let's do this."

Together, Stellan and I walk inside. The moment the door opens, the conversations inside cease and each and every person turns to look at me. The only thing that keeps me from cowering behind Stellan is the years of conditioning I've endured with the fae. I hold my head high, pretending like they're not looking.

“This is her?” A voice asks.

I resist the urge to roll my eyes. I guess they’re not so different than the fae monarchs, talking *about* me instead of *to* me.

“Finnian, you met Princess Wisteria at the wedding,” King Basilicus says, addressing the shifter.

“Yes, yes,” the man, Finnian, waves a hand dismissively. “But then I thought she was just a fae. Now I know better.”

*Just a fae?*

“Her mixed blood explains how she has such strong magic,” another shifter says, his tone holding something like awe. “Fighting off three male dragons is unheard of, especially for a female.”

Ah, yes. I did forget for a moment. Female dragons are weaker and to a species that values strength...

Well, that explains why there are no females on the council. I wonder what these men would think if they saw the fae council. Though men do outnumber women, there are many women monarchs. I wonder what they’d make of Queen Winnie, who is by far the wisest monarch. They’d probably be intimidated by her wisdom. Or Queen Summer, with her sass. I have to fight the smile that threatens to appear.

“Please come forward, Princess Wisteria.” An older guy stands and bows to me before motioning me to step further into the room.

Well... ‘Princess’ is a much better title than I’m used to with the fae. And I *am* their Princess since I’m married to Stellan.

I start to let go of Stellan’s hand to step forward, but he tightens his grip. I shoot him a grateful smile and we step forward together. The dragon shifters look between Stellan and me. I can see a mixture of confusion and possibly curiosity. What did they expect? For Stellan and I to have a cold marriage? There was no way I was going to live like that.

“May have a demonstration of your magic?” The older guy, who still hasn’t sat down, asks.

I look from him to Stellan. Stellan shrugs at me, so I look back to the older guy and clear my throat. “Uh, my magic is strong—I can’t always control how hard it hits. If I used it, even a dragon shifter would be knocked flat for a while.”

“Three days,” King Basilicus says. “That is how long every dragon shifter she’s used her magic on is passed out.”

*Three days?* I had no idea my magic was that strong. Those dragons are lucky they’re still alive.

The older guy steps back a step. “Oh.”

“And my other magic...” I pause, then add, “I suppose my *fae* magic is more for things like growing things.” I point to the flower in my hair and make it grow, having vines and flowers circle around my head. “Which I don’t think you are really interested in.”

Stellan shifts beside me. I glance over at him and see that he’s smiling. I remember him being amused by my flower crown when we first got married.

“You’re shorter than I recall,” another council member says, narrowing his eyes. “You must get your height from your fae father.”

I shrug. “I wouldn’t know. I don’t recall what my mother looked like. She died when I was just a baby.”

Stellan squeezes my hand. I smile at him, trying to show him that I’m okay. I didn’t remember my mom. There were times growing up I longed to have a mother, but I survived. And now... now I have the family I always longed for. Stellan’s family is exactly what I’ve always longed for in my own family.

“We don’t actually know how tall elves were.” King Basilicus’s focus is on Stellan and my clasped hands. He glares at it, like by his own will he can force us to not hold hands.

Does King Basilicus not want Stellan and I to be happy together? What is his problem? I want to ask him, but I wouldn't dare do it in a room full of council members.

Okay... maybe I wouldn't ask at all. King Basilicus is an intimidating guy.

I scoot closer to Stellan's side and whisper to him, "Does this mean they don't hate me for being a hybrid?"

But of course, since shifter hearing is a thing, *everybody* hears my question.

An older guy chuckles at me. "My dear girl, why would we hate you? If anything, you are more important to us because of your mixed heritage. Fae and dragon shifter blood mixed made our race strong, but imagine how much stronger we'll be with elf blood. You are going to make the king's line something even more fierce than it already is."

My cheeks grow warm at his response.

Part of me thought I'd come here and they would hate me for being a hybrid. Though, I'm starting to believe that not every supernatural species hates hybrids as much as fae do.

"We have much to discuss," King Basilicus says, turning to the council. "Do you still have need of Princess Wisteria's presence, or shall we discuss the issue with the fae?"

The council quickly turns their attention away from me and toward their king. With King Basilicus's dismissal, Stellan leads me from the council room. I feel lighter as we put distance between us and the other dragons.

That wasn't nearly as bad as I thought it would be, yet it was infinitely worse too. Worse, because I fear the dragon shifters may be as bad as the fae now that they know I'm from a supposedly dead species.

Yesterday, I didn't get to read much of the book on elves, but from the little I read, elves were known as warriors. They had strong magic that it is clear I inherited. How did I ever think that my strange magic was fae magic? Then again, I believed what my father told me. And Cypress *does* have strong magic too—just not *elf* strong.

“We need to talk,” Stellan says, once we’re in the car.

I turn to face him when I hear the serious tone. “Okay.”

His blue green eyes search my face like he’s trying to get up the courage from me to say whatever it is he needs to say.

I reach my hand over the center console and put a hand on his arm. “Stellan, whatever it is, it’s fine.”

He sighs, unconvinced by my reassurance.

“Let’s go to the beach. We can talk there,” I suggest.

He nods, moving to start the car. As he pulls the car onto the road and heads toward home, he’s got a hard look on his face. My stomach is in knots as I consider what he is going to tell me. It must be bad if he’s this nervous. I don’t think I’ve ever seen Stellan nervous about anything.

Hoping to get him to relax, I reach my hand across the center console and grab ahold of his free hand. He smiles at me and laces our fingers together, but his posture stays stiff.

“Do you... regret asking me to move to your room?” My rising anxiety forces the question from my lips. It *must* be that.

He furrows his brows. “What? *No*. No. Absolutely not.” He brings my hand up to his lips and gently kisses it. “It’s not that. But before you do move into my room, there is something you deserve to know.”

I press my lips together, forcing myself not to ask anything else. A conversation like this would be better if we can look at one another.

I force myself to relax back into my seat. No matter what he has to say, we can work through it together. We’re married and I meant our wedding vows. I’m in this for better or worse.



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## RARE AND SPECIAL

### Stellan

**W**isteria is quiet as I lead her to the beach. With one of my hands, I hold onto her. The other hand carries a picnic basket, but I doubt I'd be able to stomach any food right now. From the way her eyes flash orange, I'd guess she's feeling the same way.

I don't want to tell her. I want things to continue like they are. But if I ignore the problem until I can't ignore it anymore, it will only hurt Wisteria. Hurting her is the last thing I want.

When we get to the beach, I lead Wisteria to a small outdoor table. The wind is blowing a little. I notice Wisteria pull her sweater tighter around her.

"Are you cold?" I ask.

"I'm fine." She smiles, to reassure me.

I look at my wife, my breath catching in my throat. She's beautiful, and not just because of her fae blood. I've never met anybody as stunning as her. The more I get to know her, the more attracted to her I am.

I try to swallow the knot in my throat, wondering how to begin. What can I even say to her that will make this all right?

Wisteria reaches her hands across the table and puts them over mine. "Do you remember when I said that I can't read emotions unless they're extreme?"

I nod.

“I can *feel* how anxious you are and it’s making me anxious. Just tell me whatever it is you need to say,” she says, keeping her voice calm. “Whatever it is, I promise we will figure it out. We’ll find a solution.”

I let out a slow breath. “Do you know that dragon shifters have soulmates?”

She tucks a piece of hair behind her ear. “Yes, I know. Your parents are mates, and Natalia and Andrew are mates, right?”

“Yes.”

“I’m pretty sure most supernaturals have soulmates—except fae and dark fae,” she says, then pauses. “I wonder if elves have soulmates.”

Her words cause my heart to race, but not in a good way.

She furrows her brows. “Now you’re panicking.”

“Sorry—I just... the thought of you having a soulmate kind of makes me feel ill.” Which is an insane level of hypocrisy considering I *for sure* have a soulmate.

She chuckles. “Don’t worry. I don’t have a soulmate. The fae made sure of that.”

Her comment causes shock to course through me. “What do you mean the fae made sure of it?”

“Well, because of the alliance,” she says, then waves a hand. “Never mind that. Right now, I want to know what you’re talking about.”

Right.

I *am* stalling.

I take a breath, and then another. It’s impossible to get a deep enough breath, though maybe that’s because I’m on the verge of panicking.

“I *will* have a soulmate,” I say, forcing the words out of my mouth.

Her mouth opens slightly, but she doesn't say anything. She just looks at me, tilting her head to the side. "What?"

"A soulmate," I repeat, forcing myself to talk more clearly. "Dragon shifters always have soulmates, which means that I will have one. I haven't met her yet, but I will. It's a fate thing."

"*That* is what's bothering you?" She grins, shaking her head. It's not at all the reaction I expected.

"Yes." I frown, not knowing what to make of the way she's acting. "It's been killing me since our wedding. I tried not to get too attached to you. It's why I was so eager to go to work the day after our wedding."

"You should have told me then. I could have saved you a lot of stress." Her entire body is now completely relaxed and her eyes are somewhere between purple and blue.

"How could you have possibly saved me any stress?" I ask. "Even my family has been on me about it—they don't want me to get too attached to you only to hurt you when I meet my soulmate. They *like* you."

"Do you really not know?" she asks.

"Know what?"

"Stellan, you don't have a soulmate."

I cock my head to the side. "What are you talking about? Of course I do."

"Have you never read the contract that our ancestors signed?"

I shake my head.

Of course I haven't *read* it. It was written by fae—who are confusing enough with their fancy wordsmithing—but it's also over two hundred years old and written in a language that is difficult to understand.

She leans forward. "When our ancestors signed this alliance, the dragon shifters didn't have soulmates. The bonds

had stopped because of the war that killed off... nearly all of your species.”

I nod. “I know that part.”

“Well, the dragon shifters knew the mate bond would eventually come back.” She squeezes my hands. “So, it’s in the magic of the contract that neither of us will have a soulmate. It was to protect us.”

I blink, slowly absorbing her words. “Let me see if I understand this—you’re telling me that I’ve *wasted* every day since we got married trying to convince myself not to fall in love with you when I could’ve just given in and been happy?”

Her grin widens. “Yes, that is exactly what I’m telling you. Though, it is a little your own fault too. You were the stubborn one who decided to hide the fact that it was bothering you this much.”

“Yeah, but you were all... perfect. And I felt all these things for you and my very soul felt like it was going to be ripped in half.” I try to put it into words, but I can’t even explain. “But it doesn’t even matter now.”

“It doesn’t,” she says. “But I am sorry that you had to go through all of that. I knew there was something bothering you, but I wanted to wait until you were comfortable enough to talk to me about it. Had I known, I would’ve said something.”

I watch my wife, her eyes a swirl of purple, blue, and pink. I think of all the times I’ve walked away from her, reminding myself that she couldn’t be mine. I wasn’t always careful with my words—they were sharp. I was trying to push her away just as much as I was trying to convince myself that Wisteria wasn’t special. But I knew better. Nobody is more special than her.

“Are you disappointed?” Wisteria chews on her bottom lip as she watches me with an expression that I can’t quite read. Her eyes now have a slight orange hue to them. I want the pink back.

“Disappointed about what?” I ask, unable to understand her question.

“About not having a mate,” she clarifies. “I know that soulmates are really important to your species. Do you regret not having one?”

I slowly shake my head. “Why would I? I have something even more rare and special. I don’t need a soulmate bond to tell me that I love you.”

Her eyes, now purple, widen a fraction. “You love me?”

“Yes.” I furrow my brows. “You didn’t know?”

“No. You’ve never told me. I thought the way I feel for you is one sided.” Her eyes turn pink again. “I love you, Stellan.”

My lips turn upward at her words, almost without my permission. “I know.”

“Because of my eyes.” She groans. “I knew I should’ve kept my emotions hidden from you, but you made me trust you and then I kept forgetting to hide them around you. The only other person I can drop my mask with is Cypress.”

“You never have to hide from me. I’ve been in love with you as long as you have with me, I just couldn’t tell you because it wouldn’t be fair when I was hiding this big secret from you.” A secret that I didn’t need to hide. I should’ve just told her the truth from the beginning. Everything would’ve been so much simpler.

I watch my wife, torn between carrying her back to our rooms for a moment of privacy and eating the meal packed for us.

Wisteria answers for me. She leans forward, her eyes wide with excitement. “Can we eat now? I’m starving.”

I start pulling bowls from the basket and setting them out on the table. Wisteria glances warily at all the food like she’s wondering how we’re supposed to eat everything. So easily she forgets that shifters require a lot more calories than she does.

She bounces a little in her seat when she sees me pull out a container of brownies. I laugh at her exuberance.

My wife is absolutely adorable.

## WISTERIA

When we eat dinner with Stellan's family, he can't keep his eyes off of me. My stomach is full of butterflies as I try not to look adoringly at my husband at the dinner table. Still, his little brother notices. He wrinkles his nose at us, but I can see the humor in his eyes.

Unfortunately, Stellan's father also notices. He takes turns glaring at Stellan and then at me. I wonder what I've done to annoy the dragon king—he's always been nice on the rare occasion that we spoke previously. Maybe he just doesn't like me being married to his son.

Or, maybe...

I look at King Basilicus, the earlier proclamation of Stellan's love making me bold. "Is something wrong, King Basilicus?"

"It's just Warrick," Dove says.

King Basilicus makes no move to nod at me, making me think he'd rather I not drop the formal title.

"There is something wrong." He looks at me for a moment but quickly looks to his son. "We've talked about this, Stellan."

They've talked about *this*? Is the 'this' he's referring to me? Or have I read the situation wrong?

Stellan doesn't seem put out by his father's bad attitude—his smile never falters for even a second. He hasn't stopped smiling since our talk earlier. I knew there was something bothering him. If only I had talked to him sooner, I could've saved us both a lot of suffering.

"Dear, must you do this at the dinner table?" Dove says in a pleasant tone, but I can see the icy glare she gives him.

If I understand correctly, soulmates can share thoughts with one another after their bond is complete. It makes me curious what she's saying to him through their bond.

King Basilicus's shoulders slump slightly, but he doesn't back down from Stellan.

"Did you know that the marriage alliance is magic?" Stellan asks his father.

"What? Of *course* I knew it was magic." King Basilicus warily eyes his son. "It's why you had to go through with it. The magic in the contract bound us to it."

"So you've read it?" Stellan asks.

King Basilicus nods, then hesitates slightly. "I read it the best I could. Fae are good at using fancy phrases, so I can't say I understand most of it."

"Well, Wisteria read it too. And she understood what she read. She's smart, which I find extremely attractive." Stellan glances at me, a smirk playing on his lips. "Do you want to tell him?"

Wait... does he want me to tell him about the soulmate thing?

Is *that* why King Basilicus dislikes me? Because he's trying to protect his son and me from getting hurt? Suddenly, everything makes so much more sense.

I take a sip of my water before speaking. "Ten generations ago, the mate bond for dragon shifters was temporarily dormant, but they knew it would eventually come back. Our ancestors put magic in the contract to ensure that both Stellan and I wouldn't have soulmates."

The entire table turns to gape at me with wide eyes.

They were all worried. Now, Natalia's response to me at the wedding made sense. The way she seemed to want to keep distance between us. She was worried about getting too close. They were all worried about what would happen once Stellan met his soulmate. It makes me love his family even more than I did before.

"Is it really true?" King Basilicus asks me.

"Yes," I answer. "I am fae—I can only speak the truth."

His thoughtful expression doesn't turn away from me as he says, "Please, accept my sincerest apologies, Princess. I haven't been kind to you, but it's no fault of your own. I only wished to protect my son."

My heart warms. "It's okay. I understand. I promise I'm not offended by your actions. Though, I will admit I was curious what I did to make you hate me."

King Basilicus grins. "I never hated you. And, please, from now on you can call me Warrick."

Warrick.

Even in my head, it feels strange. But I guess I can't keep referring to my father-in-law as 'king,' can I?

Evander clears his throat. "Can the fae make a contract for me? Because I would also like to marry a fae."

Stellan reaches his hand around me and smacks his younger brother on the back of the head.

"Ouch." Evander rubs his head. "What was that for?"

"For all the times you've given love sick glances at *my* wife," Stellan says.

Evander grins and winks at me. "Are you sure you wouldn't settle for the spare? I am rather handsome."

I bust out laughing and shake my head at him. I know he's only joking, though I'm not sure Stellan knows from the way he growls at his brother.

"I should also apologize." Natalia leans forward to look at me. "I wasn't nice to you at the wedding."

"It's okay," I assure her. "We've become friends since then. And I can't blame you for wanting to protect Stellan."

I feel like, in a strange way, I've earned my spot in this family. And I wouldn't want it any other way.

"How did the council meeting go today?" Natalia turns her attention to King Basilicus. No, Warrick, I remind myself.



Warrick shrugs. “They adore Wisteria. They don’t seem worried about the fae at all, though they are a little concerned about the elves coming for us.”

“But we don’t know that the elves will come,” I say. “Even if my grandparents do want to meet me, they may not even be prominent members of elf society.”

Stellan puts his arm on the back of my chair. “I highly doubt you come from a lowly family. Even if your father was never supposed to be emperor, he was still of a royal line. No doubt your mother was just as powerful.”

His words make me pause and consider. I do wonder what my mother was like. But I’m not sure how I feel about meeting my grandparents if they are ‘important’ to the elves. As a fae, I lived my life constantly under the spotlight. And, even among the dragons, too many people are watching me. At least I have Stellan at my side. He definitely makes things better.

After dinner, Stellan and I hold hands as we head back to our room. Earlier today, Stellan helped me move all of my stuff into his bedroom. He barely used any room in his walk-in closet, but between the clothes I brought from home and the stuff Natalia picked for me, his closet is now stuffed full. I feel a little bad about taking over his space, but he didn’t seem bothered by it.

Tonight, there is no question where we will sleep. Obviously, we’re staying in his room. The thought *should* be comforting. Last night, the thought of sleeping without him made me sad. But tonight, my stomach churns with anxiety. I think I may be more anxious tonight than I was on our wedding night.

“Are you okay?” Stellan asks, breaking through my overwhelming thoughts.

I glance over at him and see that he’s watching me. “You know, it’s not fair that you can read my emotions and I can’t read yours.”

He chuckles. “This is the opposite of how I thought it would be.”

“Right. Because *you* didn’t know the difference between fae and dark fae.” I give him a pointed look.

It is believed that dark fae and fae used to be of one species, but I’m not completely sure I believe it. Though we share a lot of similarities, with our changing eye colors and short statures, that is where our likeness ends. Dark fae specialize in emotions—feeling and manipulating them. I can do none of that. A fae typically has powers of nature. Stronger fae, like Cypress, can create a shield of pure magic, but most lack the ability. It’s why my powers were so revered among the fae. Turns out, it was never fae power at all, but elf magic.

“It hasn’t escaped my notice that you avoided answering if you’re okay.” Stellan opens the door to our room and pulls me inside with him.

I worry my bottom lip between my teeth, wondering what I should say. It’s not something I really wish to discuss. So, I do what any good fae would do, and I change the subject.

“I don’t want to go to war against the fae,” I tell Stellan.

He furrows his brows. “We’re going to try and avoid that.”

“I know.” I tuck a piece of hair behind my ear. “My dad may be empress, and he may have the final say about things, but that doesn’t mean he always gets to do what he thinks is best. The monarchs are very opinionated and if they want something, they will bully him until they get their way. And Cypress...” my voice trails off.

I can’t fight against my little brother. He won’t have any say in what happens, but his being fifteen won’t stop the fae from wanting to use him. Now that I’m gone, he’s probably the most powerful fae they’ve got.

Stellan pulls me into his arms. “We’ll find a way to negotiate peace. I’m certain the fae don’t really want to start a war that they can’t possibly win. Besides, my dad is on the Alpha Council. We won’t stand alone. Likely, once the fae see how much support we have, they’ll back down.”

I relax at his words.

He's right—the fae won't start a war they can't win. They don't want others to see how weak they've gotten.

I feel Stellan's lips at the top of my head as he kisses me gently. He wraps his arms tighter around me and I sigh, feeling completely content.

“Are you going to tell me what you were avoiding tell me?” Stellan asks.

I sigh, glancing up at him. “It's really unfair that you can read me so completely.”

He gives me a stern look, one that tells me he knows I'm still stalling.

“I'm nervous,” I finally admit.

“What do you have to be nervous about?” he asks.

“Staying in your room.” I chew on my bottom lip as I watch for his reaction.

“You stayed in my room last night.” He tilts his head to the side like he's genuinely confused about why I would be nervous.

My cheeks grow warm. “Yeah, but last night I didn't know you loved me.”

A look of realization passes across his features as he looks at me with those blue green eyes. He gently brings his hand to the side of my face, cupping my cheek.

“You have no reason to be nervous. I am not going into tonight with any expectations.” He doesn't break eye contact as he says it. “We're making our own timeline.”

His words ease the knot in my stomach.

“I'm not good at the whole relationship thing,” I admit.

He shakes his head. “When have you ever stumbled through any of this?”

“I don't know. I just...” my voice trails off and I let out a long breath.

“I love you, Wisteria, but I have for a while now. You knowing it doesn’t change my expectations.” He kisses my forehead and then grabs ahold of my hand. “But I don’t want to sleep without you. I don’t think I could anymore. I’ve gotten used to you being there. I like waking up with you in my arms. I even like you complaining about me not wearing a shirt.”

That causes me to smile.

He’s right, of course. I don’t want to sleep without him either.

I stand on the tips of my toes and tilt my head up in an invitation. He bends over, his lips meeting mine. His arms circle around me, drawing me closer to him and I melt against him.

Maybe I’m overthinking things. It is, after all, one of my specialties. But with Stellan, I don’t need to think. I just need to feel and trust. And I do trust him, more than I’ve ever trusted anybody before. I’ve already given him my heart and soul. Why should I hold back anything else from him?

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## AWKWARD CONVERSATIONS

### Wisteria

**S** *he is so adorable.*  
Stellan's words wake me up, but I don't hear the words out loud as much as I feel them reverberate in my brain. I glance up, seeing my husband watching me. He brushes my hair out of my face and he kisses me on the forehead.

"Good morning," he says.

Okay *that* I heard out loud. Whatever that was before, I must have been dreaming before.

"Good morning." I can't help but smile as I look at him.

I am the absolutely most lucky fae that has ever existed.

Stellan furrows his brows. "What?"

"What do you mean what?" I ask.

He blinks. "Think something."

*Think* something? Is my husband going mad?

Stellan's eyes widen. "How is this possible?"

"How is what possible?" I ask, still confused.

"Come on." He jumps out of bed and throws on a pair of sweats.

"Where are we going?" I don't move just yet because it's comfortable and I'm still hoping he will get back in bed with

me.

He grins. “Later, I promise.”

Okay, now he’s really confusing me, but I know he isn’t going to get back in bed. I sigh before forcing myself to get up and follow his lead.

“Where are we going?” I ask as I slip on a pair of sandals. “I really want to get a shower before we go anywhere.”

“We just need to talk to my dad,” Stellan says, still not answering any of my questions.

I sigh, letting him lead me from our room. I realize once he pulls me into the hallway that I didn’t even brush my hair.

Stellan grins at me. “I assure you, you look beautiful.”

My cheeks flush at his compliment. “Are you sure you’re not biased?”

“Biased or not, your beauty is a simple fact.”

“Beauty is subjective,” I argue.

But he ignores me and pulls me along at a faster pace. With his long strides, I have to run to keep up with him. How easily he forgets how short my legs are.

Stellan laughs. “You *are* short.”

I huff. “You’re just tall.”

He doesn’t respond. Instead, he swiftly stops and picks me up from the ground. I squeal, but Stellan keeps walking at a quick pace, not at all slowed down by my extra weight. He carries me effortlessly.

“I’m a dragon shifter, remember? I have supernatural strength,” he says.

I look at him. “Did you suddenly get really good at guessing what I’m thinking or something?”

*Or something*, I hear. But Stellan’s lips don’t move. I look at him, trying to figure out what is going on.

Stellan doesn’t put me down until we’re outside of his dad’s office. I straighten my shirt, expecting him to knock.

Instead, he barges inside, pulling me with him.

King Basilicus, or, er... Warrick... looks up, surprise on his face. Though, I don't think he's surprised to see us, I'm pretty sure he could hear us coming down the hallway.

"Did you know this would happen?" Stellan motions between us.

Once again, I'm confused by what he's talking about. I feel like I'm missing an important piece of the puzzle. Hopefully, he will feel like explaining it to me soon.

Stellan winces as he looks at me. "Sorry. I'll explain soon."

Okay, maybe he really *can* read my mind. If not, it's freaky how well he knows me. We haven't known each other long enough for that, have we?

Warrick flicks his gaze between the two of us, shaking his head. "I... no... how?"

Feeling frustrated at the lack of knowledge, I slink into one of the chairs across from the dragon king's desk. If they're just going to talk around me, I may as well get comfortable.

"You're not soulmates, but you have a completed mate bond." Warrick furrows his brows. "I've never heard of that happening before."

A completed mate bond? What does that mean? And how does one complete a mate bond?

Stellan shoots me an amused look and my face instantly flushes.

Okay... now I think I know *how*, but I wish I didn't because we're in Stellan's dad's office right now and this isn't something I want to discuss with my father-in-law.

*Relax, Stellan... says? Thinks? Completing a mate bond is completely normal. We are married, after all.*

I shoot him a glare and he only chuckles at my discomfort.

But Warrick isn't acting like this is awkward. Instead, he looks between Stellan and me like we're a puzzle to figure out.

Still, I can't believe Stellan didn't warn me before bringing me here! This is all kinds of awkward. Then again, dragons are much more open and affectionate than fae are. Fae aren't exactly known for being warm and fuzzy.

*Sorry.*

I have no idea how to send him my thoughts, but I shoot him another glare and think, *When we get out of here, we're going to have a long chat about what is proper for a fae.*

But I'm not a fae, at least not fully. And it makes me wonder about elves. I wish that the book I borrowed from the library had more information on things other than their magic.

Stellan squeezes my shoulder and smiles at me. It's really hard to stay mad at him when he's so cute.

*Cute?* He wrinkles his nose.

*Hey, it's my head. I'm allowed to think whatever I want.*

Warrick clears his throat and I snap my gaze toward him. He shuffles papers around on his desk, but I can see his smirk. The look reminds me of Stellan when he's amused by something.

"It makes sense," Warrick says. "Before, when the soulmate bond disappeared after the war, dragon shifters still had a mate bond with their spouses. So it's not completely unexpected."

Stellan nods thoughtfully.

I know next to nothing about the mate bond, except that soulmates can hear each other's thoughts. I'm pretty sure it's deeper than that, but I refuse to ask questions in front of Stellan's father.

Stellan holds his hand out to me and pulls me from the chair when I put my hand in his. "Wisteria and I are going to go talk—she doesn't understand any of this, so I'm going to explain it to her."

Warrick nods, turning his attention back to the papers in front of him. I wait until the door behind us is shut to exhale,



but I keep my questions to myself. If I talked now, I'm pretty sure he'd hear us.

"He would," Stellan confirms. "Dragon shifters have really good hearing."

"Is this permanent?" I ask. Because Stellan being in my head all the time could get pretty embarrassing.

"Are you afraid I'll learn that you actually like it when I don't wear a shirt," he teases.

I'm pretty sure he already knew that. I am good at hiding my emotions from everybody except Stellan. For some reason, he has always been able to read me.

"Not always," he says, once again answering my thoughts out loud.

I groan. "This is going to get embarrassing very quickly."

He just laughs.

I look at him, furrowing my brows. "So, why am I not hearing all of your thoughts? I can only hear things you say to me specifically."

"Dragon shifters are taught how to block their thoughts from an early age," Stellan explains. "If I didn't, any dragon could read my thoughts. It's how we talk to one another when we're shifted."

"So there is a way to block it." I perk up at the news.

He nods.

"Are you going to tell me?"

He just grins, not responding. And I can't even be mad because he looks so cute.

"Not cute. Manly. Rugged. Handsome."

I snort. "I'll call you cute if I want."

I'll just have to ask Evander to teach me to block my thoughts. I bet he wouldn't be offended if I called him cute.

Stellan huffs. "Don't call him cute. My brother has a big enough crush on you already."

I just grin, not making any promises. Besides, Evander doesn't have a crush on me. He already sees me as a big sister.

"Trust me, he does *not* think the same way of you and Natalia," he says.

"No. Because I didn't spend his childhood bullying him like Natalia did."

Stellan laughs. "Don't let Natalia hear you say that."

I grin, saying nothing. I'm pretty sure Natalia doesn't need me to tell her that she's bossy to the point that some might consider it bullying. Besides, I *like* that about Natalia. She's so bold and pretty much everything I'm not. I envy that about her.

"I'm glad you're nothing like my sister."

I shoot him an annoyed look. "Can you at least *pretend* like you can't hear what I'm thinking?"

And even though I'm glaring at him, I'm sure the color of my eyes give away that I'm not actually annoyed with him.

"I can also *feel* your emotions." Stellan opens up the door to our room and motions me to walk in first.

"So that's part of the mate bond. Is there anything else I need to know?" I turn around to face him as he follows me inside. I'm the least bothered by him feeling my emotions because he could already read them from my eyes anyway.

"I can feel you from *anywhere*. Which means I also know where you are at all times," he says. "I will admit, I'm relieved. If I'm away from you and a dragon shifter comes after you again, I'll be able to feel your panic through your emotions. If there is a next time, I plan to be there before you get a brain injury."

I snort.

A brain injury? Hardly.

"It was just a bump." I put my hands on my hips, looking him in the eye.

He doesn't say anything. He just puts his arms around me and pulls me closer. "I don't care if it was just a bump—I

never want to see you injured again. My heart can't take it."

I don't bother pointing out that, as a dragon shifter, his heart is plenty strong. Mostly because I like having his arms around me and I'd prefer that we stay like this. All day, actually.

Stellan pulls back slightly so he can look at me. "I like where your thoughts are going."

I bury my face in his chest, hoping to hide my reddening cheeks. Stellan's chest rumbles with laughter.

Uh, what did I say? Embarrassing.

"I'll teach you how to block your thoughts from me," Stellan says.

"Really?" I glance up.

He nods.

I squeeze my arms around him. "Thank you."

Some things shouldn't be said aloud.

"But I'm still mad at you for dragging me to see your dad when I first woke up. That's so embarrassing." Especially considering the subject matter.

Stellan rubs a hand at the back of his neck. "Uh, about that... everybody is going to know that we've completed the mate bond."

"WHAT?"

STELLAN

I didn't know it was possible to be this happy.

I've dreaded my duty. I didn't want to marry a fae. I knew it was for the good of my people, to make dragon shifters stronger, but I resented the fact that the burden fell upon me and my generation. Little did I know, I was getting something so much better than a soulmate.

I love my wife more than I thought was possible. Looking back, I'm not sure how I resisted her for so long. How did I

not fall in love the very day we met? Or even on our wedding day?

It doesn't matter, though. Because now we're in love. And I'm happier than I've ever been.

My father bumps the back of my chair as he walks back, aware that I'm not paying a bit of attention. "...Stellan is keeping an eye on the princess."

I sit up straighter, trying to focus on the council meeting. All I want is to get out of here and go hang out with my wife. Since I didn't have a choice but to come to this council meeting, Wisteria is hanging out with Natalia and my mom. I'm pretty sure Natalia is taking her shopping, but I'd still prefer that over this boring meeting.

"I wouldn't leave my wife's side at all if I didn't have to be here." I try to keep the sarcasm out of my voice, but from the look my dad gives me, I'd say I didn't succeed.

One of the older council members chuckles. "Relax, King Basilicus. None of us are offended by Prince Stellan's youthful enthusiasm—we all remember what it's like to be newly mated."

"It is remarkable since we didn't think a bond would be possible," somebody says, but I'm back to not paying attention. Instead, I'm focusing on my wife. I nearly jump out of my seat when I feel her fear, but the fear is replaced by annoyance, then humor.

Just what are they doing?

The council only insisted I come today because they heard Wisteria and I were able to complete a mate bond. I think they just wanted to confirm it for themselves and my dad just wants me here because it's my duty. But I know for a fact he got two whole months off after he married my mom, so it's hypocritical for him to insist I keep working so soon after my wedding.

Will I ever get Wisteria to myself for more than a few hours? We've never even gotten one single uninterrupted day.

“Is it possible the dragon shifters who oppose your rule would back the fae if it came down to it?”

The question pulls me from my thoughts as I turn to look at my dad while I wait to see what his response will be.

“Anything is possible,” Dad answers. “Since the fae have openly acknowledged that they dislike Wisteria being with us, it would stand to reason those that oppose us would align with them. The fae on their own aren’t a threat, but...” his voice trails off.

He doesn’t have to finish his statement. If the two groups do decide to work together, they could quickly become a real threat.

“So we need allies,” I say.

Dad turns to me and nods. “But to gather allies, we’d have to let the situation be known. I’m not sure that the situation is that desperate yet.”

I want to ask about the elves. Would it be desperate enough if they got involved? Would the dragon shifters survive another war? Even though it’s been two hundred and fifty years since the war ended, we still don’t have the numbers we did before. Even though we have more strength, if the other supernaturals banned against us, we wouldn’t stand a chance.

## WISTERIA

Natalia has been teasing me all day long about Stellan and me completing our mate bond. She keeps making these comments about her future nieces and nephews. I’m trying very hard not to let it show just how much her comments embarrass me, but I’m pretty sure she knows.

“Isn’t this cute?” Natalia holds up a baby onesie that proclaims ‘Auntie is my favorite.’

“Natalia,” Dove chides her, but it’s half hearted as she carries Jason on her hip.

“What?” Natalia smirks. “I’m just preparing. It’s only a matter of time before those two have hybrid dragon, fae, elf babies. And Jason needs a playmate.”

I take the onesie from her fingers. “So *you* have a baby and your child can wear this.”

She chuckles. “Andrew and I are working on it.”

Dove looks up at Natalia’s words, her eyes gleaming with joy.

I put the onesie back on the rack, uncomfortable hearing my sister-in-law talking about baby making. Dragon shifters really are open with their feelings and emotions—maybe a little *too* open.

Evander, who is taking turns between peering out the window and glancing around the store groans. “Do you guys really have to talk about this in front of me? We just had lunch and I don’t want to lose it. It’s bad enough that Wisteria smells like Stellan now that they’ve completed their mate bond.”

Evander came as part of our guard detail. I figured he’d complain a lot more about all the shopping Natalia is doing, but he has taken his job very seriously. I think he plans to work as Stellan’s guard in the future.

“I *smell* like Stellan?” I turn my head and sniff my shoulder, noting that I smell like the soap I used this morning.

“That is how we know about the mate bond,” Natalia explains, a bored expression on her face. “Dragon shifters have excellent noses.” She looks through more racks of baby clothes. “Since you and Stellan completed your bond, you smell like him. It’s to deter any other male dragon shifters from coming near you.”

That is probably a good thing considering how protective dragon shifters are of their mates. Stellan was pretty mad at his dad this morning when he insisted they go to the council meeting. And even though we’re across the island from where the council meeting is being held, I can feel that Stellan is still annoyed about the fact that he’s away from me.

“If we’re going to keep shopping, I want coffee,” I say.

Evander comes closer and puts his arm around my shoulder. “I’m with her.”

Natalia rolls her eyes. “You two go get coffee then—there is a good coffee bar across the street. I’m going to go pay.”

“Get me a latte,” Dove says to Evander.

Evander leads me from the store. About half of the guards come with us, and the other half stay with Natalia and Dove.

“You hate this as much as I do, huh?” Evander asks.

“Shopping?” I groan. “Yes. It’s the worst. I’d rather just order things online. And then I could spend my time on the beach.”

“Reading romance books?” Evander teases.

“Shut up.” I shove his shoulder slightly and he laughs.

“I am happy for you and Stellan.” The serious tone of Evander’s voice surprises me. “My brother pretends to be happy for the sake of my family, but he’s been miserable his whole life. It’s their fault—they’ve drilled it into Stellan’s head that he can’t ever love you. Now that he knows he can, he is free.”

“I understand not being free,” I say, but my chest is heavy at Evander’s words. Was Stellan really that miserable? If I had known, I would’ve told him the first day we met about the soulmate thing, but I assumed that he already knew.

“You’re good for him.” Evander opens the door for me, motioning for me to talk in first. “Actually, you’re good for the whole family.”

Yes, I imagine that everybody was worried about Stellan’s arranged marriage. And, knowing how Poppy is, I don’t imagine meeting Poppy helped calm their anxieties.

“Do you know what the council meeting was about?” I ask Evander as we get in line to order our drinks.

He shakes his head. “Not exactly, but I imagine they heard about you and Stellan.”

“Me and Stellan?” I raise an eyebrow.

“About your mate bond.”

My stomach churns. “*Why* is it so important to them?”

Dragon shifters are so strange.

“I imagine they’re quite excited about getting hybrid elf heirs,” Evander teases.

I groan.

Everybody is way too invested in Stellan and my future children.

When we get to the front, Evander orders our drinks and we step to the side to wait. I’m sure my face is bright red, but I’m certain that can’t be avoided.

This entire day has been embarrassing.

“Cheer up,” Evander says to me, a smirk playing on his lips. “After you have a couple of kids, they’ll stop being so obsessed with you.”

“A couple?”

He just laughs.

The coffee machine makes a loud gurgling noise. I look over and see the steam from the machine. I’m so focused on it that the whooshing sound outside doesn’t register until it’s followed by the sound of glass shattering. I have just enough time to put a shield up around Evander and myself before the attack comes.



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## CONNECTED MAGIC

### Wisteria

**W**isteria Not one single person in the coffee shop reacts to the dragon outside. They don't even register that the window was just shattered. They just keep going about their business. People are swiping their credit cards as they pay for their drinks, the baristas are continuing their work, and a customer in the corner is curled up reading a book. Evander and I are the only ones who react.

My shield hums around us as our guards come rushing inside. I focus on the dragon, seeing the steam rising in its throat.

“We have to get out of here.” I grab Evander's arm and yank him with me. “That dragon will burn this place to the ground to get to us.”

Together, we walk out onto the street. I can only hope that Natalia, Dove, and Jason are safe. The dragon doesn't seem to want to go after them. Instead, its black eyes are focused solely on me. I call for my magic, but before I shoot it toward the dragon, ten guys come up behind him. Each of them are carrying long swords, ready for a battle.

Hybrids, though each of them are dragon shifters, they also carry the blood of another species. That will make them harder to fight, but not impossible.

Our guards rush forward, meeting the men with trained precision. My eyes can barely keep up with the blur of movements. The dragon in front of me isn't done though—it shoots hot fire from its mouth and nostrils, sending it straight for Evander and me. The fire never touches us, thanks to my shield, but it effectively blinds us. I can't see anything past the white of the fire.

“How long can you keep up a shield against magical attacks?” Evander asks with an edge of panic in his voice.

“I don't know—it's never been tested,” I admit. The fae never would've risked me like that, but now I realize my mistake. I should know my limits. After we survive this, I am going to make Stellan practice with me, to hone my skills. I need to know exactly what I can take.

The fire seems to go on in an endless stream. My shield never wavers, but neither does the dragon.

“Stellan will be on his way. You just have to hold on until he can get to you.” Evander puts a steadying hand on my back like he's trying to help support my magic. “You can drop the shield around me—I'm fireproof.”

I ignore him. He may be fireproof, but he doesn't have the strength of a dragon shifter yet.

The fire comes steadily and I feel myself start to sway from the pressure. Evander's hand tightens on my back and I know he can tell that this is a lot.

I feel another presence behind me. I keep my shield up, knowing it will protect us from anybody who is trying to harm us. I don't turn to look, but I feel somebody touch my arm. Magic flows through me and pours out of me stronger than before. Curious, I look over and see a complete stranger standing beside me.

The guy is about my age, maybe a little older. He has short silvery blond hair and the most vibrant green eyes I've ever seen—there is no mistaking this guy for a human. But it isn't his looks that has me gasping—it's the way our magic connects. He feeds off my magic and I feed off his. Together,

we blast our magic outward and it hits each of our enemies with one, strong attack. Instantly, the fire stops and the fighting is over. Eleven unconscious bodies lie on the street and sidewalk. Our guards look around, confused about what happened.

I turn fully to look at the guy, furrowing my brows as I study him. He's still holding my arm as he looks around. I think he's trying to make sure we got all of our enemies. There is something about him that is so familiar despite the fact that I *know* I've never met him before. I would remember those eyes.

"Don't touch my wife." I hear a growl from behind me. I turn to see Stellan rushing toward us.

The blond guy looks amused as he lets go of my arm.

Stellan steps forward, like he's ready to fight him, but I put my hand on his chest to stop him. I'm too awestruck to acknowledge my husband though. Instead, I focus on the blond guy.

"Did you feel that?" I ask him, still trying to comprehend what just happened.

He, unlike me, doesn't look surprised. "That was our magic connecting."

Stellan, once again, growls.

The blond ignores him though and focuses on me. "You're shorter than I thought you would be."

"I hear that a lot. But I'm confused." I lift an eyebrow. "Should I know you?"

The smile slips from his face. "Yes, but we didn't know where to find you. It wasn't until news broke about the half fae, half elf that we were finally able to track you down." He glances at Stellan and then at me. "We never imagined we'd find you living with dragon shifters."

"I don't know who you are, but if you don't stop looking at my wife you won't be alive long enough for introductions."

Power pours from Stellan at his words—it's so thick I can almost taste it.

“I heard dragon shifters ooze power like pheromones. It'd be intimidating if I didn't know one strike of my magic would have you down for a few hours, crown prince or not.” The guy crosses his arms over his chest and looks at Stellan. “I'm not interested in dating your wife, I assure you.” He looks at me again. “Your mother and my father were siblings.”

My breath gets caught in my throat. “That's why our magic connected like that?”

He nods.

I don't wait for him to say anything else. I tip myself forward and hug him—my *cousin*. That's why I felt something so familiar about him. It takes him a few seconds for him to hug me back, but he pulls away after a quick pat on my back.

“Sorry. The dragons like touching...” I say, letting my voice trail off. I didn't realize that they were rubbing off on me.

Stellan rests his hand on my lower back. He's seemed to calm down at the announcement that we're related, but he still isn't sure about the guy. “You're an elf.”

“Yes.”

“And Wisteria's cousin?”

He nods once but keeps his focus solely on me. “Our grandfather is eager to see you again. After your mom died, your father disappeared with you in the middle of the night. We never knew the truth of his origins. Had we known, we would've come for you. But elves stick to themselves—we know nothing of the supernatural world outside of us. At least, until recently.”

Stellan steps closer to me, like he wants to shield me from my cousin.

He waves a hand. “Rest easy, Prince Stellan, I am not here to steal your wife from you.”

Stellan does relax at his words, but he doesn't move back from me.

The elf focuses on me. "But I would like to invite you and your dragon prince to the elven palace. We've never invited an outsider before, but we'll make an exception for your husband. Even your father wasn't allowed." He pauses, then adds, "Probably because Grandfather hates him."

"Wait, the elven *palace*?" I ask.

His grin grows. "Didn't you know, cousin? Our grandfather is the king of the elves. And since my father and your mother are dead, that makes you second in line for the throne." He winks. "You're after me, of course. And I don't plan on dying anytime soon. Though, knowing Grandfather, he'll outlive us both."

I put a hand to the base of my throat as I process his words.

I have grandparents—at least a grandfather. I knew my father said they would want to meet me. But I have an entire family I know nothing about. Well, except now I know they're apparently royal.

"Is she okay?" my elf cousin asks my husband.

Stellan looks at me with concern in his eyes, then turns to him. "I think she's trying to process the fact that a princess of the fae and a princess of the elves somehow also became a princess of the dragons."

I nod. "What he said."

My brain hurts just thinking about it.

"What is your name, by the way?" I ask, realizing we haven't made introductions yet.

He bows slightly at the waist. "I am Prince Venali Krishorn, though you may call me Venali."

"I am Wisteria. It's nice to meet you, Venali."

"*Princess* Wisteria Basilicus," Stellan corrects.

I wave a hand. "We have no need for formalities among family."

“Indeed,” Venali agrees, then looks at my husband. “You have no need of introductions, Prince Stellan. When I found out my cousin was here, I did my research.”

“Just Stellan,” I say, giving my husband the side eye. “Right?”

Stellan huffs, then nods. “Correct.”

“Excellent.” Venali looks around. “So, should we leave now?”

“No. I must deal with the mess that was made here and talk to—”

Venali cuts Stellan off. “It wasn’t a request. You may come if you wish, but your presence isn’t required. Wisteria’s presence is mandatory.”

Stellan growls, taking a step closer to my cousin.

I put a hand out, to stop him from attacking my *elf* cousin, who also happens to be a prince. The last thing we need is another looming war to deal with because Stellan lost his temper.

“Cousin, I think we can wait until my husband talks to his father and king about this. He has duties and we can’t just leave,” I say, trying to keep my voice calm. “However, if you would be patient, we could possibly leave tomorrow morning?” I look to Stellan for confirmation.

Stellan gives me one curt nod.

“Certainly our family can wait one more day.” I grin. “Besides, I’m certain King Basilicus would be honored to meet you. You can stay with us at the estate tonight.”

Venali nods once. “Fine. I suppose our trip can be delayed by one day.”

I can still feel Stellan’s anger—he doesn’t like feeling forced to do anything. I’m not sure if it’s because he’s a prince and is used to being in charge or if it’s because he’s a dragon shifter.

Stellan wraps his arms around me and pulls me against him. “You worried me. When I felt your fear, I came as quickly as I could. I nearly shifted inside the council meeting room.”

I lean into his embrace, resting my head against his chest. I sigh, feeling complete contentment at the feeling of being in my husband’s arms. I don’t speak until he pulls back to look at me.

“You should know, Venali saved us. I was holding up a shield, but I was afraid it was going to falter. When he showed up and we connected our magic, it gave me a boost of strength. It’s how we took down every single dragon shifter at once.” I glance at him, curious to see how he’s going to react.

“It’s because we’re family,” Venali says from behind me. “Elf families are stronger when they’re together.”

Stellan growls again.

I shoot a glare at my cousin. “We are very eager to learn more about my elf heritage, but maybe you shouldn’t word things in a way that makes my husband think you intend to kidnap me.”

Venali chuckles. “No, indeed. You are a very strong elf, Wisteria—one of the strongest I’ve ever met. I don’t imagine there is an elf alive today who could take you on and survive. Besides, family can’t use their magic against one another. It’s impossible.”

The sound of a throat clearing has us all turning. Evander stands there, his hands folded behind his back. “Mom wanted to make sure you’re okay. I assured her you are, but I don’t think the guards will be able to hold her back much longer.”

That’s when I notice the guards. They’re all watching Venali and our exchange, their weapons pointed toward my cousin.

Venali snorts. “Do they really think *guns* are an effective weapon against an elf? Supernaturals really have forgotten how powerful we are.”

“This is Prince Venali, my cousin,” I announce to the guards, hoping to evade a diplomatic incident. “He will be coming home with us.”

Nobody says anything for a few awkward seconds. That is when I see King Basilicus push through the group of guards to the front of the crowd. “We will be happy to welcome Prince Venali into our home. Now, let’s get off the street and get these guys detained.”

...

A FEW HOURS LATER, after taking the quickest shower of my life, Stellan and I walk hand in hand toward King Basilicus’s office. Venali should be waiting for us there, along with Stellan’s father.

I’m not sure who makes me more nervous—my cousin or my husband’s father. They’re both intimidatingly powerful. Though, if what Venali says is true, I am more powerful than both of them.

Stellan pauses at the door and actually knocks, something I’m not sure I’ve ever seen him do before.

“Come in,” Warrick calls a moment later.

Stellan opens the door. Usually, he would have me walk inside first. Instead, he walks in first, carefully shielding my body with his. He’s trying to protect me from my cousin. The move is sweet, even if a little funny.

I can’t explain it, but I trust Venali. I knew from the moment our magic connected that he doesn’t mean me any harm. If only Stellan could get the same memo. Thankfully, Venali doesn’t seem put off by Stellan’s attitude. If anything, he looks amused.

“I heard that dragons are fiercely protective of their mates. It does my heart good to know that my cousin has you protecting her,” Venali says to Stellan.

Stellan’s shoulders relax at his words and I can feel the tension ease out of him. Somehow, Venali knew just what to say to my husband.



Warrick's chair squeaks as he moves. "Prince Venali was just informing me that you two agreed to visit the royal elven family."

Venali grins cheekily. "The—as you said—*royal* elven family is Wisteria's family. And our grandfather is dying to see her."

"Is visiting really an option?" Stellan asks, moving to sit down in a free chair. He frowns at Venali. "I thought we didn't have a choice in the matter."

I squeeze Stellan's hand as I sit beside him. "We are honored to be invited to visit, and we're especially grateful you extended the invitation to my husband. It will bring great prestige to the dragon shifters."

Venali chuckles. "Young cousin, you do have a fae's way with words."

I'm not sure if that's a compliment or not, but I decide not to dwell on it.

"Right now is a difficult time for Stellan to leave," King Basilicus says, folding his hands on the desk in front of him. "As you saw today, we are dealing with attacks on the royal family. It seems that their target has shifted from us to Wisteria, as she has so easily thwarted their previous attempts. I'm afraid this is only the beginning."

"We are prepared to offer an alliance." Venali casually takes a seat on the other side of Stellan. "For the sake of Wisteria."

"Why does your family suddenly care about Wisteria now?" Warrick asks. "She's twenty two years old and *married*. Shouldn't you have been around her whole life?"

"Twenty years ago, Emrys disappeared with Princess Wisteria in the middle of the night. We obviously wanted to see her, but it isn't something her father was keen on," Venali says. "When we found out she was here, I came right away."

King Basilicus nods. "Fine. I will allow Prince Stellan and Princess Wisteria to visit with the elves, though I will request guards accompany them."

“Of course,” Venali agrees readily.

“Any treaty negotiations will be done by my son. I trust his judgment.” King Basilicus turns to look at Stellan. “Are you okay with this?”

Stellan gives him a curt nod.

“Excellent.” Venali smiles widely.

Stellan looks from Venali to me and back again. “I now understand where you got your charisma from. It definitely has to be an elf thing.”

“Charisma?” I raise an eyebrow.

“Your entire personality draws people to you,” he clarifies. “It’s extremely hard to dislike you—or did you not notice how my whole family fell in love with you?”

Everybody except for his dad—I’m still not sure he likes me. Especially not with all the trouble I’ve caused.

“It’s definitely an elf thing.” Venali scowls, crossing his arms over his chest. “It makes staying hidden from other supernaturals extremely difficult.”

“How have you managed to stay hidden?” Warrick asks. “It’s got to be nearly impossible to hide an entire kingdom.”

“We hide from supernaturals the same way that supernaturals hide from humans. Compulsion—even the weakest elf has enough control to compel others to forget them.”

Warrick furrows his brows as he looks at Venali. “Elves can compel other supernaturals?”

He nods. “Didn’t you know? Or was knowledge of us having that particular skill lost to history?”

Everybody stays quiet, looking at Venali with wide eyes.

“Don’t worry.” Venali sighs, leaning back in his chair. “It doesn’t work on kings or alphas, so everybody in this room is safe from me. And there is no point in us staying hidden now, as the news is out. It’s a small price to pay to have Wisteria back.”

Stellan tenses at his words. “She’s *not* staying with you. We will come for a visit, but only with a promise to let us *both* come home.”

Venali lifts an eyebrow at Stellan, then looks at me. “Wisteria is free to do as she pleases. If she wants to stay, she is welcome to, but if she wishes to live with you, she can.” He wrinkles his nose as if the idea of living among dragon shifters is somehow offensive to him.

“Do you really mean to offer an alliance to us?” King Basilicus asks. “Or is this all just a rouse to get Wisteria on elf land?”

“There is no trick involved.” Venali leans forward. “We are prepared to offer an alliance. With elves backing you, I imagine your enemies will be quick to back off.”

“It’s clear that you’re not comfortable with other supernaturals,” I say. “Why are you doing this now?”

He looks at me. “Isn’t it clear? Grandfather is doing this for you, his granddaughter. You’re the only piece of your mother left. You might not remember him, but he remembers you. *I* remember you. You were two the last time I saw you, but I was four. When we go home, I’ll show you pictures.”

I turn my attention from Venali to Warrick. “I believe him. I want to go and visit my family.” I grab ahold of Stellan’s hand. “We’ll get an alliance and that will be enough for the fae to back off.”

Warrick looks at me for a moment, his eyes scanning my face, then he nods. “Fine.” He turns to Venali. “I am trusting you with my son and daughter-in-law. They are the future of our people. If you harm them in any way, I don’t care how strong the elves are. We will come for you with everything we’ve got.” His eyes turn black and he makes the threat, though I don’t think it’s because he can’t control his emotions. I think he’s showing off his power. It rolls off of him in waves.

Venali stands. “Thank you, King Basilicus. I promise, no harm will come to them.” He turns to Stellan and me. “I will

make arrangements and we will leave first thing in the morning.”

He turns to leave the room, but Stellan doesn't move to get up. Instead, he turns and looks at his father. Neither of them speak for several seconds. I wonder if they're listening to make sure Venali is far enough away that he can't hear before they speak.

“What do you think?” Stellan asks.

Warrick takes a deep breath, looking from me to Stellan. “I think that he's serious about caring for Wisteria, but I am not convinced they'll be willing to let her go. We are not in a position to refuse, but I believe you should be cautious and vigilant while there.”

I want to argue that they're wrong—they didn't feel how Venali and my magic connected. I do not believe he could ever hurt me. But maybe they're right. I don't know him or any of my elf family. We are going into an unknown situation. All I can do is hope that Venali's words are sincere.

STELLAN

I don't know what to make of the elf, Prince Venali Krishorn, or the fact that Wisteria trusts him. And she *does* trust him—I can feel it through our bond. From the moment he touched her, she made up her mind about him. But I don't have her optimism about the situation.

Elves don't like outsiders, that much is obvious. And I'm not convinced that Prince Venali likes me very much.

But Wisteria... she complicates things. How can I tell her no when she is so obviously thrilled about this?

She excitedly packs her suitcase, like she's going on an adventure. And for a girl who has been locked away in a palace her whole life, I suppose this *is* an adventure. I just don't want her to get her hopes up. We don't know anything about the elves. Are they true in their desire for an offered alliance? Or are they just trying to lure Wisteria there?

Wisteria grins as she struggles to zip her overflowing suitcase. “I hope I packed enough. We won't be there longer

than a week, right? But maybe I should pack a fourth suitcase. What if there are more informal situations? I should pack—”

I step up to her, taking her hands in mine. “Wisteria, you’ve packed enough.”

“But,” she starts to argue.

“It’s fine,” I promise her. “Anything you need, I will buy it. I am a prince, after all.”

She nods, taking a deep breath. “Right. Yeah, you’re right.”

I can’t help but grin at her slight panic at the thought of forgetting to pack something. Then I remember her panic is likely because she hasn’t been allowed to travel before.

When I see Emperor Emrys again...

“Do you think Venali is okay?” Wisteria’s purple eyes focus on me. “He might not find the thermostat in his room. Maybe he needs another blanket or something.”

I walk over to her and put my arms around her. “Wisteria, your cousin is fine. He’s a grown elf that is fully capable of taking care of himself.”

She leans into my embrace. “I know, but...” she sighs. “You didn’t feel what I did. When our magic connected, I *knew* I could trust him. And I know you don’t trust him.”

“Your safety will always be my number one priority,” I tell her. “But for you, I will try.”

She grins, looking up at me with her purple eyes that have a hint of light pink around the edges. “Thank you, Stellan. I know I haven’t talked about my mom much, but that’s because I don’t know anything about her. My dad always refused to speak of her. As far as I knew, she died when I was a baby. I didn’t realize I was two. I want to know about this other half of my life that has always been forbidden to me.”

I can’t deny Wisteria anything, especially not when she looks at me like this. I can feel her love and trust for me. I know that I can’t keep her from her family, and maybe this is the solution that we need.

“I will not keep you from your family, I promise you that.”  
I cup her chin gently with my hand. “You are free here.”

The smile she gives me makes everything completely worth it. Even if we are walking into a trap, I will handle it. I will protect her with my life.

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## ELF ETIQUETTE

### Wisteria

**M**y stomach is in knots as we get on the airplane that morning—a mix of nerves and excitement. The sun isn't even up yet, and I'm excited about seeing the island from the sky when it's dark. When my father and I flew here, it was always in the middle of the day and I'm curious what it will look like at night. But I'm so nervous about what is going to happen once we land.

“Are you nervous to fly?” Stellan cocks his head to the side as he studies me. An amused smirk plays on his lips.

I shake my head. “I'm not a nervous flyer. I just...” I wring my hands, searching for the right words. “Well, we're going to see my mother's side of the family. I never thought this day would come and I'm anxious. What if they hate me?”

Stellan grabs onto my hand to stop my fidgeting and he tugs me toward our seats. “That isn't going to happen. You're impossible to hate.”

Before I can say anything else, Venali walks down the aisle of the jet. He saunters over and takes a seat across from us. Even though it's early morning, he looks completely put together. His hair is perfectly styled and he's even wearing a suit. I look down at my own clothing, wondering if I'm dressed nicely enough. I've gotten used to how chill the dragons are about everything.

The pilot comes back to talk to Stellan about something, so I turn my attention to my bright eyed cousin and find him

watching me.

“What?” I raise an eyebrow at him.

“Your eyes,” Venali says. “They’re purple.”

I nod. “Hence the name, Wisteria. My father told me that my mother named me. I assume it’s because of the color of my eyes.”

“They’re the same shade as our grandfather’s eyes.” He leans forward. “But I could’ve sworn they were blue yesterday, that’s what I’m surprised by.”

“Because I’m half fae,” I remind him. “Purple is my natural color, but they change depending on my mood.”

“Right. I forgot fae’s eyes did that.” He scrunches his nose. “That must be horrifying, for your emotions to always be showing like that. My court would eat me alive if my eyes changed colors depending on my mood. Knowing how cutthroat the fae are, I imagine it was significantly worse for you.”

“I can mask them,” I admit. “I used to always keep them masked, but I don’t have to with Stellan.”

He lets out a breath. “You should keep them masked when we’re at the palace. Seeing purple may make our grandfather softer toward you.”

Softer... I want to ask him if he thinks our grandfather will be hard toward me, but Stellan comes back before I can ask, sitting back down beside me. The three of us buckle up as the plane starts to move.

I clear my throat, looking at Venali. “Is there anything I need to know before I meet our grandfather?”

Venali leans forward. “Grandfather adores you, there is no question about that. I don’t think there has been a single day he hasn’t thought about you in the last twenty years. But he hates your father. It’s probably best if you don’t mention him.”

I nod. “It makes sense. My father did take me from him and all of my mom’s family.”



“He hates fae in general,” Venali admits, then glances at Stellan. “And he naturally thinks that any supernatural that isn’t an elf is below us.”

Stellan stiffens at Venali’s words.

I grab onto Stellan’s hand, lacing our fingers together to try and reassure him. “What about me? Will he hate me because I’m a hybrid?”

Venali shakes his head. “No. Our grandfather may have disapproved of your mother and father getting married, but you are his blood. That’s why I said having purple eyes will help. His heart will be softened toward you. You look so much like your mother, even the color of your hair is the same.”

My heart beats faster at his words. “I wish I knew what my mother looked like.”

“There are pictures in the castle, I will show you,” Venali offers. “But I do recommend that Stellan stay by your side the entire time. I can’t promise how he will be treated if he’s found without you.”

“So all elves hate other supernaturals?” I ask.

“No—that’s just Grandfather. He’s pretty old school, but even he will have to rethink his ways when he sees how strong you are. Mixing blood isn’t the abomination he thinks it is.” Venali sighs, shaking his head. “The elves are pretty torn in their beliefs. The older generation is very against mixing blood, but my generation is tired of hiding. We want peace with other supernaturals. That’s why I pushed Grandfather to invite your husband to the castle. Forming an alliance with the dragons is a step in the right direction.”

But not everybody will be for it. It’s something to consider while I’m there. I’ll have to be vigilant, especially when it comes to Stellan and his safety.

*It’s my job to take care of you,* Stellan says, projecting his thoughts to me.

I glance at him. *You promised to teach me how to block my thoughts from you.*

He leans over and kisses me on the cheek. *When we get back home.*

Of course he wants to be in my head while we're on this trip. He knows how nervous I am and how much I want my mom's family to like me.

*They will adore you,* Stellan assures me.

Venali clears his throat. "You two are mates, correct?"

I say, "No," at the same time that Stellan says, "Yes."

Venali looks between us, raising his eyebrows. "Which one is it?"

I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. "Well, we're not soulmates, but we do have a complete mate bond."

He nods. "It makes sense. Elves don't have soulmates, but we do get a mate bond."

"Are you mated?" I ask.

"No." He frowns. "I'm the heir, which means whoever I marry is going to be a queen. Women are either scared of the crown or they covet it. It makes falling in love difficult."

Stellan puts his arm around me. "Are you scared of being queen?"

His question makes me laugh. "You're kidding, right? I'm going to be a queen, but before marrying you, I was going to be an empress. Somehow, being at your side as you rule the dragons seems a far less terrifying option."

Venali shivers dramatically. "Anything is better than the fae."

Stellan glares at my cousin, ready to stand up for me. It's sweet, even if not necessary.

I scoot closer to Stellan's side. "Not all the fae are bad, you know?"

"I do know." Venali studies me. "You are nothing like I thought you would be. Even though you look more like a fae, with your eyes that change colors and your tiny structure."

“I’m not *that* short.” I frown at him.

Venali and Stellan both laugh. Of course this would be the one thing they agree on.

“My younger brother isn’t like other fae,” I say, trying to ignore their reaction.

“Your brother?” Venali looks at me. “He will be emperor, right?”

I nod. “Yes, Cypress will be emperor because of the marriage alliance.”

“But the fae are willing to fight to have you back.” Venali watches me as he tries to piece it together.

“Yes, because of my magic. I guess it never was fae magic.” I shrug. “But Cypress has strong fae magic. His magic is even stronger than our father’s, which is rare.”

“I heard that fae magic is dying.” Venali leans back in his seat. “It must be nature’s way of punishing them for their own self righteous indignation.”

“I’m surprised you know. It’s not something they’re advertising,” I admit. “My father also wanted to keep the information away from the dragons. He didn’t want you guys to back out of the alliance. The fae don’t want to admit it, but they need the dragons.”

“Yet they’re willing to go to war with us to get you.” Stellan shakes his head.

“The strongest fae wouldn’t stand a chance against the weakest dragon shifter,” Venali says. “Just as no supernatural in the world can match the strength of an elf.”

Speaking of self righteous behavior...

Stellan grins at me and I know he’s heard my thoughts.

Venali shifts his gaze between Stellan and me. “I am curious what your children will be like. We already know that fae blood makes dragons stronger, but adding elf blood to the mix is interesting. I imagine nobody will want to mess with

your children. The supernatural community will be even more frightened of them than they are of King Basilicus.”

My cheeks grow warm at the mention of Stellan and my future children. I *know* that’s what our entire marriage and alliance is about.

“We haven’t even been married a month yet,” I say to Venali. “It’s a little soon to start thinking about heirs.”

Venali snorts. “It’s a little late for that, considering you have a mate bond.”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

Stellan stiffens but doesn’t say anything.

I glance up at Stellan, but he’s got his attention focused out the plane window. His mind is carefully blocked off from me, which is so hypocritical.

“Well, you know that dragon shifters typically have large families,” Venali begins.

I shake my head. “I didn’t know that.” I look at Stellan. “You only have two siblings.”

“Yes, but a typical dragon shifter has five plus children,” Venali says. “Just like most shifters—it’s because birth control doesn’t work very well for shifters. It’s not a huge problem with female dragon shifters because they can only get pregnant at certain times, but when a male dragon shifter marries another species...”

My eyes widen and I look at Stellan who is still looking out the window. “Is that true?”

Stellan gives me a guilty look. “Yes, but I thought you knew.”

How would I possibly know that?

“Do you think I’m pregnant?” I look at my stomach, not sure what emotions I’m feeling. Terrified, yes. Scared out of my mind, absolutely. But I don’t dread the idea like I thought I would.

“Your husband would be able to hear the baby’s heartbeat if you were,” Venali says like he’s trying to comfort me.

“But there isn’t a heartbeat for six weeks,” I counter, then look at Stellan. “Unless dragon shifters have shorter pregnancies like wolf shifters.”

Stellan shakes his head. “No. It’s actually longer. Sixteen to twenty months.”

“WHAT?” I practically shout the words.

He winces. “But yours would only be nine months because you’re not a dragon shifter.”

I sigh, feeling relief at his words.

Venali snorts. “At least you don’t lay eggs.”

I glare at my cousin, which makes him laugh harder. I try to ignore him as I work through what I’ve just learned. Am I really ready for a *baby*? I’m only twenty two and Stellan and I just got married.

“Your sister didn’t have a child for a few years,” I say, turning to look at Stellan.

“Venali exaggerates,” Stellan says, but his mind is still closed off to me.

I’m not sure that Venali is ‘exaggerating.’

Stellan sighs. “To be honest, they struggled to get pregnant. A healer was able to help Natalia, but they’re not sure if she’ll be able to have more children or not.”

My heart goes out to Natalia. She’s such a good mom. She adores her son, that much is certain.

Why did nobody tell me about the high birth rate of dragon shifters? Or why didn’t they tell me birth control does work? Natalia and I are going to have a long chat when I get back. Though, her cryptic comments about nieces and nephews make a lot more sense now.

Stellan kisses the side of my head. “You will make a great mom, don’t worry.”

My stomach flips. I ignore the sensation for the moment, focusing instead on Venali. “Maybe you could get yourself a dragon shifter wife out of the alliance.”

He chuckles. “Before meeting you, I would’ve said absolutely not. But Grandfather might just want to arrange a marriage for me if it could make our blood stronger. Maybe it’s not something to be rejected. Although, we’ve already got one member of our royal family at the dragon court. Maybe Grandfather will arrange with a different supernatural.”

“You wouldn’t rather pick your wife?” I ask.

He shrugs. “Picking sounds complicated. I’d rather let somebody else choose.”

I grin. “I would be happy to help you choose a wife, cousin.”

“Don’t look so pleased.” Venali wrinkles his nose. “I’m not sure I’d like you picking my wife—you’re too mischievous. You’d probably choose a girl who would most likely annoy me to death.”

“You do need a strong willed girl.” I tilt my head to the side as I study him.

Venali turns to look at Stellan. “Save me from your wife.”

I look at Stellan and he grins adoringly at me.

Venali snorts. “Is it too late to turn the plane around?”

STELLAN

Wisteria’s head is on my chest as she sleeps soundly. Venali is quiet, taking turns between looking out the small airplane window and watching Wisteria.

I’m curious about the elf prince. The more time I spend with him, the more I see the similarities between him and Wisteria.

From our conversation, I now know that Venali is an only child. His parents were killed at the same time as Wisteria’s mom. Which is why he is now the heir—the only heir, except for Wisteria.

My wife doesn't need the weight of a second crown, but it seems that Venali is very dedicated to his people.

"Are the people from your court going to hate that I'm a dragon shifter?" I ask.

Venali turns to me, his eyes widening. "Uh... to tell you the truth, I'm not sure. I don't think they will hate you for being a dragon shifter, but they likely will hate you for marrying their elven princess. Wisteria is beautiful, and the elves lack daughters."

I raise an eyebrow. "Elves *lack* daughters?"

He nods. "I don't know why, but about eighty percent of elves born are male."

"Interesting." I push the hair from Wisteria's face, studying her more carefully. "I can't blame anybody for hating me for marrying her. She's incredible."

"She is. I wasn't expecting it. When Grandfather asked me to retrieve her, I dreaded it. I thought she would be like most fae." He wrinkles his nose. "Most fae are despicable."

How does *everybody* know so much about fae when I knew next to nothing before marrying Wisteria. Then again, I dreaded my marriage. I avoided any topic related to the fae. Had I known how well my marriage would turn out to be, maybe I would've researched a little more.

I turn my attention out the window when I notice the plane starts to make a circle.

Elves, as it turns out, live in a rural town in Montana. For some reason, I expected them to live in some old European country in some huge castle, but I suppose Montana is a great place for them to stay hidden. They have a small town that is a mix of humans and elves, with a system similar to the dragons. All of the townsfolk are compelled to forget any supernatural things they see.

My gut twists as the plane makes its descent toward the small airport wedged in a valley between two mountain peaks. I vow to myself that I will protect Wisteria at all cost, even if it's her family that she needs protection from.

I shake Wisteria's shoulder lightly to wake her. She slowly stirs, her bright purple eyes looking up at me. She smiles widely, her eyes flashing light pink. My heart expands when I see the love in her eyes.

Unable to resist, I bend over and give her the softest of kisses. She runs her fingers through my hair, and I can hear her think about how soft my hair is. Her thoughts, as always, make me smile. I never thought I would have a mate bond. Hearing Wisteria's voice in my head is one of the best feelings ever.

"I love you," I whisper to her.

Venali groans. "You two are disgusting."

Wisteria chuckles at his discomfort, but she keeps her eyes on me. "I love you."

Because of our mate bond, I can *feel* how true her words are. Any discomfort I was feeling previously is gone, replaced by an overwhelming ache in my chest. I never knew a love like this could exist. But right now, I have to stay focused. We're on our way into a potentially dangerous situation and I have to protect my wife.

Wisteria leans forward and kisses me one last time before sitting up. She flashes me a grin when she sees the disgusted look on Venali's face.

"Are elves like fae when it comes to physical touch?" Wisteria asks.

Venali furrows his brows. "How do fae feel about physical touch between spouses?"

"It's not done in public," she says.

He gets a thoughtful look on his face. "If I say yes, will you two keep the touching to a minimum?"

She pretends to think. "Probably not."

He sighs. "No, elves aren't against touching. Though we aren't quite as expressive as dragon shifters."

I'll have to keep that in mind when we're in the elven court.



Wisteria's purple eyes look up at me and I can't resist kissing her forehead.

Okay, maybe not being affectionate with her is going to be harder than I thought. Hopefully the elves won't be too offended by us.

Venali rolls his eyes. "Let's hope Grandfather doesn't want you two to stay for long or all your mushy crap is going to make me vomit."

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## MY ELF FAMILY

### Wisteria

**M**y heart pounds so hard that I can hear the blood rushing through my ears. Stellan gives me a concerned look, so I try to give him a reassuring smile. I'm sure my eye color gives away my true emotions though.

I'm *so* nervous.

Today, at twenty two years old, I'll be meeting my grandfather for the first time. And maybe I knew him when I was younger, but I haven't seen the guy since I was two. I don't remember him. So... it's like it's the first time.

Grandfather and Venali are the only family left on my mother's side. A lot of our family died at the same time as my mother did, but I don't ask questions about that. On the plane, Venali told me that our grandmother died a few years ago, but the things he said about our grandfather makes me nervous.

Will he like me?

Stellan laces our fingers together and brings my hand up to his mouth and kisses it gently. *Everybody who knows you loves you. Trust me, he will adore you. It's impossible to hate you.*

I grin, knowing that he tried to hate me when we first got married. Since he only did it to protect me and my heart, I don't hold it against him.

The town the elves live in is gorgeous. It's small and quaint—it's exactly the kind of town I would've loved visiting

growing up. It makes me feel sick to think about my dad keeping me away from my family like he did. I wish he had told me the truth from the beginning. What would it have been like to know my family as a kid? How different would this visit be, with me introducing Stellan to them?

I can feel a bubble of magic surrounding the castle, which makes me wonder what humans see when they look at this mountain. Is it just trees, or is there another large structure?

The castle is well hidden in the mountains. It looks like something out of medieval times, with stone towers and jutting turrets. There is even a bridge that expands across the massive lake—the only way into the castle. Venali drives across it without hesitation, but I glance at the dark water beneath. The sun is on the other side of the mountain, casting a shadow on everything.

Even though none of this looks familiar to me, there is a sense of comfort. It's similar to what I felt when Venali and I connected our magic for the first time. I relax a little into my seat, feeling safe. I notice Venali's shoulders relax too.

“What is that?” I ask him.

“Magic,” Venali answers. “It keeps out everybody except for our family and those who are invited.”

Stellan leans forward. “So I really was invited?”

“You're married to Wisteria, so you're family.” He says it so simply and my heart swells with pride at the fact that he's including my husband as family.

“So why was my father never allowed here?” I ask.

“Like I said, Grandfather banned him.” Venali pulls the car into an open door in the garage and it shuts behind us. “It's probably best you don't mention your father—it's still a sore subject for him.” He shuts off the car and gets out before I can respond.

Stellan and I share a look before we climb out after him.

“You seem really calm for somebody who was freaking out a couple minutes ago,” Stellan whispers to me as we

follow Venali through an arched wooden door.

“It’s because of the magic,” I say, trying to find the words to explain it. “It must be an elf thing, but it’s like when I connected my magic with Venali. I knew I could trust him and I know that I can trust whatever we find here.”

I can tell from his emotions that Stellan isn’t convinced, but he has confidence in me. I’m so glad he’s willing to go along with this. I know he’s only doing it for me.

We clasp hands as Venali leads us through a maze of long, well lit hallways. Even though the outside of the castle looks like something straight from medieval times, the inside is surprisingly modern. It’s actually similar to the estate, except the decor is darker.

The path that Venali leads us on I know I’ll never be able to remember. We take so many turns that I get lost right away. Eventually, he comes to a stop outside a set of double doors. He knocks on it and shoots a grin over his shoulder at me. When the doors open, I expect to see our grandfather, but the man on the other side is young—probably somewhere between Venali and me in age. When he sees Venali, he bows deeply, but he freezes mid bow when he sees me.

Copper eyes latch onto me, his eyebrow creasing and his jaw dropping open as he stares at me. I shift uncomfortably, wondering why he’s staring.

“Cyran, I believe Grandfather is waiting for us.” Venali smirks, clearly amused by the guy’s reaction.

Still, he doesn’t look away from me. I hear a low growl to my left. The guy snaps his gaze from me to Stellan. He clears his throat and backs up.

“Right, please come in.” He opens the door wide enough for the three of us to come in.

I walk inside, keeping my hand in Stellan’s. I freeze when we walk into the room and find it full of people.

Elves.

All of these people are elves.

I swallow hard, forcing myself to mask my emotions.

Venali clears his throat loudly, getting the attention of the room. Slowly, everybody turns to look and each one of their gazes latch onto me. My heart thumps faster at the attention, and the only thing that keeps me from hiding behind my husband is years of practice. I spent twenty two years under the careful scrutiny of fae court. If I can handle that, I can handle this.

“Who is she?” The guy who opened the door for us asks. Venali called him Cyran, so I can only assume that’s his name.

I hear feet shuffling and I look up to see an older elf walking toward me. His hair is the exact same shade of silverly blond as Venali, though he has a few lighter streaks throughout it. His eyes are what stand out—they’re the exact same shade of purple as mine. The sight has me gasping.

“Wisteria?” the older guy asks.

“Yes.” I chew on my bottom lip.

He comes to a stop in front of me, his purple eyes scanning my face. “You look so much like your mother.”

I want to ask him questions about my mother, but I know now isn’t the time—not in front of all these people.

He continues speaking, “I am your grandfather, King Elwin Krishorn.”

I curtsy to show respect to him as my king. “It’s nice to officially meet you. I am Princess Wisteria Basilicus.”

A gasp echoes through the crowd. That is when my grandfather turns his attention to Stellan, who is standing beside me, still clasping my hand.

“Prince Basilicus.” Grandfather nods at Stellan. “Welcome to elven court. You should know that we don’t allow outsiders.” He turns to Venali. “But my heir doesn’t seem to care much for the rules.”

I turn to glare at Venali, my heart racing faster. “You said Grandfather gave his permission.” Is he going to make Stellan leave? He already knows I won’t stay without my husband.

Venali shrugs. “I may have twisted the truth a little. He gave me permission to use my own discretion while coming to get you. I knew you wouldn’t willingly come without your husband. I didn’t think Grandfather would like it if I kidnapped you and started a war with the dragons.”

Grandfather shakes his head at Venali and then looks at me. “Your cousin has always been stubborn, but I will not turn your husband away as long as he is respectful. This is my kingdom and we do things a little differently here than the dragons do.”

Stellan gives my grandfather a shallow bow. “I will follow any rules you set forward, as I am your guest.”

Grandfather’s eyes widen slightly, but he quickly masks his features.

Is he surprised? But by what? Stellan’s willingness to follow the rules? Or something else entirely?

“King Krishorn, will you please introduce us,” a male voice says from behind my grandfather.

When Grandfather backs away from me, I get a good look in the room. That is when I realize that everybody in the room is male—there isn’t a female in the entire bunch.

Do elves have the same beliefs about women as dragons do? I know that dragons protect their women because they lack the physical strength of a male dragon, but elves can’t be the same, can they? Not if my magic is any indication.

“This is my granddaughter, Wisteria.” Grandfather motions toward me. “When she was little, her...” he pauses, “*father*,” his voice is low and gruff as he says that, “hid her after my daughter passed.”

I can see why he disliked my father. I would too, in his shoes. As far as he’s concerned, my father took me away from him. I’m a little upset about it too. I would’ve liked to know about this side of my life. I’m just as much an elf as I am a fae. If my magic is anything to go by, my elf blood is stronger than the fae side.

“She’s...” an older guy steps forward, angling his head to the side as he studies me, “short.”

Venali snickers.

I shoot my cousin a glare.

“She’s half elf, half fae,” Grandfather says.

Gasps ring through the group.

Is it really so scandalous that I’m a hybrid? And wouldn’t they already know this? If my mother was a princess, wouldn’t all the elves know of my existence? Shouldn’t they know who my mother married?

Venali leans closer and whispers to me, “It’s illegal for an elf woman to marry outside of our race.”

“Really?” I furrow my brows as I look at him. “Why?”

Venali doesn’t answer—instead, my grandfather does. He explains that female elves are rarely born, and they have no idea why. It started happening five generations back and when the elves saw that it seemed to be a permanent problem, they made a law that female elves could only marry male elves.

Now it makes sense...

Grandfather kept my existence a secret to protect my mother. If word got out about her marrying a fae, she’d be in trouble.

It also explains why the council is all male—there just aren’t enough females.

“Which leads us to the issue at hand,” one of the older elves says from behind my grandfather. “This girl clearly broke the law when she married a dragon shifter. There *must* be proper punishment.”

Grandfather’s face stays impassive, so it’s hard to get a read on what he’s thinking. Venali steps up beside me, but he doesn’t say anything. I can tell from his clenched jaw that he *wants* to speak up, but he doesn’t. Stellan, on the other hand, has no problems speaking his mind.

“She didn’t know she was an elf until her father told her a few days ago—I was a witness to his confession myself. She can hardly be punished for marrying me when she didn’t know anything about this law, or even who she is,” Stellan says. Even though he keeps his voice calm, I can feel his anxiety. He’s worried about me.

I squeeze his hand, trying to comfort him.

“You misunderstand, dragon prince,” Grandfather says, looking at Stellan. “Wisteria would not be the one in trouble. You would be. We do not punish our women.”

I suck in a sharp breath.

This changes things, but I will *not* allow them to punish my husband. No matter what the consequence, I will fight for Stellan with everything I’ve got.

I stand up straighter, squaring my shoulders. I put on the mask I’ve perfected over the years at fae court, not letting them see how much this is getting to me. “You can hardly punish the crown prince of the dragons for breaking a law he didn’t know anything about. Or did you miss the part where he said neither of us knew the truth of my origins until a couple of days ago?”

Grandfather turns his purple eyes on me. “I’m afraid it is out of my hands. We will hold a trial here tomorrow for the young prince. It is up to the elven council to decide his fate.”

*A trial?*

I start to open my mouth to argue, but Venali nudges me and shoots me a look. I don’t have to be a mind reader to know what he’s trying to portray—I should keep my mouth shut. I press my lips firmly together so I won’t be tempted. If Stellan really is in trouble, I will find a way to protect him, but it won’t do either of us any good if I make the council mad.

“As for now, this meeting is over. I would like to spend some time with my granddaughter.” Grandfather motions toward the door. “Would you and your husband like to have dinner with me?”

I clear my throat. “Uh, sure.”



I'm still not sure what to make of my grandfather, but I know better than to start something with other people around. I'll wait until we're alone to question him. And then... we will have to get out of here before they decide to put my husband on trial.

Stellan squeezes my hand as we walk into the hallway. He's calmed down significantly since he found out I won't be the one in trouble. Ironically, he's fine with him being in trouble. He will gladly take my place in getting punished.

I shake my head at him. Does he not get that I feel the same way about him? I will do anything to protect him.

As we walk down the corridor with my grandfather, nobody says a word, but Venali keeps shooting glances at me. He's probably expecting me to fight... or bolt out of here. I'm still debating which option would be the best for Stellan.

Stellan, hearing my thoughts, gives me an amused grin. *Let the elves try to punish me—they will quickly find out that dragons aren't weak.*

Yes, but elves aren't weak either. And I don't want there to be a war because of me.

*Because of us,* he corrects.

Venali clears his throat. "Are you two talking in your minds again?"

Grandfather looks behind at us as he leads us down the hallway. "How long have the two of you been married?"

"Less than a month," I answer.

"So you are soulmates?" Grandfather asks bluntly.

"No." I shake my head.

He comes to a stop at my answer and turns to face us. "But dragon shifters have soulmates." He narrows his eyes at Stellan. "Have you met your soulmate yet?"

"Stellan doesn't have a soulmate," I say quickly, not wanting my grandfather's ire to be turned to my husband.

“Impossible,” Grandfather says. “Dragon shifters *always* have soulmates.”

“Not impossible.” I tuck a piece of hair behind my ear. “Ten generations ago, the fae and dragons signed a magical contract—an alliance, of sorts.”

“After the Dragon War?” He looks from Stellan to me, his face softening.

“Yes. Because fae blood made dragons stronger, they made an alliance. And it just so happened that the duty of the contract fell on Stellan and me—me, as the emperor’s first born daughter, and Stellan, as the dragon crown prince and future king,” I explain. “So neither one of us had a say in it. And the magic in the contact keeps Stellan from having a soulmate.”

Grandfather nods. “It makes sense.”

“So Stellan can’t possibly get in trouble for marrying me because he didn’t have a choice, right?” I worry my bottom lip between my teeth.

“Even if I did have a choice, I would choose you every single time.” Stellan scoots closer to me, slipping an arm around me. He kisses the side of my head. “Don’t worry—everything will be okay.”

Grandfather doesn’t share Stellan’s optimism, I can tell by the pained expression he gives us. “The law is clear.”

“What kind of punishment are we talking about here?” I shift my weight back and forth as I wait for his response, unable to stand still.

Grandfather and Venali share a look that I don’t like. “The punishment is death.”

My eyes widen. “*Death?* For getting *MARRIED?*”

“Why do you think I didn’t allow your father to come to this castle? I was protecting your mother, but I was also protecting *him*.” Grandfather clenches his jaw. “Although, I never liked your father very much. He’s too cunning for my liking. Everything he said dripped with fancy word smithing.

It didn't matter that he couldn't lie, I still didn't believe half the things out of his mouth." His face softens as his purple eyes land on me. "But you are different. Your magic..."

Venali steps forward. "She has *strong* magic, Grandfather. It's incredible to witness."

"You connected your magic?" Grandfather asks, looking at Venali.

He nods. "When I arrived, she was being attacked by a group of dragon shifters."

Grandfather's face turns red as he turns to look at Stellan. "You allow your people to attack her?"

I feel a flash of anger from Stellan, but he quickly masks it as he speaks to my grandfather. "I don't allow anybody to attack her. The people who attacked her have been dealt with, I assure you. The dragons have a group of traitors, but we are handling the situation. I would never willingly put Wisteria in danger." He takes a deep breath, looking at me. "But as it turns out, she is more than capable of taking care of herself."

I grin as I feel the pride in his emotions—he is proud of me. Me, a girl he never wanted to marry, but still got stuck with. I'm so different than a dragon shifter, but he still loves me.

"Your eyes," Grandfather gasps.

I turn toward him, curious what he's going on about.

"Do they change colors?" he asks.

"Oh." I let out a breath. "I'm fae—my eyes change colors depending on my emotions."

"They were *pink*," Grandfather says.

Venali grunts. "Uh, I thought we agreed you guys weren't going to flirt in front of me anymore."

I ignore my cousin's protests. "Light pink means love. Since we have a complete mate bond, I can feel Stellan's emotions. And he was proud of me. It made me remember why I love him so much."

“He’s probably proud because you’re not helpless like most female dragons,” Venali mutters under his breath. “Female elves may be rare, but at least they’re fierce.”

“You love him?” Grandfather asks, ignoring Venali as his eyes focus intently on me. “I thought your marriage was arranged.”

“It was arranged,” I admit, wondering what that has to do with me being in love with him.

“And your marriage was less than a month ago,” Grandfather continues.

I nod.

“You two didn’t know one another before the wedding?”

“No,” I answer. “I met him once, two weeks before our wedding. But other than that, any of our interactions were always from a distance. He was supposed to marry my older sister.”

“Older sister?” Venali perks up at that. “I didn’t realize your father had other children before you.”

“She was adopted as a sacrifice for the alliance. Once the fae realized how powerful I was, they decided to do whatever it took to keep me.” A diety. An empress. A prisoner.

“Fae beauty mixed with fierce elf magic and a soft heart,” Grandfather says. “I imagine there isn’t anybody who would willingly let you go, my granddaughter.”

My heart swells at his words... not because he means them as a threat, but as a compliment. My grandfather loves me, even though he barely knows me.

“I will do what I can to save your husband. The fact that he is the crown prince will help. The elves do not want to start a war just as we reappear in the supernatural world,” Grandfather says, then he begins walking again, leading us toward the dining area.

Venali looks over his shoulder at me as we make our way to dinner. It’s not hard to read the smile on his face. He wasn’t sure how bringing Stellan would go, and despite the fact that

the council wants to punish him for marrying me, it's gone better than he expected. My grandfather truly has accepted Stellan.

Stellan squeezes my hand and I smile at him.

Everything is going to be okay. I believe my grandfather when he says he'll do whatever he can to protect Stellan.

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## NOBODY CAN TAKE YOU FROM ME

**Stellan**

**H**ow are things going?

I look at the text from my father, wondering how to respond. Do I tell him about the trial today? Or do I tell him all is well? The *last* thing we need is for my father to show up here, even if it is to protect me.

I look at Wisteria. She's still asleep, her head on my chest. I run my fingers through her white blonde hair—a color I now know she got from her mother and grandmother. And those purple eyes... Wisteria may be beautiful like a fae, but most of her physical features come from the elf side of her family.

I wonder what our children will look like...

My phone vibrates again. I expect it to be another text from my dad, but instead it's Natalia. She's sent a picture of Jason, who got into a jar of peanut butter and smeared it all over himself. I chuckle, shaking my head. That kid has so much energy. I *know* for a fact that my sister watches him like a hawk, but he is just so fast. He can cause chaos in a split second. I respond to her first, then I go back to my dad's text.

*All is well. King Elwin is a nice guy. I'll let you know when we're coming back.*

I send the text before I feel too guilty about hiding the truth from my father and put my phone back onto the nightstand. I go back to studying my wife's features, wondering how I got so lucky to have her as my wife.

I push her hair out of her face, gently stroking my thumb across her cheek. She sighs and scoots even closer to me—she’s already half on top of me.

I can’t imagine a better feeling than this. I almost feel sorry for people with soulmates because they’re missing out. I *chose* to love Wisteria. And every day that we’re together, I fall more in love with her. She’s not the missing piece of my soul—she is the person who makes my soul happy. The smiles she gives me, the way her eyes change to light pink every time she looks at me, and the way she is always seeking my touch. She always wants to hold my hand. And even though she grew up in a cold and distant court where touching wasn’t something they did, she has adapted to dragon culture so quickly. I love that about her. I just... love her. Period.

When I look at her face again, I see purple eyes on me. She has a huge grin on her face and I watch as her eyes slowly change from purple to light pink.

“I love you, too,” she says.

I grin, realizing that I wasn’t blocking my thoughts.

“I wish you *never* blocked your thoughts.” She leans over and kisses me on the lips.

“It’s a habit. I promise I don’t do it on purpose. *You* aren’t the one I want to keep out of my head.” I trail my fingers along her cheek and tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. She leans into my touch, sighing. I can feel how content she is.

She pushes herself up on her elbow and looks at me, her light pink eyes studying my face. From her thoughts, I can tell she’s thinking how ‘adorable’ I am in the mornings.

I shake my head at her. “What did I say about calling me cute and adorable?”

Her grin widens. “It’s *my* thoughts. I’m allowed to think whatever I want. And if you don’t want to be called adorable, stop being so adorable.”

But her smile slips and her eyes change from pink to gray. My heart squeezes and my dragon wants to come out—it wants to destroy whoever or whatever made her sad.

“What’s wrong?” I cup her face with my hands, looking deeply into her eyes.

Tears well up in her eyes. “You’re not safe here.”

*That’s* what she’s worried about? “They’re not going to kill me. They know that doing so would start a war—a war that *none* of us want, but especially not the elves.”

“What do you mean *especially* not the elves?” She chews on her bottom lip as she looks at me. Her eyes are still gray, and it makes my chest ache.

“You’ve heard from them. They are lacking females. And since only females can give birth, no matter what the species...” I let my voice trail off.

Her eyes widen. “There aren’t many elves. That’s why they’ve stayed hidden. And the fact that there are so few females born only makes it harder on them.”

I nod. “They need an alliance with us as much as we need one with them.”

I can feel her relief through our bond as her shoulders sag forward. “You’re right. They’re not going to kill you. But that doesn’t mean they won’t try something else. If they really do have such few females, and they seem to think you stole me, they might be desperate.”

I can’t help but grin and I run my fingers through the long strands of her hair. “They can’t help but want to claim you as theirs. I don’t blame them because I feel the exact same way.”

Her eyes change to hot pink as she looks at me. “The difference is, I *am* yours. You’re allowed to claim me, just as I have claimed you. Besides, the elves only want me to be a baby maker for them.”

Do I point out that the point of our marriage alliance was about us having babies? We just happened to get lucky and fell in love with one another.

She grins, clearly reading my thoughts, then shoots me a mock glare. I can tell from the hot pink of her eyes that she’s



not actually angry. “When were you going to tell me that birth control doesn’t work for dragon shifters?”

“After our third child,” I tease and kiss her jaw. I make my way toward her neck, she gasps, completely forgetting the question she asked me.

“Just how many children are you planning on us having?” Her question is breathy, but I know she’s curious. We never talked about these things before we got married—we didn’t have the chance. Before I married her, I would’ve said two children only. That was the amount required for the alliance. But now...

“How many do you want?” I pull back to look at her.

She blinks at the question. “I don’t know. I haven’t really thought about it.” She cocks her head to the side. “How do dragon shifters prevent pregnancy if they don’t have birth control?”

“They don’t,” I say bluntly. “Dragon shifters typically have big families, but it’s harder for a female dragon shifter to get pregnant. There are only certain times it can happen, and that cycle usually only happens anywhere from one to ten times in a female dragon shifter’s life.”

Her eyes widen. “But I’m not a dragon shifter. So I can get pregnant any time.”

I nod.

She shoves against my chest slightly, but she’s not actually trying to get away from me. “So the only way to prevent pregnancy is abstinence.”

I narrow my eyes. “Don’t get any ideas.”

She laughs. “Like I could say no to you. Not when you’re looking at me like that.”

“Like what?”

“With your sexy bedroom eyes.”

I cock an eyebrow. “You say that as you look at me with hot pink eyes. I know *exactly* what that color means now,

Wisteria Basilicus.”

Her grin widens. “Only because you swindled and tricked me into telling you.”

“I tricked you?” I lean closer to her and kiss her behind her ear.

She sucks in a sharp breath, just like I knew she would. “Because you were all shirtless and hot and...” she takes another breath, “and I can’t think straight around you.”

My stomach muscles tighten from a mix of her emotions and my own. I’m about to capture her lips when there is a knock on the door. Because I was distracted, I wasn’t paying attention.

Wisteria groans and rests her forehead against mine. “Can we ignore it and hope they go away?”

From the other side of the door, I hear Venali speak. “No, I won’t go away. The trial starts at nine and you guys need breakfast first.”

I sigh and pull away from her. “We should get ready and eat breakfast.” I kiss her softly on the lips and then turn my head to yell at the door. “We’ll be right there.”

She pokes out her bottom lip but nods.

“We *will* finish this,” I promise her. “Because I don’t care what they say—nobody is keeping me away from you.”

Her heart quickens at my words and she grins widely. “I love you, Stellan.”

“I love you too.”

WISTERIA

My heart is racing so fast as Venali and my grandfather lead us into a large room in the east wing of the castle. There are a bunch of chairs set up around the place with three throne-like chairs placed at the front of the room.

“Stellan, take a seat.” Grandfather motions toward the front row of chairs.

I twirl my hair around my finger. “Are we not sitting together?”

Grandfather shakes his head. “You are our princess. Even though you are the accused, you will still sit at the front with Venali and me.”

I’m the accused, but Stellan is the one who will be punished. I swear, elven culture makes even less sense than fae culture.

I worry my bottom lip between my teeth as I look at my husband. He steps up to me, putting his hands on my forearms.

“Don’t worry about me, I will be okay,” he promises. He leans over and gives me the softest kiss on the forehead. When he does, the elves that are already in the audience begin to murmur to one another.

Venali gently tugs on my arm, pulling me away from Stellan. I want to fight him off and run back to my husband, but I can’t right now. I have to put my court mask on and face this. I was trained to handle situations like this. I know I can do this.

*You can do this*, Stellan says, through our mate bond.

I hold my head high as I make my way to the throne-like chairs at the front.

My grandfather sits down in the largest chair. It’s got gold finishings and an integrant design on the legs and arms. The cushion is a velvety purple and the back goes up higher than me when I’m standing. The chairs on either side are similar in color, just smaller. Venali sits down on the right side of my grandfather, which leaves me with the chair on the left. I take a seat, keeping my court mask firmly in place. I will not let these stuffy elf council members get to me. If I can handle the fae monarchs, I can handle anything.

I look out at the audience, but I don’t make eye contact with anybody. I just skim over them quickly, like I’m too above them to even acknowledge them.

*You, in charge, is quite possibly the sexiest sight I’ve ever beheld.*

I do not look at Stellan to acknowledge his comment. If I did, I'm pretty sure my face would give away my thoughts.

*When this is over, you are in trouble,* I scold him.

*Is that a threat or a promise?*

Finally, I glance over at Stellan and see that he's smirking. The arrogant—but incredible—prince.

How could the elves ever punish us? This is what marriage is supposed to be like. I'm so in love with Stellan that I can't imagine life without him. How did I get by twenty two years before I knew him?

A young guy I recognize from yesterday—Cyran, I believe—shuts the door to the room before coming to take a seat. It must be some kind of a signal to start the meeting because everybody falls silent and turns their attention to my grandfather.

“A trial is not normally held for a simple matter such as this, but seeing as that this isn't normal circumstances, a vote must be put forth on what punishment is appropriate,” Grandfather says. His voice is loud and authoritative, and I can feel his power radiate through the room. While others tense as they feel it, it soothes me. It connects with my own magic and my heart starts to slow its frantic beats and my body relaxes.

Grandfather glances over at me, confusion on his face as his mask falls. But he quickly turns forward again, hiding his reaction.

What was that about?

“Lord Vulmer, you may address the court,” Grandfather says.

A middle aged elf—Lord Vulmer, I presume, stands from his chair. He tilts his chin high, making it appear that he's looking down his nose at everybody.

I see that elf nobility isn't really *that* different from fae nobility.

*I'm afraid nobility of any species have an inflated sense of entitlement, even among dragon shifters,* Stellan says.

Hearing his voice in my head calms me even further. Even though he isn't here beside me, nobody can separate us.

“I don't see why we're even wasting our time with a trial. We all know the punishment for one of our females marrying somebody of a different species. Just because she's a princess doesn't mean she should get away with it. If anything, we should make an example out of her,” Lord Vulmer declares. “Let us kill the boy and be done with it. Then, our princess can marry an elf of nobility.”

Why do I get the feeling that Lord Vulmer has a son about my age that he'd be happy to offer to me for marriage? The thought nearly makes me gag, but I tamper down the reflex. I've listened to the fae council argue over my future spouse too many times to let this get to me.

“My granddaughter is your princess and you *will* respect her.” Grandfather leans forward and pins Lord Vulmer with a sharp look.

Lord Vulmer swallows hard and bows quickly before taking a seat.

“Wisteria's husband is a *crown prince*. Elves may be warriors, but we are less in number than the dragons. Make no mistake, dragon shifters are *not* weak. And we all know that King Basilicus is a member of the Alpha Council. If we harm their prince, it will mean war, not just against dragon shifters, but *all* shifters.” Grandfather looks at the audience, who stare back in silence. “We cannot afford to lose another war.”

Nobody says anything—it's so quiet, the only sound I can hear is my own, steady heartbeat.

Grandfather turns his attention to me. “Wisteria, will you explain your reason for marrying Prince Stellan to the council?”

“Yes, Grandfather.” I sit up straighter as I address the council. I tell them everything from the beginning. I know that once they know about the alliance, there is no possible way they can punish us. Our marriage was decreed long ago.

Everybody watches me with calculating eyes. They may not be that different from the fae, but the fae are much better at hiding their emotions.

“So you see,” I say, in conclusion, “Stellan and I never had a choice. I may be your princess, but I was also a princess of the fae. It was my duty, from birth, to marry him.”

A duty that I am very glad fell on me.

Stellan smirks, hearing my thoughts.

*So hot*, he says in my thoughts.

“We must find a way to free Princess Wisteria from her marriage,” Lord Vulmer cries, standing from his chair abruptly. “This cannot be allowed. She is *our* princess.”

Many of the elves nod their head in agreement. They lean close to whisper to one another, and I realize that I’m doomed. The majority agrees with Lord Vulmer, even if they’re not as vocal about their opinion.

“Quiet.” Grandfather stands from his chair, which makes everybody else quickly stand. Seeing Venali stand, I follow his example.

The room goes completely silent.

“Before a decision is made, I would like Talindra to read my granddaughter,” Grandfather says.

Talindra? Who is that? But everybody bows to grandfather, and they all voice their approval.

“King Elwin, I mean no disrespect, but I do not think it wise to wait for Talindra at a time like this,” Lord Vulmer says.

Grandfather only smiles in return, but I can see the ice in his eyes. “Good thing that she is already here. We won’t have to wait.”

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## THIS IS ALL YOUR FAULT

### Wisteria

**A**t Grandfather's announcement, the door at the back of the room is thrown open and an older woman walks inside. I look at her, wondering *what* she is. She isn't an elf, but she is a supernatural, though not a supernatural that I've ever come in contact with before. As she gets closer, I get a good look at her eyes. They're a milky blue color.

*Oh, wow.*

Stellan isn't blocking his thoughts, but he's watching the older lady with a look of awe and fascination.

The woman walks right past every single elf in the audience, her gaze focused solely on my grandfather. She walks up to him, extending her hand. He takes her fingers in his and kisses them, bowing slightly.

"Talindra, it is an honor. Thank you for gracing us with your presence," Grandfather says.

Gracing us with her *presence*? Just who is this lady?

Her blue eyes go from Grandfather to me. She grins widely.

"I see that congratulations are in order," Talindra says, then tilts her head to the side.

"Congratulations?" I ask.

She nods, looking at my stomach. "Your pregnancy."

I suck in a sharp breath. “I’m *not* pregnant.”

Do I *look* pregnant? I glance down at my stomach, but it doesn’t look any different than it always has. Maybe the big dragon shifter appetite is rubbing off on me.

I glance toward Stellan. *Have I gained weight?*

But Stellan completely ignores my question. Instead, he has this look of stunned happiness on his face, but his mind is completely blank. I don’t think he’s blocking me, he’s just... shocked, I think.

“She is pregnant?” Grandfather asks.

Talindra nods. “Yes. With twins—one boy and one girl.”

I blink and blink again, trying to make sense of the situation.

“Can you see anything about their magic?” Grandfather asks.

Talindra takes a step closer to me. She grabs ahold of my hand and her milky blue eyes get a dazed look to them. “The male is a good mix of elf and dragon shifter. His elf magic will be strong. The girl is mostly elf, though I do believe she has a touch of fae magic as well. Her elf magic is equal to her brother.”

I swallow hard at her words.

What the heck is going on?

*She’s an oracle, Wisteria,* Stellan finally says.

*An ORACLE!?*

That means I really *am* pregnant.

I sit down in my chair, suddenly feeling faint.

Talindra grins like she knows exactly what Stellan said to me. Who knows, maybe she does know.

Oracles are... rare. They’re only supposed to be born every thousand years. I never imagined one would be alive in my lifetime. Since their magic is so rare, not a lot is known



about them, seeing as every oracle that's ever existed has been unique in their abilities.

How has she managed to stay hidden? The supernatural community would revere her if they knew. Though, maybe that's why she is keeping her identity secret. I can't blame her for not wanting others to know.

She gently pats my hand and turns to face my grandfather. "The things I see are not always exact, but I am certain about the twins. And, if this girl is allowed to stay married to Prince Stellan, she will give birth to *many* female hybrids with strong elf magic. How many, I can not tell you. But this girl and her dragon shifter husband are going to save the elves from a slow extinction unless you separate them."

*Many?* I'm going to have *many* children?

I think I'm going to be sick.

I wanted one kid at a time. *One*. And here I am, pregnant with two. And now she's telling me about all the many children I'm going to be having. It's too much.

I turn to look at Stellan. *This is all your fault.*

He laughs. *Me? How is this my fault?*

*Because. You look at me with those sexy bedroom eyes and I can't help myself. And, apparently, every time you touch me, I'm destined to get pregnant.*

*Out of the two of us, YOU are the temptress.* Stellan shakes his head at me, but I can see the grin on his face.

He's *so* wrong, but I'm not going to argue with him about it right now. I'm still trying to process the whole 'pregnant' thing.

Twins?

Really?

"That... changes things," Lord Vulmer says, but I ignore him.

I just need to breathe. Focus on slowly sucking air into my lungs. But it's harder than it sounds.

The air here feels thinner than it did before.

“We *must* sign an alliance with the dragon shifters,” another council member declares, but I just lean back in my chair, my head spinning.

Stellan steps forward. I hear the council members gasp as he approaches, but he ignores them. He pulls me up from the chair, sits down, and then pulls me into his lap.

His touch is exactly what I need. All the anxiety melts away.

*It's going to be okay.* Stellan presses his forehead against mine and he gently strokes his fingers down my arms, making me shiver. *You're not alone in this.*

I lean into his embrace, letting him comfort me. Once again, everybody has grown silent. When I look up, I see the elven council members looking at us. This time, it's not with disgust, but something closer to awe. I turn to Venali, who has a smirk playing on his lips. Last, I look at my grandfather, who is beaming with pride. His happiness is so strong that I can feel it. My heart swells with my own happiness.

My grandfather may not have been part of my life growing up, but I will make sure he's part of my life now. And I'll make sure my children come and visit him often.

*Does this mean you're getting used to the idea of us having lots of daughters?*

I nearly laugh out loud at his question as I lean closer, letting my lips brush against his. *I'm warming up to the idea.* I kiss him, just a peck, but it has my heart racing. *A lifetime of being ravished by you I can handle.*

He chuckles. *That sounds like a wonderful life to me.*

Grandfather clears his throat.

I pull back from Stellan and look at my grandfather. He has a smirk on his face that is similar to the one on Venali's face.

“At least you'll enjoy the act of having lots of daughters,” Venali teases. His voice is low, but from Talindra's chuckle, I

can tell she's heard.

My cheeks grow warm, but I hold my head up high.

Living with dragon shifters has really rubbed off on me. Who am I? I seriously just kissed my husband in a room full of people.

Still, I don't let them see my embarrassment. Instead, I turn to look at my grandfather. "So... about that alliance."

STELLAN

My wife is wonderful.

I never imagined there would be so many advantages to marrying a fae, one of them being her ability to understand intricate details of contracts. I had no idea fae could be so sneaky with their wording, so Wisteria has trained her entire life to become empress of the sneakiest species on the planet. I love having her on my side to take care of this alliance. I know I can trust her to do what is best for the dragons. I just sit back and watch her, unable to tear my eyes away from her. Her eyes are lit up with excitement and I can tell she's enjoying this.

Her purple eyes flash to me like she knows exactly what I'm thinking. Maybe she does. I haven't been blocking my thoughts from her. I *want* her to know everything about me.

I can feel Wisteria's confusion at my thoughts. Her grandfather is talking, saying *something*, but I have no clue what. All of my focus is on my gorgeous wife.

*I never thought anybody but a fae could find my cunningness enduring.* She grins a little at me, then focuses on her grandfather again.

Enduring? I nearly laugh out loud at that.

*No, my gorgeous wife, not enduring. I find it incredibly sexy.*

She shoots me an amused look. *It's completely your fault that we're going to have many daughters, I hope you know that.*

I grin and lean back in my chair. I'm glad that my wife is attracted to me.

When I was younger, and I thought about my future, I never imagined *this*. I never thought love was a possibility. But I definitely didn't think attraction was possible. As far as beauty goes, no species is as good looking. I never imagined my fae wife would be attracted to a dragon shifter, seeing as we are so physically different from the fae. Where I am tall, they are short. Where I am hard, they are soft.

I sigh, thinking about our future daughters. What am I going to do if they're as beautiful as Wisteria? I'm never going to let them out of my sight.

Now I know how my dad felt when Natalia met Andrew. When she first came to tell my dad the news that she met her soulmate, he *cried*. I had never seen him cry before that. And then he cried again on the day she got married.

But then I think about Jason. The day he was born, our family was so happy. Yes, things changed after Natalia got married to Andrew, but it isn't necessarily a bad thing. Their marriage is why I have the most adorable nephew in the world.

*It's a little too early to start thinking about our children getting married.*

Wisteria's voice in my head makes me grin. She's right, of course. I am going to enjoy every moment of our life and take it as it comes.

Wisteria stands up from her chair, a smirk playing on her lips. She brings a stack of papers in front of me. "You just need to put a little blood on this page." She points to a spot on the page. I can see that King Elwin has already put his mark. I can feel the magic coming from the page. I press my finger down, the magic taking the exact amount of blood required.

King Elwin stands from the table, so I do the same. He holds out his hand and I shake it.

"Welcome to the family, Prince Stellan. I hope you realize what a treasure my granddaughter is." He narrows his eyes a

little. “And if any harm should come to her, you will find exactly why the elves are so feared.”

Wisteria groans. “Grandfather!”

I slip an arm around her. “I will never purposefully hurt her. We may not be soulmates, but what we have is even more rare and special. I love her.”

He nods once, then looks at Wisteria. “I know that you’ll probably need to head back to your island soon, but I do hope you’ll stay one more day.”

Wisteria glances at me and I nod. Her grin widens.

“I would love to stay longer and spend time with you and Venali,” she says.

“I’ll be going back with you guys.” Venali stands from his chair and walks closer to us.

It’s tradition after an alliance is signed, for the leaders to spend time in one another’s kingdoms. Besides, I know my wife wants to spend more time with her cousin whom should’ve known growing up but never got the opportunity.

Wisteria’s eyes turn bright blue as she glances at her cousin. “Perfect! There are so many places on the island I want to show you. I know the dragons keep the estate freezing cold, but you can control the thermostat in your own suite, so it’s not so bad. And it’s gorgeous there. I can’t wait for summer so I can spend more time at the beach.”

I can feel her excitement through our bond. My own stomach tightens with the emotion, making me feel happy about Venali’s visit too. Not that I’m unhappy about it, the guy seems nice enough.

“Though I’m not sure I will want to stay long if the two of you keep being disgusting.” I turn and see Venali watching me with a wrinkled nose. It’s then that I realize I haven’t taken my eyes off of my wife.

“Leave them alone, Venali,” King Elwin scolds his grandson. “They’re young and in love. Someday, I hope you

will know what it feels like—hopefully before I die would be great.”

Wisteria laughs, knowing he’s joking. I imagine King Elwin and Venali have had many conversations—er, arguments—about this very topic. Since Venali was the only heir, I imagine the pressure was on for him to have his own heir.

“Maybe you will meet a nice dragon shifter girl to settle down with,” King Elwin suggests.

“Dragon shifters have soulmates,” Wisteria says, then smiles. “But maybe you have a soulmate out there, waiting for you.” She sighs like it’s the most romantic notion ever. And maybe she does think soulmates are romantic, seeing as she hadn’t spent her entire life dreading the day she would meet her mate. Knowing that I don’t have a soulmate is the best feeling in the world. It gives me the freedom to be happy with my wife.

Venali frowns like the idea of having a soulmate makes him sick as it did for me once upon a time.

“No thanks,” he says. “I’d rather pick somebody myself and not have some magic connection force me to have feelings for a stranger.”

I had never thought about it like that before. He’s not wrong, but he’s also *so* wrong. A mate bond doesn’t force feelings—it just makes you aware of the person. A soulmate is the other half of one’s soul. It’s a feeling of completion. Kind of how I feel about Wisteria, even if she’s not my ‘soulmate.’

Maybe Venali is right. Maybe choosing is better. It certainly worked out well for me. I will choose to love my wife every day, and I think it’s a lot better than magic forcing it.

Wisteria leans into my side, hearing my thoughts. She grins up at me, making my heart race. What we have is so much better than anything else.

“Will word get out about Wisteria’s pregnancy?” I ask, finally looking away from her to King Elwin. “Because I’d

like it if my family heard the news from us first.”

King Elwin nods. “Don’t worry. Though the supernatural community is aware of the elves, we are still keeping to ourselves. Your secret is safe.”

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## BETTER THAN FATE

### Wisteria

**W**ithin a day of signing our new alliance with the elves, my father called King Basilicus to issue an official apology. Apparently, our new friendship with the elves scared them into backing down on their threats of war. They, *finally*, agreed to back off from trying to get me back. In a show of support, they decided to send a delegate to spend some time at the estate. I was ecstatic to hear that Cypress will be coming to visit over the summer.

Venali also came back with us. He is going to be introduced to the Dragon Council and spend some time hanging out with us. He's family, so I made sure he knew that he's welcome as much and as often as he wants. Equally, Grandfather made sure I knew that I'm welcome at his home anytime I want. I plan to take him up on his offer. I want to learn more about my elf side.

The night we get back, Venali joins the family in the dining room for dinner. Surprisingly, Natalia didn't show up late. Jason is even awake, so she puts him in a highchair right between her and Evander at the table.

Stellan clears his throat. "Before we eat, there is something you should know." He pauses as if looking for the right words to say. "Something we learned while we were with the elves."

It takes a moment for me to remember he's talking about my pregnancy. Of course he wants to tell his family before they find out from somebody else. I sit up straighter, chewing



on my bottom lip to stop my grin. I don't want to give anything away by the look on my face.

“What is it, Stellan?” Natalia’s eyebrows scrunch together as she looks at her younger brother.

“Nothing bad.” He rubs at the back of his neck and then looks at me. He opens his mouth and then closes it, like he’s not sure what to say, and then gives me a pleading look.

“We met an oracle,” I blurt out, not sure how to say the words ‘I’m pregnant.’ I still can’t quite believe it myself.

Everybody starts talking at once, clearly shocked by the fact that there is an oracle alive. They’re so *rare*.

I hold up a hand, trying to get them to quiet. “The existence of an oracle is not the news. The news is what the oracle told us.” I can’t hide my grin now. “Apparently I am... pregnant.”

Natalia shoots up out of her chair, screaming her delight. “Yes! I knew it would happen fast! I can’t wait to have nieces and nephews to spoil!”

“That’s wonderful.” Dove gets out of her chair too, heading to Stellan to give him a hug.

He stands up, hugging her.

“Apparently you’re going to have a *lot* of nieces to spoil,” I say, unable to help myself.

Natalia’s eyes widen. “What about nephews? Stellan will need an heir.”

“Oh, well, I am apparently pregnant with twins—one is a girl, but the other is a boy. The oracle told us that he’s a dragon shifter, but he also is going to have exceptionally strong elf magic.” I chew on my lip, not sure how they will react to that.

King Basilicus grins. “Excellent.”

Dove lets go of Stellan and comes over to me, wrapping me in a hug. “I am always free to babysit, any time.”

I can't help but smile at her offer. Stellan's family is the best.

"I'll babysit too," Evander says. "But not *always*. Just occasionally."

I glance at him as Dove pulls back. "Thanks. You're going to have to teach them how to surf."

Stellan slips his arm around my back. "But Wisteria will have to wait to learn how to surf until after the babies are born."

"I can surf while pregnant," I say, objecting. One look at Stellan tells me he's not going to back down on the issue, so I don't argue. I'll let him have this one. I'm sure we'll have lots to argue over during my pregnancy, especially considering how protective dragon shifters are.

Stellan smirks at me, clearly reading my thoughts. *I will protect you, no matter what.*

But I don't always need protection. With my elf magic, I can protect myself. And I don't have to be in Stellan's mind to know he's relieved that I can protect me and our children if the situation arises. Still, I don't mention that because I know he is only thinking of me. He wants to protect me—it's in his very nature to do so.

"So everything is all good now, right?" Natalia asks her dad as the servants bring out food. "The fae are backing down because of the alliance. The rebel dragons probably will too, since they don't stand a chance."

King Basilicus frowns. "I'm afraid it might not be that simple. I am worried this might make them act more rashly. They're not going to like us aligning with other supernaturals like this. The fact that they upped their attacks after Stellan's marriage proves that."

"I will stay for a while," Venali promises. "Grandfather wouldn't want me to leave anyway, not until we're sure Wisteria is safe. And our magic is stronger when we're together."

I turn to my cousin, giving him a smile. "Thank you."

Everybody chats excitedly through dinner, mostly about the alliance and my pregnancy. It's still weird to think about me being pregnant. I don't *feel* pregnant. I haven't even taken a test, I'm just trusting the word of an oracle. And, okay, maybe oracles are historically accurate with their prophecies. But I still just can't wrap my head around it.

After dinner, Stellan slips his arm around me and leads me toward our rooms.

"We'll need bigger living quarters soon," Stellan says. He kisses me on the top of my head.

I frown. "I like our little space."

"We'll need more rooms. And our own kitchen, for the middle of the night when we need to make bottles."

Bottles.

My heart speeds up.

"Are you sure we're ready to be parents? It's so..." *frightening?* I swallow, not knowing how to finish my sentence.

"We've got nine months to prepare. And I plan to spend every moment enjoying keeping you to myself." He opens the door to our room and motions me inside.

I grab a quick shower before bed. Our plane landed only an hour before dinner so there wasn't time before. As I get out, Stellan slips inside, not even trying to hide behind a towel this time. He smirks as he shuts the glass door and I shake my head at him. I use my magic to dry off and throw on my pajamas. As I brush my teeth, I glance over at Stellan, still unable to believe that he's my husband.

Fae beauty has never intrigued me. But my husband... he takes my breath away.

*And you said it's my fault we're going to have so many children. Keep those thoughts up...*

I laugh at his threat, but turn my attention to the sink as I finish up. He shuts off the shower just as I slip out of the

bathroom. I head straight to our large bed and lie down, feeling so happy and content.

I've got everything I've ever wanted—freedom, a family that loves me, love, and happiness. What more could I ask for?

When Stellan comes out of the bathroom, he slides into bed beside me and he pulls me into his arms, pressing his lips firmly over mine. His lips are so warm against mine. *He* is always warm. I snuggle closer to him, trying to steal his body heat.

*Now I know why you love me. You only want to steal my body heat.*

I grin against his lips. *It's not my fault you keep your room so cold.*

Stellan likes his room to be a crisp sixty degrees, just like the rest of the estate.

He pulls back to look at me. "It's all just a trick to get you to cuddle with me."

I raise an eyebrow. "I'd cuddle with you, even if it were ninety in here."

"Wait until summer and say that." He frowns like he's already dreading the upcoming warm season.

I capture his lips once more. And it's definitely not because I want to steal his body heat. No, instead it's because I can't keep my hands, or lips, off of my gorgeous dragon shifter husband.

*Gorgeous, huh? It's better than cute.*

*You are cute, I protest. And handsome. Sexy. Absolutely breathtaking.*

*You are the one who is breathtaking.* His hand squeezes my thigh, and I moan against his lips. I feel him smile at my reaction as if he didn't already know how I would respond. He's in my head and he knows me inside out. He knows my very soul.

When I came to marry Stellan, I never expected *this*. I thought I was gaining freedom, which is why I was so excited, but I had no clue that I would fall so helplessly in love with the crown prince. I didn't realize that he was exactly what I needed, that he would make me feel complete.

My heart pounds so fast in my chest and I can tell from Stellan's smug thoughts that he can hear it.

*If only you could hear my heartbeat right now. I think mine is even faster than yours,* he says to me, never breaking our kiss.

I love this man more than I ever thought possible. It's a deep love that goes right down into my very soul.

I sigh against his lips, unable to help myself. Stellan is just so perfect. It's like he was made for me. And who knows, maybe he was. If I could go back in time, I would thank my many great grandparents for signing that treaty. This is better than fate.

STELLAN

The absolute last thing I want is to be at a council meeting, especially since Wisteria *isn't* here.

Though the council made an exception for her when they wished to question her, the law hasn't changed. Women are not allowed to be at council meetings. I never questioned this before, even if I didn't agree with it. But now... I think it has to change. Not only for my wife but for our future daughters.

I want my daughters to have a say on the council. I want them to have a vote. Maybe female dragon shifters aren't as physically strong as male dragon shifters, but does that mean they shouldn't get a vote in important matters?

Through the years, I've tried to tell myself that Mom and Natalia have a voice. Dad and I talk to them. We take their thoughts into consideration. But in the end, it's *my* choice. *My* vote.

As soon as we get this situation with the rebels settled, I will bring this up to the council. I will do everything in my power to change the law. Because certainly to a species where

women are so important, their voices should be heard and should matter.

Venali is at the council meeting today. They've just been going over the contract that I signed. It's too late for them to protest about anything in it, not that they could find fault if they tried. My lovely wife made sure that it was fair, which is another reason she should be here today. She could explain that contract better than I ever could.

Wisteria is hanging out with Evander today. I've already asked her not to leave the house without me or Venali with her. She agreed and didn't seem upset by the suggestion, for which I am thankful. I think she knows that it's for *my* peace of mind, and not because I think she's weak. She's proven that she's strong enough to protect herself. But the rebels are now aware of her elf magic. Last time they sent ten hybrids after her. Next time, maybe they'll send twenty or thirty. We don't know the limits of her magic and I have to make sure that she's protected.

When the council starts asking questions about heirs, I sit back in my chair. Dad gives me a questioning look, so I shake my head. I'm not going to announce Wisteria's pregnancy to the council yet, not until she gets a chance to tell her family, even if the entire elf community is already aware.

Dad clears his throat. "Stellan and Wisteria have only been married a month. Isn't it a little soon to start asking about heirs?"

But we all know the answer to that. A month isn't too soon, not when it comes to a male dragon shifter. And since they're already aware that Wisteria and I have a completed mate bond, they're probably expecting an announcement soon.

"I hope we won't be waiting too long," one of the council members states loudly.

Why are they so worried about heirs already? I figured they'd at least wait a year before they started getting antsy about it

“I am quite curious to see what their magic will look like,” another council member says.

It takes me a moment to realize he’s talking about Wisteria and my children. But Venali, Dad, and I keep quiet about what the oracle said. It was one of the terms of the alliance—we can’t speak a word about the oracle’s existence. She has stayed hidden from every supernatural except for the elves. I don’t understand her reasoning, but she’s the oracle. Everything she does is with purpose.

I’m so bored with the council meeting that I nearly fall asleep when suddenly, my heart begins to race like crazy. Fear washes over me and it takes a few, disorienting seconds to realize that it’s Wisteria. I don’t waste a second. I jump from my seat and rush out the doors. I’m vaguely aware that somebody is following me—probably my father or Venali, but I don’t stop to explain anything to them. I’ve got to get to Wisteria. I shift and take off to the sky.

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## RIGHTFULLY MINE

### Wisteria

“You don’t look pregnant,” Evander comments, squinting his eyes as he watches me intently.

“I don’t feel pregnant,” I admit. “But I don’t think the oracle was lying. Besides, I found out, belatedly, that male dragon shifters are super fertile.”

Evander snorts. “Of course my brother conveniently left that out until later.”

What I don’t mention to Stellan’s younger brother is that it likely wouldn’t have made a difference. I can’t seem to help myself when it comes to the dragon crown prince.

“It’s not usually a problem, with female dragon shifters,” Evander says. “Since they can only get pregnant at certain times in their life. But there is a lot more interspecies marrying lately.”

“Hopefully somebody will create a birth control that works for dragon shifters.” I frown. “What if we’re one of those weird people who have twenty kids or something?”

Evander laughs. “I’m not babysitting for you if you have that many kids. But it would be a relief for me. Twenty kids between me and the possibility of ever being king...”

I roll my eyes at him. “What happens if your soulmate isn’t a dragon shifter? You might be the one with twenty kids.”

He purses his lips. “You already know I’m hoping my soulmate will be a fae. Or an elf. I doubt there are many fae elf



hybrids about the right age.”

His words make me laugh.

Evander is a good brother-in-law. He’s young, only seventeen. Because of his title, he’s been forced to grow up early—it’s the burden of royalty. But when we hang out, I get glimpses of the seventeen-year-old. My heart breaks for him that he can’t go to Dragon Academy and have friends, but I know all too well what it’s like to be a lonely teenager, set apart from my peers.

Evander and I head out to the pool. He swims laps while I relax in the hammock, reading one of the dragon romance books Stellan bought for me the first day we hung out. The sun is at a point in the sky where the hammock isn’t shaded and I enjoy the heat on my skin. After being stuck inside the estate, where I’m at risk of hypothermia from how cold they keep it, the warmth is a nice reprieve.

“Wisteria,” Evander says.

I look over at him and see that he’s watching me with wide eyes. I’m about to ask him what’s wrong when a shadow passes over the top of me. I look up and see a dragon coming in to land, but it’s what’s behind the dragon that has me jumping from my hammock. An entire horde of dragons, so many that I can’t even begin to comprehend. I throw up a shield around myself and wave Evander over to me. He was already halfway over anyway. I stretch my magic around him, making sure he’s protected as well. I know he can’t shift to protect himself, so it’s up to me to protect him.

“If it comes down to it, drop the shield around me,” Evander orders. “If something happens to you and I survive, Stellan will kill me anyway.”

“Neither of us are dying,” I say, through gritted teeth. I keep my focus on the dragon at the front of the horde. Black eyes are focused on me. “How many dragons do you think there are?”

“I don’t know.” Evander’s voice quivers. “More than even you could fight off on your own. And since I’m only

seventeen, I'm useless in this fight."

"You should run," I tell him, as the dragon gets closer. "My shield will protect—"

"NO!" He cuts me off. "I am staying here with you. I would *never* abandon you."

I want to argue, but there isn't enough time. Not as the first whoosh of fire rushes toward my shield. They're close enough now that I can use my magic to blast them from the sky, but it's not enough. I see no good coming out of this. I might be strong, but I'm nowhere near strong enough to fight off an entire horde of dragons.

*Wisteria.*

I hear Stellan's voice in my head right before a dragon lands beside me.

Stellan. My posture relaxes slightly, but I keep the shield tightly around Evander and me. I momentarily think about extending it to Stellan.

*Absolutely not. I can protect myself.*

I figured he would say that.

But as the enemy dragons keep coming, I know my magic alone won't be enough. Even with Stellan fighting beside me, it's not enough. Not considering at least half of these dragons are hybrids.

The ground moves beneath my feet and I have to grab onto Evander to keep from toppling over. I wonder what's going on when I see the strands of magic.

Elemental magic, of course.

I follow the magic back to its source and send a burst of my own magic forth. The hybrid dragon falls from the sky with a loud thump on the ground.

"That's going to hurt later," Evander says.

Another dragon swoops down. I start to call forth my magic, but Evander tugs on my arm.

“That’s Dad.”

Backup has arrived. Considering they were at a council meeting, I imagine the council isn’t far behind. Hopefully that means Venali is on his way too, our magic is stronger when we’re together.

But the dragons stop attacking. As soon as King Basilicus lands, they all stay back, like they’re waiting on something. I watch as the rest of the council arrives. I keep looking for Venali, but of course it’ll take him longer to get here—he can’t fly.

“What’s going on?” I ask Evander since he’s the only one in human form.

But he looks just as confused as I am.

One of the dragons swoops down, but not to attack. He lands, shifting instantly as he steps forward. I look into familiar blue-green eyes.

This guy looks shockingly like Stellan. He’s probably about the same age too, but instead of having blond hair, his hair is dark. I can also tell that he’s a hybrid elemental and his magic is strong.

Is this Stellan’s cousin—the one who would’ve been king if his father hadn’t lost it and killed a bunch of people? I study him cautiously as he steps closer to us. Stellan shifts, but everybody else stays in their dragon form, ready to fight.

“This must be your hybrid elf bride.” The guy looks directly at me, a calculating expression on his face. “She is rightfully mine.”

Stellan reaches his arm out and puts me slightly behind him. “Don’t look at my wife.”

The guy smirks as he finally moves his gaze from me to Stellan. “Why not? She’ll be mine after I take the throne. It is rightfully mine and you don’t have the strength to stop me.”

At his threat, Stellan lunges forward. I want to call out for him and tell him to stop. I can take care of the arrogant hybrid. But I know this isn’t my fight. The two meet with a loud clash.

Instantly, they shift, taking off toward the sky. I try to watch, but their movements are a blur in the sky. I can't keep up with what's happening—elves and fae don't have the physical strength or speed of a dragon shifter, so my eyes can't even process. I notice Evander watches, probably seeing it perfectly.

I hear footsteps behind me and I turn around in time to see Venali run my way. He steps up beside me and grabs ahold of my hand. Together, our magic hums stronger. The enemy dragons take notice and they move back, giving us more space.

They're scared of us, I realize.

Evander glances at me, his shoulders relaxing when he sees Venali and me standing side by side.

I squeeze Venali's hand. "Thank you for being here."

"Of course." He keeps his eyes on the sky, watching the fight. "This is what family does, Wisteria. I will fight to the death with you if that is what it takes."

Let's hope it doesn't come to that.

I glance up in time to see both dragons making a hard nose dive toward the ground. Venali pulls me backward, but they don't land. A strong whoosh of wind pushes my hair back as the two dragons go toward the sky again. They're a blur of black so fast that it makes my head spin.

Evander tenses beside me and I look up, trying to see what's happening, but it's all just a black blur.

"What's happening?" I ask Evander.

"Ioza is using his elemental magic. Stellan barely got out of the way, but he's doing good. He's holding his own, despite Ioza's advantage," Evander answers, keeping his head up.

"It's not always about the strength of one's magic," Venali says. "I've seen many elf warriors lose battles due to arrogance. Stellan is strong and he fights knowing his subjects stand behind him. He's got powerful allies. This is the start of a new generation, one that is leaving old prejudices behind."

Venali's words encourage me. I lean closer to him, feeling much more at ease than I was moments ago.

Stellan's got this. He comes from the royal line and there is a strength in that Ioza can't match. Even if Ioza is the son of the man who was supposed to be heir, his father lost his magic, which makes his dragon shifter magic weaker by result. The advantage he has of being a hybrid isn't enough.

"What about the other dragons?" I ask Venali, keeping my voice low. I imagine the other dragons are too far away to hear me if I talk low.

Venali glances toward the hoard of enemy dragons that are staying back to observe the fight. "How many do you think there are?"

I glance up, then shrug. "I don't know. Maybe fifty?"

He nods. "With the other dragons, we could easily handle fifty."

"You think?" I ask.

He turns to me, raising an eyebrow. "Wisteria, we're *royal* elves. We don't have soulmates like other supernaturals and our bloodline has been bred for strength. We're stronger now than we've ever been. In addition, you're a hybrid, so your strength is off the charts regardless. We can handle this."

We can.

I look up in time to see Stellan and Ioza crash into one another. They move in a blur, this time falling fast toward the ground. Venali pulls me back a few more steps as both dragons land in a heap on the ground. Ioza shifts back instantly, his eyes open and glossy. I look away quickly, not wanting to see anymore. My eyes search on Stellan. He takes a few more seconds to shift back. When he does, his eyes are closed. He's bleeding heavily, but he's still breathing.

He's alive.

My heart races as I start to run toward him. Venali tightens his grip on my hand, keeping me from going forward. I wonder what he's doing until I remember the horde of

dragons. This fight isn't over—I need to keep my head for a little bit longer.

My mouth is dry and my heart throbs painfully. All I want to do is run over to Stellan and make sure that he's all right. I force myself to stand by Venali and look up at the horde of dragons. For several seconds, they don't move. They just hover in the air, like they're in a state of shock.

These dragons turned their back on the crown and swore loyalty to Ioza and his family. This is the moment they were waiting for, and it's clear that none of them expected Ioza to fail. I watch in complete shock as one by one they turn and fly off. Nobody chases after them—they don't need to. Stellan just showed them exactly how strong the royal family is. There is no way anybody will come after him again. And once our children are born and they see how powerful the royal bloodline is, there is no way anybody will ever attempt a coup. It would be pointless.

As soon as the last dragon is gone from view, I let go of Venali's hand and run over to Stellan. I kneel on the ground beside him, taking one of his hands in mine. I look at his chest and see it moving. There is still red blood oozing from his wounds at an alarming rate.

“Stellan.” I touch his face with my other hand, hoping to stir him.

“Wisteria,” I hear behind me.

I turn to see King Basilicus walking up. “Let me take him inside so the healer can tend to him.”

I move out of the way, allowing King Basilicus to lift him from the ground. I walk directly behind him as he moves toward the house. I hear somebody behind me, but I don't turn to look. All my focus is on Stellan's still form.

Once in the house, King Basilicus lays Stellan down on a padded bench. I kneel beside him once more, taking one of his hands in mine. Tears spill down my cheeks as I look at his pale face.

He's lost a lot of blood.

The healer bends over Stellan, checking each wound. He stitches up what needs to be stitched and puts bandages over the wounds. I try my best to be strong and hold my head high, but it's all I can do to keep myself from losing it.

"Is he going to be all right?" King Basilicus asks the question I'm too afraid to.

The healer hesitates. "Right now, it's unclear. He has very deep wounds and he's lost a lot of blood. He's healing so fast, but I don't know if it's fast enough. We have to wait and see."

A sob escapes my throat at his words.

No. *This* isn't how it's supposed to end. We're supposed to have a long, happy life together. A life where we have lots of children and we grow old together.

Evander gets onto his knees on the floor behind me. He slips an arm around me, so I bury my face in his chest, letting him support my weight as I sob against him. Stellan's hand slips out of mine. I start, looking up. King Basilicus has Stellan in his arms and is moving him somewhere else—probably somewhere more comfortable. Before I can get up and chase after him, Evander tugs on my arm. I turn to him.

"Wisteria, he's going to be okay. You'll see. My brother is strong and he has a lot to live for. You're not going to lose him."

I try to take comfort in his words, but the pain is too deep. My chest aches worse than any pain I've ever felt before. I want to lose it, but I can't. Right now, I have to keep it together. Stellan needs me.

I force myself to take a deep breath and go to stand. Venali steps in front of me, offering me his hand. I accept it, letting him pull me to my feet. He tugs me a little toward him and wraps his arms around me. I allow myself to feel comfort in his embrace for a few seconds before I pull back.

"Stellan," I say, my voice breaking as I say his name. I clear my throat. "He needs me."

Venali shakes his head. "Stellan is recovering. He won't even know if you're there. Right now, you need to take a few

minutes and get yourself together.”

I shake my head. “No—”

He cuts me off. “You can’t just think about yourself right now, Wisteria. You’re pregnant. You must think about the babies.”

Babies.

Of course he’s right. Just in my panic, I completely forgot about the pregnancy.

“I think you should see a healer, just to confirm the pregnancy and make sure that everything is all right,” Venali says.

“But Stellan...”

“Can wait.” He nudges me down a corridor and I don’t fight him any further. He’s right, of course. I can’t just think about myself right now. And it would be smart to make sure the babies are okay.

I glance back and see Evander walking with us. King Basilicus will be with Stellan, and I’m sure Dove will be there too. He’ll be well looked after.



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## THE COUNCIL WILL NOT BE HAPPY

### Wisteria

**T**he healer confirms my pregnancy, though he says it's too early to confirm much. With his magic, he can tell that there are twins. The healer looks at me with fascination on his face.

“Are there not many dragon shifters that have twins?” I ask.

“No. It's very rare,” he says. “And it's never happened before in the royal family.”

“Are they okay?” I ask, looking at my stomach. It looks the same as it always has, though I don't expect it will stay that way for long, not with twins on the way.

“They are perfectly healthy.” He looks at me for a few more long moments. “You are aware that birth control doesn't work with dragon shifters, correct?”

My cheeks grown warm, but I nod. “I was informed.”

He nods. “Good. I expect I will see you often.”

Great... even the healer thinks I'm going to have a lot of babies.

But then a sharp pain goes through my chest when I remember that Stellan is currently lying in a bed right now, still unconscious.

I stand quickly from the chair. “I want to go check on Stellan.”

He nods. “I will be staying with him overnight. You can come to see him, but I will not allow you in the room tonight. You need to sleep in your own bed. I’ll give you something to help you sleep. You have to think about the babies. Rest is especially important during the first trimester of your pregnancy.”

I want to argue, but I can’t.

I nod, to let him know I heard, and then I rush from the room. Venali and Evander are both waiting for me.

“Well?” Venali asks.

“It’s twins,” I say.

He snorts. “Obviously.”

“They’re fine. Healthy. And apparently I am to sleep in bed tonight. He doesn’t want me to stay with Stellan.” I frown, not sure how I’ll be able to sleep without my husband by my side. How can I sleep without knowing if he’s all right?

“I’ll stay with you.”

A feminine voice has me jerking my head up. Natalia walks down the hallway with Jason in her arms. He’s asleep, with his head resting against her shoulder.

“Are you sure?” I ask her. “Don’t you want to be with Andrew?”

“Andrew will be fine for one night without me,” Natalia promises. “I’ll even leave Jason with him.”

My shoulders sag with relief. “Thank you, Natalia. I didn’t want to be alone.”

“It’s what family does.” She grins at me. “Now, come on. Let’s go see Stellan—the rest of the family is waiting for us.”

I’m glad that Stellan isn’t alone. With this family, I doubt he will ever be alone. I’m sure somebody besides the doctor will be staying with him tonight. I will rest easier knowing that.

Natalia leads us down the hallway. Venali and Evander both stand at each of my sides. Even though I am scared out of

my mind for Stellan, I rest assured knowing that I'm not alone. Venali is here. And when the rest of my family can't be here, Stellan's family will be here for me.

When I walk into the room where they have Stellan, tears press against the back of my eyes. I try to hold in my tears, but it's no use. Dove looks up and sees, so she comes over to embrace me.

"Ah, sweetie, it's going to be all right. You'll see," she says, patting me lightly on the back.

But she doesn't *know*. The doctor said we won't know for sure until he wakes up. *If* he wakes up.

"What did the doctor say?" Dove pulls back from our embrace, but she keeps her hands on my shoulders. I know she's trying to distract me, which I am grateful for. I need *something* to get my mind off this.

"Everything is fine." I wipe under my eyes. "The doctor confirmed that it's twins. He seemed kind of shocked. He told me twins are rare for dragon shifters."

Dove nods, a grin on her face. "In our history, there have only been three sets of twins documented, and none since the war ended."

I didn't know that.

"As soon as Stellan..." I clear my throat, taking a deep breath. "Well, I want to make the announcement with him."

She smiles sadly at me. "And you will be able to."

I square my shoulders and look over to where Stellan is lying on the bed. He's so, so pale. I've never seen him look so weak before. I swallow a sob as I take a step closer. Once I'm at his side, I take his hand in mine, noticing how cold it is. Stellan is never cold.

I wipe under my eyes again. "He's cold. Do you think he needs another blanket?"

"I'll go get him one," Natalia says, jumping from her seat. She gently passes Jason to Dove's arms. He stays asleep, the move not even stirring him.

“Who is staying with Stellan tonight?” I ask.

“I am,” Warrick says. “The doctor told me you’re forbidden from staying the night here.”

My heart aches. I rub at my chest, wishing I could make all of this disappear. Even magic can only do so much to heal a supernatural.

The door opens and Natalia comes back through, carrying an armload of blankets. I help her spread them over Stellan.

“Wisteria, we should head to your room,” Natalia says softly. “It’s getting late and you need your rest.”

I nod, giving Stellan’s hand one last squeeze.

*I love you, Stellan*, I tell him through our bond, hoping that he can hear me. I bend over and kiss him on the forehead, trying to tell myself that this isn’t goodbye. It’s just a goodnight. And hopefully this will be the last night I ever have to spend apart from my husband.

Natalia whispers something to Dove before turning around to face me. “Are you ready?”

I nod, turning to look at Stellan one more time before Natalia leads me from the room, my heart breaking a little more with each step.

...

Last night I slept horribly. After a few hours of tossing and turning, I eventually moved to the couch so Natalia at least could get some sleep. Sometime after midnight, the medicine the doctor gave me finally kicked in and I fell asleep for a few hours. I’m up by six and head straight to Stellan’s room.

There is no change from last night. Stellan is still pale, but his cheeks look a little more flushed. I’m hoping that’s a good sign.

As I’m sitting by his bed, Warrick walks up beside me.

“How are you doing?” he asks.

I shrug, not sure how to answer. “To be honest, I’m not sure. Everything just feels so uncertain right now. And my

heart..." my voice trails off.

Warrick pats the top of my head in a gesture I'm sure he means as comforting. "I'm afraid that I must ask something of you that you're not going to like."

I stiffen at his words and turn to face him. "What is it?"

"The council has called for an emergency council meeting." He rubs the back of his head, looking uncomfortable. "In times like this, they always panic and want to discuss backup plans. Unfortunately, Evander is their backup plan. But Evander..."

I shake my head. "No. Evander would hate that. He wants nothing to do with the throne."

Warrick nods. "Exactly. So I'm hoping you will come. I know you wanted to wait to talk to the council about your pregnancy, but I think the time for secrecy has passed."

I chew on my bottom lip, looking from Warrick to Stellan. I know that Stellan would want me to do this. He would want me to protect his younger brother. As much as I don't want to leave his side, I *have* to do this. It's my duty as Stellan's wife and crown princess.

"Who will stay with Stellan?" I ask, glancing back to Warrick. "I don't want him to be here alone."

His face softens at my question. "Dove is on her way now. She will stay with him. You need not worry—he will never be alone. Neither will you. No matter what happens, you are one of us now."

My heart swells at his words. At one time, I really thought Stellan's father hated me. I was wrong—he never hated me, he just wanted to protect Stellan. I can't fault him for that. But him accepting me into his family like this means more than I ever thought it would.

Dove comes into the room, so I say a quick goodbye to Stellan before going with Warrick to the council meeting.

"The council will not be happy to see you," he tells me, as he opens the passenger side door to his car for me. "They do

not want women there for the meetings.”

I smile at him. “That is something I plan to change when Stellan gets better.”

He chuckles. “It’s a change I will gladly accept. I’ve been trying for years myself, but they’re stuck in their ways. If anybody can change their mind, it’s you. Dove never wanted anything to do with politics and I don’t want to push her to get involved.”

I can imagine that. She’s so kind and soft hearted. It’s a good thing, but the dragon shifters need a change. Maybe I can do some good while I’m married to Stellan.

Thinking about his name causes my chest to ache fiercely.

Warrick stays quiet for the rest of the drive and I keep my focus out the window. I know that if I start thinking of Stellan, it will only make me cry. Instead, I focus on the beautiful views the island has. I never imagined a place as beautiful as this could exist and I’m extremely lucky to call this place home.

When the car comes to a stop, I look at the familiar building. I’ve been here once—when the council wanted to meet me. It was after they found out that I was a hybrid. Once they realized how strong my blood truly is...

And today, I will remind them that I am strong.

I unbuckle my seatbelt and get out of the car, following Warrick inside. The parking lot is already full of cars, and I imagine all the council is here, waiting for us. I take a deep breath, focusing on keeping my heart rate steady.

If I can handle a room full of fae monarchs, I can certainly handle a few dragon shifter nobility. They may be strong and powerful, but they’ve got none of the cunning and cutthroat nature a fae has. I may be half elf, but I’m also half fae. I can be cunning when I need to be.

Warrick turns his head to look at me. He opens his mouth, like he wants to say something, and then closes it again. He studies me with furrowed brows and then nods. Whatever he was about to say is gone as he pushes open the doors and

motions for me to walk in first. As soon as I step into the conference room, all conversations cease as every single member turns to look at me.

I spot Evander sitting in one of the chairs. His face is pale and he looks like he's going to puke. I don't blame him. He hates politics, so this must be killing him. When he sees me, he jumps out of his chair and walks over to my side. I smile warmly at him, trying to help ease his nerves.

Isn't Evander going through enough? Isn't Warrick too? Why are they having a council meeting today of all days? Couldn't they wait until Stellan wakes up?

*If* he wakes up.

I push the thought away and square my shoulders, standing up straighter. It does little to help my height in a room full of shifters. I'll always be short compared to them. I just hope our children get their height from Stellan.

"What is *she* doing here?" An older council member wrinkles his nose. "She has no say in what is taking place here."

"She does have a say. Whether or not you believe it, she is one of us and she has been since the day she married my son," Warrick says the words casually as he strolls over to the head of the table and takes a seat. He nods his head toward Evander and me. We stroll over and sit next to him, Evander taking his seat to the left and me the seat to the right.

"We need a contingency plan, whether you want to think about it or not," one of the council members says, his voice sounding weary. "Stellan has no heirs. You know we've always wanted Evander trained as backup."

Warrick holds up his hand to stop the man from speaking. "Evander has made his decision. He doesn't want the throne, and I will not force him to take up the role."

"I still don't see why the girl needs to be here," the older guy says again.

I clear my throat. "*The girl* has a name. It's Wisteria—*Princess* Wisteria to you. And Stellan does have an heir. Two

of them, in fact, if what the doctor told me is to be believed. So this meeting is a complete waste of all of our time.”

The council falls quiet as they look at me. I’m not sure if they’re more shocked by my insubordination or my announcement that I’m pregnant.

“Twins?” A younger council member leans forward. “But the royal family has never had twins before. It’s... completely unheard of.”

Warrick grins, leaning forward. “Yes, it is true. My son and daughter-in-law are pregnant with twins.”

“Yes, but we don’t know if the twins are male. And if they are, will they be able to shift? Their children being hybrids brings a whole new aspect—”

I cut him off. “Stellan is alive. I don’t know why you’re talking like he’s not. If these children can’t shift, then we’ll have more.”

Nobody says anything to that. Maybe they don’t want to anger a pregnant woman. Or maybe Stellan was sincere when he said dragon shifters treat their women really well.

Warrick pulls something from his pocket—his phone, I realize, as he puts it up to his ear.

“Yes.” He pauses, his eyes going wide. He glances toward me. “Okay. We’ll be there soon.” He ends the call. “Stellan is awake.”

I jump from my chair.

I should be there, not at a stupid council meeting.

But before I follow Warrick and Evander from the room, I turn and look at the council one last time. They have no idea what they’re in for, but their entire world is about to change, starting with allowing females to have more of a say.

The drive back to the estate feels like it takes forever, even though I know from watching the clock that it’s less than five minutes. As soon as the car comes to a stop, I open my door and run inside. Evander runs at my side. He’s probably just as eager to see his big brother awake as I am.



When I come to the door, it's open. Stellan's entire family is inside, but I ignore them as I look at my husband.

Stellan is sitting up on the bed, pillows propped behind his back. His face is still pale, but he's awake. His eyes are open and he turns to look at me as I enter the room. I don't wait before I run to his side.

"Stellan," my voice breaks as I begin to cry. I didn't want to cry—he's okay. I just can't help it. I'm so relieved that he's alive.

Stellan pulls me onto his lap and holds me against him.

"I don't want to hurt you," I protest.

"Wisteria, I'm fine. I'm not hurting." He squeezes me tighter, not letting me move from his arms. Now that he's holding me, I'm not sure I have the strength to move.

Was it really only a day that he was unconscious? It felt like so much longer. I missed him so much.

"Never do that again," I scold him.

He chuckles. "Which part?"

"Any of it." I bury my face against his neck, just enjoying the feeling of him embracing me.

"Don't cry." Stellan kisses the top of my head. "I'm sorry I scared you, but I'm okay now."

I lift my head so I can look at him. He uses his thumbs to wipe away the tears from under my eyes.

"I love you and nothing is going to take me away from you." He looks into my eyes as he makes the promise. "You and I are going to grow old together and we're going to have the happiest of lives."

"That sounds really good."

He pulls me into his arms again. I get a look at the rest of the room and see that his family has cleared out to give us some time alone. I'll have to thank them for that later.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t here when you woke up. Your dad made me go to a council meeting,” I tell him.

“Oh?” he asks, then pauses. “Oh. You had to tell them about the pregnancy, didn’t you?”

“Yeah.” I sigh, leaning further against him. “I’m sorry. I wanted to wait for you.”

“It’s all right.” He rubs his thumb against my lower back, making me shiver. “We just need to tell Cypress before word gets out. Maybe in a couple of days, we can fly to see him so we can tell him in person. I deserve a vacation after everything the council has put me through.”

I grin. “You’d really want to visit my family?”

“Absolutely.” Stellan kisses my cheek. “After all, I did promise we could go see your little brother anytime you want.”

He did promise that, on our wedding night. That was also the first time I cried in front of him.

“I made a lot of mistakes on our wedding night.” Stellan brushes the hair back out of my face. “The first was letting you sleep in your own room. If I had been smart, I never would’ve let you go off alone.”

I smile, glancing up at him. “Yes, but I’m not sure I wanted to sleep with you on our wedding night. I think it was perfect the way it happened.”

“I could’ve been a lot nicer to you,” he says.

“Absolutely you could have,” I tease. “But I like that our relationship progressed naturally, even if I fell in love with you incredibly fast.”

“I fell for you very quickly too.” He continues to swipe his thumb against the small of my back. “But maybe you’re right that it was perfect timing. Because I got you in the end, and nothing could make me happier.”

I lean forward and press my lips against his. “I love you, Stellan,” I mumble against his lips.

He kisses me back hard and then he backs up to look at me. "I love you, Wisteria Basilicus."

My heart skips a beat and I think it will every time I hear his last name attached to my first.

Neither one of us chose this marriage, but as it turned out, it was exactly what we both needed.

# EPILOGUE

WHAT FAIRYTALES ARE MADE OF.

## Wisteria

**A**n entire kingdom of people waited anxiously for the birth of my children.

Scratch that, the entire supernatural community was waiting. But none of them were as anxious as Stellan.

In the weeks leading up to giving birth, he got progressively more anxious. The day I went into labor, I'm pretty sure he hyperventilated for a good thirty minutes.

But when our children were born, Stellan had never looked so happy before.

The oracle was right—one boy and one girl. Our son, with his vibrant purple eyes, has strong elf magic, but he's equally as strong with dragon shifter magic. And our daughter, who got Stellan's blue-green eyes, is equal parts fae and elf. She doesn't have even a hint of dragon shifter magic in her.

The council is, of course, overjoyed by our son's birth. And even though our twins are only six months old, they're already asking when we're going to have more children.

Last week, Natalia announced that she is pregnant with her second child. I'm so happy for her because we didn't know for sure if she would be able to have another kid. She's overjoyed, as is Dove.

Dove is the best mother-in-law that I could ask for. She babysits anytime I ask and she never complains about it. She's always offering to help with anything that needs to be done.

Evander also helps babysit some. Despite my earlier reservations, he's really good with them. He's a good uncle.

Cypress has been to visit a few times, and he is spending the summer with us again this year. I love having my little brother around, and I know he enjoys taking a break from fae court.

Last week, we went to Grandfather's castle. We introduced our children to him and all of elven court. They're happy with my daughter's magic since it's clear she is an elf. But I'm nervous that they'll try the same stunt they pulled on me with her when she's older. Venali assures me that he won't let that happen. He's working on changing the law.

Speaking of changing the law, I am still working on the dragon council. They haven't approved me joining the council quite yet, but it's only a matter of time before they change their minds. The vote is nearly split down the middle now. I just need to work on them a little bit more and I believe they'll cave.

Kellan, our son, makes a noise in his crib. Stellan is at his side before I can even blink, pulling him into his arms.

Our children are so spoiled, but I can't be mad about it. Stellan is so sweet with them.

Sky makes a noise in her crib, obviously jealous that Kellan is being held. Stellan lifts her with his other arm and holds them both. I just shake my head at him. He smirks at me, knowing exactly what I'm thinking.

I walk over to him, holding out my hands to take Kellan. He passes him over and then he bends over to kiss me on the lips. It's a quick kiss because as soon as he hands Kellan over, he starts screaming.

He's hungry.

Always.

Kellan may be only six months old, but he has a large appetite. I swear, he eats double what his twin sister does.

“Shifters eat a lot, remember,” Stellan reminds me.

I shake my head at him and go to make Kellan a bottle.

This life is nothing like the one I imagined I would have, and I couldn't be happier about it. This is where I belong. With Stellan. With the dragons.

As I'm making a bottle for Kellan, Stellan walks into our kitchen. He cocks his head to the side as he looks at me, narrowing his eyes.

“What is it?” I ask, knowing that he's listening for something.

He grins and bends over. I wonder what he's doing when he puts his ear up to my stomach and listens carefully. He used to do that all the time when I was pregnant with the twins.

My heart speeds up as I realize what he's doing. “Am I pregnant?”

He looks up at me, a grin on his face. “Yeah.”

I swallow hard, not knowing what to think of that. Our kids are only six months old. They won't even be two when their sibling is born. How am I going to handle having three kids under the age of two?

My eyes widen as I wonder...

“Not twins, right?”

He chuckles, shaking his head. “Just one.”

I sigh in relief as I put Kellan's bottle in his mouth. He instantly calms down.

“I still blame you,” I tell him, as I make my way into the living room.

He just smirks, taking a seat beside me on the couch. “It's not my fault you find me so irresistible.”

I roll my eyes at him, but he's not wrong. I am very attracted to my husband.

Our life is chaotic, but I wouldn't change it for anything. I'm happier than I ever thought possible.

Stellan and I may not be soulmates in the traditional sense, but fate couldn't have chosen better for me. What we have is the stuff fairytales are made of.

**The end.**

# LETTER FROM SCARLETT

This book was therapeutic for me, after having a very rough 2023.

My husband got sick around Christmas of 2022. We did everything right, going to the doctor, hospital, etc. It wasn't until July that he finally got the surgery he needed. And, I can proudly say, he's feeling SO MUCH BETTER. I'm so thankful.

But with him being sick, I didn't write. I was so stressed out. Writing wasn't even on my mind. When he did get better, I was still pretty stressed. After going through that, I'm sure you can understand. The thought of writing anything was too much. But then I started thinking about THIS BOOK. I've had the idea in my head for a while. I didn't plan to write it yet, but here we are. And I couldn't be happier. This book pulled me out of a deep pit of stress.

I know this is different than what you're used to from me, but also similar. I do plan to write more 'adult' books. This was so much fun. I love the arranged marriage aspect of the story. And I even like that Wisteria and Stellan aren't soulmates. I like that they chose one another freely. I also like that this is a stand alone. While I would love to write more



about this couple, I'm happy with where I left things for them. (Though, maybe we can do a story for Evander later. And maybe one for Cypress too. And Venali—I would love to write about an elf prince). I love this world, which is why I've written so many young adult books in the same world.

I hope you like this book. If you did enjoy it, it would mean a lot to me if you left a review wherever you picked this up. Or a rating :). Anything helps!

—**Scarlett Haven**

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