



The Royal Engagement

Author: *Scarlett Haven*

Category: Romance, Paranormal, Vampires

Description: I found the one thing I hate more than vampire politics: wedding planning.

While my advisor is out looking for my missing older brother, I am busy planning a wedding. Only the planning is mostly my mom and mother-in-law fighting with one another. I think it can't get any worse when the other half of my family wants to get involved in my wedding. I'm trying to take these six months to get to know my betrothed, but the Nodin Clan is still trying to get me. It's not safe.

When the Nodin Clan makes their final move, I have an impossible decision to make.

Will I ever be happy? Or am I destined for a life of war, loss, and heartbreak?

Total Pages (Source): 76

FIRST MEETINGS

The car is completely silent inside, the only noise to be heard is the sound of rubber hitting pavement as we cruise along the interstate.

Dad taps his finger on the leather seat as he looks out the window—a tell that he is nervous. Not that I didn't already know, I can hear his heart racing. I don't comment on his racing heart, not wanting to point out the obvious.

I wonder why he's nervous. Sure, we're on our way to the airport to pick up my mother—the woman he had an affair with twenty four years ago—but it's not like this is the first time he's seen her since the affair. He's been in contact with her since I turned eighteen and he went to see her the day I agreed to become his heir.

Truthfully, my heart is racing almost as fast as his. I'm nervous about seeing my mom again. I haven't seen her since I left more than three months ago and we didn't leave things on the best of terms.

I'm still mad at my mother for keeping me separated from my father. I think how different my life could've been, how much better it should have been. But I can't stay mad at her forever. I need to forgive her.

I sigh softly, but because vampire hearing is a thing, Dad hears me. He turns in his seat to face me.

“Are you okay?”

I shrug, then nod. This isn't exactly something that I want to talk about with my dad because I don't want to give him a reason to hate my mom.

He reaches across the seat between us and takes my hand in his. It's a sweet gesture that only solidifies my feelings—my childhood would've been so much better with him in my life.

“Thank you for coming with me to pick up my mom.” I take a deep breath. “And thank you for letting her stay with us. I know it won't be easy to have my mom there, especially with Eden.”

He stiffens at the mention of Eden, but he squeezes my hand. “It was Eden's suggestion. I was going to pay for a hotel for your mother during her stay, but Eden knew you'd want her close by.”

My heart melts at his admission. Eden is truly a great woman.

The car slows down and makes a left turn. My mouth goes dry as we pull into the parking lot of the private airfield. An airplane is coming in for a landing and I know my mother is on that plane. I take a deep breath to try and calm my racing heart.

When the driver gets out, he opens the door for Dad first before coming around to my side. I hesitantly get out, wishing that I could delay this for a few more days, but I can't. We have less than six months to plan a royal wedding and I'm going to need all the help I can get, especially when it comes to Queen Rune.

My stomach churns as I think about my future mother-in-law. The woman has hated me from the moment she laid eyes on me. I am hoping that over the next few months, as she gets to know me, her opinion of me will change. I just wish I knew what I did

to make her think so negatively about me.

Dad and I stand next to the car as the airplane comes to a stop not too far away from us. As the crew pulls down the steps, the two of us slowly walk closer to the private jet. My heart races as somebody walks down the stairs, but it's not my mom.

"Grandpa?" My voice comes out squeaky. "What are you doing here?"

He comes to a stop in front of Dad and me and he offers me a smile. "My granddaughter is getting married—you didn't think I would miss the opportunity to meet your fiancé, did you?"

"But..." my voice trails off as Grandpa turns his attention to Dad.

This is the first time they are meeting, I realize. My mom never revealed my father's identity, not even to my grandfather. I look between them, my mind going crazy with scenarios. What I don't expect is for my dad to extend his hand in a very human like gesture.

"Hello, I'm Michael—Madeline's dad."

My grandfather accepts his handshake. "I know who you are, King Scott. I am Madeline's grandfather, King Bennett."

My worlds are colliding and I'm not sure what to make of it.

Since I am paying attention to what is happening between my dad and grandfather, I don't hear my mother's approach. I nearly jump when she suddenly appears in my peripheral.

"Dad," she says, giving my grandfather a scolding look. "You promised you'd be

nice.”

“No, you told me to be nice and assumed I would listen. This man took advantage of you,” Grandpa says, still keeping his gaze on Dad.

Yikes, this meeting isn’t going well. Part of me is glad I didn’t know he was coming so I wouldn’t stress about it.

Mom steps between Dad and Grandpa. “No, Dad, he didn’t. If anything, I was the one who took advantage. I would’ve done anything to get out of the marriage you were arranging.”

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:00 am

At that, Grandpa drops his gaze.

Well, it seems that the two of them have talked since I left. Maybe this entire thing has been good for the family—we've always been bad at communicating our feelings.

I clear my throat. "I'm glad you could come, Grandpa. How long are you planning on staying?"

Not that I want him to leave quickly, but I'm not certain I can survive a long visit. Thankfully, he is king and has a lot of duties. He's never stayed anywhere longer than a week.

"Only for a few hours. I want to meet this fiancé of yours and make sure he's good enough for you." He checks his watch. "I have to be back home for a meeting by eight in the morning, so we better get a move on."

Mom gives me a quick side hug as Dad leads us toward the large SUV. I climb into the far backseat, Dad climbing in beside me, while Mom and Grandpa sit in front of us. As soon we were buckled in, the driver takes off toward the estate.

I pick up my phone to send a quick text to Damek, giving him a heads up. He's supposed to be there when we get back, but I should warn him about my grandfather's surprise visit.

My grandfather decided to come. He wants to meet you,I type quickly.

He responds within seconds. King Bennett is coming to meet me?

Yes.

Any advice?

I look at my phone and then at the back of my grandfather's head. I still can't believe he came with my mom, though I don't believe for one second he came just to meet Damek. I bet this visit was more about meeting my dad than anything else.

Still, I do want Damek to make a good impression.

Just be polite and respectful. My grandfather isn't like other incubi. He won't care that you're gorgeous.

I hit the send button and then re-read what I just sent.

Yep, I did just call Damek gorgeous.

Damek is my fiancé, but we're not a typical couple. The truth is, I don't know him that well. We've spent the last month talking every day on the phone until the late morning hours—he is the reason I've been getting very little sleep. But we've barely kissed and we weren't dating before our betrothal. We're still getting to know one another and I'm not sure that I've ever told him just how attracted to him I am.

Should these things be done via text?

You think I'm gorgeous?

My cheeks grow warm as I read his response. I'm trying to think of how I should respond when another text comes through.

Since we're both sharing, you are the most beautiful woman I've ever met. But you already know that.

My heart swells.

"Who are you texting?" Dad asks.

I lock my phone, putting it away. "Damek."

Dad's eyebrows knit together. "You two really like each other, huh?"

"Like?" Grandpa twists around in his seat. "They're engaged to be married—I should hope that they're inlove."

"Dad," Mom says. "Do you really want to argue that you're against marriage for political gain?"

That shuts him up.

"Yes," I say, answering my dad's question. "I like Damek a lot—I have since the first night I met him. Kaine tried to get me to give all the candidates a chance, but I couldn't. Not after Damek."

Dad's lips turn upward and his shoulders visibly loosen. "I tried to give you more options than I had, but I feared I was still pushing you too hard."

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:00 am

I shrug. “I would’ve liked more than six months, but I have no doubts that Damek will be a very good husband. I think the two of us will be happy together.”

At least, I hope so.

In succubi culture, it’s normal to wait many years before marriage. Engagements are always long and even then half of the engaged couples split before the actual wedding. Since supernaturals don’t have divorce, we tend to be picky. Vampires, on the other hand, don’t have the same outlook as succubi. Most couples get married within a few months of dating.

“Six months,” Grandpa scoffs. “Your grandma and I met three days before our wedding.”

Yes, I’ve heard the story many, many times.

My grandparents had an arranged marriage. At the time, there were two ruling families among the succubi and incubi community. Their marriage brought the two opposing alliances together and we all united under one ruler. It was a big deal at the time, as we were on the verge of civil war.

“And you were going to argue for love.” Mom snorts. “And you wonder why I got myself knocked up and refused to marry an incubus.”

Dad shifts in his seat, uncomfortable by the current conversation. I, on the other hand, am used to the drama. My family lives for it and I’ve gotten good at blocking it out.

“Mom, Grandpa, can you two not fight in front of Dad?” I ask. “Or Damek—I don’t want you two scaring him away.”

Grandpa chuckles. “If your Prince Damek can’t handle a little bickering, he won’t last two seconds in our family.”

True, but I’d rather not scare him away this quickly.

“Who will we be meeting today?” Mom asks, turning slightly in her seat so she can look at me.

“Damek, of course. And Julien, he’s my younger brother. You will love him.” I grin, thinking about Julien’s confidence—he will fit right in with my succubi and incubi family. The grin slips from my face as I clear my throat. “Also, you will meet Eden. She’s Dad’s wife, my stepmom, and she’s really nice. I think you’ll like her.”

Mom looks away, suddenly interested in the view out the window. I don’t blame her as I’m sure meeting Eden will be very uncomfortable for her.

Grandpa, however, has no qualms about the uncomfortable situation. He looks at my father. “Well, that will be uncomfortable for you, I’m sure.”

Dad lets out a breath but he doesn’t say anything.

Truthfully, it will be uncomfortable for all of us, most of all Eden. But I know Eden and I know she thrives at doing things that others consider difficult. While meeting me was hard for her, she took to me right away and treated me like I was her own child.

Still... it will be different with my mother. Part of me wishes I could shield Eden from this, but I know I can’t. I can’t just abandon my other family. I want my mom to

be there for my wedding and I want her help with planning. The next few months are going to be crazy and I want as much family at my side as I can.

“Madeline, tell me about this prince of yours,” Grandpa says. “I want to know everything about him.”

For the rest of the car ride, I settle in and tell Mom and Grandpa as much as I can about Damek.

2

A NATURAL BEAUTY

When we eventually arrive at the estate, my stomach is in knots and my heart races faster.

What if my grandfather doesn't like Damek? Would he do something to stop the wedding? A few weeks ago, I might've been okay with any political marriage being sabotaged, but now I don't know how I feel.

Dad leads us inside and through a maze of hallways that I used to find confusing. Eventually, we end up in the formal sitting room—a room I've only seen a handful of times during my stay. Damek and Julien are both standing by a window, talking about some car that they both like. And Eden is sitting on a chair, ringing her fingers together. When they hear the noise, all three look our way.

Damek smiles widely, making his way over toward us. Julien looks at his mom who is looking at my mom.

Yikes, this is going to be more uncomfortable than I imagined.

When Damek gets over to me, I decide to introduce him to my family. Maybe I can cut some of the tension.

“Grandpa, Mom, this is Damek,” I say to them, then turn to Damek. “This is my mom, Sasha, and my grandfather, King Bennett.”

Damek bows to Grandpa. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, King Bennett.”

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:00 am

Grandpa slaps him on the shoulder. “No need for formalities. You are, after all, part of the family. Call me Grandpa.”

Damek looks at me so I nod to let him know it’s okay. He turns to my mom. “Princess Bennett.”

Mom grins at him. “You can call me Sasha.”

Damek looks between my mom and me. “I always thought you looked like your dad, but wow, you look exactly like your mom.”

My eyes widen.

He thinks I look like my mother? I don’t believe I’ve ever been told that before. Most people are surprised when they hear that we’re mother and daughter, though most believe my mom is too young to have a child my age—succubi age well.

Julien, who had crept over to us during the conversation, takes the opportunity to introduce himself.

“I’m Julien, Maddie’s very good looking younger brother.” Julien grins, oozing all the charisma of an incubus. If I didn’t know better, I’d think he was the one who was a hybrid, but no. He’s all vampire.

Grandpa looks at Julien. “A prince, huh? Are you betrothed? If not, I have many granddaughters. They’re all very charming.”

“Grandpa!” I step up next to a smirking Julien. “He’s my brother. You can’t have him marry one of mycousins.”

“Why not?” Grandpa asks. “It’s not like any of them are related to Prince Julien.”

“Yeah, Maddie. Why not?” Julien teases.

I just know that Julien is going to remind me of this moment for the rest of our lives.

“Julien is still twenty one,” Dad says from behind us.

We move slightly, so Dad and Eden can join the conversation. Eden keeps her head down, not making eye contact with anybody. I hate seeing her like this, so out of her comfort zone.

“Do vampires have a certain age where it’s appropriate to get married?” Grandpa asks.

“No.” Dad glances at Julien. “Julien, however, isn’t at a point in his life where he’s mature enough for marriage.”

I try to hold back a chuckle, but it comes out anyway. Everybody turns to look at me and Julien smirks.

“Dad’s right, I’m not ready for marriage quite yet. But we can talk again in a couple of years,” Julien says, then winks at my grandfather.

I shake my head at Julien.

No—it’s absolutelynothappening.

Once the introductions are through, one of the servants shows my mom to her quarters. Eden quickly flees, not that I blame her, and Dad and Julien follow her. Damek and I stay with my grandfather because he says he wants to talk with us.

“This marriage—it is consensual between both of you, correct?” Grandpa asks.

“Yes,” I say, my cheeks growing warm.

Damek slips his arm around me. “Yes, we both want this.”

Grandpa nods. “I just wanted to make sure. I know that sometimes these political marriages can be forced. I got lucky with my wife—she turned out to be a wonderful woman and I’ve been happily married to her for forty six years, but not all are as lucky as me.”

Damek’s eyes widen. “Forty six years?”

“Do vampires typically not stay married that long?” Grandpa asks.

“Yes.” Damek nods. “But I wasn’t shocked over the length of time you’ve been married, I am more shocked that you’re old enough to be married so long. You look young.”

Grandpa grins. “Incubus genes. We are blessed to age very well. My wife still looks as young as she did when we married.”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:00 am

My heart melts when I hear him talk about my grandma. The two of them are sweet together. Though she definitely doesn't look as young as she did when they married, she does look extremely young for her age, even for a succubus.

I hope someday that I have a love like them. Will Damek and I be in love after forty six years? My grandparent's marriage was arranged too, so they didn't love each other when they got married. But they did grow to love each other very deeply. I hope that we can get there.

"Since Madeline is so dear to my family and to our community, I would like to throw the two of you an engagement party," Grandpa says.

'Dear' to my family? I nearly snort at the thought. If anything, I'm certain that my cousins are glad to be rid of me. They've always hated my presence at work. If anything, they miss me bringing me coffee every morning.

"Grandpa, you don't have to do that," I quickly say, hoping to avoid this.

"I insist." His tone is light, but I can see on his face that this isn't something I can get out of.

I sit up straighter. "I don't want to be rude, but are you sure this is a good idea?"

Damek's arm tightens around me and I wonder what he's thinking. Does he think I'm ashamed to introduce him to my cousins? Maybe I should explain it to him, but I won't in front of my grandfather.

“Your cousins miss you,” Grandpa says.

I raise an eyebrow. “Yeah, right. I’m sure Henry threw a party to celebrate my departure.”

He looks away, confirming my suspicions.

Of course Henry threw a party to celebrate that I was gone—what a puke.

“I will keep Henry in check,” Grandpa promises after a long pause.

Like you kept him in check all those years I worked for you? I keep the thought to myself, wishing I were brave enough to say it out loud to him.

“Do not forget, Madeline, you are a princess on both sides.” He meets my eyes. “You have a duty to more than just the vampires, but succubi as well.”

I lower my head, not sure what to say. I’ve never felt like a princess, only an outsider. But I do know that I can’t deny my grandfather’s request—not only is he my grandpa, but my king.

“You know what the succubi and incubi will say, even my family.” I don’t make eye contact as I say it.

Damek keeps quiet, but I’m sure he’s wondering what we’re talking about.

“It matters not what anybody says about you,” Grandfather says. “You are special and they all know it.”

I shake my head. “Special is just your kind way of saying that I’m ugly compared to my non-hybrid cousins.”

Damek takes a step closer, putting himself between my grandfather and me. “I am willing to go to this engagement party of yours, but I am unwilling for Maddie to be treated poorly by her family while we’re there. If that is what this is about, we will not be coming.”

My eyes widen as I look from Damek to my grandfather. Damek keeps his eyes on my grandfather, not breaking eye contact for even a second. Grandpa looks... amused.

Is he smirking?

“That is not what this is about. I can assure you that I love Madeline very much. If her cousins make fun of her, it is only because they are jealous,” Grandpa says. “She is the kind of natural beauty that a full succubus could never be. Her cousins are all aware of it, too.”

I stare at him, wondering if he’s just saying that to make Damek and me feel better, but it doesn’t feel like it. It’s like he really means what he’s saying.

But he couldn’t, could he?

I’ve never felt beautiful. How could I be when I was constantly reminded that I wasn’t a full succubus?

“I don’t understand,” I say.

Grandpa looks at me. “You’ve always been beautiful. Why do you think your female cousins treat you like they do? Succubi and incubi are vain, they can’t stand anybody to be more beautiful than them.”

More beautiful than a succubus? Impossible.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:00 am

Damek turns to look at me for a moment, then nods to my grandfather. “We will come, but I won’t tolerate any of them treating my fiancé rudely.”

Grandfather bows slightly to him. “Of course, Prince Damek. I will make sure all of my grandchildren behave.”

I nearly laugh at the idea of any of my cousins behaving. But I do know that none of them would cause a scene, not at a place like that. I have handled their jeers and insults for twenty three years, what’s one more night?

“I will have my secretary get in touch with you for the dates,” Grandpa says, smiling at me. “I look forward to seeing you again soon and I’m excited for what your betrothal means for both of our communities.”

I wonder what he means by that. Succubi and incubi don’t marry outside of their species. That is part of the reason that my existence is such a big deal. I am one of a kind.

After that, Grandpa leaves, getting a ride to the airport from our driver and I’m not sure what to make of anything that’s happened, but Julien is in a really good mood as he throws my bedroom door open, without knocking, of course.

“Do you ever knock?” I narrow my eyes as he saunters into my room.

He smirks. “I wanted to make sure you and your boyfriend were behaving.”

I lift an eyebrow at him referring to Damek as my boyfriend. “Damek left about an

hour ago—you know he never stays this late. And he's never been to my bedroom."

"Good," he says, his tone very subdued.

Julien may be younger than me, but he is very protective of me. It's really sweet, even if unnecessary when it comes to Damek.

"How is Eden doing?" I worry my bottom lip between my teeth.

Tonight was hard on her—even harder than the night she met me. Part of me still can't believe she's being so welcoming to my mother. If I were in her position, I'm not sure that I would be so kind to the woman who had an affair with my husband.

Julien takes a step closer to me. "My mom will be fine. She and Dad worked through their issues a long time ago. It was hard for her to see your mom, especially seeing how pretty she is."

I sigh, running my fingers through my hair. "My mother is a beautiful woman, but so is Eden. She has nothing to worry about when it comes to my mother."

"She trusts Dad now," he says. "Or else their marriage never would've lasted this long. Everything will work out."

"I just feel so bad. I don't want to force your mom to be uncomfortable. This is her home."

Julien shakes his head. "No. She is doing this for you, Maddie. Because you need your mom here to help you plan for this wedding."

Still, my heart aches when I think about Eden's face today. She looked completely crushed. It's one thing to forgive your husband for his transgressions, it's another to

invite the woman into your home.

“My mother is a strong woman,” Julien says.

He’s right. Eden is strong—probably the strongest woman that I know. She’s a great queen and wife, she’s a great mother to Julien, and she has been a great stepmom to me. I know she can handle anything, I just wish I could somehow make it up to her.

“Enough about my mom.” Julien wiggles his eyebrows. “Let’s talk about your grandfather, who looks young enough to be your dad.”

“What about Grandpa?” I gaze curiously at him.

His smile turns into a smirk. “He’s very, uh, good looking.”

I roll my eyes. “He’s an incubus—of course he’s good looking. You should meet the rest of my perfect family—you’ll see why I don’t fit in.”

“Maddie, Maddie, Maddie,” he says my name as if it pains him to even utter it. “I’ve told you already—you and I look alike. If I call you ugly, I’m calling myself ugly. You and I are hot.”

I gently bump my elbow into his gut. “And you’re so humble too.”

He chuckles. “You have no confidence, I have too much confidence—we balance each other.”

I laugh at his thought process, but I will let him win the argument tonight. “I love you, you know that?”

“What’s not to love?” he teases, but then his smirk turns into something warmer. “I

love you too, Maddie. I'm glad you moved here."

3

RED

I was excited about wedding planning for about five seconds, and then the fighting began.

“Red is an important color to vampires. Every royal wedding is red—it’s tradition,” Queen Rune says, raising her voice as she leans closer to her victim.

Mom doesn’t back down. If anything, Queen Rune raising her voice only makes her more determined to win the argument. “But my daughter’s favorite color is pink. Who cares what your stupid traditions are? This is her wedding, not yours.”

Queen Rune sucks in a sharp breath and puts a hand against her chest. “Well, I have never been talked to so rudely before!”

Mom snorts. “Maybe not to your face. I guarantee with that attitude many people have talked behind your back.”

“Take that back.” Queen Rune takes another step closer.

I glance at Eden. Her eyes have bugged out and she has sunken back into her chair as far as she can get.

I don’t think she is going to help right now.

I'm not sure what to do in this situation. Do I step in and try to get them to stop fighting? And whose side am I supposed to take? I wish Damek were here.

I glance at my phone again, noting that he's five minutes late. He hasn't texted to let me know he was running behind. I hope he's okay.

"I will not take it back." Mom puts her hands on her hips as she stares down my future mother-in-law. "I will not allow somebody like you to push around my daughter."

"I'm not pushing her around, I'm just trying to help her. This is a day she will remember for the rest of her life and it must be perfect," Queen Rune says, defending herself.

I do not doubt that her only worry is for herself and her family—she doesn't care about me. Still, I keep my mouth shut. I can do whatever makes her happy for this wedding, just as long as I don't have to get involved in this argument. I can't stand the bickering and fighting—it's starting to feel like a family dinner back home.

"Madeline, what do you think?" Mom turns to face me.

I think I'd rather be anywhere but here. I open my mouth, then close it. "I, uh... I think maybe we should wait for Damek." I look at the time on my phone again. "He should be here any minute. I'd rather get his input."

I look toward Eden, hoping to get some kind of advice from her.

She leans closer and whispers, "A royal vampire wedding is traditionally red. Since you are half succubus, nobody will think it strange if you decide to do something different."

Eden is too sweet for her own good, as she takes both of their sides.

No, rather I think she's taking my side of things. Whatever I want, I know she'll support me. I would've thought my mom would be the same way, but the way she glares at Queen Rune, I wonder if she will argue against anything she picks.

Uh, why didn't anybody warn me how difficult this would be?

I glance at my phone again and see I have a text from Damek.

Sorry, I'm running late. I'll be there soon.

Of course he's running late. Because he's smart. Why didn't I think of that?

Next time, I vow to be late, even if Queen Rune complains about my tardiness—anything to avoid...

"How dare you suggest that I lack class," Mom says, pointing a finger at Queen Rune. "Have you looked in the mirror lately? Nobody has worn shoulder pads since the eighties."

Queen Rune gasps. "I'm not wearing shoulder pads."

"Oh." Mom blinks slowly. "I didn't realize your shoulders were so wide."

"You take that back." Queen Rune points a finger at my mom.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:00 am

I hide my face in my hands and wish that invisibility was one of my powers. Now that would come in handy.

Eden pats my back, trying to comfort me, but there is no comfort for this. How am I supposed to survive five more months of this until the wedding? Will they fight the entire time? Maybe Damek and I really should just elope. We don't even have to go anywhere, the county courthouse would do. However, I'm not sure that vampires recognize human marriage licenses as legal proof. Human ceremonies are very different from our own.

"Madeline." Mom whirls around to face me. "You need to speak up for yourself. This is your wedding. What do you want?"

I clear my throat, hoping to stall for time—just how late is Damek going to be? "Pink may be my favorite color, but I don't think I want my wedding to be pink. It's not just my wedding, but Damek's too. Maybe we should go with something more traditional."

Queen Rune grins smugly at my mother. "Likered."

Mom stares at me like she can forcibly change my mind with a single look.

"Mom," I say, giving her my best stern look. "Can you try to get along with Queen Rune? She's going to be family, after all."

That takes the smug smile right off Queen Rune's face—the reminder that, yes, this wedding is for her son who is soon going to be married to a succubus.

Five months. I can handle five months.

Right?

My stomach churns with anxiety as I contemplate running away. Australia is nice this time of year—they're going into fall. But I fear even the other side of the hemisphere isn't far enough away.

"Sorry I'm late." I sigh in relief as I turn to watch Damek walk through the doorway. He slips into the chair beside me. "Did I miss anything important?"

"No," Queen Rune and Mom say in synchronization.

Damek glances at me, raising an eyebrow. I sink further down in my seat, wishing for the day to be over.

"Now that we've settled on a color—" Queen Rune begins.

Mom cuts her off. "We didn't settle on a color. My daughter simply said she didn't want pink, but she never said she wanted red."

Damek leans closer to me and whispers as our moms argue. "After we're done here, do you want to go out?"

"Out?" I ask, trying to tune out our moms' arguing, though I do hear my mom say something about 'masculine shoulders.'

Damek also pretends like he can't hear their arguing. "On a date."

My stomach flutters. "You want to go on a date with me?"

He rubs a hand on the back of his head. “Uh, yeah. I mean, if you’re up to it. I know you’re busy since your mom is here, but I figured we should take the time to get to know one another. I know we’re already engaged, but...” his voice trails off.

He’s nervous, I realize.

It’s extremely attractive to see how anxious he is about asking me on a date.

I look up at him through my lashes. “I’d like to go out with you. Maybe we can ditch the wedding planning early.”

Damek chuckles. “Have they been at it long?”

I glance back to where our moms are. They’re both standing again. Queen Rune is looking down her nose at my mom while my mom has both hands on her hips. She’s giving just as much as she’s taking. I don’t want to get involved, so I turn back to Damek and nod.

“Yes, they started arguing about what color scheme our wedding should be right away,” I explain.

“Did you ask your opinion?” Damek raises an eyebrow.

I shrug. “Sort of. Mostly I think they just asked because they wanted me to pick a side—I told them we should wait for you.”

He grins. “I don’t care what color our wedding is. I just plan on showing up in a tux.”

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:00 am

I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. “And I’d prefer to just show up in a dress. Can we elope?”

“Unfortunately, no. Vampire law dictates that multiple clans must be present for a royal wedding to make it legal,” Damek explains.

“I didn’t get that far in my vampire education.” And I likely won’t now, not since Kaine, my advisor, is busy looking for my older brother, Lucien.

“Have there been any leads in finding Lucien?” Damek asks.

I shake my head. “No, but Kaine has a large group scouting different locations. If Lucien is to be found, Kaine is going to find him.”

Which will make Julien happy because if Lucien doesn’t come home soon, Julien is going to have to take over as heir. Even though the wedding is five months away, our clan leaders want Julien to take over duties as heir. Julien is trying to put it off as long as he possibly can. He doesn’t want to be heir and I can’t blame him—I didn’t want the job either.

“They will find him.” Damek takes my hand in his and he laces our fingers together. My body relaxes at the touch.

Since when do I find Damek’s touch so soothing?

When the room quietens, I look up and find Queen Rune studying Damek and me, her eyes squinting. Mom’s face is red as she glares at Queen Rune.

Are they done fighting? Did they decide on a color yet?

“Damek, what do you think about a wedding color?” Mom asks, breaking the silence.

“Do you want to side with your mother, who thinks blood red is appropriate for a wedding, or with Madeline?”

Damek’s mouth opens as he looks between my mom and me.

“I didn’t say I had a problem with red.” I shrug, hoping to show my indifference.

Queen Rune doesn’t grin smugly like I thought she would. Instead, she looks at Damek. I glance at him and see that he’s looking at me.

“Whatever Maddie wants is fine with me.” He grins sweetly. “The wedding is about her, after all.”

I shake my head. “No. It’s your wedding too.”

“And yet nobody will be looking at me on that day—everybody will be looking at you.”

My heart swells at the compliment. Eden and Mom both look at us, tears in their eyes. Queen Rune, however, still stares with an expression that I can’t read.

“Do you need anything else from us?” Damek stands from the chair and tugs me with him. “If not, Maddie and I are going to head out early. We have plans.”

Oh, he is good at avoiding uncomfortable things. From now on, I will make sure I wait for him before I go into any meeting that involves both of our moms.

“Have fun,” Eden says, waving at us.

“But...” Mom says.

It’s too late. Damek and I are already halfway out the door. I sigh in relief as the door shuts behind us.

“That went well,” he says.

I laugh, shaking my head. “It’s not funny, I know it’s not. Our moms hate each other. Is this what planning our wedding is going to be like?”

“No.” He tugs me to a stop. I turn to face him and he looks down at me. “Don’t worry—things will work out, you’ll see. This wedding isn’t about either of our moms, it’s about us. It’s about the future of our clans. My mom knows that and she won’t screw that up. And I imagine your mom won’t either.”

He’s right. I just wish they wouldn’t argue, especially not over silly things like color schemes.

“And you’re sure we can’t just run away and get married?” I ask again.

He grins. “Tempting. If we could, I would. But I argued to give you six months, and we are going to take every advantage of this time to get to know one another.”

I nod. “Yeah, okay. Let’s go out on this date that you have planned.”

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:00 am

He tugs me forward again and I forget all about wedding plans, color schemes, and our fighting mothers.

4

SCANDALOUSLY SHORT

Should holding hands with the guy I'm engaged to make me nervous? Because it does.

I try to consider the emotions and the butterflies. It's not like this is the first time Damek has held my hand—he's kissed me before. But this is the first time we've done anything intimate since we got 'engaged.'

It's still weird to call Damek my fiancé, and even weirder to be engaged without having anybody ask to marry me.

Succubi love big, showy engagements. Usually, when a succubus is getting engaged, there is a party involved, with lots of people coming to watch it happen. I've never liked the idea of having a party like that—it ruins the surprise. But I want to be asked. I want a guy that I love to get down on one knee and propose marriage. I want a ring... something I don't have. Vampires aren't big on engagement rings. They typically only wear them after marriage.

"Are you cold?" Damek asks as he opens the passenger side door of his car for me.

I shake my head. "No. It's nice tonight."

As a hybrid, I feel the temperatures—most vampires don't. It's inconvenient considering my father's clan lives where it gets very cold in the winter and we are up at night. I don't even have the sun to help warm me. When I first came, it was the middle of winter and it was cold. Now that spring has come, it's not quite as cold at night.

When Damek starts the car, I see that the temperature is forty-seven. Maybe it is still cold, but I've gotten used to it. Or maybe forty-seven doesn't seem that cold considering it was single digits when I first came.

"Have you talked to your grandpa since he left?" Damek asks as he drives the car toward town.

"Uh, no. He doesn't talk to me hardly ever. I was surprised when he came with my mom." I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. "Though, I shouldn't be surprised. Succubi and incubi make a big deal out of engagement and marriage. There are always celebrations leading up to the wedding. And I am the first of my cousins to get married."

"None of your other cousins are married?" He sounds surprised.

"No. But I'm one of the oldest. My uncle has a son who is a few months older than me." I turn in my seat so that I can face him. "He's been dating a girl for a couple of years, but I imagine he won't get engaged for a while yet. The rest of my cousins aren't mature enough for marriage yet."

Damek frowns. "It's strange that succubi and incubi date for so long before getting engaged. Vampires are typically together for a couple of months before getting married."

That is why our having a six-month engagement is such a big deal. Scandalously

short for a succubus and long for a vampire.

“I think six months is a good amount of time,” I say in hopes that Damek feels the same.

Damek grins, his eyes meeting mine for a second before he looks back at the road. “Yes, I agree. Six months is perfect for us.”

With his right hand, he reaches across the center console. He holds my hand, lacing our fingers together. This time, it doesn’t feel as uncomfortable.

Since the moment I met Damek, he’s made me very comfortable. We’ve never had to fumble through awkward conversations, so I’m not sure why I thought it would be weird now that we’re engaged.

I think back to all the days we stayed up late, talking on the phone. We never seemed to run out of things to say.

“What are we going to do about our moms?” I relax into the seat, getting more comfortable.

“Let them fight it out,” Damek suggests.

I laugh, shaking my head. “It was horrible. They were fighting over colors—your mom wants red and my mom wants pink.”

“Pink is your favorite color,” he says.

My eyes widen in surprise. “How do you know?”

“You told me once, but it’s also obvious. You always wear pink.” He shrugs like it’s

not a big deal. But it is a big deal. I'm not sure that I know what his favorite color is.

"You're right. But I don't want our wedding to be pink."

"Red is tradition for vampires, which is probably why my mother mentioned it. But we don't have to follow tradition—we wouldn't even be the first to break tradition. In the last ten years or so, vampires have strayed from tradition," he says. "So we can do whatever you want."

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:00 am

“What do you want?” I ask.

He shrugs. “Pink is fine. Red is fine. I don’t care.”

“I wish you would care.” I sigh. “I don’t want our moms fighting over our wedding. I was so excited about wedding planning. I was hoping that Eden and Mom could get to know one another.”

Damek lifts an eyebrow. “You think they’ll get along.”

“I don’t know. Maybe.” I chew on my lip, wondering if I am insane. How could they ever possibly get along? But it would make my life better. I want both of them to be part of my life. And if we don’t get over the awkwardness, every single life event that we celebrate will continue to be awkward. “They are going to spend a lot of time together.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, our wedding is just the beginning. There are holidays and our children’s birthdays...” my voice trails off as I realize I’ve mentioned our future children. Will that scare him off?

We are engaged, but it’s not like this is a typical engagement. This was thrust on him just as much as it was me. Neither of us had a choice.

“We haven’t discussed children yet in our long phone conversations.” Damek stays relaxed, not at all bothered by the mention of children. “How many children do you

want?”

I take a deep breath and slowly exhale. “I don’t know. I do know that it’s lonely to be an only child and meeting Julien is one of the best things that’s ever happened to me. He’s annoying, but I love him. So I definitely want more than one.”

He grins. “By law, we have to have at least two—an heir and a spare.”

“How many children do you want?” I ask.

“I don’t know. I guess that is something we can decide together when the time comes,” he says.

I like the sound of that.

But this conversation makes me realize... Damek and I may have had a lot of late morning phone conversations, but we still have a lot to talk about when it comes to the logistics of being married.

Damek pulls the vehicle into a restaurant. He squeezes my hand before letting it go.

“Will you wait here and let me open the door for you?” he asks.

I nod. “Yeah.”

He grins, revealing dimples, and then he gets out of the car. My heart pounds faster as he makes his way around the vehicle.

The more I get to know Damek, the more I like him. He’s sweet and gentle, but he’s also protective of me. He’s exactly the kind of guy that I said I wanted to find, but I never thought I’d be able to.

He doesn't look down on me for my hybrid blood.

The door opens and Damek holds out a hand to help me out. I accept his hand, putting mine in his. He helps me from the car and leads me inside the restaurant. He gives the hostess our name and we're led to a table at the back of the restaurant. We're seated by a large window that overlooks a lake.

"It's beautiful," I say, looking at the view.

"I knew you'd like it." Damek glances from the window toward me. "You can get here from the Rune estate by boat. We come here a lot in the summer months."

I raise an eyebrow. "But vampires don't feel the cold. Why not use a boat all year round?"

"Less conspicuous." He shrugs. "While some humans know about us, we try not to make it obvious. The less humans know about us, the better."

Ah, of course he's right. "Summer is better for me anyway. I don't think I could stand riding in a boat when it's this cold. But I do look forward to summer. Maybe we can come back then."

"I would like that." He grins at me and then glances at his menu.

Once we order our drinks and food, I look at Damek and try to imagine our future together. I can picture us coming here in the summer months on his boat. A future with Damek doesn't scare me like I thought it would. Instead, I find myself looking forward to the memories we're going to make.

"What are you thinking?" Damek asks.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:00 am

My cheeks grow warm. “Just about the future and what it could look like.”

“And what does the future look like?”

I shrug one shoulder. “Not so bad, especially if our mothers learn to get along.”

He chuckles. “My mother is stubborn, but I know her. Once she gets to know you, she will love you. I know she made a bad first impression, but I promise she won’t always be like that.”

It’s hard to imagine Queen Rune ‘loving’ anybody. Well, except her family. I’ve seen how sweet she can be to her husband and sons. And even though Damek isn’t her son by blood, she treats him as such.

Maybe once she gets to know me, she will consider me family too. But I somehow doubt it, especially since the only time Queen Rune deems to look at me, it’s always through narrowed eyes or an upturned nose. I’m certain my mother didn’t help the situation either.

Still, I will try. For Damek’s sake, as well as my own. I don’t want to be miserable and his mother, as queen of the Rune clan, has the ability to make my life very miserable.

I have learned that she is queen in name only—a consort to King Rune. She doesn’t get to make any decisions and even her son, Duncan, isn’t considered a spare. He’s a prince in name only. And it’s not just because she was his second wife, but it’s mostly because she was human before they married. Her blood is considered weaker.

I've even heard Kaine talk about how turned vampires are weaker, but from what I've witnessed, that's not true.

"I still can't believe you agreed to marry me." Damek plays with the straw of his drink. "Your dad showed my dad all the alliance requests that he had and some of the clans offered a lot more than we did."

I can't hold back my grin. "Oh, well, it was a close call between you and Prince Caedmon."

Damek chuckles, knowing that I'm joking.

"As far as choices went, there wasn't any. There is no competition, Damek. You were it from the moment I met you, even if I didn't realize it then." My cheeks grow warm at my admission. I'm not usually so bold, but I do want Damek to know where I stand.

"That's good." He sits up straighter. "I was disappointed when we met because I knew that we were there for my younger brother. I had never felt like that before. At first, I thought maybe I was drawn to you because you're a succubus, but it is so much more than that. I feel like it was fate for us to meet."

"Yeah, it would've been super awkward if I had gone out with your brother before I met you," I tease.

"You're the only girl I would consider fighting him for," he says in a serious tone. "I really like you, Maddie. I hope you know that. This engagement isn't something that was forced on me. I chose you."

My smile grows into something softer and my body relaxes. "I am glad because I feel the same way about you. I may have chosen to get to know you a little better first, but

I am glad that it's you."

After dinner, Damek and I take a walk along a path behind the restaurant. There is a dock with boats tied to it and we walk to the end of it. I could imagine that this place is nice in the summer months and it makes me excited for the future that Damek was talking about.

I don't dread marrying him like I thought I would, but I'm not sure what that means. Not wanting to consider it, I push the thought aside for later.

Damek holds my hand as we stand at the edge of the dock and when I glance over at him, I see that he's watching me. I start to say something when he takes a step closer to me. Every coherent thought is gone as he leans closer.

We've kissed before, there is nothing new about it, but somehow it feels different tonight. His lips are soft and warm, never pushing too much or asking too much. The kiss makes my stomach knot up and my head spin. Damek puts one hand on the small of my back and his touch feels so warm. I scoot closer to him, stealing his warmth.

My heart pounds embarrassingly fast, but I can hear that Damek's is beating just as fast as mine. I wonder how this kiss makes him feel—is he just as enamored with me? Does he get butterflies? When Damek pulls back, his brown eyes are glowing. I lean into him, letting him take the bulk of my weight. He doesn't say anything, he just wraps an arm around me and tucks my head beneath his chin.

This is bliss. For some reason, I don't completely dread our life together. Damek is the kind of guy I always pictured myself with. He's the kind of guy I thought I'd never meet. I never realized that what I needed was a political engagement.

I think back to conversations I had with my mom—she wanted me to put myself out there and date. When she would mention trying to date a vampire, I would get so mad

at her. But now, I can't remember why I was mad at her. She was right. I did need to try dating a vampire.

We stay like that for a long time, just enjoying one another's company. When it's time to leave, I'm a little disappointed that the night is already over. I want to spend more time with Damek and get to know him better.

As if reading my mind, Damek says, "We will do this again soon. I want to make us a priority."

"I would like that."

He opens the passenger side door for me. Before I can get in, he grabs my hand to stop me. I look up at him and he bends down to give me the softest of kisses.

"Sorry, I just had to," he says.

I grin. "Had to?"

"Don't you ever just have to do something?" His thumb gently caresses my cheek. "With you, I can't help myself."

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:00 am

“I don’t mind.” I chew on my bottom lip. “I encourage it.”

His smile widens, revealing his dimples. “I should get you home before Julien complains that you’re late for curfew.”

5

ARE YOU HAPPY?

Damek drives me back to the estate after our date. Like a gentleman, he walks me to the door to kiss me goodnight, or, er, good morning. Hearing our arrival, my mom invites Damek inside for something ‘warm’ to drink. Unable to refuse her request, he ends up in the sitting room beside me with a warm latte in his hand. He looks between my mom and me, likely baffled by the position.

“You’re a sweet boy.” Mom takes a seat on the couch across from us.

I blink, wondering why she’s calling Damek—a twenty-five-year-oldman—a ‘boy.’

“I know you’ll take good care of Madeline once you two are married,” she continues, not at all put off by the baffled look on my face.

Damek wiggles in his seat, looking uncertainly at my mom.

She grins, standing up. “Ah, you two want to be alone. I get it—I was young once too.” She cackles at her own joke. “Don’t stay up too late. We have more wedding planning tonight.”

I look at Damek as she walks from the room.

“Is she always so...” his voice trails off.

I take a sip of my latte. “Uh, she’s always been exuberant. I think she’s just excited over the fact that I’m getting married soon, which to her equates with grandchildren. My mother has been bugging me about it since I graduated college a couple of years ago.”

Damek’s lips turn up in one corner. “Ah, so she approves of me?”

I nod, confirming. “Not only does she approve, but I’m pretty sure she loves you. Maybe more than she loves me.”

Damek puts his cup down on the coffee table, so I do the same. It’s too late to be drinking caffeine, even if this is the time I used to have to get up to make it to work on time. I don’t miss those days.

He scoots closer to me. “I probably should go home.”

I look up at him through my lashes. “You could stay a little longer.”

He leans closer, but before his lips can touch mine, the sound of a throat clearing has us both pulling back. I glance into the doorway and spot Kaine standing there with his arms crossed over his chest.

I haven’t seen Kaine in a few weeks, not since he left on his search to find Lucien.

Damek and I both stand from the couch.

“When did you get back?” Damek asks.

Kaine rubs a hand on the back of his neck. “About an hour ago.”

“Any news on Prince Lucien?” Damek puts his hand on the small of my back. A small gesture I’m not even sure he’s aware of.

I scoot the tiniest bit closer to him and Kaine’s eyes zero in on me. “No, nothing yet.” He shifts his gaze back to Damek. “But we’re not giving up hope. We’ll find Lucien.”

If anybody is going to find Lucien, it’ll be Kaine. I know he’s finally doing what he’s wanted to do since Lucien’s disappearance. He never wanted to be stuck babysitting me.

Damek turns to face me. “I really should go. It’s getting late and your mother is right—we have to get up early tonight.”

The fact that he considers five PM ‘early’ nearly makes me laugh.

Now that spring has come, the sun is staying up longer. It stays lighter later in the day and even vampires see the sun in the summer months.

“I’ll see you tonight,” I tell him.

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:00 am

He bends over and kisses me on the lips—it's just a quick kiss, but it still causes my heart to race. He says goodbye to Kaine and he's out the door.

I look at Kaine who is watching me. I wonder what he's thinking as he tilts his head to the side to study me.

"You seem happy." Kaine takes a step closer.

"I am." I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. "Damek is a really good guy. And I like him more than I thought possible when I first heard I had to marry a prince."

"I'm not surprised." He takes a deep breath before continuing. "Prince Damek is a good choice. The two of you fit well together. If I hadn't been so smitten with you, I would've seen it that first night. I made a lot of mistakes with you."

"Mistakes?" I ask.

"By forcing you to go out with all the princes. It made you miserable. I'm sorry about that," Kaine says.

I shrug. "It's okay. I don't regret those dates, even if they sucked. Now I know that Damek is the perfect choice—theonlychoice."

Kaine nods. "Good. I'm glad that you're happy."

"Are you?" I take a step closer to him. "Happy, I mean."

He hesitates before saying, “I’m fine, Princess Madeline. Don’t worry about me.”

But I do worry about him. I worry that he’s miserable. And if he is miserable, I worry that he will keep it to himself.

Did I hurt Kaine? And if I did, what can I do to make things better?

“You can’t stop me from worrying about you,” I say.

His face softens. “Princess Madeline, I’m fine.”

“Just Madeline,” I tell him.

He starts to object. “No, I—”

I cut him off. “Yes. You can call me Madeline—or even Maddie—when it’s just us. I know you have to call me by a title in public, but I consider you a friend.”

He sighs. “You don’t make things easy for me.”

I shrug one shoulder, a grin tugging at my lips. “When have I ever made things easy for you?”

“True.” He smiles back, but it quickly fades as he takes a step around me. He starts to walk toward his office, so I follow him.

“You’re working late,” I comment, as I pace beside him.

He glances over at me, raising an eyebrow. “I often work late, but I’m only here for today. We’re leaving again tonight to try a few different locations and I have some work I need to get done. I’ll sleep on the plane.”

I frown, not liking the sound of that. Is Kaine getting any rest? Or is he doing what he always does and throwing himself into his work?

“Do you think you’re close to finding Lucien?” I ask.

“I think so.” He opens the door to the office and flicks on the light. He motions for me to walk in first. “At one location, we found evidence that Lucien had been there. Now that we know who has him, it’s only a matter of time.” Kaine sits in his seat behind his desk, so I take a seat across from him.

“Is there anything I can do to help?” I ask, worrying my bottom lip between my teeth.

He shakes his head. “No. You have duties here.”

“Lucien is my brother—there is nothing more important than family,” I protest. “Besides, I already promised you that I would help find him.”

“And you did help.” Kaine offers me a smile. “Without you, we’d still be in the dark. It’s because of you that we found out the Nodin Clan were the ones holding Lucien. I’d probably still be looking into the Rune Clan if it weren’t for you.”

Page 15

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:00 am

I absently run my hand along the arm of the chair. “I would feel a lot better if Lucien were here. I know that I’ve never met him, but I feel like we need him. He’s the one who trained for this, not Julien and me.”

Kaine snorts. “Julien as heir would be a disaster.”

I don’t know about that. I happen to think Julien could make a great ruler, but he doesn’t want this and I can’t blame him. I didn’t want to be queen. Yet, here I am, engaged to Prince Damek. I’m destined to be queen one way or another, even if it’s in name only.

“Julien may surprise you.” I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. “I think he’d do a better job than I would.”

“Not a chance,” Kaine says. “You are going to make an incredible queen one day. I’m glad that you’re marrying Prince Damek. The Scott Clan needs this alliance with the Rune Clan—they offer so much to us, the most important thing being protection. After your marriage, nobody will dare come after us again.”

That is a relief. I do want my family and my clan to be safe.

But that isn’t why I chose Damek.

I don’t bring it up because I get the feeling that Kaine isn’t ready to hear about it and I don’t want to hurt him any more than I already have.

I stand up from my chair. “I’m going to head to bed. Don’t stay up all day, okay?”

He smirks. “I’ll be fine. Good morning, Madeline.”

I grin when he doesn’t use my title. “Good morning, Kaine.”

I turn and leave his office, heading for my bedroom.

Things with Kaine are complicated, but I have hope that they won’t always be. Someday, the two of us will be friends again. And Kaine is going to find an incredible woman who is worthy of him. He was wrong when he said he didn’t deserve to marry a princess—he deserves it more than anybody I know.

As I get to my door, I notice that Julien’s door is open. I stick my head through the doorway.

“You’re up late,” I comment.

Julien spins around to face me. He’s holding a very large book in his hand. I recognize the title.

‘Vampire Succession, Volume II,’ I read.

“Are you studying vampire law books?” I raise an eyebrow at him.

He rubs his eyes with his free hand. “Unfortunately. Do you think you could temporarily call off your engagement to Damek? Just until Lucien is found. Because Dad is insisting I read up on vampire law, just in case. And this stuff is so boring.”

I grin. “Sorry, little brother.”

He groans. “It’s okay. I know you actually like Damek. It gives me hope that someday I will marry somebody I like, though it’s doubtful considering my marriage will be

politically motivated.”

“Does it have to be?” I lean against the doorframe. “Since I’m marrying into the Rune Clan, can’t you marry who you want? Once Lucien is back, you’re the third born. You won’t even be the spare.”

Julien purses his lips as he considers my words. “Maybe. I’ll read this.” He holds up his book. “I know some families try to offer their third child up for political marriages, but if I can wiggle out of it, I will.”

“Good luck,” I tell him. Though I don’t imagine he needs it. Julien is the charismatic one. No matter who he marries, I believe he will be happy.

Still, I hope he is as happy as I am with Damek. The only thing that could make it better was if I loved him. I’m not there yet.

“Do you think it’s possible to fall in love with somebody you’re arranged to marry?” I ask Julien.

His gaze snaps to me. “Are you asking if I think you will fall in love with Damek?”

I want to deny it, but it’s very clear who I’m walking about. I clear my throat, “Yes.”

Julien takes a step closer to me. “From where I stand, you’re already half in love with him. The two of you spend half the morning talking on the phone instead of sleeping.”

My cheeks grow warm. “You knew?”

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:00 am

“The whole estate knows.” He points at his ears. “Vampire hearing is a thing. Sometimes, I can hear you laughing through the walls. Plus, the staff likes to gossip.”

“Oh.” I lower my head, hiding my pink cheeks.

Julien starts to say something else, but my phone starts ringing. I glance at the screen and see Damek’s name popup.

Julien chuckles. “Go talk to your fiancé, but don’t stay up too late.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I grumble. “Good morning, Julien.”

“Morning,” he says, as I make my way across the hallway and answer my phone.

I can’t help but wonder if Julien is right. Am I already half way in love with Damek?

6

SUCCUBI ARE PICKY

Today, I will be smart and ‘accidentally’ show up late.

Queen Rune is coming to the Scott household today to discuss wedding plans. She has multiple staff members that she’s put in charge of, but we have to decide a few things—like color.

Uh, I don’t even care at this point. If I say red, Mom will be mad. If I say anything

else, Queen Rune will be upset.

I don't think red is a bad color for a wedding. And if it's tradition for the vampires, I don't have a problem with it. I want to observe traditions from both succubi and vampires, as I am both.

I sip on my latte slowly while I consider my options.

If I angered my mother, she'd be unbearable for a few days, but she would eventually come around, especially if I explained my reasoning to her. Queen Rune, on the other hand, doesn't like me. She has gotten better since Damek spoke with her, but she's got a grudge against me. If I side with my mother, it'll only make things worse. And since I don't want my future mother-in-law to hate me...

Or, I could just let the two of them fight it out. I don't have to get involved at all. I can sit back and let them make all the decisions. I know no matter who gets their way, Mom or Queen Rune, my wedding will be beautiful.

I hear footsteps and I tense as I turn around. I relax when I see it's just Damek.

He lifts an eyebrow, looking at his watch. "You're late."

"Oh, am I?" I take a sip of my latte to hide my grin.

He chuckles. "Learned that lesson, did you?"

I put down my cup. "Yes. I have decided I'll just let my mom and your mom fight it out. They don't need me there for that."

"What about what you want?" Damek asks.

I shrug. “I’m a succubus—my mother has been planning my wedding since I was born.”

“Weddings are important to succubi?”

“Yes. Very important.” I slowly inhale, wondering how to explain my culture to Damek. “Succubi and incubi are extremely picky when it comes to dating. When a couple decides to get married, it’s a huge deal. Everybody celebrates the union of the couple. Weddings aren’t just a one ceremony thing—it’s something that lasts for many days. It’s a celebration for family and friends.”

“Succubi are picky?” Damek perks up.

I nod. “Extremely.”

He takes a step closer. “And you’re sure you want to marry me?”

My cheeks grow warm. “Yes.”

His face brightens. “Do you want a multi-day celebration for our wedding?”

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:00 am

“No,” I admit. “I rather like the short ceremony that vampires have. From what I understand, the ceremony lasts less than ten minutes, yes?”

“Vampires are impatient. But before the ceremony, there are celebrations. We’ll have dinner with everybody and people will bring us celebratory gifts. After the wedding, we will leave for our honeymoon.” Damek’s cheeks turn red at his admission.

“So why is Queen Rune making such a big deal about our ceremony, if it only last ten minutes?” I ask.

“Because every clan leader is invited. There will also be leaders of other supernatural races attending our wedding. My father is good friends with King Basilicus.”

I suck in a sharp breath.

The dragon king will be at our wedding?

“He’s also reached out to King Elwin Krishorn and I imagine an invitation will be sent to them, though who knows if they will accept,” Damek continues, like he’s not naming off some of the most powerful supernaturals in our time.

King Elwin is an elf, a species once believed to be dead. A couple of years ago, it was revealed that they were very much alive.

“And I’m certain your family will be there too,” he says.

It takes me a few moments to realize he’s talking about my incubi and succubi

family. I nod slowly. “Yes, they will come. I imagine all of my aunts, uncles, and first cousins will be here. Maybe a few second and third cousins as well.”

“How many cousins do you have?” Damek asks.

“I haven’t counted in a while,” I admit. “But I know I have more than one hundred first cousins.”

Damek’s eyes widen as he stares at me in shock. “You have over one hundred first cousins?”

I raise an eyebrow, surprised that he’s surprised. “Incubi and succubi like to procreate.”

He coughs.

I laugh, realizing how strange my family must seem to Damek.

“Do you know all of your cousins?” he asks.

I nod. “Of course. We get together multiple times a year with the whole family, but I grew up seeing some of them every day. And I worked with some of my cousins too...” My voice trails off as I realize that Damek is going to be meeting my cousins—all of them.

“Hey, are you okay?” Damek puts his hand on my arm.

I chew on my bottom lip. “Yeah, I’m okay. I just realized you’re going to meet my family. You know that I’m the only hybrid, right?”

He raises an eyebrow. “It’s crazy that out of that many family members, you’re the

only hybrid. Even I have a couple of hybrid cousins and my family isn't very big."

"I just mean that my female cousins are succubi. And they're really pretty." I glance away from Damek.

He takes a step closer. "I told you, I've met succubi before. None of them have ever held any kind of appeal to me. You're the first woman I've ever had serious feelings for."

Serious feelings...

Could Damek possibly be falling for me?

"As much as I'd love to keep stalling, my mom has texted me five times in the last three minutes asking where we are." Damek frowns at his phone.

I groan. "Are you sure we shouldn't just let them fight it out? They can stress over the planning and we can just show up."

"Tempting." Damek grabs ahold of my hand and together we head toward one of my dad's conference rooms where our moms are waiting for us. The only reason I don't refuse to go is because I know Eden is also there and I don't want to leave her to deal with Mom and Queen Rune on her own.

When we walk inside, I hear the familiar argument of our moms fighting over colors. They don't even pause when Damek and I walk in, they just keep on yelling at one another. Eden is sitting at the table with her hands folded on her lap. She has her head down like she's trying to make herself as invisible as possible. Knowing Mom and Queen Rune, I'm sure they've tried to drag her in on their argument.

"Damek, what color do you want?" Queen Rune turns to face her son.

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:00 am

He shrugs. “I don’t have an opinion.”

“Madeline?” She turns her gaze to me.

I glance at my mom for a second, then I look down. “Red is tradition for the vampires, so it’s fine with me as succubi don’t have color traditions.”

Damek squeezes my hand to try to encourage me.

I take a deep breath and look at my mom. She is frowning as she studies me—maybe she wants to make sure I’m not being ‘bullied’ into choosing red.

“Mom,” I say softly. “I know that I’m a succubus, but I’m also a vampire. I want to embrace this half of me.”

She nods. “Okay.” She then turns to face Queen Rune. “Now that the color is settled, we should talk about the ceremony.”

Queen Rune narrows her eyes. “What about the ceremony? It will be a traditional vampire wedding ceremony.”

“As my daughter said, she’s onlyhalfvampire. She is also half succubus. Succubi have a lot of traditions that need to be followed. Such as—” she begins, going off on a long tangent about what is ‘traditional.’

The longer she speaks, the redder Queen Rune’s face becomes.

Damek gently caresses the top of my hand with his thumb, which is when I realize that I am squeezing his hand tightly. I loosen my grip.

“Sorry,” I say softly, not wanting to interrupt my mother’s very long, and clearly rehearsed, speech.

He grins and softly responds, “I’m okay with any succubi traditions you want to follow.”

I shake my head. “I don’t want a wedding that lasts multiple days. I like the one day ceremony that vampires have. There are a few traditions I’d like to keep, but I am fine with a vampire wedding.”

The room goes quiet and I realize that I wasn’t speaking so softly anymore.

“If that is what you want,” Mom says, giving me a curt nod. “But you know all the family will want to be here.”

“Of course.” I tuck my hair behind my ear.

“And just how many people are you thinking of inviting?” Queen Rune says as her assistant opens her notebook. “I believe we have two hundred extra seats—”

Mom cuts her off. “Two hundred won’t even cover our immediate family. No, that simply isn’t enough.”

And just like that, the two of them start arguing again.

I groan and cover my face with my hands.

Is this what my life is going to be like from this point forward? My mom and

Damek's mom fighting over every little thing? I can just imagine our children's birthday parties being ruined by their arguments. Just thinking about it gives me a headache.

Queen Rune abruptly stands, her chair making a loud noise and it rubs against the floor. She points a finger at my mother, raising her voice. My mom, not to be outdone, also stands and starts yelling back. While the two of them are screaming at one another, I push myself up from the table and exit the room as quietly as I can. Neither of them notice, they're too busy fighting to notice anything else.

I lean against the wall and take a deep breath, trying to calm my racing heart and mind. When the door opens, I flinch, looking up. I relax when I see Damek walk out.

"Are you okay?" He walks up to me, never taking his eyes away from mine.

I shrug.

"You're not... regretting this, are you?"

I let out a long breath and shake my head. "No. I don't regret you, Damek. I just wish our moms got along better."

"I'm sorry. I'll talk to my mom—"

I cut him off. "No, it's not just your mom. It's my mom too. They're both at fault here. I'm not asking you to take a side—there is no right side."

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:00 am

“I’m onyourside.” Damek puts his hands on my shoulders. “Always yours, Maddie.”

My heart melts as I look into his brown eyes. They glow in the way that vampire eyes always seem to glow.

“You’re really beautiful,” he says.

“Me?” I lick my lips as I look into his eyes. “You’re one to talk. When I mentioned you to Julien, he told me all the vampire girls want to date you.”

He scoffs. “Because I’m a prince.”

I raise an eyebrow. “I don’t care if you’re a prince—I just like you.”

He grins. “Maybe that’s why I like you so much. You’ve never cared about titles. You proved that the night we met when you punched me.”

“You know I didn’t mean to do that.”

“I know.” He takes a step closer, making me look up to meet his eyes. “I had never been so bummed because I thought you were dating Kaine. I connected with you that first night. After our conversation, I was about ready to tell my dad to put in an offer for me instead of Duncan.”

“I’m glad my punch didn’t scare you off.”

He leans closer. “It only made me want to date you more.”

Before I can respond, his lips gently touch mine. He kisses me softly and any thoughts of our fighting mothers and wedding planning cease.

This is right. What is happening between Damek and me feels like fate. I'm not going to let anything come between us.

His hand cups my cheek and I feel his thumb caress the side of my jaw. My body melts into his.

7

AN HONOR

I look in the mirror at myself, hating my insecurities, but unable to stop criticizing everything about myself. It's like I've lost every bit of self confidence I gained while with the vampires.

Coming to my grandfather's castle was a mistake.

My stomach churns as I think about all my cousins who are arriving for my engagement party. What happens when they inevitably try to use their charms on Damek? What happens when he realizes that I'm not the great woman he thinks of me as?

There is a knock on the door, so I step away from the mirror. It's too late to second guess if this dress was a good choice. When I open the door, Damek stands on the other side. He looks handsome as always as he plays with his cufflinks. His eyes widen when he sees me.

“Wow. You look—”

I cut him off. “I should change, shouldn’t I? This dress is unflattering.”

I turn around to do just that when Damek puts a hand on my shoulder to stop me. I hesitantly turn around to face him as he shuts the door to my room.

“What I was going to say is that you look beautiful.” He takes a step closer to me, but I don’t look up to meet his gaze.

He’s just saying that because he’s supposed to. Damek is a good guy. No matter how he feels about me after seeing my gorgeous female cousins, he will go through with this marriage because he feels obligated.

Damek cups my chin with his fingers and gently nudges my head up so that I’m looking at him.

“I never would’ve agreed to this engagement party if I realized how much this was going to hurt you,” he says softly. “Rest assured that you are the most beautiful woman I have ever met, but it’s not just the way you look. It’s you. We just fit together. If vampires had soulmates, you would be mine. I choose you, Maddie. Do you understand?”

I nod slowly, his words causing my heart to double in speed.

Does Damek really think that much about me? It doesn’t feel real. I never thought any guy could love me, not when my cousins are so much better.

“I’m not the kind of girl an incubus would want to take home to their parents. My grandfather may be king, but I’m a hybrid.” I chew on my bottom lip.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:00 am

“And I already told you how I feel about hybrids. Though I may be partial to hybrids, but only because my fiancé is one.” He gives me a pointed look. “Say the word and we will leave. I don’t care if we anger the incubus king. All I care about is your happiness and it’s clear you’re unhappy here.”

He would leave forme. He doesn’t care about impressing my grandfather, he only cares about how I feel.

Maybe Damek is right about the soulmate thing because he would definitely be mine.

Still, an ugly part of me wonders if he will feel this way after he meets my cousins.

Damek looks at his watch. “We should probably head down there.”

I reach for his wrist and gently nudge his arm up so I can see the time. If we left now, we’d be five minutes early.

I shake my head. “Vampires may arrive on time, but succubi and incubi don’t. My cousins take arriving fashionably late to a new level.”

Besides, the less time we spend with them, the better.

“I was just thinking the earlier we arrive, the sooner we can leave,” he says.

“Good point.” I walk toward the door. “Most of my cousins will arrive an hour late, so let’s get out there before they start arriving. If we’re lucky, we can leave before Henry gets here.”

“Henry?” Damek asks as he chases after me.

I’m walking at double speed toward the ballroom. Damek’s idea is a good one—why didn’t I think of it years ago? Though, to be fair, I did skip out early ninety percent of the time anyway.

Damek uses his vampiric speed to catch up with me. He grabs my hand and tugs me so I walk at a slower pace.

“Who is Henry?” Damek asks. “Is he an ex-boyfriend or something?”

I laugh.

He looks at me expectantly.

“You remember I told you I’ve only been on one date,” I remind him. “When I was sixteen.”

“Yeah, but you can’t be serious. You’re so pretty—there is no way you weren’t asked out every week by an incubus,” he says.

His words are so sweet, even if they’re completely ridiculous.

“I am glad you think so,” I say, pausing at the top of the stairs that lead to the ballroom. “Henry isn’t an ex. He’s my cousin. His hobbies include making fun of me and ensuring that my life is as miserable as possible. I’m hoping I can avoid introducing you to him.”

Damek’s jaw flexes and he gets a determined look in his eyes. “Introduce me to him. I will kill him.” He heads down the stairs, pulling me with him.

“You’re joking, right?” I ask.

He doesn’t respond.

Certainly he is joking. There is no way he would actually kill my cousin.

“Henry isn’t worth the trouble killing him would cause,” I say to reassure him. “I never take anything he says seriously.”

“I told you already, I will not allow anybody to mistreat you.” He stops at the bottom of the stairs and turns to face me. “Protecting you from your cousins is worth any political incident it would cause.”

As I look at Damek, all I can do is pray that he doesn’t fall for any of my female cousins’ charms. Because I am falling for him so hard.

“There you two are.”

I turn when I hear my grandfather’s voice.

“You look beautiful, Madeline.” He steps closer to us. He nods to Damek. “You look nice as well, Prince Damek. I dare say your looks would rival any incubus here tonight. It’s easy to see why my granddaughter chose you.”

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:00 am

He thinks I chose Damek because of the way he looks? Does he not get that looks are the least of my concerns when it comes to choosing the man I want to spend the rest of my life with? Yes, Damek is gorgeous, but he's so much more than that.

"I like Damek for a lot of reasons and the way he looks ranks far down on the list." I link my arm through Damek's. "Good evening, Grandpa."

"Good evening. I am glad you and your prince could come." Grandpa smiles at me. "Are you two ready?"

Do I have a choice?

"We're ready," Damek answers for me. "By the way, do you think you could introduce me to Henry?"

Grandpa pauses, looking from Damek to me. His lips turn up in the corners. "Henry can't make it tonight. He's out of the country."

I let out a long breath, my shoulders loosening.

Damek huffs. "I guess I'll see him at our wedding."

Grandpa shrugs. "Possibly. He may be out of the country for a while."

I get the feeling he's 'out of the country' on purpose.

"You should've sent him out of the country a few years ago," I mumble under my

breath too low for my grandfather to hear.

Damek smirks at me.

When we get to the double doors that lead inside, a couple of guards open for us. They bow to Grandpa and nod to Damek and me.

I tighten my grip on Damek's arm and nearly stop walking when I see how crowded it is.

Did all of my cousins decide to show up early tonight?

Grandpa leans over and whispers to me, "I told them it started an hour early. I didn't want anybody to be late. Tonight is your night." He winks at me and then turns around to address the crowd. I don't make out a word of his speech because my heart is pounding so fast and hard.

So much for avoiding my cousins.

What was I thinking by agreeing to this? I should turn around and leave right now. I shouldn't be here.

Damek leans closer and whispers, "Say the word and we will leave."

I force myself to take a deep breath.

I can do this. It's one night. And when the night is over, I'll be going home.

Since when have I considered my home with the vampires? If I'm being honest, it was the very first night I arrived with my dad and met Julien. Being engaged to Damek only solidified it for me.

“I can do this,” I say low enough that only Damek will hear me.

The crowd around us claps and we follow Grandpa further into the room. The crowd parts for us and it feels strange to be the center of attention, at least here in my grandfather’s castle.

Long rectangular tables line the back wall. At my grandfather’s command, we approach them for dinner. My stomach is in knots, so I’m unsure if I’ll be able to eat anything.

Like the prince he is, Damek pulls out my chair for me. I notice my female cousins watching with calf-like eyes. Pulling out chairs, opening doors, and being a gentleman aren’t part of our culture. I wonder why because it’s so nice. I could get used to this.

When we sit down, Damek holds my hand and he watches me. Even surrounded by beautiful succubi, it’s like he only has eyes for me.

Being chosen is an unfamiliar feeling. I never imagined that any man could pick me over another succubus. I’ve always felt inadequate. But with Damek, I don’t feel those things. I feel so seen.

Is a political engagement supposed to feel like this? Because it feels like we’re seriously courting. It feels like I’m introducing a man that I love to my family. And even though we’re not there yet, we’re not in love, I feel pretty close to it.

My stomach twists for an entirely different reason. It’s not nerves. It’s butterflies.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:00 am

I have a crush on Damek. And from the way he watches me with those brown eyes that seem to glow, I don't have to question if he feels the same. I know he does.

The moment is ruined when my cousin, Eleanor, leans across the table and flashes Damek a grin that I'm certain most men can't resist. "It's so nice to meet the man who was able to tempt our homely cousin. She's never had a man interested in her before." She winks at him. "I hope you're not too tempted by all of her succubi cousins."

Damek's nostrils flare. He takes a deep breath before responding. "Quite the contrary, every vampire clan wanted Madeline. I'm honored that she chose me." He kisses me on the cheek.

Eleanor's smile slips off her face, but she forces it back. "That's great to hear." She sits back in her seat, her mood somber.

I don't believe Eleanor has ever been turned down before. It must be hard on her ego.

"You must forgive my granddaughters, Prince Damek," Grandpa says. "My granddaughters don't interact much with other supernaturals."

Damek clenches his jaw. "Is that why hybrids, specifically Maddie, are treated so poorly?"

Grandpa grins. "Ah, young love. It's so beautiful to witness."

After dinner, the evening is only 'just beginning.' A string quartet starts playing a

familiar tune and the guests, of whom are almost all related to me, begin dancing. Damek is asked by no less than five of my cousins for a dance. Even while we are dancing, multiple cousins offer to ‘rescue’ him from me. For some reason, I think they’d like to rescue him from more than just dancing.

“I don’t mind if you want to dance with any of my cousins,” I tell him. It’s a lie, but I don’t want him to feel guilty if he wants to dance with them. I know exactly how alluring a succubus can be.

“I don’t even want to be in the same room as your cousins,” Damek says through gritted teeth.

I stare at him in disbelief.

He actually means that.

I can hardly believe it as I look up at him.

He tightens his grip around my waist. “You don’t believe them, do you? You can’t think that your cousins are more... alluring... or more beautiful than you.”

“Of course I believe that.” I lower my head, not wanting to look into his eyes. I felt so confident when the night began and he was watching me, but after all of my cousins came up to us, I feel less confident.

Damek deserves somebody great because he is great. He deserves a lot more than a hybrid.

One hand leaves my waist and he gently puts his finger under my chin and nudges it up so that I’m looking at him. His brown eyes are glowing in the dim light of the room. All of his attention and focus is on me.

“I promise you, your cousins who are fully succubi don’t hold a candle to you.” Damek rests his forehead against mine. “Sometimes when I look at you, I can’t believe that I get to marry you. It still doesn’t feel real. I don’t deserve you. But, somehow, you chose me. Yes, I chose you. But make no mistake, you were the one with all the alliance options.”

I open my mouth, then close it.

I know Damek’s father had many alliance opportunities before me. But he’s right. I did choose him. We chose each other. My cousins can flirt all they want, but Damek is mine.

We dance for a while longer before stepping off the the side for a drink. When I spot Violet and Olivia making their way through the crowd, my entire body stiffens.

I was hoping I could get a break for a few minutes. I should’ve known better though. My cousins have been ruthless their whole life when it comes to me and tonight is no exception to that rule.

“Madeline, why don’t you introduce us to your betrothed.” Violet wiggles her eyebrows.

“Yeah, introduce us,” Olivia repeats, her voice low and sultry. I’ve heard her use this tone when trying to impress a guy.

I take a deep breath. “This is my fiancé, Prince Damek. Damek, this is Violet and Olivia.” I point at each of them as I introduce them to Damek. “We used to work together for my grandfather.”

“We’re just so thrilled that our cousin was able to get engaged, especially with her looks,” Olivia says.

“Try not to be too put off by her ugly appearance. She has a great personality.” Violet winks at me like she’s paying me a compliment.

Olivia steps closer to Damek, putting her hand on his bicep. “Nobody would blame you if you wanted to break off the engagement after meeting a real succubus.”

Damek yanks his arm free and takes a step back.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:00 am

Olivia's eyes widen like she's surprised by his movement.

Damek completely turns his back to Olivia and Violet. He steps between my cousins and me and he kisses me right on the lips. I'm so stunned that it takes me a few seconds before I remember to kiss him back.

Succubi and incubi are no strangers to public displays of affection—it's quite common to see couples kissing and holding hands. I'm not surprised that Damek has caught onto this, but I know he's not kissing me for any other reason than to show my cousins where he stands, and that's with me.

When Damek pulls back, we are both breathing hard. I barely notice Olivia and Violet standing behind him, their mouths hanging open. The room has grown quiet—even the musicians have stopped playing.

The sound of a throat clearing has me turning.

"Prince Damek, I believe you had something you wanted to say?" Grandfather steps up beside us.

Damek nods as my grandfather hands him a cordless microphone. He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a small notecard—maybe it has a speech on it. But he looks at the paper, shakes his head, and then stuffs it back into his pants. He takes a deep breath and then holds the microphone up to his mouth and begins speaking.

"When King Bennett invited us here tonight, I wasn't sure what to expect. I've met succubi and incubi before, but I've never observed your culture up close. And I must

admit, I am disappointed,” he begins.

The room is so quiet now that you could hear a pin drop.

“I’m disappointed because for a species so obsessed with class, you are classless. The way you treat Maddie is disgusting. You call her ugly when she is the most beautiful one of you all.” Damek clenches his jaw as he speaks in a harsh tone that I’ve never heard from him before. “I am so proud to be marrying Madeline. I will be proud to call her my wife in a few short months. And if any of you dare speak ugly about her again, you can disregard any wedding invitations that are sent. Your princess is going where she will be appreciated and loved. She will be a queen.”

He passes me microphone back to my grandfather who takes it.

Everybody stares at Damek and I look up at him with a full heart.

Does he really mean all of that? But when he looks at me, I can see it. I know it’s the truth. He gives me another mind blowing kiss. Somebody behind us starts clapping—I’m pretty sure it’s my grandfather—but I ignore it as I kiss my fiancé.

When I moved in with my father and learned that I would have to choose a husband based on his political ties, I never expected to find anybody like Damek. I thought I would be marrying because of duty. But marrying him isn’t a chore. It’s an honor.

8

GOING HOME

Getting on the plane to head home is significantly nicer this time around.

I consider my dad’s estate ‘home’ now. Before, I wasn’t certain I was going to stay. I

mostly wanted to come to meet Julien and see what life would be like living with vampires. I was only on the plane with just my father, who I barely knew. This time, I'm with Damek. My fiancé.

It hasn't been that long since that first plane ride, but so much has changed. I'm not the same girl I was back then.

Damek holds my hand, something he's been doing with great frequency since my cousins started in their petty insults.

He squeezes my hand. "You're really quiet."

I scoot in my seat so that I can angle myself toward him. "I'm just wondering when you're going to run away."

"Run away?" He cocks an eyebrow.

"My family is," I let out a sigh, "dysfunctional. Or maybe it's just new who makes them like that. You saw how they are with me. I figured you wouldn't want anything to do with me after that."

He shakes his head. "Your family..." his voice trails off and he hesitates like he's not sure what to say. "Your family sucks. They're downright rude to you. Your grandfather just puts up with it and your mom..." he shakes his head. "Where was your mom during our engagement party?"

"Mom has always been good at hiding." It's a needed skill in a family like mine.

"The point is, I'm not ever going to run away from you." Damek's voice grows softer. "Was it always like that?"

“I was an easy target.” I lower my head, not wanting to see his reaction. “I’m the one who is different. I’m the hybrid. Everybody else has a succubus mom and an incubus dad. And I know I’m not as pretty as my cousins, though it was sweet of you to stand up for me.” I finally dare to look into his eyes. “Thank you for that. Nobody has ever said such sweet things about me before.”

Damek runs his free hand through his hair. “That was messed up. You know it’s not normal, right? I don’t make fun of my hybrid cousins because they’re only half vampire.”

“Vampires are different than succubi and incubi.” I shrug, hoping to show him it’s not a big deal—even if it is. I’ve always hated the way I was treated. All I’ve ever wanted is to belong.

Page 24

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:00 am

He continues like I didn't even speak. "As for you saying they're prettier than you, that is a downright lie. Your cousins have nothing on you. You're so beautiful, Maddie. They're just jealous, that's the only explanation for their behavior."

The thought of my gorgeous succubi cousins being jealous of me is enough to almost make me laugh. But the way Damek looks at me...

Is he serious?

I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. "But I'm only—"

He cuts me off. "Half succubus, yes. But you're far more charming and charismatic than your cousins."

My breath gets caught in my throat.

He's saying that after meeting them. And he doesn't seem like he's just trying to make me feel better. It's almost like he genuinely means the words.

But... how? How could he possibly feel that way after meeting them? They're so beautiful and perfect. I'm the one with flaws.

"You're surprised." Damek studies me and shakes his head slightly. "I wish you could see yourself the way I see you." He pauses. "Someday, you will."

"I will?" I ask.

He nods. “Once we get married and we have a mate bond, I will be able to share my thoughts and feelings with you.”

Oh, right.

My cheeks grow warm at the thought of that.

“There is something I want to talk to you about,” Damek says.

I clear my throat as I look at him. “What is it?”

His heart rate slightly increases, which leads me to believe that he’s nervous. I sit up straighter as I wonder what he’s about to say.

“Next week, my family is going on vacation—it’s something we do every year around this time. And I was wondering if you would come with us.” Damek looks at me with hope in his eyes.

He wants me to come on vacation with his family?

My heart swells at the idea that he wants me there. But then I think of his mother. I’m certain she would be happier if I didn’t come.

“What about your mom?” I ask, not breaking eye contact.

He doesn’t flinch or react at all. “I want you to come. I think that once my mother spends a little time with you and gets to know you, she will adore you as much as I do.”

Head over heels for me?

Why does him saying that give me butterflies?

Still, I don't want to give in just yet. I want to make sure he knows what he's doing by inviting me.

"Damek, it's your last vacation with your family before our wedding. Shouldn't you enjoy your last time alone with them before you're stuck with me?" I ask.

He grins. "You're already part of my family. When I asked my dad to put in an alliance request with the Scott Clan, I knew exactly what that meant. I wanted to marry you and I'm sorry if I haven't made my part in this very clear."

He wants to marry me.

Some part of my gut loosens at his confession and I feel lighter.

"You didn't know that I wanted to marry you?" Damek's brows knit together.

I shrug. "I don't know. I guess I thought you were kind of forced into this. You're twenty-five, which I know is still young but most vampires are married by your age. I figured you were being pushed into making a decision and figured I was your best option."

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:00 am

I expect him to laugh, but he gets a serious expression on his face.

“My father has never pushed me into marriage. After what his father did to him, he never wanted to do that with me,” Damek says. “There was no list of women for me to choose from. I just met you and after talking to you for only a few minutes, I knew I wanted to marry you.”

My heart pounds loudly in my ears as I consider his words.

I’ve never had anybody look at me the way Damek does. And I’ve never had anybody treat me like he does. He’s kind, sweet, and helikesme. He chose me over all of my gorgeous succubi cousins.

But I don’t understandwhy. It just doesn’t make sense.

“Maddie,” Damek says.

I look up. “Yes?”

“Will you please come on vacation with my family next week?” he asks.

I can’t stop the smile as I nod.

Damek smiles back, his entire body relaxing at my acceptance. “We’re going to the beach—a supernatural only island. It will be warm, but we’ll be spending most of our time in the water. My family owns a beach bungalow. It’s always a lot of fun.”

Spending a week on an island sounds perfect right now. And the fact that Damek will be there only makes it better.

“Thank you for inviting me.” I chew on my lower lip, wondering if he will regret bringing me. I still think he should have some alone time with his family before our marriage.

“I want you to come,” Damek says, interrupting my thoughts. “I know you probably don’t believe me, but you are my family now.”

Family.

With Damek.

I squeeze his hand tighter. “Thank you for inviting me. But are you sure your mother doesn’t mind? You talked to her, right?”

Damek looks away.

“Damek!” I sit up straighter. “You did talk to her, right?”

“I asked my dad. He can tell her,” he says.

I groan. “But she hates me. She’ll spend the entire vacation thinking I invited myself.”

“No.” Damek shakes his head. “I promise you, I will not let her think that. I won’t allow my mother to be mean to you. I will talk to her before we leave, I promise.”

I chew on my lower lip, not knowing what to say.

Queen Rune may love Damek, but she loathes me. I'm not sure even he can keep her from being upset at my presence.

"She has to get used to you," Damek says stubbornly. "And it's like I said, she will love you once she gets to know you."

I don't know about that...

"I know my mother." Damek gives me a pointed look. "She doesn't much like anybody when she first meets them. It takes a while for her to warm up to people."

Maybe he is right.

Still, I think back to our first meeting. She was about as warm as a snowman in Alaska.

"What about Duncan?" I ask.

Damek furrows his brows. "My brother likes you."

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:00 am

“But does he want me to come on your last vacation before you’re married?” I ask. “What if he wants to spend quality time with his big brother? I don’t want to ruin that.”

Damek chuckles. “My brother would laugh if he heard you say that.” He turns slightly so he can face me better. “Trust me when I say that my family will all welcome you on this trip. Even my mother will welcome you, even if not at first.”

“Okay.” I sigh. “Fine. I won’t object anymore. I just wanted to make sure you know what you’re getting yourself into. This will be the first time I’ve ever spent more than a couple of hours at a time with your family and going on a week long vacation seems like a lot.”

“I think a week on an island is exactly what we need.” Damek smirks.

A week where I’m unable to run away from his scheming mother. Yes, that sounds like it’s going to be a load of fun.

Still, spending a week with Damek won’t be so bad. And I do want to get to know his family better. And maybe he’s right. Maybe I do need time to get to know his mom. Maybe once she gets to know me she will like me better.

Or maybe the whole week will be miserable.

Still, I can’t back out now because Damek is clearly ecstatic. He wants me there. So not even his mother will scare me away.

I put my head on his shoulder. He slips an arm around me and we stay snuggled up like that for the rest of the flight home.

We land at the airport and I am surprised to see Julien is waiting for us. I figured my father would send one of his drivers to get us.

“How was the engagement party?” Julien asks as he drives Damek and me toward the Scott Clan estate.

I look at Damek and decide to let him answer this one.

“It was an experience I hope to never repeat,” Damek says simply, then turns his gaze to me. “And if they try anything like that at our wedding, they will promptly be escorted off of Rune Clan property and banned from all future events.”

I grin at his protective proclamation. “I will pass the message along to Grandpa.”

“Please do,” Damek says.

Julien chuckles. “Ah, I knew I should’ve gone. I could’ve been comedic relief. Or, at the very least, I could’ve distracted all your female cousins with my dashing good looks.”

I snort. “Succubi are really picky. I doubt any of them would be swayed by your looks, Julien. No offense.”

“I’m not sure that I believe you,” Julien replies. “You’ve never had confidence in yourself. I, on the other hand, know exactly how good looking I am. Trust me when I say they would all be tripping over themselves to get close to me.”

Damek looks at me, then at Julien. “If you met them, I’m not sure you’d be

impressed. They're nothing like Maddie."

Julien glances toward me, but quickly looks back at the road. "What happened?"

"Nothing," I respond before Damek can. "Just my cousins being themselves."

"If any of Maddie's family comes to visit, I need you to keep an eye on them," Damek says to Julien. "Don't let them drip their poisonous insults to her."

Julien grips the steering wheel tighter. "I will look after her, don't worry."

I groan, sinking further into my seat.

It's sweet that they want to look after me, even if it's not necessary.

9

APOLOGIZES

I stare at my empty suitcase as I chew on my bottom lip.

What does one pack for vacation with their future in-laws and fiancé?

It shouldn't be this difficult. We're spending a week on the beach.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:00 am

But what about dinner? Do they have fancy dinners? But what if I pack nice dresses and dinner is casual? I could pack both, but what if Damek's mom complains about me overpacking?

I'm thinking way too hard about this. I should just pack what I would if I went on vacation with my family because Damek's family is my family. Or, they will be in a few short months.

I turn when I hear a knock on my door.

"Come in," I yell, wondering who it could be. Julien doesn't knock, so I know it can't be him.

When I see red hair, I turn to fully face my mother.

My mom is beautiful. I've always thought so. So when Damek told me that I looked like my mother, it was absolutely the highest compliment he could have given me. Even now, with her hair in a messy bun and wearing pajamas, she's gorgeous.

"What are you doing?" Mom asks.

"I'm packing for my trip," I answer.

She looks at the empty suitcase. "I see."

I sigh. "I don't know what to pack. I haven't spent that much time with Damek's family and this is the first time I'm going to be doing more than just having dinner

with them. I have no idea what to expect.”

“With that mother of his, there is no telling.” Mom chuckles, shaking her head.
“You’re going to have your hands full with that one.”

I chew on my lip, not saying a word. I don’t want her to have more ammunition to use against Damek’s mom.

Queen Rune may not be the easiest person to get along with, but she is the mother of the guy I’m marrying. And she has gotten better since that first meeting. I’m hoping that Damek is right and once she gets to know me, she will like me.

I hope this vacation isn’t complete chaos.

“All right, all right,” Mom says. “I won’t talk about her. But I will help you pack if you want.”

I nod. “Please.”

My mom is so good at always knowing the perfect outfit. With her help, every day will be perfectly planned. Then I won’t have to stress, I can enjoy my vacation with Damek and his family.

“So, what do you think of Damek?” I ask trying to subtly broach the subject as Mom steps into my closet.

Her eyes widen as she looks around my closet. “Just how much shopping have you done since you arrived?”

I grin. “Not me. Eden. She was quite excited about buying clothes for a daughter.”

Mom grows quiet.

I wonder what she's thinking. She and Eden are cordial with one another, but they're not overly friendly. They both stay quiet and only speak when necessary.

"She's a nice woman," Mom eventually says.

I nod, agreeing with her sentiment.

She turns to face me. "I wouldn't mind if you'd rather have Eden help you pack."

"No, Mom," I say. "I like Eden—she's a lovely woman. And while I do think of her as a second mom, you're still my mom. You raised me. And I love you."

She visibly relaxes. "I love you too."

I watch as Mom carefully looks through my closet. I can't help but think that she and Eden have a lot in common. Under different circumstances, the two might even get along.

I clear my throat. "You never answer my question earlier."

She lifts an eyebrow at me but barely glances my way as she begins to gather clothes into her arms. "Which question?"

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:00 am

“What do you think of Damek?” I ask.

She takes a trip into my bedroom to drop a load of clothes and I follow behind her. “Damek is a nice boy,” she pauses, then corrects, “man. He’s a very nice man. And he is easy on the eyes.”

My cheeks grow warm. “Yes, Damek is very attractive.”

She pauses in front of me. “He treats you well and he seems to adore you. And I can tell you are very smitten with him.”

Smitten? Yes.

Half way in love? Possibly.

“I came here fully prepared to fight with your father to get you out of an arranged marriage, but when I saw Damek and you together, I knew he was your one,” Mom says. “The two of you will be very happy together. I can see that.”

My heart feels so full at her words. She approves, which is more than I could’ve ever hoped for.

She turns to head back into the closet, but I stand in my room and breathe for a few more moments.

Everything is working out so perfectly. Sure, Damek’s mom still isn’t warm, but she’s not as cold as she once was. And since Mom promised not to fight with Queen

Rune so much over wedding plans, maybe things won't be so bad anymore.

This could really work out.

Am I really going to get a happy ever after with Damek? It feels too good to be true.

Mom pokes her head out of the closet. "Are you coming?"

I follow her inside as she makes her way expertly around the space. After being here for only a few minutes, she knows her way around my clothes better than I do. I swear, she moves like she's skating around a clothing store. A few more minutes and she takes another armload of clothes to my bed. I start to help her fold the clothes, but she shoo's me off, telling me to sit. I sit crisscross on the bed and watch her as she packs my suitcase.

"Mom, I don't mind helping," I say. "I'm not a kid anymore."

"Let me baby you." Mom frowns. "It might be one of my last opportunities before you marry. And soon you'll be having your own children."

I smirk. "But then you can baby your grandchildren."

Her lips turn upward, her entire face lighting up. "You are right. And I will babysit anytime you want, Madeline. When they're older, you can send them to spend the whole summer with me so you can have alone time with Damek." She claps her hands, excited by the idea. "I am going to spoil them."

My heart feels so full as she makes plans for my future children. I never allowed myself to dream of a future where I could have children. I never thought anybody would be interested in dating me, let alone marrying me. But Damek is absolutely perfect in ways that I never could've dreamt up. And I do want children with him. I

know we need at least two since he's a prince, but we may want more than two children.

Mom pauses her packing as she looks at me. "You're happy, aren't you?"

I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. "I am so happy, Mom. I never imagined I could be this happy."

She sits down beside me and takes my hand in hers. "I am so, so sorry."

I frown when I hear the serious tone in her voice. "What do you have to be sorry for?"

"For keeping you away from your father," she says. "As much as it kills me to admit it, you belong here. You're thriving in ways that you never could among the succubi community."

I shake my head. "No. You don't have to apologize—"

She cuts me off. "Yes, I do. It was wrong of me to do what I did. You needed your father. And I was selfish. I wanted to keep you all to myself, but by doing that, I hurt you."

"It's okay," I assure her. "Everything is working out exactly how it should. I came here at the perfect time. And who knows if Damek would even like me if I had been here when I went through puberty."

She chuckles. "Ah, but you were so cute in every stage of growing up. No doubt he would've loved you just as much at thirteen as he does now."

I'm not so sure about that, but I don't argue the point. Even at twenty three, I'm not

sure what Damek sees in me.

“You’ve always been beautiful,” Mom says. “I know you don’t believe that because of the way the others treated you, but it’s the truth.”

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:00 am

I play with a loose string on my comforter, not looking her in the eyes.

I've never felt beautiful. My whole life, I've always been reminded that I'm not as pretty because I'm a hybrid. I could never reach the same level of perfection because of my mixed blood. It's going to take more than a few compliments for me to let that go.

"Your vampire half doesn't make you less. It makes you more." Mom puts her hand on my shoulder.

I look up and see my mom watching me with her kind eyes.

My mom has always been so perfect. All the succubi and incubi community agree that she is the prettiest of my grandfather's children. And when she had me, I never lived up to the expectations.

I think back to Damek telling me that I look just like my mom.

Do I really?

"I do like my vampire half more than I expected," I admit. "I like it here. Nobody looked down on me for being a hybrid and everybody is so nice."

Well, with a few exceptions.

Mom raises an eyebrow. "You're going to argue that Queen Rune is nice?"

I giggle. “She could be nicer.”

She nods. “Yes, she could. And while I do promise to make nice with her when it comes to wedding planning, I will not put up with her being mean to my only daughter.”

“That’s fair,” I say. “And I won’t be mad if you stand up for me. But she is better than she used to be. I think Damek has had a talk with her about her behavior.”

I hope that she will get to know me on this vacation and will grow to tolerate—maybe even like—me.

Mom stands up and begins packing again. “You know, my grandfather did like my dad.”

My eyes widen. “Wait... Pops doesn’t like Grandpa?”

“He does now.” Mom grins. “But I don’t think the two of them got along until I was a teenager. Pops was always mad at Dad for marrying my mom.”

I open my mouth, then close it.

“She was his only daughter,” Mom reminds me.

It’s true. Pops and Mimi had fifteen children and only one daughter.

“You’d think that making his only daughter a queen would’ve been enough for him, but he wouldn’t have been happy unless Grandma had the entire world.” Mom gets a faraway look in her eyes. “The two of them used to go at it for hours. It always made Sunday dinners... interesting.”

I can imagine.

One thing I don't miss about living with my mother is Sunday dinners. It's still a tradition, but in a family as big as ours, it was chaotic. And with all of my cousins berating me for my hybrid blood, I hated every minute of it.

"I'm sorry about the way your cousins treated you." Mom puts more clothes into my suitcase. "I tried talking to them, but it never did any good. I couldn't get them to stop."

I shrug, trying to show her it's not a big deal. "It's okay, Mom. It wasn't your fault."

She nods but doesn't say anything. After a moment, she looks up at me and grins. "But you're happy now and that is all I've ever wanted. I want you to be happy. You deserve it."

My heart warms as I look at her.

I can't stay mad at her anymore, not when she so clearly regrets her actions. I can see that it hurts her. And I don't want my mom to hurt anymore.

"I just want you to know that I forgive you," I tell her. "For all of it. I don't resent you anymore for keeping me away from Dad."

Her face softens. "Thank you."

10

WHAT FAMILY IS SUPPOSED TO BE LIKE

When Damek picks me up the next morning, I am nervous. I think he can tell because he holds my hand the entire way to the airport.

“Are you okay?” he asks after a long moment.

My heart is racing, something I’m certain he noticed long before now.

I take a deep breath. “Yeah, I’m just... nervous.”

“What do you have to be nervous about?” He furrows his brows.

“Spending an entire week with your family—more specifically with your mom.” I lower my head. “And I’m also nervous about spending the week with you.”

“Am I that bad? Do you not want to spend an entire week with me?” he teases.

I can’t help but grin. “It’s not that. I’m more worried about how you will feel about me after spending an entire week with me.”

He squeezes my hand. “You’re not going to scare me away that easily.”

Will I not?

What if, once he gets to know me, he hates me?

Still, wouldn't it be better to know now, before we get married?

"Part of me still can't believe that this is real," I admit. "I was always told that I was too ugly to get married—that nobody would want me like that."

Damek brings my hand up to his mouth and he kisses my knuckle. "Rest assured that I am very attracted to you, Madeline-soon-to-be-Rune."

My heart skips a beat when I hear his last name attached to my first.

I suck in a sharp breath. "Madeline Rune doesn't sound so bad."

His grin widens. "No, it doesn't. I think it sounds nice. I'll be even happier once it's officially yours. Part of me is kicking myself over the six month thing. If I were smart, I would've demanded we marry within two weeks."

I can't help but laugh.

It's a little less than five months until our wedding now, but part of me agrees with Damek. It does seem like a long time to wait now that we've gotten to know one another.

"You don't have to be nervous about my mom," Damek says, continuing our earlier conversation. "I talked to her and made her promise to be nice."

I have no doubts that she will be nice to me in front of Damek. I just worry about her getting me alone. But maybe she will be kinder since my mother isn't there to make things worse.

“My mom promised to be nicer during wedding planning,” I tell him. “So maybe things will be better.”

“It will.” He nods firmly like it’s a guaranteed thing.

I, on the other hand, grew up with a lot of fighting and bickering. It’s hard to imagine our moms getting along.

We arrive at the small airfield. It’s different than the one that I flew into with my father. A private jet is waiting there for us, and I spot Queen Rune climbing the stairs to get on the plane.

Well, it’s too late to back out now...

I unbuckle my seatbelt and look at Damek. My stomach is in knots, but Damek doesn’t look nervous at all. He’s wearing a huge grin as he climbs out of his SUV and walks to my side. He opens the door for me and sweetly helps me out. As we walk toward the plane, somebody begins to unload our luggage for us and stow it away.

Damek holds my hand and I’m aware that my heart is racing slightly. He squeezes my hand, probably trying to reassure me. But it’s not Damek that I’m nervous about spending time with—it’s his family. Or, more specifically, his mother.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:01 am

He comes to a stop before we reach the stairs. I glance over at him, curious what he's doing. He's watching me with his glowing brown eyes. Ever so slowly he leans over and kisses me. He keeps holding my left hand, but with his other hand, he gently traces his fingers along my jaw and through my hair. I melt into him as I kiss him.

This is what I've always wanted—no guy has ever made me feel like Damek before. Our relationship may have had a strange beginning because of the political weight that comes with our being together, but that doesn't change how I feel about him.

He pulls back a little and smiles at me before tugging me toward the plane. Any thoughts other than his lips are gone as we make our way up the stairs and onto the plane. It isn't until I see King and Queen Rune sitting toward the front of the plane that I remember I was nervous. Damek doesn't pull us toward the front though, he sits in the back. I also spot his younger brother, Duncan.

I haven't spoken much to Duncan—I don't think his younger brother has said more than a handful of sentences to me. I don't even remember dancing with him at the ball that introduced me to society. The more I think about it, the more certain I am that I didn't dance with him.

Duncan, as per usual, ignores us as he does something on his phone. He glances up and gives us a nod before focusing on whatever is on his screen.

“What is your brother always doing on his phone?” I whisper to Damek as we buckle our seatbelts.

Damek rolls his eyes. “Texting.”

That's it? He's texting somebody?

Damek must see the question on my face because he explains, "Duncan has a girlfriend, but don't bring it up while we're on vacation. It's a touchy subject for my parents."

I raise an eyebrow.

"She's a turned vampire, not born. Dad doesn't care—he should marry for love. Mom, on the other hand, wants Duncan to marry to best. She wants him to marry a queen."

"Isn't that..." my voice trails off as I search for the right word.

"Hypocritical," he supplies. "Yes, it is. My dad would've gladly given up his throne to marry my mom. And he pretty much did. It will be difficult for Duncan to marry a royal since he's not considered legitimate by our laws."

I lean closer. "I never danced with your brother at that ball."

Damek grins. "Duncan already confessed as much to me. He pretended to be excited about you for our father's sake. He said he never even introduced himself to you. He knew you'd never choose him when you had legitimate royals to choose from. I was glad to hear it. I didn't want to fight with my brother for you, but I would have."

I put a hand to the base of my throat. "Damek..."

He laces our fingers together. "We've got about a seven hour flight before we get there."

The pilot comes back to make sure everybody is ready to take off and informs us

we'll be leaving within the next couple of minutes.

Once we're in the air, Damek lets go of my hand and instead slips his arm around me.

Part of me still can't believe that Damek wants me here with his family on this vacation. I wouldn't have blamed him if he had wanted to go on one last family vacation before our wedding without me. I'm not technically part of his family. And our engagement isn't 'normal' by any means.

And yet... I feel chosen. And, dare I say, I feel loved.

Does Damek love me?

Do I love him?

As I consider my feelings, I already know the answer.

Yes, I love him. I think I've loved him for a long time, possibly since our first date, when we stayed up nearly the whole night talking on the phone afterward. Or maybe since he fought to give us a year long engagement because he knew it was the custom of succubi to have a long engagement. He did that for me. Because it's customary for vampires to marry within a few weeks.

Everything Damek has done is for me.

What have I done for him?

"Damek," I say.

He looks at me.

“Thank you.”

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:01 am

“What for?” He raises an eyebrow.

I take a deep breath and shake my head. “Just... everything. You’ve done so much for me—like arguing for a long engagement.”

He smirks. “That was slightly selfish on my part. I wanted to make sure your father didn’t accept any other alliance proposals and I thought if we had a lengthy engagement you might be more open to the idea.”

“Still, thank you. Everything you do is for me and I haven’t done enough to reciprocate that.” I chew on my bottom lip as I wonder what I can do to show him how I feel about him.

Do I tell him that I love him or is it too soon?

“Having you here, by my side, is all I want.” He gently kisses the top of my head.

“Gross.”

I look up and see Duncan take a seat across from us. “Could you two keep the kissing to a minimum this week?”

Damek snorts. “Absolutely not.”

I study Duncan, noting that he and Damek do look similar, with their brown eyes, dark hair, and pronounced jawlines. But Duncan’s features are softer and he carries himself differently.

Because he doesn't have the weight of a crown, I realize.

Damek has a lot on him. Someday, he will rule his clan.

And he chose me to rule by his side.

My heart feels so full at the thought.

Duncan groans. "The two of you are going to be stealing love sick glances at one another the whole week, I can already tell."

Damek tightens his grip around me. "You're just jealous."

Duncan nods. "Because they wouldn't let me bring my girlfriend with us."

"I doubt your mom wanted me to come either." I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear.

"True," Duncan says. "She has been complaining about it for days, ever since Damek confirmed you were coming."

Damek shoots his younger brother a glare.

"It's okay," I tell Damek, to reassure him. "I know your mother doesn't like me."

"Mom doesn't like anybody," Duncan says. "It's her coping mechanism. She is snubbed by most other royals, so she does her best to pretend like she doesn't care."

For the first time since I met Queen Rune, I can relate to her. I have never fit in with my royal succubi and incubi cousins because I'm a hybrid. It's always bothered me horribly, even if I try to hide it.

“Don’t worry,” Duncan continues. “She might say she doesn’t like you, but I think she does. And once she sees how much Damek cares about you, she will love you too.”

I somewhat doubt that. I imagine Queen Rune and I will never truly get along with one another.

“What is there to do on the island we’re going?” I ask, changing the subject away from family drama. I’ve had enough of it to last a lifetime.

Duncan’s face lights up. “We’re going to have so much fun, you’ll see. We always take the boat out, that’s always fun. We have jet skis too, and we go night surfing. And the food...”

I grin at his enthusiasm.

Duncan sits up straighter, a mischievous grin on his face. “Though I suppose in a few years, I’ll get to teach your children how to surf.”

My cheeks grow warm.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:01 am

Damek snorts. “As if I want you teaching them. I’m a far better surfer.”

“Keep dreaming,” Duncan teases.

I can’t help but smile at their banter. Though, Duncan is likely right. Once Damek and I get married, it will only be a matter of time before we have children. Isn’t that what a marriage like ours is about? Having heirs? Our children will one day rule the Rune Clan.

I want to have a large family, that way the weight of the crown won’t be so heavy for my oldest child.

“Most succubi have large families,” I tell Duncan. “So I imagine you’ll have lots of nieces and nephews to spoil.”

Damek’s grin widens.

Duncan groans. “The two of you are going to gang up on me, aren’t you? Uh.”

But even Duncan can’t hide his smile.

This is what family is supposed to be like.

When I glance toward the front of the plane, I find Queen Rune watching us with an expression that I can’t read. When she realizes that I’ve caught her watching, she quickly looks away, but her expression doesn’t change. She almost looks... thoughtful.

I wonder... is Damek right? Will his mother grow to like me over time, once she realizes I'm not like the royals who have snubbed her?

The thought gives me hope. Because, as much as I don't want to admit it, I do want a caring family. I don't like having a family that is constantly fighting with one another. And that isn't an environment I want to raise my children in either.

Damek keeps his arm around me as he and his brother continue to tease one another. And I think about what future vacations will look like once we have children. I imagine us heading to the beach for a fun week. I even imagine what Queen Rune would be like as a grandmother. As much as she dotes on her sons, I imagine she will do the same to her grandchildren.

Maybe Queen Rune isn't as bad as I once thought. The way she treats her sons is evidence of that. Even though Damek isn't her son by birth, she loves him just as much as she does Duncan.

11

VACATION

The island is even more lovely than I imagined.

It's an island in the Atlantic Ocean, cloaked by magic. The entire island is a supernatural only island. It's bigger than I expected, expanding more than five hundred square miles—too big for us to explore it all. But several supernaturals have vacation homes here. The home next door, for example, is owned by an older dragon shifter couple. They're really sweet and the older woman even gave us homemade bread and jam when we arrived.

About an hour before sunrise, Queen Rune asks everybody to head outside for dinner.

While they're here, it's tradition for the Rune family to eat dinner outside and then watch the sunrise together. It's surprisingly sweet—they've been doing it since Damek was two when his parents got married.

During dinner, I sit between Duncan and Damek. Queen Rune smiles as Duncan makes a joke. I'm surprised she's not in a bitter mood since I'm here—I figured my presence would ruin the vacation for her.

While everybody else sips blood from wine glasses, I have ice water. Part of me wishes I could join them, just so I didn't stand out so much, but Damek doesn't mind. He never has.

"Have you tried drinking blood before?" Duncan asks.

"Yes. I can't keep it down." I take a bite of my chocolate cake. Forget blood—dessert is so much better.

"But it's nice that you fit in with the succubi that way," he says.

I swallow my cake. "No. I never fit in with them. And my cousins never let me forget that I'm hybrid." I try to keep my tone light but from the frown on Duncan's face, I don't think I managed to keep all the bitterness out.

"It doesn't matter now." Damek grabs my free hand under the table. "You're with us. And I don't care that you're a hybrid."

"Is that not a concern for your heirs?" I ask. "They will be more vampire than I am, but they will still be hybrids."

"It may make me more protective of our daughters," Damek says.

Our daughters.

Just thinking about Damek with our daughters in the future makes my heart melt.
He's going to be a good dad.

Page 34

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:01 am

“Hopefully you two have daughters.” Queen Rune smiles at me. “We weren’t able to have any children after Duncan, but I always wanted a baby girl.”

Wait a minute... is she seriously smiling? Atme. And saying something that isn’t antagonistic.

The world as I know is coming to an end. I glance up at the sky, expecting a giant meteor to be barreling toward Earth, but all I see are stars.

Damek squeezes my fingers. I can tell he’s encouraged by his mother’s kind words.

He is why I will keep trying. Because he wants me to get along with his mom and I want that too. I want us to be a happy family. And I definitely don’t want my children to think that I hate their grandmother.

“Succubi have large families, yes?” she asks.

I nod. “All of my aunts and uncles have anywhere from six to fifteen children each. When I was a kid, I was constantly meeting new cousins. I can’t even imagine how chaotic it will be once my cousins start having children.”

Queen Rune’s eyes widen. “Wow. Well, if you two have that many children, I am always free to babysit. Never hesitate to ask for help.”

For some reason, the thought makes my chest warm. “Thank you. I will most definitely be taking you up on your offer.”

I'm not even embarrassed by the fact that we're talking about Damek and me having children. If anything, I feel encouraged. This feels real—like Damek and I are a really engaged couple, going on vacation with his family.

Once dinner is over, and we watch the sunrise, we head inside for the day. Queen Rune offers to show me to my room, so Damek heads to his room.

“I hope this is all right,” Queen Rune says. She points at a cabinet. “There are extra blankets in here if you get cold. The boys like to keep the house freezing at night.”

“Thank you.” I hope she can tell that I'm being sincere. I like this version of Queen Rune—the motherly version. It's easy to see why Damek loves her. I start to open my suitcase that is sitting on the dresser, but pause when I see that Queen Rune is still standing in the doorway.

“I want to apologize to you.” She knits her fingers together. “I was unkind to you when we first met. It was never because I hated you personally. I just didn't want Damek to suffer the same fate my husband did. My husband... he was forced into a marriage he didn't want. I wanted Damek to be free to choose his wife. I thought he was marrying you because it was his duty, but I know now that's not the case.”

“Thank you, Queen Rune. That means a lot to me.” I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. “Since we're going to be family, I do want us to get along.”

“I do as well,” she says. “But, please, call me Tiffany. I am, after all, to be your mother-in-law. There is no need for titles.”

“Okay.” I offer her a smile.

“You really are beautiful. I know my grandchildren will be adorable.” She stands up straighter. “I want to ask your mother if she can show me some of your baby photos.”

She cringes. “I should apologize to her as well.”

“No.” I shake my head. “My mother was being stubborn. You don’t have to apologize to her. I’ve talked with her and she will be nicer to you during wedding planning from now on.”

Queen Rune—Tiffany—lets out a breath. “Well, that is a relief. Before you spoke up, I thought you were going to end up with a pink wedding.”

I laugh. “I like pink, but I’d rather go the traditional route since there will be so many people at the wedding. My mom is just against anything traditional—she’s been that way as long as I can remember. I think it was because of the way she was raised. She rebels against my grandfather too, even still. It drives him crazy.”

“Your mother has managed to stay out of political matters,” Tiffany says thoughtfully. “So you really don’t play a role in succubi and incubi politics?”

I shake my head. “Nah. Even when I worked for my grandpa, I filled a secretarial role. My cousins didn’t want me to hear anything important, since I’m a hybrid.”

She furrows her brows. “Why would they care that you’re a hybrid?”

Her genuine confusion eases a knot in my chest that I didn’t realize was there.

Damek and his family don’t care that I’m a hybrid. They are going to welcome me anyway.

“I don’t know,” I answer, after a long pause. “But they didn’t like it.”

Tiffany nods. “You get some sleep.”

“Goodnight,” I tell her.

She turns to go but grins at me over her shoulder. “Good night.”

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:01 am

I sit down on the bed as she shuts the door behind her.

Did that conversation seriously just happen? I feel like I'm dreaming.

Things aren't supposed to work out for me. I'm a hybrid—I don't fit in with succubi and I don't belong to the vampires. Yet, here I am, existing in happiness. I didn't realize I could be this happy.

I'm not sleepy yet, so I intend to read a book until I fall asleep, but a knock on my door interrupts me before I get a paragraph in. I slip off the bed and make my way to the door.

"Damek." I tilt my head to the side as I study him, wondering what he's doing at my door.

He puts a finger up to his lips and then motions for me to follow him. I slip on a pair of shoes and then follow him through the house and out the back door. The sun is up so being outside feels strange. I haven't been up during daylight hours for many months.

Damek leads me toward the beach where waves are crashing onto shore. It's still too early for others to be up, but I do spot the elderly dragon shifter couple next door. They're both drinking coffee on their back deck. I try to imagine the future and wonder if Damek and I will be doing something like that when we're older.

"It's so pretty here," I say, breaking the silence.

“I heard what my mom said,” Damek says softly.

My lips turn up in the corners. “I get what you were saying about her now. She is very sweet and nice.”

He squeezes my fingers. “I’m happy to hear you say that. I know she was unkind to you when you first met and has never been warm to you. To hear that you’ve forgiven her means a lot to me.”

I shrug.

“It’s not shrug worthy,” he objects.

“Maybe.” I shrug again. “But I guess I get her point of view. She wanted to make sure you weren’t forced into a marriage you didn’t want. She would’ve run me away herself before she allowed that to happen. Besides, there is no way I could’ve stayed angry with her. She’s a good mom. And you saw how my family was—I don’t want that. I hate the fighting and bickering. I don’t want to be miserable.”

He grins at me. “Still, thank you, Maddie.”

I am not sure what to say to that, so I focus my attention on the water. The sky is starting to brighten up.

“You only come here once a year?” I ask, after a moment of silence.

“We come at least once a year, but most of the time we come more often,” Damek answers. “It’s nice to get away from politics and court life. Here, my dad isn’t king and I’m not his heir. We’re just a normal vampire family on vacation.”

I can see how much his title and position weigh on him. I put my head on his

shoulder. “You’re not alone anymore. I’ll be by your side to help you in any way that I can. I know that my title will only be in name only, as your consort, but I still want to help you however I can.”

Damek slips his arm around me. “Thank you. That means more to me than you know. Besides, you will have more of a role than my mom does. Since she’s my dad’s second wife, she doesn’t get a say in the court. She’s barely even recognized as a queen.”

My heart goes out to her. “That must be difficult.”

“It is.” He nods. “My parents can’t even form a mate bond.”

I sit up straighter at that. “Really?”

He frowns. “My dad’s mate bond to my birth mother is broken, but since it was broken, he wasn’t able to form one with my mom. I think it’s part of the reason she wanted to run you off. Even though I told her how I felt about you, she thought I was just saying it to make her feel better.”

How he feels about me...

I want to ask him to elaborate, but I don’t want to push him. I just figured out that I’m in love with Damek, but what if he’s not there yet?

No, I won’t ask him to share. Not yet anyway.

“Do succubi and incubi have mate bonds?” Damek asks.

“Yes. I think that’s part of the reason that succubi are so picky with who they marry.” I relax further into Damek’s side, happy with my choice to marry him.

If I had stayed home, with my family, I'm not sure that I would've ever married. I never could've found somebody as great as Damek.

12

HAVE YOU EVER BEEN IN LOVE?

Two nights later, Damek takes me out on a date. It's our first night of vacation that we're not spending with his family. While I have started to get along with Damek's mom, I am thankful for the alone time. We haven't had alone time since I realized that I love him.

Should I tell him?

And how does one just tell somebody 'I love you?' It's something I've always said to my mom and now to my new family. But I've never said it to a boy before. To love somebody, you have to go out on more than one date with them, which isn't something I have experience with before Damek.

Which makes me wonder... has Damek ever been in love? I know he's dated girls before, but was he ever serious about any of them?

Damek and I slide into opposite sides of the booth. I pick up the menu to look, but Damek is watching me.

I look at him over the top of my menu. "What?"

"You have this serious look of concentration on your face and I'm wondering what it's about," he says.

I sigh and put down the menu. “Nothing serious. I was just thinking.”

“About what?” he inquires.

“Have you ever been in love?” I ask.

Damek is quiet for a moment. He folds his hands together on the table and looks questioningly at me. “You know I’ve never dated anybody seriously before. When I was young, I spent all my time learning about vampire politics and laws—all the things I need to know to one day be the leader of my clan.” He shrugs. “And when I was old enough to date, I knew my options were limited. And I never liked any of the other women. I knew it was my duty to marry a royal, even if my father never pushed me. So I tried. But I never could get past one or two dates with any of them. So, I didn’t exactly have time to fall in love.”

I let out a breath of relief.

That’s good to know.

But it also means that he’s just as inexperienced as I am.

I want to question him further, but Damek picks up his own menu and begins to look over the options, so I do the same.

The waitress, who is a kind dark fae, takes our orders. Once she leaves, I notice that Damek fidgets in his seat, bouncing slightly.

I raise an eyebrow at him. “Did you drink one or ten espresso shots before coming tonight?”

He cocks his head to the side. “What?”

I nod to his fingers, which are currently drumming a beat on the tabletop. He's usually pretty calm, so his behavior surprises me.

He moves his hand from the table and grins. "Sorry."

But he doesn't explain his behavior. I shrug it off. It's not important.

Unless...

Maybe he wants to tell me that he loves me. Maybe that's why he's nervous—because he doesn't know how to. But is it possible that we're both thinking the same thing tonight? Maybe he's worried about something unrelated to me. Maybe he's not in love with me at all.

"Have you ever been in love?" Damek asks, breaking the silence.

I shake my head. I almost say, 'Not before you,' but I catch myself before saying it. "No, never. You already know my dating experience."

After eating, Damek pays the check while I head to the bathroom. As I finish up in the bathroom, I wonder who I can ask for help. I usually go to my mom for advice on all things, but I don't think she's any more experienced in telling a guy 'I love you' than I am.

Maybe I could ask Eden.

Or Tiffany.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:01 am

I cringe at the thought of asking my future mother-in-law for dating advice.

As I am coming out of the bathroom, I spot our waitress standing at a computer in the back of the restaurant.

“Excuse me,” she says, as I’m about to walk past.

I turn to the dark fae. “Yes?”

She clears her throat. “I know it’s none of my business, but you should tell him.”

“What?” I ask.

She rocks up on the tips of her toes and talks excitedly. “I’m a dark fae, so I can sense emotions. I don’t mean to sense them, it’s just who I am. And I could tell that you are in love with that cute vampire guy. You should tell him. I promise he feels the same.”

He feels the same.

My head swims with the knowledge.

It’s kind of weird to think that this dark fae has been reading my emotions all night, but she knows. And I don’t think she’s lying about Damek’s feelings.

I glance up at the girl who watches me with bright eyes. “Thank you.”

Her grin widens. “Of course. And I really am sorry about reading your emotions.

People always hate that I can do that.”

“It’s okay,” I assure her. “You can’t help who you are and I’m thankful for what you’ve told me. It makes everything easier. I don’t really have anybody that I can talk to about things like this.”

Her shoulders relax. “Well, good luck.”

I wave at her and then head back to the table where Damek is waiting. He raises an eyebrow, glancing toward the back where I was talking with our waitress. There are too many people in the restaurant, so I know he wasn’t able to hear our conversation.

“What was that about?” he asks.

I grin. “Nothing. She was just being friendly.”

He raises an eyebrow. “Why do I feel like you’re hiding something?”

“I’ll tell you later,” I promise him. And I will. Once I get up the nerve to take her advice and tell him that I love him.

He nods, not pushing me to talk, though I can tell he wants to know.

As we head outside, Damek holds my hand. The close contact makes my heart race and I wonder if he will always make me feel like this. But he doesn’t comment on my increased heart rate. Instead, he leads me along a path. I’m surprised when he tugs me in the opposite direction of the car, but I allow him to lead me.

It’s a beautiful night. There aren’t many lights on the island, so the sky is dark and the stars are bright. Because I am a hybrid vampire, I can see perfectly in the dark, so once the lights disappear behind us, I have no problems keeping up with Damek. He

leads me along a narrow footpath. I can't see where we're heading because of the thick foliage and trees that seem to get thicker as we head up a hill.

Damek is quiet and I wonder what's on his mind. He's been very quiet tonight and he's acted strange. Part of me wants to tell him how I feel right now, but I don't dare break the silence between us. Damek is very focused and it's clear he's thinking hard about something. Maybe I'll find out once we get wherever he's leading me.

Soon, the trees and foliage clear and Damek leads me to the side of a cliff. From here, I can see for miles and miles on the ocean. The sight is gorgeous and nearly takes my breath away, from the way the moon reflects off the water to the dark depths further out.

"Wow," I whisper under my breath. "This is gorgeous."

But Damek doesn't respond, so I glance over at him. He got his hand in his pocket and he's looking down at the ground, not paying attention to the views at all.

"Hey, are you all right?" I take a step closer to Damek.

He takes a deep breath and nods. Finally, he looks up, meeting my eyes. The determination on his face makes me turn and give him my full attention.

"You are beautiful," Damek says softly.

My breath gets caught in my throat. "Thank you."

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:01 am

“The incubi don’t know what they missed out on,” he says. “But their loss is my gain because I can’t imagine anybody more perfect for me than you.”

My heart swells.

The waitress was right. Damek does love me. I can see it in his eyes. The way he looks at me is the way supernaturals look at their soulmates. I’ve always been envious of that love, but I’m not anymore. Because I have Damek, who is way better than a soulmate. He’s better because he chose me and I chose him. What is more special than that?

“Damek...” my voice trails off as I try to get the words out.

Just say it.

Say ‘I love you.’

But it’s harder than I thought it would be.

Damek continues speaking, “I would have married you after our first date. I knew I was attracted to you that first night, but I didn’t realize at the time just how special you would become to me. I never imagined that it was possible to feel like this.”

Tears press against my eyes at his confession.

He reaches into his pocket. “I didn’t want to go too fast. I know that succubi have different dating traditions than vampires. And I don’t want to pressure you. But I

can't wait to tell you this." He pauses, his eyes scanning my face. "Maddie, I love you."

My heart thumps even faster. So fast that I can hear my blood rushing through my ears.

"And I am willing to wait for you to fall in love with me," he says. "But I realized after our conversation about you not feeling chosen, I've never told you how I really feel." He pulls something from his pocket, but I am looking into his eyes so I don't see what. "I will choose you every day for the rest of my life." He slowly lowers himself onto one knee. "You deserve the world, and I will do everything in my power to give it to you. Will you marry me?"

That is when I see that he's holding a box in his hand.

I stare at him, completely stunned silent.

I never expect this, not in a million years. We're technically already engaged. But I didn't get the big proposal, which is customary for succubi. And Damek is making up for that now.

My heart feels so full that it could burst.

But as I look at Damek and he looks at me, I realize I haven't said anything.

"I love you too," I tell him.

"You do?" he asks.

The genuine surprise on his face makes me giggle. It's like I'm a teenager again, having a crush on the popular boy at school.

But this is so much better because Damek loves me too. And he's asking me to marry him.

"Yes, I love you. And yes, I will marry you," I say boldly, hoping to show Damek just how confident I am in him. In us.

Damek stands from his kneeling position and he pulls me into his arms. He squeezes me tightly against his chest lifts me from the ground and spins me in a circle. After he sits me back on the ground, he gently cups my face.

"Did you seriously just say yes?" he asks, his jaw slightly agape.

I nod. "Absolutely yes. Because it isn't just you choosing me. I choose you too."

He kisses me hard and fast and then pulls back to look at me again. "I honestly expected you to tell me it was too soon."

"We were already engaged," I remind him.

"I know. But I didn't think you loved me," he admits. Then he holds up the box in his hand. "I picked this out the day after our first date. You weren't mine then, but I so badly wanted you to be."

The ring is beautiful, but what's important to me is what the ring represents.

Damek didn't have to do this. I would've married him and been happy with him. But this proves just how happy our lifewillbe.

He did thisforme.

Damek takes the ring from the box, so I hold my left hand toward him. He slides it onto my finger and smiles as he looks at it. “I asked your mom what size you wore and I got it resized last week. I knew I wanted to ask you while we were here.”

I glance at the ring, then I look at Damek. Part of me still can’t believe that this is real.

When I came to live with my dad, I never expectedthis. I never knew it was possible to be this happy.

My hand trembles in Damek’s grasp.

“Are you okay?” he asks. “Are you nervous?”

“Not nervous.” I worry my bottom lip between my teeth. “I’m excited. I didn’t see this coming. I never thought you’d propose to me.”

He tugs me closer. “You deserve the world, Maddie. This is the minimum of what you deserve. I plan on giving you the happiest of lives. This is only the beginning.”

I grin. “The beginning—I like that.”

He lowers his lips to mine and gently kisses me, making me his in all the ways that matter.

He pulls back, just slightly, and says again, “You deserve to be happy, Maddie.” And then he kisses me again, deeper this time.

He thinks I deserve to be happy.

My heart soars at his declaration.

Tonight is the beginning of the rest of our lives and Damek is right—we are going to have the happiest of lives.

“I love you,” I tell him again after he pulls back.

Damek grins so wide that it reveals his dimples. “You have my whole heart.”

13

MY HAPPY PLACE

When Damek and I get back to his family’s bungalow, his family is waiting for us. They offer us congratulations and ask to see the ring. Tiffany even insists on taking a ton of photos with her phone.

They’re treating us like we really just got engaged.

My heart warms at the moment. I didn’t realize just how badly I wanted this until Damek proposed. I thought I was fine with the way things were. But having him propose means more than I could have ever imagined.

As the sun begins to rise, Damek and I cuddle on an outdoor sofa, our gaze on the horizon. And once again, I find myself imagining the future. I wonder what it will be like next year when we come. Or the year after that. I think about the children we will

have and what they will be like.

Growing up, I wish I had something like this. Mom did try—we went on a lot of vacations. Grandpa had lots of family trips too, but those were always miserable for me. Before coming to live with the vampires, I never realized how lonely I was.

I want this. I want a family. I want to be happy. And I can admit that to myself now that I am happy. Before, I always thought I was okay with mediocrity. I tried to convince myself that I could smile through the pain.

Later, when Damek and I part for the day, I find myself excited about waking up that night. I can't wait to see Damek again and I don't dread being around his mom anymore. Things are finally coming together.

When I lie down, I drift off to sleep quickly. I'm not sure how long I'm asleep, but it only feels like moments before I am woken.

I jerk awake when I hear a strange sound. My eyes take a few minutes to focus, but when I see my curtain move, I sit up straight.

What is happening?

A figure in a dark hoodie approaches and my heart races faster. I call out, knowing that there are guards stationed around the bungalow. I know somebody will hear.

But how did this guy get past the guards?

Page 40

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:01 am

He rushes toward me and I notice a syringe in his hand. I jump up, matching his speed. The guy hesitates for a moment, like he's confused.

Probably because I don't need blood to be fast. I imagine he drank blood right before breaking in. In theory, he should be faster and stronger than somebody who just woke up. I guess nobody told him that I don't need blood to be fast and strong.

There are some benefits to being a hybrid.

The guy doesn't stay stunned for long. He moves toward me again. I try to run for the door, but I know I won't be able to yank open the door before he catches up.

What do I do?

As I'm thinking it, my door bursts open. I hear a loud pop followed by a thud. I look behind me and see that the intruder is now face first on the floor. My shoulders relax when a familiar looking guard comes into the room.

"Princess, are you all right?" he asks.

I nod, confirming.

My heart is still racing so fast that I can hear the blood rushing through my ears. I take a deep breath, trying to calm my heart.

"Maddie!"

I turn when I hear Damek's voice. He comes rushing into the room. He puts his hands on my shoulders and carefully looks me over from head to toe.

"Are you injured?" he asks, his voice still frantic. His heart is racing even faster than mine.

"I'm okay," I assure him.

He pulls me into his arms and squeezes me tightly against him. I don't know if he's trying to comfort himself or me, but it feels good to be safely in his arms. I relax into his embrace, my entire body relaxing.

I feel Damek's lips on the top of my head. "I don't know what I would do if something happened to you."

More footsteps join the room. I don't look, but I'm sure there are more guards.

"Is she okay?"

Damek pulls back at the sound of his father's voice, but he keeps an arm around my middle. "Yes, she's okay."

"Nobody touched me," I tell him, not wanting him to be worried.

"We don't know how she got away from him," one of the guards says. "He had just drank blood."

"It's because she's a hybrid," King Rune says, then turns to Damek and me. "The guards are going to escort you to the jet. Our family will be leaving within the hour. I will be informing King Scott of the incident."

“We have to leave?” I worry my bottom lip between my teeth, hating the idea of leaving so early.

“It’s for the best,” Damek says softly. “They will have to investigate how the intruder got in anyway.”

My heart sinks.

Damek squeezes me tighter against him. “Don’t worry—we will come back here again soon.”

His words do calm me, but I’m still sad that our vacation was cut short. I wanted to stay here longer and celebrate our ‘proper’ engagement. This is my happy place.

“Maybe we can come back here for our honeymoon,” Damek suggests.

Our honeymoon. I once thought I would dread it when I heard about my political marriage, but I look forward to that time with Damek.

I grin up at him. “I’d like that.”

Damek leads me out the door, guards trailing behind us. The guards drive us straight toward the airport, which is just a runway with a place to store private jets. When we get on the plane, Tiffany and Duncan are both there. The two of them rush toward us when they see us.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:01 am

“Madeline, are you okay?” Tiffany asks.

Even Duncan looks anxiously at me.

“I’m fine,” I tell them, but my heart squeezes when I see the genuine worry in their eyes.

When I first met Damek’s mom, I thought there was no way she would ever like me. And it’s not uncommon—most women do hate succubi. It’s something in our very nature that makes them not like us. The night we had that dinner, I almost decided not to pursue Damek as a marriage candidate because I thought my life would be miserable.

Damek squeezes my hand. “Dad will be here soon and then we can head home. I imagine we’ll go right to the Scott estate to tell King Scott everything that happened.”

My dad is going to be upset that this has happened again. At least this time we know who is was coming after me.

I glance at Damek. “It was the Nodin Clan, right? They’re the ones who sent the intruder?”

Damek shrugs. “That’s likely the case, but I imagine we will question the guy and find out for certain.”

I guess I am just speculating, but I sincerely hope another clan isn’t after us.

“Let’s sit,” Tiffany says. “You poor thing. You’ve just been attacked and we’re just asking questions and making you stand.”

She leads us toward a long couch in the middle of the plane. There is a long couch on one side and a table with chairs on the other. Damek and I sit down and Tiffany sits beside me. Duncan takes a seat at the table, but he angles his body toward us.

“How long do you think Dad will be?” Duncan asks.

Tiffany glances at her phone. “He said he’s on his way.” Her eyes widen as her phone vibrates. “And he’s bringing the prisoner with him.”

I swallow hard.

He’s going to be on the plane with us? My stomach churns at the thought, even if I know I’ll be safe. There will be tons of guards and I imagine they will keep him sedated.

But the guy tried to kidnap me. At least, I think that’s what he was doing. He didn’t really attack me, he likely just planned to use that syringe on me.

I shiver at the thought.

What if I hadn’t woken up? And what if he was able to sneak past the guards a second time? The thought of being locked up with Lucas Nodin makes me feel sick to my stomach. I don’t imagine he would make the same mistake twice. This time, it would likely be difficult to find me. Just like it’s been difficult to find Lucien...

“You’re safe.” Damek puts his arm around me and squeezes me.

I lean into him, taking advantage of the comfort he’s offering.

He kisses the top of my head. “I hope this didn’t ruin the night we had.”

I sit up straighter, grinning at the still unfamiliar weight on my finger. “No way. The night was absolutely perfect, nothing could change my view of what happened.”

Damek’s face lights up and I know in that moment that when I look back at the night of our engagement, nothing could ruin it. It was absolutely perfect.

“Damek explained to us that engagements are really important to succubi,” Tiffany says.

I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. “Yes, very important. I know every supernatural takes marriage seriously because of the mate bond, but for us, it’s a cultural thing. A couple typically dates for many years before getting engaged. Before an engagement, you don’t introduce your boyfriend or girlfriend to your family. So it’s a really big deal. And there are a lot of parties to attend and introductions to be made.”

“Are the weddings really a week long?” she asks.

I nod. “Yes. It’s a huge celebration. Most weddings are destination weddings, which is a lot of fun. I’ve traveled to a lot of different places because of it. Succubi and incubi will take any excuse to celebrate, but weddings are over the top.”

She rings her fingers together. “Is that something you want? A succubus wedding?”

“No,” I say quickly. “I love my family, but the thought of spending an entire week with them...” I shiver. “I like how short vampire weddings are. There is no need to drag it out.”

Her shoulders relax and I can tell she’s relieved.

Page 42

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:01 am

Talking about the wedding helped get my mind off the incident, but the moment I hear a vehicle pull up, my body stiffens.

We're about to be stuck on this plane for many hours while we fly back home. And the guy who tried to kidnap me will be mere feet away.

I take a deep breath through my nose and slowly exhale.

Damek squeezes my hand. "I won't let him come near you, Maddie."

"Thank you." I lean into his side, letting him take my weight.

I feel braver with Damek at my side. I know that he will do everything that he can to protect me. He's my home. The thought hits me and sends a jolt straight to my heart. I can't imagine life without him.

"Six months is too long," I mumble.

He chuckles. "Four and a half months now."

"Still too long."

I hear footsteps on the stairs and moments later, King Rune steps onto the plane. A bunch of guards follow him in. I stiffen as I spot the prisoner—he's slung over a guard's shoulder. But as he takes the prisoner to a room in the back of the plane, I let out a breath of relief.

Good, I won't have to physically see him on the way home. That will make things easier.

King Rune makes his way toward us. "Madeline, how are you doing?"

"I'm fine," I say again, feeling like I keep repeating myself. "Honestly, he didn't touch me."

"Good. It is a benefit to your hybrid blood that I never realized. I wonder if your children will be the same." He sits down across from Duncan at the table.

My heart skips a beat at the mention of 'children.'

Before he can speak further, a guard approaches him. "We are ready to take off. The sooner we get the prisoner back on the mainland, the better."

"Very well." King Rune nods his head. "Let's get going."

We all buckle up and we're in the air within a minute.

14

EQUAL

As soon as the plane lands, we head toward my house. King Rune—or Paul as he's insisting I call him—says he needs to talk to my dad. The prisoner and five guards are in an SUV behind us. They're waiting to interrogate him until my dad can be there.

I wonder what 'interrogation' means. I picture some dark basement with the guy tied to a chair while they torture him. I would feel bad for the guy if he hadn't tried to kidnap me.

The succubi and incubi community may be vicious with their words, but I was never kidnapped when I was there. Still, I'd take the vampires any day. And that might have to do with the boy holding my hand.

Damek hasn't let go of my hand since we left the island. He's been so sweet and supportive. It only makes me fall for him even harder.

When we get to the Scott estate, Dad is waiting for us in his conference room. Julien is there, surprisingly, and so is Kaine. I didn't know that he was back, though maybe he came back when he heard what happened.

Kaine's eyes meet mine for a brief second before he looks pointedly away from me. The move hurts more than I thought it would. He was my advisor—an advisor who never wanted to advise me—but we became friends. Now, he can't even stand to look at me.

Damek pulls out a chair for me. I smile at him as I sit down.

Kaine thought he was in love with me, but Kaine doesn't know what love is. He was attracted to me—he had a crush. That was it. And I hope he will see that someday so that we can be friends again.

But will I even see him after Damek and I are married? Possibly I will see him in passing, but even that will be rare.

King Rune, or, er...Paul... catches Dad up on everything that happened with the intruder. I tell the events that I remember, but thankfully I only have to repeat myself a couple of times before they move on.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:01 am

Julien, who sits across from me, smirks as he pointedly looks at the ring on my finger. “Nice ring, sister.”

Everybody turns to look at me.

My cheeks grow warm. “Damek proposed.”

Julien snorts. “Duh, you’ve been planning your wedding for two months now.”

“She means that I properly proposed, not just signing an alliance, but I got down on one knee and asked her to be my wife.” Damek looks at me with love in his eyes.

I look up at him through my lashes.

Julien makes a loud hacking noise. “Gross. Can you two not flirt in front of me?”

I laugh but abruptly cut off when a chair scrapping echoes through the room. I glance up to see Kaine getting up from the table. He whispers something to my dad though I can’t hear it over the laughter and conversation in the room and then he storms off. He’s likely just leaving to interrogate the prisoner but the action still hurts.

I’m pretty sure he just wanted to get away from me. Even after all this time, he’s still so mad at me.

How can he be mad when I was doing what I was supposed to do? I did what he instructed me to do. Though, if I’m being honest, it was only a matter of time before I fell for Damek.

Julien makes a joke about a 'ball and chain' that makes Paul laugh so hard that he snorts. Only Julien could make a kingsnort.

Once Paul stops laughing, he turns to my father. "Michael, while I am here, there is a change to the alliance I would like to make."

Dad sits forward. "A change?"

Paul smiles widely, looking at me and Damek for a moment before shifting his gaze to my father. "As you know, when a couple gets married, the person who leaves their clan also gives up their right to rule and they're queen or king in name only."

Dad nods.

"A couple of months ago, when Damek first told me he wanted to marry Madeline, he insisted that he didn't want Madeline to be a queen consort. He wanted her to rule by his side equally," Paul says.

My stomach knots at his words.

Damek argued for me to rule equally at his side.

"At the time, I told him no. There was no way that I would agree to that. It went against all of our traditions." Paul glances at me. "I am sorry, Madeline. At the time, I didn't see what my son did."

I try to smile, hoping to show him that it's fine, but my head is spinning.

Damek really loves me. And I think he may have loved me for far longer than I've loved him. Why else would he go against his nature and argue for a one year engagement? Why else would he try to give me equal rights to rule? He didn't have

to do that.

Paul turns back to Dad. "I know it is unorthodox, but when Damek and Maddie one day take over the Rune Clan, I would like for them to do it as equals."

I sit back in my chair, feeling completely stunned. When I look at my dad, he's rubbing a hand along the scruff on his jaw, a small smile playing on his lips.

Dad looks at me. "Madeline, what do you think?"

What do I think? What does it matter what I think? I'm so stunned, I don't think I could get my tongue to work if I tried.

Julien, who usually stays quiet during meetings like this unless it's to deliver a well timed comedic relief, leans forward. "Maddie, you were born to rule. I know you doubt yourself, but you're amazing. I see it, Damek can see it, King Rune can see it. We all believe in you."

"I admit, I had my doubts before I met you," Dad says, his gaze on me. "When I was flying to get you, I questioned if it were the right thing to do. But I wanted to meet you so badly and I knew it was the perfect excuse. But from the moment I met you, I knew you'd be perfect for the job. You're excessively kind hearted and that is rare in a ruler."

Still, I don't know what to say. I look from Dad to Damek, wondering why he would fight for me to rule equally. I was satisfied to be by his side as a consort.

"Is this truly what you want?" I ask. "It's your birthright. I don't want you to do something that you'll regret."

Damek shakes his head. "I will never regret this decision. I know that it is right. I

want our sons and daughters to know that I fought for you to be my equal. I want them to know that they're worth more than what society expects of them. And I want them to know it is possible to find love, even in a marriage of alliance.”

Page 44

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:01 am

My heart swells at his words.

Damek is more than I deserve, though if he knew I was thinking it he would argue that I'm worth it and more.

"Why don't the two of you go talk while Michael and I talk about the change to the alliance," Paul suggests.

Damek stands quickly. It takes me a few seconds longer to get my legs to work. I think I'm stunned.

My legs feel numb as Damek leads me from the room. He leads me down the hallway and toward one of the sitting rooms on the main floor. I'm barely away when I sit down beside Damek on the long sofa.

"What are you thinking?" Damek asks, turning so that he is facing me. "I can't get a read on you right now."

I lick my lips and try to form the right words. "I'm shocked."

I wish that I could articulate what I'm feeling, but shocked works just as well as any description.

I take a deep breath. "I can't believe you did that for me."

He smirks. "You say it like I'm not selfish, but I am selfish, Maddie. I initially asked my dad because I thought it would make your dad more favorable toward us. I

thought it would convince him to let you marry me. But, as time went along, I started really pushing for it because I knew you would make a good ruler. I felt bad for even offering an alliance where you would have to give up your title of heir.”

“It’s a temporary title anyway.” I shrug. “Lucien is going to come back and rule. I know Kaine will do everything he can to find him.”

“Maybe so, but you deserve to be queen,” Damek says. “And I don’t mean in title only. You deserve the world and I wish I could give it to you. But everything that I have is yours—even my clan.”

My breath gets caught in my throat.

I know it’s no small thing for Damek to offer me his clan. I know how much vampire clans mean to their leaders. The fact that he’s welcoming me...

“Damek,” I pause, taking a breath, “are you sure?”

“I’m absolutely certain.” He gently cups the side of my face, his thumb caressing my cheek. “I’ve never been more sure about anything in my life. I trust you—not only with my heart but with my kingdom.”

I lean closer and kiss him. What else could I do after he said that?

Damek is the best guy that I’ve ever met and it doesn’t seem real that he would choose me. My heart is so full it feels like it could burst.

Am I supposed to be this happy? Shouldn’t I be fighting with my father to get out of this alliance? If anything, I want to fight to move the wedding sooner. I want to marry him now. Today. I question my past judgment when I thought six months was too short of an engagement.

“How do succubi and incubi wait years before they get married?” Damek asks as he pulls back.

I shake my head. “I have no idea.”

“Four months.” He sighs. “Why does four months feel like an eternity?”

I clear my throat. “They’re working on changing the alliance. Maybe we can see about moving the date forward by a month or three.”

He chuckles, standing from the couch. “Come on. We should get back in there and tell them that you agree to the change.”

I stand up, my head still spinning. Though I’m not sure if it’s spinning from that kiss or from the revelation earlier.

I put my hand in Damek’s. “Thank you for believing in me, even when you barely knew me. And thank you for choosing me and loving me.”

Damek pulls me into his embrace. “I will always believe in you, choose you, and love you.”

I grin. “That kind of sounds like wedding vows.”

“It’s a promise, Maddie.” He kisses the top of my head and squeezes me tighter against him.

I sigh and lean further into him, feeling completely content.

Page 45

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:01 am

I can't wait for us to get married. I want to complete our mate bond and know what he's thinking and feeling. I want us to be connected in all the ways that we can be.

"We're going to have a happy life," I say softly.

He relaxes his grip on me and he looks down. "The happiest of lives."

Together, Damek and I make our way back to the meeting room. Our fathers and Julien are both waiting there when we return.

"Do you have an answer, Madeline?" Dad inquires.

I grin, glancing at Damek, then Dad. "Yes. I want to rule by Damek's side."

Julien smirks. "I knew you were born to rule, you brat."

I stick my tongue out at him, which makes him laugh.

15

THE TRUTH

The door to the conference room opens with a loud thunk. It hits the wall with force and I jump at the abrupt sound.

I forgot this room is soundproof, so I couldn't hear the footsteps coming.

Kaine walks inside, his gaze going directly to my dad. He bows slightly. “King Scott, I have a lead on Lucien’s location.”

Dad stands from his seat. “WHAT?”

“The prisoner,” Kaine explains. “Do I have your permission to go? I want to leave now before they have a chance to move him.”

“Yes,” Dad says. “Go.”

Kaine bows again to Dad and then he leaves the room without any other word.

My heart leaps at the thought of Kaine bringing home my brother. I know that is all he’s wanted since I arrived—to find Lucien.

Things between Kaine and me are so awkward now. I don’t even know how to talk to him anymore. Everything is so messed up. And I can’t help but think that I was the one to mess him up.

I never should’ve kissed Kaine. I only did it because I was confused. I felt backed into a corner and I thought kissing him would help me sort out my feelings. And, in a way, it did. After that kiss, I knew exactly where Kaine stood. Even if he said he ‘loved’ me, he couldn’t be with me. I knew nothing would change his mind about that.

Kaine didn’t love me, even if he thought he did. For Kaine to love anybody, he’s first going to have to love himself. And right now, he thinks he’s unlovable since he’s a turned vampire.

Still, I feel guilty about the way things are. They wouldn’t be so awkward if I hadn’t kissed him

“I think this should be good.” Dad pushes his chair back. “I don’t think I’m going to be able to do any more work tonight.” He turns to Paul. “Please, feel free to stay for dinner tonight.”

Paul stands as well. “I need to get home, but I’m certain my son will stay.” He glances at Damek, who nods.

I stand up as well and lead Damek from the conference room. Even though the chairs are comfortable, my butt and legs are numb from sitting for so long.

“Do you want to take a walk outside?” I ask. “The flowers in the garden are starting to bloom and it’s pretty out there.”

“Sure.” Damek squeezes my hand. “Lead the way.”

Outside, it is quiet. A few bugs are chirping, but it’s still too cool for many to be out. The lights from the nearby city mask the stars, though a few can be seen. It makes me miss the island—I’m still sad we had to end our vacation early.

“You’re quiet,” Damek comments as we walk down a long pathway.

I sigh. “Sorry. I’m just... thinking. I’m kind of nervous about meeting Lucien. I hope Kaine can find him.” I pause, then add, “I also hate how awkward things are with Kaine.”

Page 46

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:01 am

Damek pulls me to a stop. “Do you want to talk about it?”

I turn to face Damek, my stomach in knots. “No, but we probably should talk about it.”

He gently puts his hand to the side of my face, pushing a piece of hair behind my ear. “You can talk to me about anything. We’re in this together.”

His words only make me feel worse. While Damek was fighting to make me a queen and give me a lengthy engagement, I was questioning everything and kissing another guy.

“You might be mad at me.” My voice comes out low, barely above a whisper.

“Nothing could ever make me mad at you,” he says.

I boldly meet his eyes, seeing the love in them.

He deserves to know, even if I’m scared.

I take a deep breath. “Do you remember when I told you that I kissed another guy? Right before we got engaged.”

“Yes, I remember.”

I worry my bottom lip between my teeth. “Well... it was Kaine.”

Damek smiles. “Maddie, I already knew that.”

I suck in a sharp breath. “You did?”

He shrugs. “It was obvious to me. But Kaine also told me. It was shortly after we got engaged—the night of our engagement party. He took me aside and told me what happened. And he gave me his blessing. He said that he knew he couldn’t pursue you. He made me promise to treat you like you deserve.”

My heart skips a beat.

Damek knows. And he doesn’t hate me.

“And you’re really not upset that I kissed him?” I ask.

He pauses. “Well, I’m not happy about it, but I understand it. After meeting your family, I understand it better than before.”

“Thank you. I am sorry that I did it.” I look up at him through my lashes.

“You don’t have feelings for him?” His shoulders are tense.

I shake my head. “No.”

His entire body relaxes at my reassurance.

“You saw what it was like for me at home.” I lower my head. “You saw how my family treated me, and that is how all the incubi treated me. I thought I wasn’t attractive.”

Damek nudges my chin up. “You don’t have to explain it to me. I trust you, Maddie.”

He wraps his arms around me and embraces me. I lean into him, letting him take my full weight.

“You really are the best.” I put my head against his chest and sigh. “Thank you, Damek.”

He kisses the top of my head and I know that this is supposed to be. It’s not the dramatic feelings my cousins used to have every time they met a cute guy. It’s actions. It’s the things he’s done for me because he wants me to be happy.

A few hours later, after dinner and after Damek goes home, I sit with Eden in the living room. Mom went to bed hours ago—she’s still not used to the vampire sleep schedule. Dad and Julien are working on something, I’m not sure what.

Eden is quiet as she works on some sort of crochet project, but she glances up at me. “You look happy.”

I can’t help the grin that spreads across my face. “I didn’t realize it was possible to be so happy.”

Her face softens. “I’m glad. You deserve to be happy.”

“Damek makes me happy,” I admit.

She grins. “I admit, I wasn’t quite so excited before my wedding. I didn’t like your father very much. It took me a while to get feelings for him. We didn’t even sleep in the same bedroom for six months and the only reason we changed that was because the council started asking about heirs.”

“But it worked out.” I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear.

“Eventually.” She nods. “But it took a while.”

I pull my knees up to my chest. “I was wondering about something. You said you were born a human, correct?”

She nods.

“And your mom was human?”

She nods again.

“Then how did you marry my dad? I thought monarchs were only allowed to marry royals and that royals couldn’t marry humans.”

She puts down her crochet project. “Mine was a special circumstance because of my mother. Occasionally, a vampire couple will give birth to a human. It’s rare, I think one in a million, but my mother was a one-in-a-million case. She was also the firstborn to my grandfather, so she was the heir of her clan.”

I put a hand to the base of my throat. “That can seriously happen?”

“It happened to my mother. There were also two other cases in vampire history,” she explains. “But when a human is born from a vampire couple, there is something in their blood that makes them unable to be turned into a vampire. So my mother had to marry somebody strong. My grandfather arranged her marriage. She gave birth to three children before she passed away. I was the only human born to my mom and dad. You already know my dad changed me.”

I blink, soaking in her words. “Wow.”

“Yeah.” She shrugs. “So that is my story. My family was the exception. I think my father was surprised that the Rune Clan wanted an alliance with us, just because of my blood. They were the only clan that wanted an alliance with us. So I really didn’t have any options.”

That must have been awful. She had no option but to marry my father. No wonder it took so long for them to grow to love one another.

“I’m sorry that happened. The other clans don’t know what they missed out on. I’m very happy to call you my stepmother. Even though you had every reason to hate me, you didn’t. Thank you for accepting me.” I worry my bottom lip between my teeth.

She grins. “Your father and I had a complicated relationship when he met your mother. But after what happened, we finally worked out our issues. In a way, I’m glad the affair happened. And now that I’ve met you and grown to love you, I don’t regret it. You were always meant to be part of our family.”

As I look at Eden, I wonder how many women would be so accepting. In her shoes, I don’t think I could. But she’s not only welcomed me, but she loves me as a daughter.

“I know that I have a mother, but I hope you know that I see you as my mom too. I love you and am thankful to have you in my life.”

Eden looks at me with tears in her eyes. “That means a lot to me, Madeline. I always wanted a daughter.”

My heart aches at how full it feels.

Everything is coming together. And once Lucien gets back, everything will be perfect.

Well, other than the Nodin Clan still having it out for me.

“Are you going to come wedding dress shopping with us next week?” I ask.

She nods. “I won’t leave you alone with Queen Rune and your mother arguing.”

I laugh. “They promised to try to get along, but I think it would be best if you’re there. Somehow, I don’t believe those two will ever fully get along.”

“True.” She picks back up her crochet project. “I’m excited to see you in your dress. You are going to make a beautiful bride.”

My breath gets caught in my throat.

A bride.

I’m getting married.

And I don't dread it.

I look at the ring on my finger and smile.

"He did good in picking out your ring," Eden says.

I keep my gaze on my finger. "He did. I honestly can't believe he asked me to marry him. It was such a surprise."

"He wanted to make you happy."

I look up. "He did. I just hope I'm worth all this trouble. I feel like I haven't put as much into our relationship as he has. He's the one who has fought for me."

"That's how it is. Sometimes he will give more and sometimes you will," she says. "Don't worry. The two of you will have a lifetime of fighting for one another. I have no doubts that you two will have a long, happy life with one another."

That sounds amazing.

"Did my dad fight for you?" I ask.

She nods. "Eventually, yes. It was after your mother. He felt really bad for what he did. We had our mate bond, so I could feel his emotions. It was hard to stay mad at him because I knew exactly how bad he felt. It worked out in the end. I'm glad I forgave him. A lifetime is too long to be mad at somebody."

Eden is right, though I'm certain not all married couples feel that way.

"Thank you," I tell her. "For your advice and for talking to me. I needed to hear that."

She grins. "You're welcome. I'm always here for you."

16

DRESS SHOPPING

Today is a day I have equally dreaded and looked forward to since I got engaged: dress shopping.

I love the idea of putting on a beautiful dress and getting married. But succubi are the most judgy species on the planet and I know I won't be excluded from their scrutiny.

Then there is the fact that Mom and Tiffany will both be there. And I know the two of them promised not to fight anymore, but I'm not expecting miracles. There is no way the two of them are suddenly going to become besties.

As I head out front, where the car is waiting, Eden is standing by the front door. She passes me a large to go coffee cup.

I happily take it from her. "You're an angel."

She grins. "I figured you'd need the caffeine tonight. It's going to be a long night."

Uh, true.

She puts a hand on my shoulder. "But don't let them get you down. Today is a happy day. You're picking out the dress you're marrying Damek in. It should be a joyous

occasion.”

Her words ease my anxiety.

She’s right. Who cares what the succubi think of my dress? The only thing that matters is what I think of my dress. Well, and Damek, but I doubt he will care half as much as I do. He’d think I look beautiful no matter what.

When we get into the SUV, Mom eyes my coffee. “Where did you get that?”

“Barbara,” I answer, naming the lady who works in the kitchens. She makes the best coffee drinks.

Mom groans. “Why didn’t I think of that? I woke up way too early this morning. I don’t know how you guys sleep all day and stay up all night.”

“Now you know how hard it was for me to be up during the day,” I say.

Mom frowns. “Oh, I know exactly how miserable it was. You didn’t keep a normal schedule as a baby or a toddler either. And it’s not like I could let a hyper two year old roam the house while I slept.”

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:01 am

“Madeline was a hyper toddler?” Tiffany asks.

The SUV takes off toward the first dress shop, so I buckle my seatbelt.

“So hyper,” Mom answers. “I don’t have the speed of a vampire, so keeping up with her was difficult.”

Tiffany grins. “Damek was the opposite. He was very chill as a toddler. I didn’t know him until he was two and a half years old, but he was an angel. I wonder what their children will be like.”

My cheeks grow warm as I listen to my mom and my future mother-in-law discuss what they think their grandchildren will be like.

Goodness, I almost think I prefer them fighting to this.

Shouldn’t we get married before they start talking about grandkids?

When Mom tells Tiffany about how succubi have large families, Tiffany gets hearts in her eyes. She claims she always wanted a large family.

Uh.

I sink further in my seat. Eden gives me a small smile.

At least there is one sane person with me.

During theentiredrive to the dress shop, Mom and Tiffany discuss what they think their grandchildren will be like. And as happy as I am that the two of them are getting along, I wish they would discuss something else.

As soon as the vehicle comes to a stop, I jump right out of the vehicle. The guards rush around me, the lead guard glaring at me as he orders the others to sweep the area. Eden steps out beside me and puts a hand on my shoulder.

“They’re just excited,” she says.

They’re excited, I’m terrified.

“I think I want to be married for a few years before I have kids,” I tell her.

She chuckles. “Your dad and I had lots of comments before Lucien was born. We couldn’t go anywhere without somebody asking about us having children. It was quite awkward considering we didn’t even share a room at the time.”

I cringe thinking about it.

That’s right—they were married a few years before they shared a room. I still have no idea what my dad was thinking. Eden is so easy to like. But if he had fallen in love with her straight away, I never would’ve been born.

Once we’re given the all clear, Tiffany and Mom lead us into the dress shop. The two of them are chatting eagerly to one another. I do my best to ignore whatever they’re saying. But when we walk inside, I hear a group of girls chatting loudly.

Wait—I recognize those voices.

“Madeline!” My cousin, Sophia, squeals as she runs over to me and hugs me. Behind

Sophia are three more of my cousins, Harper, Willow, and Paisley.

“Sophia, what are you doing here?” I ask.

“Your mom invited us.” She grins widely. “Did you think we’d want to miss dress shopping with you?”

I look between my four cousins.

Out of all my cousins, Sophia, Harper, Willow, and Paisley are among my favorites. They’ve never treated me as cruelly as the rest of them.

Harper sighs. “We wanted to come. All of the cousins have been so jealous of you! Imagine how envious they’ll be when we tell them we got to see your dress!”

“They’ll just begreen!” Paisley claps her hands.

“Jealous?” I raise an eyebrow. “Of me?”

“Because of the speech your prince gave. He ignored everybody’s flirting and only had eyes for you,” Willow explains. “It’s the kind of love that only exists in books. It was so romantic.”

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:01 am

They are jealous of me? Because of what Damek said? If anything, I figured they would be mad. My succubi cousins had never been turned down a day in their lives. I can't imagine it felt good to be turned down by my finacé.

"Madeline, introduce me to your cousins." Tiffany comes to stand at my left side.

"Tiffany, these are my cousins, Sophia, Willow, Paisley, and Harper." I point to each of them. "This is Queen Rune, she's Damek's mother."

Harper steps forward. "Your son is just so dreamy. All the cousins are half in love with him."

"Please tell me you have another son." Paisley steps up on the tips of her toes and bounces a little.

Tiffany looks from my cousins to me and raises an eyebrow.

"Sorry, but Damek's brother is taken," I say, remembering the mention of Duncan's girlfriend. I'm not certain that his parents approve of her, but I guess whoever she is doesn't look so bad when compared to my enthusiastic cousins.

Sophia pokes out her bottom lip. "What a shame."

I grin, feeling a little mischievous. "I have a younger brother, though."

"Wouldn't that make him our cousin?" Willow wrinkles her nose.

I shake my head. “Nah. He’s not related to you guys.”

Eden chuckles. I turn to look at her and see that she has her head turned to the side so I can’t see.

Julien is so full of himself—he only thinks he can handle a succubus.

“I’ll introduce you when we go home,” I say, turning back to Sophia. “You guys are staying a few nights, right?”

“We can stay long enough to meet your brother.” Paisley grins widely. “And any other single vampire men you happen to invite over.”

“Madeline,” Mom calls.

Mom is standing next to a worker, chatting away.

Uh, no telling what she told her my ‘style’ is.

“They have a room ready for you,” she says.

“Coming.” I groan, realizing that I’m in for a long night of trying on dresses.

Seven hours and four dress shops later, I found my dress. Nobody could agree on a single dress and I was about ready to give up and go shopping on my own. But the last shop we went to, I found it. Everybody agreed straight off. So the tailor got my measurements and they’re going to make the alterations. And I am so glad it’s over.

When we get back to the house, Julien is there so I introduce him to my cousins. They instantly take to him and he walks around with a girl on each arm. Willow and Harper refuse to let go of him and he’s got a huge grin on his face.

I roll my eyes when I see him smirk at me.

Tiffany headed home and Mom went straight to bed. Both claimed to be exhausted. I don't know why they're exhausted for, I'm the one who had to try on a million dresses.

Eden leads us to the kitchen where snacks are waiting for us. Eden grabs a plate before leaving Julien and me alone with my cousins.

"You just have the longest lashes," Harper coos.

"And the prettiest eyes," Willow says.

"Are you sure you don't have any incubi blood?" Paisley asks. "Because you're so charming."

I think I'm going to be sick.

Sophia smirks. "You were the one who reminded them they're not technically related to Julien."

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:01 am

“Something I now regret,” I grumble under my breath. I turn to fully face Sophia. “Were you guys serious about the cousins being jealous of me?”

She nods. “Absolutely. You wouldn’t believe how jealous they are. Violet and Olivia are absolutelyfuming. They’ve been in a funk ever since your prince turned them down. Violet even made a profile on a vampire dating app.”

I snort. “Good luck to the guys she matches with.”

“Right.” Sophia takes a sip of her water. “I still can’t quite believe this. You, a princess of the vampires. Who would’ve thought?”

I lean back in my chair. “I know. It’s still wild to think that I’m the spare. Though, when I marry Damek, Julien will go back to being the spare. Since Damek is the crown prince, I won’t be eligible to take over for my dad’s clan.”

“But your older brother is missing, so aren’t you technically the heir,” she asks.

“Technically.” I lean closer to her. “But don’t tell the other three.” I glance to where they are hanging onto Julien’s everyword while. “I think Julien would be even more popular if they knew.”

Sophia giggles. “Your brother is good looking.”

I wrinkle my nose.

She swats a hand at me. “Obviously not to you. But trust me when I say that he’s

ababe. If you weren't related, you would see it."

I look at my younger brother and shrug. "He definitely thinks he's all that. He's constantly reminding me that we look alike and because of that, I'm also gorgeous."

"You are," she says and takes a bite of her food.

She's so casual about it. I don't think she realizes just how strange it is for me to hear a succubus admit that to me.

"Why do you look surprised?" Sophia asks once she swallows her food.

"I've never felt pretty—not when I'm the only hybrid living among full blooded succubi," I admit. "I'm not as charming or as charismatic as the rest of you. It's like Henry, Violet, and Olivia always reminded me—I'm the ugly cousin."

She narrows her eyes at me. "You know they only said that because they're jealous, right?"

I stop with a bite halfway to my mouth. "Jealous because I'm marrying a vampire prince?"

"No." She pauses. "Well, yes. They are jealous of the fact that you're marrying a vampire prince, but they're more jealous of the fact that Damek adores you. But that's not what I'm talking about. You're a hybrid, which somehow enhances your succubus half. You're more charming than all of us, that's why no incubus would ask you out on a date. You intimidated them."

My mouth falls open. "No. No way."

"Yes way," she says. "I promise I'm not lying. This is the truth, Madeline. Nobody

thought you were ugly. You're the most beautiful of us all. I thought you knew or I would've told you sooner."

She thought I knew?

I sit back in my chair, feeling stunned at her words.

Could it be possible that she's right? That all of my cousins hated me, not because I was ugly, but because they thought I was prettier than them?

"No." I shake my head. "Olivia and Violet and gorgeous. There is no way I'm prettier than them."

"Believe what you want," she says. "But it's the truth."

I contemplate her words as I watch my younger brother flirt with my cousins.

This is too weird to even contemplate right now. But if she's right...

Well, it doesn't matter anymore. Because I live with the vampires now. And vampires have never felt the need to put me down to make themselves feel better. So it doesn't change anything. But I am glad to know it.

"Thank you, Sophia. That means a lot to me." My throat closes up at the emotions. "I've always felt like an outsider, but I'm glad to know that's not the case."

She smiles softly. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner. I tried not to get in on the teasing because I knew it bothered you, but I don't think I realized just how much it affects you."

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:01 am

“It doesn’t anymore,” I admit. “I’m happy now.”

“Prince Damek makes you happy,” Sophia says. “I’m glad to hear. Out of all of us, you’re the one who deserves to marry a prince. You’ll make a great queen.”

My stomach twists at the word ‘queen.’

Someday, I will be a queen. And it won’t be just in name, not since Damek fought for us to have equal rights in his clan.

I still can’t believe he did that for me.

Harper, Willow, and Paisley all giggle at something Julien said. I look over and see that all three of my cousins are looking at him like he hung the moon.

“Should we do something about that?” Sophia asks, nodding toward Julien.

I roll my eyes. “No. Let them have their fun. Julien thinks he can keep up with a succubus, so I guess we’ll find out.”

She raises an eyebrow at that. “Maybe he could keep up with an ordinary succubus, but we’re from the royal family. I doubt he can keep up with our crazy family.”

She’s not wrong. But if anybody can keep up with them, it’s Julien.

I look at him and see Harper kissing him on the cheek.

“Oh, come on,” I say. “That’s gross.”

Julien laughs. “Jealous, Maddie? You should call Damek and have him come over.”

I cross my arms over my chest. “He’s in meetings with his dad tonight. He knew I’d be busy with dress shopping.”

However, if he knew my cousins were here, he might change his mind and come over anyway. After our disaster engagement party, I don’t think he trusts any of my family. Not that I blame him. If Damek’s family talked to him like my family does to me, I’d want to protect him too.

“Isn’t Prince Damek just dreamy?” Harper asks him, sighing.

Julien narrows his eyes. “I liked you better when you thought I was dreamy.”

“Oh, you are!” She squeezes his bicep.

“I think I’m going to be sick,” I say loud enough for Julien to hear.

Julien chuckles but ignores me.

I turn back to Sophia. “Who thought it was a good idea to introduce them to Julien?”

“That was you.” She taps something on her phone and then turns the screen to face me. “You look so beautiful in your dress. You’re going to make a stunning bride. And you’ll be the first of us to marry! I imagine all the cousins will be more serious when it comes to dating now.”

I glance at the dress, my heart warming at the sight.

It was definitely the right choice. I hope it makes Damek's jaw drop.

"And to be married at twenty-three." Sophia puts her phone away. "It's so young."

"I turn twenty-four soon after the wedding," I remind her.

She waves a hand. "You're still practically a baby."

I laugh.

Sophia is younger than I am by two years. But she's right. Twenty-three is scandalously young for a succubus to marry.

"I think it's a good age to marry," I say. "I feel ready."

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:01 am

“You feel ready because Damek is the one.” She takes a sip of her water. “And I’m not above admitting that I long for a love like yours.”

I never thought any of my cousins would be envious of me.

And it turns out, they’ve always been jealous.

17

WE FOUND HIM

When my cousins leave, I’m a little sad to say goodbye to them. I never thought I could feel that way about any of my cousins, but my heart feels happy after the conversation I had with Sophia.

The week passes quickly. Wedding planning isn’t nearly as chaotic since Mom and Tiffany started getting along. The two of them have found common ground. Unfortunately, their common ground is their future grandchildren.

“At least you’ll have no shortage of babysitters,” Julien says after I tell him about our latest wedding planning session.

Even though we’ve hired a great team of designers, Tiffany and Mom both insist that we should be involved in the planning as much as we can. I don’t have the heart to tell them that I don’t care what the wedding is like. The only thing I care about is the marriage.

I narrow my eyes at Julien. “Just wait. You’ll get your turn.”

Julien smirks. “Yeah right. You see how Eden is. She’ll be thrilled to have grandchildren, but she’d never be vocal about it.”

Uh, he’s right. Eden is too sweet to say anything.

I turn to him, my lips tilting upward. “Ah, but I need nieces and nephews.”

He raises an eyebrow. “Shouldn’t I find a girlfriend first?”

“As long as you don’t date any of my cousins.” I give him my best stern look. I don’t think it works because he laughs.

“They do adore me.” He grabs my phone from my nightstand. “I should get their numbers, just so I can be friendly and text them.”

I snatch my phone from him and glare when I see that he’s past my lock screen. I glare at him.

“Your wedding date is your password.” He shakes his head. “Honestly, Maddie, you made it too easy.”

I roll my eyes and start to complain when my phone vibrates. I glance at it, expecting it to be Damek. Instead, my father’s name is on the screen.

Come to my office now. Bring Julien.

“Dad needs us to come to his office.” I try to swallow, but my mouth has gone dry.

Dad never has us working this time of the night. It’s nearly sunrise. Whatever it is, it

must be urgent.

Julien abruptly turns and walks toward the door with a quick stride. I follow him closely, wondering what's going on.

Right away, my mind begins wandering—is it the Nodin Clan? Have they done something again? Maybe they've kidnapped somebody else.

What if it's Damek?

At the thought, I quicken my pace even more and slip in front of Julien as we rush down the stairs. When I get to my dad's office, I throw the door open and make my way toward his desk.

“What happened? What's wrong?” I sound out of breath, though it's not from the run we did. I'm on the verge of a panic attack.

“Nothing is wrong.” Dad motions toward the chairs across from his desk. “Both of you, sit down.”

Julien closes the door to the office and comes to take the seat beside me.

Nothing is wrong.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:01 am

I panicked for absolutely nothing.

I take a couple of slow breaths, trying to calm my racing heart.

“I got a text from Kaine a couple of minutes ago. He’s going to call me soon. He says he has an important update on Lucien and I want you both to be here when I talk to him,” Dad says.

Lucien.

Maybe Kaine has good news. Maybe he found Lucien.

My palms feel sweaty at the thought of meeting my older brother. I’ve heard so much about him that I feel like I already know him. But will he like me? Does he even want to meet me?

But I should wait to see if Kaine found him before I worry about whether Lucien will like me.

Julien sits forward. “What about Mom? Do you think she should be here too?”

Dad hesitates. “I thought about it but don’t want to get her hopes up. What if he’s just calling about another lead? I don’t know for sure that he’s found Lucien and I just can’t stand to see her disappointed again.”

“You’re right.” Julien sits back against his chair frowning.

I reach my hand over and grab his, squeezing it. He glances at me and grins, but his posture stays tight.

This weighs on Julien more than I thought. Not just because without Lucien, he will be the heir once Damek and I marry, but because he misses his brother. Julien copes by telling jokes and being silly, but I know he's hurting.

Whatever this phone call is about, I hope it's good news. I need Lucien to come home. I want to meet my older brother. I want him to be at my wedding. I want to have a relationship with him.

When Dad's phone rings, I jump at the abrupt sound. He answers it right away and Julien leans forward.

"Yes," Dad says.

He doesn't put it on speaker, but he doesn't have to. We're vampires and we can hear the person on the other end.

"We got him," Kaine says.

My heart thumps faster.

They found Lucien.

Julien lets out a breath of relief and Dad sags in his chair.

"Oh, thank God." Dad takes a deep breath. "How is he? Is he okay?"

"You know Lucien. He's already asking about the clan. The healer is doing an examination right now—we had to force him to let us," Kaine says.

Dad chuckles. “That sounds like Lucien. But how is he? Is he hurt?”

“A few cuts and bruises, but nothing serious,” Kaine answers. “We’ll know more after the healer examines him. We should be home by sunset.”

Tonight.

I get to meet my brother tonight.

I doubt I’ll be able to sleep much today.

Dad closes his eyes, relief clear in them. “What about the Nodin Clan?”

Kaine grunts. “They ran like cowards. Our priority was protecting Lucien, so we let them go.”

“You did right,” Dad assures him. “Thank you, Kaine.”

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:01 am

“It is my honor to serve the Scott Clan.”

Dad ends the call and takes a few deep breaths before he looks up, He grins widely.
“Our whole family is going to be together soon.”

Julien jumps up from his seat. “I’m going to go get Mom.”

He runs from the room and I watch Dad. He can’t stop smiling and his cheeks are pink with elation. He tips his head back and looks up at the ceiling.

I lean forward. “Dad, do you think Lucien will like me?”

He looks at me, his eyes wide. “Why do you think he wouldn’t like you?”

I shrug. “I’ve been doing his duties while he’s been gone. Maybe he won’t like the choices I’ve made.”

Dad shakes his head. “Madeline, your brother loves you.”

“He doesn’t know me,” I argue.

“Ever since I found out about you, once you were eighteen, Lucien has been after me to go find you and bring you back.” He folds his hands on the desk in front of him. “I didn’t want to disturb your life, but he argued that this was where you belonged. He wanted to meet you. He wanted us to be a family. You know my reasons for not coming sooner. I was an idiot for not listening to him and I’m certain he will tell me so when he sees how well you’ve integrated into the family.”

My eyes widen.

Lucien wanted to meet me.

“So he won’t hate me?” I chew on my bottom lip.

Dad chuckles. “No. He will adore you. Damek, on the other hand, will likely be interrogated.”

“Does he not like Damek?” I put a hand on the base of my throat. I just got Mom and Tiffany to stop fighting, the last thing I want is Lucien trying to start something with Damek. Though, Damek isn’t the fighting sort.

“They get along well,” Dad assures me.

I let out a breath of relief.

“But you are his little sister,” he continues. “And he will want to protect you.”

“Yes, but I don’t need protection from Damek,” I say.

Dad shrugs.

The door is abruptly thrown open. I jump at the sudden noise, once again hating how the room is soundproof.

“What is going on?” Eden asks, walking up to Dad’s desk. “Julien woke me up and told me I needed to come to your office. He said it was something urgent.” She pauses. “Is it Lucien? Did something happen?” I can hear the anguish in her voice.

She’s been waiting for news, not knowing if they would find her son alive or dead. I

can't imagine how difficult this has been for her.

Dad smiles so widely that I'm sure she can tell without being told. "Kaine found him. He's alive."

Eden sobs in relief. Julien slips his arm around her and hugs her tightly. When I look at Julien, he's got tears in his eyes which causes me to tear up.

"When will be home?" Eden asks once she can speak.

"By sunset," Dad answers. He walks around his desk and embraces his wife. "Lucien is coming home."

Julien and I watch the two of them embrace, both of us smiling. I don't know Lucien, do I do know that this feels amazing. Pretty soon, our family will be whole.

When Eden backs up from the embrace, she wipes under her eyes. "We should all get some rest. Tonight, we're having a family reunion."

My heart flutters.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:01 am

She glances at me. “You should call Damek. I’m sure he will want to be here.”

“Are you sure?” I ask. “I don’t want to intrude on family time.”

Eden puts one hand on her hip. “Damek may not be married into the family yet, but he is family.”

Julien snickers. “She told you.”

Eden waves her hand. “Now, off to bed. Both of you. I will see you both early tonight.”

Julien slips his arm around me and says, “Good morning,” to Eden and Dad, then he leads me out of the room.

I take a deep breath as he shuts the door behind us. “How am I supposed to sleep tonight? I’m way too anxious.”

“Me too.” Julien rubs his hands down his face and then smiles at me. “You have no idea how happy I am, Maddie. And not just because I don’t want to be heir. I just want my older brother to come home.”

“I’m excited to meet him,” I say as we walk toward the staircase. “It always felt so weird to have an older brother that I didn’t know.”

“Lucien is going to love you,” he says echoing the words Dad told me. “He always told me that he wished for a younger sister instead of a brother.”

I grin. "I'm sure he was just messing with you."

"Maybe."

We head up the stairs toward our rooms. I rub my sweaty palms against my oversized sweatshirt. "I'm so nervous."

"Don't be." Julien slips his arm around me. "Come on. Let's go to bed so you can call your prince. But don't stay up half the night."

"I won't."

We pause at our doors and Julien turns to face me. "Things will be different when Lucien gets back, but I promise that it will be a good change."

I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. "Thank you, Julien."

He grins. "As long as I'm still your favorite brother."

I press my lips together not making any promises.

Julien's mouth falls open in mock surprise. "Maddie! I'm the one who gave you your nickname. We're besties."

"We'll always be besties," I say. "You'll always be my favorite younger brother."

"He hasn't even arrived and you already love him more than me. I see how it is." He grumbles.

I grin. "Good morning, Julien."

“Good morning, Maddie.” He opens his door and turns to me one last time. “By the way, you should warn your prince that Lucien will be interrogating him.”

I groan as Julien shuts his door behind him.

So Dad wasn’t joking about that.

18

HOMEcoming

I wake up long before my alarm and get ready for the night. I’m too amped up to sleep. Judging by the fact that Julien, Dad, and Eden are all downstairs when I get there, I’m not the only one who woke early.

Mom left during the day. She sent me a text, telling me she was going to visit my grandpa. I think she just wanted to give the rest of us time alone.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:01 am

“Is Damek coming over?” Eden takes a sip of blood, but she hasn’t even attempted to eat any of her food.

“Yeah. He texted me and said he’s on his way.” I take a bite of food. My stomach is in knots, so it’s hard to eat anything. I force myself to swallow and take another bite.

Julien, on the other hand, has no problems eating. He shoves a huge bite into his mouth and washes it down with a large gulp of blood.

“I sometimes have a hard time believing that I’m related to you,” I tease him.

He smirks. “Well, I’m sure Lucien will be thrilled to have somebody on his side.”

At the sound of Lucien’s name, my stomach twists again.

I’m about to meet my brother for the first time. I went through this already with Julien, but it was perfect. There is no way that this can go perfectly twice, right? I’m the one who almost broke up his parent’s marriage. My existence has probably caused a lot of hardship for Lucien. There is no way he will like me.

The doorbell rings. Eden jerks her head toward Dad.

Dad shakes his head. “You know Kaine won’t ring the doorbell when he’s bringing Lucien. It’s probably just Damek.”

Eden’s shoulders slump forward.

Dad reaches over and grabs her hand. “Kaine will text once the plane lands—”

He says something more, but I get up from the table to answer the door. I’m so glad Damek will be here today. Somehow, having him there feels like comfort. I need his support. When I open the door, he is standing on the other side with his hands stuffed into the front pocket of his jeans. When he sees me, he smiles widely.

“Maddie, you look beautiful.” He steps through the threshold. “Are you nervous?”

I shut the door and wipe my palms on the skirt of my dress. “So nervous.”

Damek slips his arm around me and pulls me into his embrace. He kisses the top of my head. “I’d tell you not to be nervous, but I’m a little anxious myself.”

Still in his arms, I lift my head to look up at him. “What do you have to be nervous about? Don’t you know Lucien?”

He nods. “I do. We’ve always been cordial, even friendly, but that was before I was in love with his sister.”

My heart jumps at his confession of being ‘in love’ with me. I already knew it, but I will never tire of hearing it.

Somebody clears their throat, so I step back from Damek’s embrace. I turn around and see Julien smirking at us. When he sees that he has our attention, he steps forward.

“Kaine called—the plane landed, so they should be here in about half an hour,” Julien informs us.

This is really happening.

I take a deep breath. “Is there anything I should know before I meet him?”

Julien cocks his head to the side and pauses before replying. “The only thing you need to know is that I am the charming brother.”

I roll my eyes. “I’m not sure I would use the word charming to describe you.”

“Really?” Julien puts a hand on his chest. “Because your cousins all seemed to think I was very charming. I told you that I exchanged numbers with them, right? They text me nearly every day to ask how I’m doing.”

“You’re a prince,” I remind him. “You have to marry a royal vampire.”

“I’m third born. I can marry a princess of another species if I want,” he says.

Damek slips his hand into mine. His hand is much cooler than mine and it feels good. “Julien, do you really think you can handle being married to a girl who is better looking than you?”

I laugh so hard I have to grab my stomach.

Julien glares at Damek. “You know, I like you. Trust me when I say, you don’t want to get on my bad side. I’ve got all the control in this family.”

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:01 am

“My apologies,” Damek says, but his smirk shows how insincere his apology is.

Julien groans. “I regret encouraging this relationship.”

A little later, a group of us stand outside as the sun begins to set. Damek is at my side, holding my hand. Julien stands on the other side, his gaze on the driveway as we anxiously await Lucien’s arrival.

Dad is embracing Eden as we wait. Eden is smiling bigger than I’ve ever seen. I knew that Lucien missing was hard on her, but I don’t think I realized just how difficult it was. Seeing her so happy like this makes my stomach twist. She’s a great mom to Julien and Lucien—the fact that she accepted me proves that. It would’ve been so much easier for her to reject me. But she didn’t. And I know it was—at least a little—for the sake of Julien and Lucien. She never wanted them to have to choose between their mom and their sister. And I am so thankful to have Eden in my life as my stepmother.

The sound of a car turning off the main road and onto the driveway makes me stiffen.

That has to be them.

I squeeze Damek’s hand tighter and he scoots closer to me.

Why did I ever question if marrying Damek was the right thing? I know now that nobody is more perfect for me than him.

Eden stands up straighter as the black SUV comes into view. She can hardly keep still

while she waits for the vehicle to come to a stop. As soon as it does, she runs over to it and opens the door. Dad is right behind her, followed by Julien. I follow them, but I keep my distance. I want them to be able to have their reunion before introductions are made.

I peek between Dad and Julien's shoulders and spot a head of dark brown hair. It's on the long side, but I know from his pictures that he normally keeps it short. I can't blame him for the long length since he's been in captivity.

"You need a haircut." Eden pulls back from the embrace to look at him.

He grins at her. "I'll get right on that, Mom. After I eat. And sleep."

Julien was right—Lucien does look like Eden. Not just his hair and eye color, but he's got the same smile too.

Dad hugs Lucien next, which consists of a hard slap on the back.

"I'm glad you're back," Dad says.

Julien hugs him next. "Very glad. For a while, I thought I was going to have to be heir."

Lucien laughs. "Of course you wouldn't want the responsibility."

"I'll have you know I'm very responsible." Julien puffs out his chest.

Lucien turns his attention from Julien toward Damek and me. He glances at Damek for only a couple of seconds before his eyes focus on me.

"So, you're my younger sister," he says.

I pause before saying, “It’s better than calling me the infamous love child.”

Lucien laughs as he steps forward. “I’m not surprised Julien said that to you.” He stops in front of me. “I’m Lucien.”

“I’m Madeline,” I say.

“But call her Maddie,” Julien says.

Lucien surprises me by hugging me. I hug him back, my head spinning from the unexpected gesture.

I didn’t expect my older brother to like me. Though, I shouldn’t be surprised, not with Eden as his mother.

“It’s nice to meet you, Maddie.” Lucien pulls back and his gaze finally settles on Damek. “Prince Damek, I wasn’t expecting you to be here.”

Damek rests his hand on my lower back, a move that Lucien notices.

Lucien looks at me, raising an eyebrow.

I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. “Uh, Damek and I are engaged.”

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:01 am

Lucien turns around to face Dad, who is talking with Kaine. “Dad, you approved this,” he yells, breaking up the conversation.

Dad turns to us. “Are you talking about Madeline’s engagement to Damek? Yes, I approved it. Though it was Madeline’s choice.”

Lucien turns to Damek. “You always were picky. I thought you’d be single forever—or until your council forced you into marriage. I will take it as a compliment that you chose my sister. But let it be known that if you hurt her, I will hurt you.”

Damek grins, not at all put off by what Lucien is saying. “Thanks, I appreciate your support. I will never purposefully hurt Maddie.”

The two of them shake hands and I stand there wondering what just happened.

Lucien just threatened Damek and now the two of them are going on like they’ve always been friends.

We head inside so that Lucien can get some food and blood. From what I understand of his captivity, he wasn’t given a lot of blood—only enough to survive. To make up for the lack of nutrition, he’ll have to drink double his usual amount of blood over the next few months to make up for it. The healer also gave him a lot of vitamins to take.

Eden coo’s over Lucien as he eats, making sure he has plenty of food. She keeps refilling his drink.

I don’t think I’ve ever seen Eden smile so big and she can’t take her eyes off her

oldest son. My heart feels so full as I watch the love she has for him.

Somehow, the family feels complete now. I didn't even realize how much was missing by Lucien not being here, but now I can't imagine it any other way. It feels as though he has always been here.

Dad catches him up on everything that happened while he was gone.

Lucien chuckles when Dad gets to the part of Damek and I getting engaged. He glances at Julien. "Which left you as heir. I'm sure you loved that."

Julien shrugs. "I tried to talk her out of marrying Damek, but the two of them are sickeningly in love."

Lucien looks at Damek and me. "I've noticed."

Damek and I are holding hands, but I didn't think we were doing anything too 'lovey.' I glance at Damek and he shrugs.

"I think they're sweet," Eden says.

Julien pretends to gag.

"Wait until you see Julien with my cousins." I stick my tongue out at my younger brother.

Lucien chuckles. "Julien is probably as vain as an incubus."

"Can confirm," I tease.

Julien put a hand to his chest. "Wow. Is this pick on Julien day?"

“How is that different from any day?” Lucien takes a sip from his cup of blood. Eden rushes to refill it, but he waves her off. “I don’t think I can stomach much more, Mom. But thank you.”

Eden pushes his hair back out of his face. “I missed you, Lucien. I’m glad you’re home.”

“Me too, Mom.”

I lean into Damek’s side, watching my family.

Everything feels so good... so right. I glance over at Kaine, who is sitting at the table with Lucien. He’s looking at some paperwork, but I see him look at Lucien every few minutes. It’s almost like he can’t believe he’s here either.

After finishing as much of his food and blood as he can, Lucien heads for bed. He must be extremely tired because the sunset was only a few hours ago.

Damek heads back to the Rune estate soon after, promising that he’ll be back tomorrow night—he has a lot of duties as heir to his clan. When he leaves, it feels so quiet again.

19

HOW DOES ONE GET A HUSBAND?

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:01 am

It's been three and a half months since Lucien came home. We haven't heard a word from the Nodin Clan. Wherever they are, they are well hidden.

Tonight is my bachelorette party, which isn't a crazy evening like some bachelorettes would have. Queen Rune, Mom, and Eden are all invited, along with my cousins. We have a fun spa night planned with food, mani-pedis, and massages. I know Damek is having his version of a bachelor party with my brothers, dad, his family, and a few of his friends. I don't know what they're doing—Julien refused to tell me.

While my feet soak in the warm water, Sophia and Harper giggle as they look at some human magazine. What is so interesting in a two-year-old magazine?

When Harper sees me watching them, she turns the magazine toward me. "Look at this human man. He's adorable."

I look at the human and shrug. "He's not my type."

"Not your type?" She gasps.

Sophia swats a hand at Harper. "Now, now, you must forgive our dear cousin. She's likely thinking of her prince right now."

Harper grins. "Thinking about the wedding night, huh?"

My cheeks grow warm—not at her question, but because Damek's mother is sitting beside me.

Tiffany looks up and winks. “I am a forty-five-year-old married woman, there is no need to be embarrassed. I know what happens on a honeymoon.”

Harper giggles again.

“Maybe you can give us advice then.” Sophia steps forward. “How does one get a husband?”

Harper’s eyes light up. “Yes, yes! Tell us! All the guys we’ve dated have been jerks.” She glances at me. “Though, I get the feeling maybe we’ve dated the wrong species.”

I could’ve told her that years ago. There was a reason I never went out with incubi and it wasn’t because they never asked me out on dates.

Mom sits down in the chair on the opposite side of me. “Girls, I’ve told you, when the right guy comes along, you will know.”

“Yes, but you’re single,” Harper says.

Sophia nudges Harper with her elbow. “Rude.”

“Ouch.” Harper rubs at her side.

Tiffany chuckles. “I hate to say it, but Sasha is right. When the right guy comes along, you will know it.”

“Was it that way for you?” Sophia turns to Eden, who sits on the other side of Tiffany.

Eden shakes her head. “I didn’t like my husband for the first three years of our marriage. But when you’re married and have a mate bond, you have to make things

work. When we both decided to work on making a relationship, I fell in love with him. We've had a happy marriage."

"Did you just know with Damek?" Harper asks.

I shrug. "It wasn't like that. I liked him right away and was attracted to him, but I didn't know he was the one until later. But even before we started dating, we'd spend hours on the phone every night."

"I didn't know that." Tiffany glances at me. "Is that why Damek is always so tired?"

My cheeks grow warm. "Uh, maybe. We still talk on the phone until late. Sorry."

She grins. "It's quite all right, dear. I understand. I was once young. Though, Paul and I could never stay up late and chat on the phone. He had a toddler to care for and a kingdom to rule."

Their relationship must've been difficult. I can't imagine having all the responsibilities that they had at my age.

After we get our nails done, we head to dinner. Eden picked out an amazing restaurant on the lake—the same one Damek took me to on a date not long ago. Before we head inside, I look at the lake. Harper, Sophia, and Mom turn to look too.

"What are you looking at?" Mom squints, like she's trying to get a better view.

"The lake," I answer.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:01 am

Harper frowns. “It’s so unfair that you can see in the dark.”

“Right,” Sophia crosses her arms over her chest. “I’ve always been so scared of the dark.”

I grin at her. “Trust me, nothing is out there. Just a beautiful lake.”

“We eat here a lot, especially in the summer,” Tiffany says, once we head inside. “Damek and Duncan always loved coming here—I think they just wanted an excuse to ride in the boat. It was their favorite thing when they were younger. We make a point to come once a week, even now.” She smiles at me. “I suppose you’ll be coming with us this summer.” She pauses. “That is unless you want alone time with Damek. I don’t mean to pry.”

“I want to come.” I slip my arm through hers, linking them together. “We’re going to be family—don’t think you’re prying by inviting us to dinner.”

Her shoulders relax. “Not all women would feel that way about their in-laws.”

“Well, I do. So don’t worry about that,” I say, hoping to reassure her.

We get a table by the windows, even though Mom and my cousins won’t be able to see the view. Mom raises an eyebrow when Tiffany orders a glass of blood, but nobody says anything. We eat our dinner and laugh about silly things. It’s exactly what I want out of a bachelorette party.

When we eventually head to the hotel, Mom is exhausted and heads to bed straight

away. Tiffany and Eden also retire early, though I have a feeling they just want to give me time with my cousins.

Harper, Sophia, and I stay up late talking about nothing and everything all at once. They tease me about my upcoming honeymoon—something that I’m quite looking forward to. And they talk about wanting their own vampire prince to sweep them off their feet. I want to warn them that the other princes are half as charming as Damek, but I don’t want to ruin their fantasy. They’re looking forward to all the single princes they’re going to meet.

I think about that—they technically could marry a vampire prince. They’re royalty and would offer an alliance with the succubi and incubi, which would give them an alliance with the Scott and Rune clans. It’s not a bad position for the other vampires to be in.

Still, the thought of either of them warming up to Prince Caedmon has me shivering. Then again, if anybody could handle him, it would be a succubus.

Surprisingly, my cousins stay up until the sun starts to rise, and then we all head to our rooms for a good day’s sleep.

I wake up in the early afternoon to Eden shaking me gently.

“Madeline, wake up.”

I rub my eyes. “What time is it?”

“It’s three o’clock. I’m sorry to disturb your sleep, but we can’t find your mom,” she says softly.

My mom?

I look around, feeling disoriented. It takes me a few moments to realize where I am.

The hotel.

The bachelorette party.

My skin is still smooth from all the lotion and oils they used during my massage despite the shower I took before bed.

I sit up and look at Eden. “What do you mean my mom is missing? She probably just went out to get food or something. Unlike us, she can’t sleep during the day.”

“Madeline.” Eden hands me a slip of paper. “She was taken.”

“What?” I look down at the paper and slowly read the words.

I’ve taken Princess Bennett. We will be in contact with demands shortly.

Sincerely,

Prince Lucas Nodin

My heart races as I look at the signature.

The Nodin Clan took her? Why would they do that? And how did they do that? We have guards with us.

“How?” I ask.

Eden shakes her head. “I don’t know. The guards said nobody had been in or out of her room. She had food delivered at about noon, but the guy delivered her food and left.”

I run my fingers through my hair, trying to think. “How long has she been missing?”

“I don’t know,” Eden says. “Harper and Sophia were the ones who went to her room and found this. The guards woke me.”

“Have you called Dad?” I ask.

She nods. “The guards called him before they woke me. He, Lucien, Julien, and Damek are all on their way, but they are out of town. It’ll be another hour before their car arrives.”

My hands shake as I run them through my hair, trying to gather my thoughts. “Eden, are... I...” I take a deep breath. “We have to call my grandfather.”

“Sophia and Harper have already taken care of that.” Eden sits beside me on the bed, putting her hand on my arm gently. “Are you all right?”

I nod then shake my head. “I don’t know. I wish Damek were here already.”

“I know, dear.” She pulls me into her embrace and I lean against her, allowing myself to take comfort in her.

A knock on the door has her pulling back. I glance over as the door opens and spot Tiffany walking inside. She's dressed and looking poised and beautiful, as always.

"Madeline, are you doing okay?" She wrings her hands. "No, of course you're not okay. I'm so sorry." She walks closer to the bed. "Damek called and asked me to check on you."

I take a deep breath. "Make sure he knows that I'm okay."

Tiffany raises an eyebrow. "You don't look okay."

I let out a long breath. "I know. But I don't want him to worry. He can't do anything right now. He's on his way. They'll be here as quickly as they can."

She nods but doesn't look convinced.

"Do we know anything else?" I ask, turning to look at Eden.

Eden shakes her head.

"All right." I push myself to get out of bed. "I should get ready. There is much to do. Have the guards got the security feed from the hotel manager?"

"They're going over it now," Eden answers. "We should know something shortly."

"Will you be okay getting dressed on your own?" Tiffany asks.

I would be offended by her question if she didn't look so concerned. She really is worried about me.

I offer her a smile. "I'll be okay, I promise. I just woke up and this still feels like a

strange dream. Once Damek and my dad and brothers get here, I'll be fine."

Tiffany and Eden both reluctantly leave me alone. I take a few seconds to breathe before I force myself to get ready. I go through my night routine of washing my face, brushing my teeth, and fixing my hair. With only one outfit packed for the day, it's easy to get dressed and ready. I don't have to think.

Once I'm ready, I head into the hallway. Guards are swarming the area, looking for clues. The door to my mother's room is open as people go in and out. Tiffany and Eden are talking to a guard. Harper and Sophia both spot me and rush over to me, each of them hugging me.

"Oh, Madeline, I'm so sorry." Harper wipes the tears from her eyes.

"I'm sorry you had to go in there and find her missing," I say, trying to keep calm. Tears press against my eyes, but I refuse to let them fall. I need to be strong right now. "Eden said you called Grandpa."

"I did." Sophia sniffs. "He has dropped everything and he's coming. He's bringing all his guards too. He even called in a favor with a local wolf shifter pack. At least half the pack are on their way."

I know that Sophia is worried because she doesn't even make a joke about how 'hot' their alpha is—she's had a crush on the alpha for as long as I can remember. Unfortunately for her, wolf shifters have soulmates—succubi don't.

I let out a breath of relief. "With everybody coming, we'll find her quickly."

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:01 am

Harper nods firmly. “We will. This Nodin Clan won’t get away with what they’ve done.”

20

ARE THEY ALWAYS LIKE THIS?

I hold it together exactly as long as it takes Damek to get there, but as soon as I see him, I run into his arms and let him hold me while I sob into his chest. He rubs my back and softly tells me that everything is going to be okay. Somehow, when he’s holding me like this, I believe him. When I eventually do pull back, I notice Dad, Lucien, and Kaine are talking to the guards. Julien is talking with Harper and Sophia, but for one he’s not smirking or flirting with them. He looks... concerned.

“I’m okay,” I tell Damek.

He gently wipes the tears from under my eyes. “You don’t have to be okay right now. Your mother was kidnapped. You’re allowed to fall apart and cry right now. I’m here for you and I always will be.”

“I know.” My heart warms at his promise.

“I was so worried about you.” He tucks me into his arms again. “I don’t know what I would do if something happened to you. What if he had taken you instead? And I feel selfish for even thinking about it. Your mother was kidnapped.”

I pull back to look at him. “Don’t be sorry, Damek. I’m glad that you care about me.”

“I do care about you. So much.” He kisses me on the top of my head. “I never thought I would ever love somebody as much as I love you.”

My breath catches in my throat. “I love you too.”

“Maddie.”

I turn when I hear my name being called. Lucien is standing by Kaine and Dad. When he sees me look, he waves me over. I hold hands with Damek and bring him with me.

“Did you see or hear anything?” Lucien asks.

I shake my head. “I was asleep. Eden was the one who woke me up and told me what happened.”

He sighs, turning to face Dad. “How did she get kidnapped from inside a locked hotel room without our guards hearing anything?”

“That is the question.” Dad rubs at the scruff on his jaw. “Madeline, did you call your grandfather?”

“Harper and Sophia did,” I answer. “He’s on his way. He’s also bringing a local wolf shifter pack with him and all his guards.”

Dad perks up. “I didn’t realize your grandfather had an alliance with wolf shifters.”

I shrug. “I don’t know that it’s official. The succubi women like wolf shifters and they flirt with the single men in the pack.”

Damek stiffens. “You don’t flirt with them, do you?”

I turn to him, smiling at how jealous he is. “I never saw the point. Wolf shifters have soulmates. Besides, they don’t date. Wolf shifters are very serious about waiting for their mates.”

Damek only relaxes slightly at my reassurance. “I’m trying really hard not to be jealous right now.”

Lucien dramatically rolls his eyes, reminding me of Julien. “Are they always like this?”

“Always.” Dad nods.

“Hey,” I scold him. “Whose side are you on?”

Dad just grins.

Kaine clears his throat. “I’m going to go watch the security feed and see if there is anything the guards missed.”

He leaves quickly and my stomach aches with guilt. I hate the way things went with Kaine and me. I hate that things are so awkward now. He’s such a big part of my family. We really need to work things out.

A few hours later, we head back to the estate. We have no more knowledge now than we did when I first woke. Kaine brought copies of the security recordings back and he’s looking through it with a couple of guards.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:01 am

Grandpa shows up roughly around sunset with about twenty of his own guards and about thirty wolf shifters. When a couple of wolf shifters come to greet me, Damek is quick to move to my side and introduce himself as my ‘fiancé.’ It’s really sweet, even if completely unnecessary—the wolf shifters have never been interested in me like that.

It isn’t long until the estate is overrun with supernaturals. Even other vampire clans have come to offer their support. With everybody helping, I know we’ll find my mom quickly. There is no way the Nodin Clan will be able to stay hidden.

My mom is going to be all right. I know it. I relax, knowing she’ll be back in no time.

“I found something,” Kaine says, heading straight for my dad.

Damek and I walk over so we can hear whatever Kaine has to say.

Dad turns to face him. “What is it?”

“In the security feed,” Kaine replies. “We didn’t go back far enough. In the parking lot, around noon, the person delivering Princess Bennett’s food showed up. He was compelled by a vampire and the food back was changed out. I’m guessing that the food was laced with something because an hour later, Princess Bennett was carried over the shoulder of a vampire and loaded into a van. She was passed out.”

“Did you get a license plate number?” Dad asks.

Kaine nods, holding up the paper. “I’ve already got people on it. I just wanted to

update you.”

“Thank you, Kaine.” Dad slaps him on the back. “I appreciate your dedication to finding Madeline’s mother. I know you won’t rest until she’s back.”

Kaine dips his head. “Absolutely, King Scott.”

Kaine leaves, likely getting back to work since he updated my father. Grandpa comes over to join us and Dad tells him everything Kaine said. Grandpa takes everything in stride—he’s a lot calmer than I expected him to be since my mother is missing.

Grandpa puts his hand on my shoulder. “How are you doing, Madeline?”

I lean into him. “I’m okay. I’m worried about Mom, but I know we’ll find her.”

He squeezes my shoulder gently. “Of course, we will find her. I wouldn’t be surprised if she were back home by tonight. And when we get her back, she will be accepting twenty four hour protection. The wolf shifters have agreed to help keep the family safe until the Nodin Clan is taken care of, including you, Madeline.”

I smile up at him. “I don’t need the wolf shifters to protect me. I have plenty of guards.”

“She also has me.” Damek comes up beside me. “I don’t plan on letting her out of my sight again.”

Grandpa raises an eyebrow at him. “You will not be with her when she’s sleeping.”

Damek’s cheeks turn pink. “I didn’t mean to imply...” his voice trails off.

I laugh. “Grandpa is messing with you.”

“Was I?” Grandpa gives Damek a serious look, but I can see the mischievous gleam in his eye.

I lace my fingers together with Damek’s and pull him closer to my side. “Our wedding is only two weeks away.”

“That means you have two more weeks of sleeping in your own bed,” Grandpa says.

I laugh when Damek gulps.

His words hit me hard—two weeks.

I’m getting married in two weeks. It still doesn’t feel real.

“I hope Mom is back before the wedding.” I worry my bottom lip between my teeth. I can’t imagine any other alternative. She has to be at my wedding.

Damek wraps an arm around me. “She will be.”

“Your prince is right,” Grandpa says. “I will do everything in my power to make sure your mother is back.”

Between all the vampire clans helping and my grandfather’s support, there is no way the Nodin Clan will be able to stay hidden. And when we find her, we will end their reign.

Page 65

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:01 am

Damek and I leave the crowded room and head for the kitchen to grab a bite to eat. I'm not sure I can eat anything because my stomach is in knots, but Damek insists that I try. We sit down at the small table in the kitchen where we're sure to have some privacy.

"Your grandpa wasn't serious about wolf shifter guards, was he?" Damek asks.

I grin. "You're not jealous, are you?"

He shrugs. "No. Maybe. Yes."

"I already told you, the wolf shifters are waiting on their soulmates. Trust me, they're not interested in me." I take a small sip of the broth of my soup. It's surprisingly good.

"What about you?" He takes a small sip of his blood.

I glance up, meeting his dark eyes. "What about me?"

"Are you interested in them?"

"Am I interested in somebody who is waiting on their soulmate when I'm engaged to the man of my dreams already?" I ask, just to confirm that's what he's asking.

He smiles. "I'm the man of your dreams?"

I put down my spoon and give him a look. "You ignored vampire customs to give me

a long engagement. You proposed to be just because it's succubi custom even though we were already engaged. You've gone out of your way to make me happy, even if it meant making yourself uncomfortable. Everything you've done has been for me. If that isn't every girl's dream, I don't know what is."

He sits back in his chair and considers my words. "I did that because it was the right thing to do. You're a hybrid. I had to consider both sides of your DNA. Our children will be hybrids too. I want them to know both sides of their heritage." He frowns. "Though, I don't like the idea of our daughters dating incubi."

I laugh, taking a bite of my food. "Shouldn't we get married before you start worrying about hypothetical children?"

"Maybe. But I'm still excited about having children with you."

And he thinks he's not every woman's dream...

"Don't worry about our daughters—it's our sons who will be heartbreakers," I tease. "Especially if they look like you."

His grin widens. "I'm starting to think you're a little attracted to me."

"Oh, I am."

"More than the wolf shifters?" He raises an eyebrow.

I nod. "Wolf shifters aren't my type. The whole alpha thing doesn't do it for me. My mom always told me I should try to date a vampire. Don't tell her I told you this, but she was right."

Damek chuckles. "I don't think she needs you to admit she was right. She already

knows.”

Probably. But she knows better than to gloat—she wants grandchildren far too badly for that.

“By the way, you should hurry and eat. When I was out there last, Prince Caedmon was flirting with Harper,” Damek says.

I shake my head. “Harper is used to dating incubi. She would eat a guy like Prince Caedmon for breakfast. Honestly, it would probably do him some good to try to date her.”

He laughs hard. “You’re more devious than I gave you credit for.”

I turn when I hear footsteps. I relax when I see that it’s just Lucien. He sits across from Damek and me, and a servant rushes to bring him food and blood.

Lucien eyes my glass of water. “Dad said you don’t drink blood. Have you ever tried it?”

I take a sip of my water. “Yes, I can’t keep it down. It’s like my body rejects it. Besides, I don’t need it.”

“So you’re more like a succubus?” Lucien asks.

I shake my head. “I’m actually more like a vampire—I got the speed and strength. And I’m nocturnal. I didn’t get any of the succubus beauty or charm.”

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:01 am

“What did I say about that,” Damek scolds.

I grin. “Just because you find me beautiful and charming doesn’t make me succubus beautiful.”

Lucien nods. “I agree with Damek. I believe you’re more succubus than you give yourself credit for. I heard how you got away from Prince Lucas. Being able to enthrall a prince must mean that you’re very powerful.”

He’s right, but I don’t want to admit it out loud.

Damek slips his arm behind my chair and I automatically lean closer.

“How are you doing?” Lucien asks.

I shrug. “I’m okay. I’m worried about my mom, but I know she’ll be found quickly with everybody looking for her. I’m not worried that they’ll kill her—they need her too badly for that.”

Lucien nods. “True. We’ll find her, Maddie.”

21

YOU DESERVE A PRINCE

Damek and I must have fallen asleep on the couch because I wake up with my head on his lap. He’s slumped over against the armrest and I am careful when I move so I

don't wake him.

I have a throw over the top of me. I smile, knowing it was probably Damek who covered me up. I fold the throw and drape it over the back of the couch. When I look behind me, I spot Kaine sitting at a round table in the corner, papers spread out across it. When he notices me looking, he glances my way and motions for me to join him.

“Any news?” I ask, slowly approaching the table. I'm certain that my hair must be a mess, so I comb my fingers through it. Once I check in with him, I'll head upstairs to get ready.

“Nothing,” Kaine answers, his lips turning down in the corners. “But we've got a lot of people looking. They won't stay hidden long. We've even had members of the Nodin Clan asking for asylum. They don't like what their leaders are doing.”

“Wow,” I sit down across from him. “So what will happen to them?”

“They can join the Scott Clan.” He pauses. “Or the Rune Clan.”

Wow. He said the ‘Rune Clan’ with no disdain and without making a face.

I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. “You seem happy—since Lucien came back.”

He chuckles. “Well, I am happy. Without him, Julien would've been the heir once you get married. I love Julien, but he's not a leader.”

I disagree, but I don't voice it out loud.

Julien is young, but he would make a great ruler. Even if he never becomes a king, whatever he does I know he will be leading people. It's in his nature.

“You are also happy,” Kaine says.

I look up and see that he’s watching me.

I nod. “I am. I didn’t think I could be. When I first heard that I have to marry somebody for political reasons, I thought I’d never have a chance at being happy.” I glance over at Damek, who is still slumped against the couch. “Damek makes me happier than I thought possible. He does things that he doesn’t have to just because he knows that I want it.”

Kaine nods to the ring on my finger. “Like the proposal.”

I grin, turning to face Kaine. “Yes. Getting engaged is a big thing in succubi culture. The fact that he did this means more to me than I could ever describe.”

“You love him,” Kaine says as a statement.

“I do,” I admit.

He runs his fingers through his hair. “I knew you did. It was clear to me from the beginning that the two of you had something special. I’m sorry that I tried to discourage you. I never should’ve made you go out on dates with all those spoiled princes.”

I shrug. “It sucked at the time, but if anything it’s made me appreciate Damek more.”

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:01 am

“I was jealous,” Kaine admits. “Whenever you showed up, you took my breath away. I had never met somebody as beautiful as you. And then I got to know you and I liked everything else—your brain, your personality, all of it. It sucked that you were a princess because I knew nothing could ever come of my feelings for you. They would always be one sided.”

“Kaine,” I say.

He cuts me off. “No, Princess Madeline. It’s okay. I’m happy that you are happy. You were always meant for him. You deserve a prince.”

“And you deserve a princess,” I counter.

He grins. “Thank you for saying that. You don’t understand our society though. I will never marry a princess.”

“Have you not met my cousins?” I raise an eyebrow at him.

His cheeks turn pink. “Your cousins are, uh, lively.”

“You mean flirty,” I tease. “And since they met Damek, they all want to marry a vampire.”

Kaine’s cheeks darken to a shade of red. “Uh, yeah. They’re beautiful, but none of them would be interested in me. I’m not a prince.”

“You forget, it’s different for them. All the incubi princes are their cousins. They’re

not expecting to marry royalty.”

“Yes, but I’m not attractive like an incubus.”

I snort. “Incubi aren’t half as attractive as they believe they are.”

“Are you kidding?” His eyes widen. “Incubi are all about being attractive. They have literal magic that makes women attracted to them.”

“You have to remember, my cousins and I grew up surrounded by incubi. Their magic loses its appeal, especially when you know the arrogance that comes with said magic.”

He wipes a hand down his face. “Please don’t take this wrong, but I’m not sure I could handle being mated to a succubus. Especially if she were anything like you.”

I laugh so hard that I have to hold my side to keep it from hurting. “Do me a favor and never tell Julien you said that. He’d never let me live that down.”

He grins. “I’m pretty sure Julien knows. When you first came, he was constantly teasing me about you. I think he knew I had a crush on you.”

“So that’s why you hated me so much.” I cross my arms over my chest. “I’m going to have to get revenge on Julien. Maybe I’ll recruit one of my cousins.”

Kaine snorts. “Please, if anything, Julien would charm them.”

“True.”

“I reallyamsorry,” Kaine says, lowering his head. “I had a massive crush on you and I didn’t handle it very well. I thought it would be easier if I treated you poorly and

pushed you away. But it made things harder. I was an idiot.”

I shrug. “It’s okay. I promise.”

“I promise, from now on, I’ll be supportive of you. And of Prince Damek,” he says.

“I know.” I smile. “And I appreciate your support.”

“I’m also really glad Lucien is back.” He rubs a hand on the back of his neck.

“Because I’m not sure I could handle being Julien’s advisor.”

I chuckle, imagining the two of them fighting every day. It would be chaotic. “I’m glad Lucien is back too.” The smile slips from my lips as I think about my mother, who is now with the Nodin Clan. I wish there was something more I could do to help find and rescue her.

“Princess Madeline,” Kaine says, getting my attention.

I look up.

“We’ll find your mom,” he says softly, reassuring me. “There are a lot of really powerful people looking for her.”

I nod, knowing he’s right. But I still don’t like it. “What if they’re hurting her?”

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:01 am

“They have no reason to hurt her.” Kaine pushes away his papers. “They never hurt you when they captured you. And they never hurt Lucien.”

He’s right. The Nodin Clan may not be the most upright, but at least they haven’t hurt anybody. Or worse...

“Can your mom not get away from Prince Lucas like you did?” Kaine asks.

I shake my head. “My mom isn’t as strong as me. Nobody besides my grandfather could enthrall a royal. I didn’t realize I could until the moment it happened.”

“Because you’re a hybrid.” Kaine nods. “Hybrids are always stronger.”

It feels strange to hear him say that.

Hybrids are always looked down upon in the supernatural community. Even as recently as two hundred years ago, all hybrids were put to death. And elementals still put hybrids to death except in the case of soulmates. It’s only recently that hybrids have become more accepted.

I hear rustling on the couch, so I turn to see Damek sitting up. When our eyes meet, he smiles widely at me. I stand up from the chair and make my way back to his side.

“Did we sleep here all night?” Damek asks.

I nod.

“That’s why I’m over here,” Kaine says, waving a hand at Damek. “King Scott didn’t want Princess Madeline in here alone with you.”

Damek rubs at the scruff on his jaw. “What did he think would happen? We’re in an open room with a house full of visitors.”

I grin. Damek’s right, but my dad is always protective of me.

Kaine shrugs. “I don’t question my king, I just follow his orders.”

Meaning he likely agrees with Damek but he won’t admit it out loud.

“Is there any news?” Damek asks.

“Not yet.” Kaine frowns. “King Scott has been keeping me updated. More vampire clans are flying in today to offer their support, so I imagine the Nodin Clan won’t be able to stay hidden for long.”

My heart swells when I think about all the vampire clans coming together to help find my mom. I know everything is going to be all right.

Kaine’s phone goes off and he looks at it. “Breakfast is ready in the dining room if the two of you are hungry.”

“Thanks,” I say.

Damek stands from the couch, so I grab his hand and lead him from the room.

“After we eat, I’ll head home to get a shower,” Damek says. “But I’ll come over right after.”

“Maybe bring some clothes so you don’t have to go home tomorrow.” I chew on my lip while I wait for his response.

“Of course,” he answers.

Once we eat breakfast, Damek heads home to get a shower, so I do the same. As I’m getting a shower, I can’t help but think about our wedding. It’s only two weeks away. Two more weeks and I’ll get to spend every day and night with Damek. We won’t have to say goodbye anymore.

Once I’m dressed and ready, I head back downstairs to the craziness that is happening. The main level of our house is full of people and my heart feels lighter at the sight, knowing they’re all here to help find my mom. Damek walks through the front door shortly after I come down—he must’ve taken a very quick shower to get back to fast. Or maybe I’m just slow.

I make my way over to him, aware of the fact that people are watching me. Damek pulls me into his arms, embracing me. I feel his lips at the top of my head as he kisses me. I sigh and lean further into him.

“Madeline.”

Dad’s voice makes me pull back from Damek. I turn to face him. “What’s going on?”

“We think we found where Sasha is being kept,” Dad says.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:01 am

My heart accelerates. I put a hand on the base of my throat. “Can I come on the rescue mission?”

Dad shakes his head. “It’s too dangerous. I have my best men going. The Rune Clan is also sending men, along with many other clans and allies.”

I take a deep breath and slowly let it out. “How long before we know something?”

“They’ll be leaving within the hour,” Dad answers. “The location is less than an hour by flight, so we should know within a couple of hours.”

A couple of hours and my mom could be rescued. I just have to be patient a little longer.

“You’re sure I can’t go.” I worry my bottom lip between my teeth.

Damek slips his arm around me. “Sorry, Maddie. I can’t let you go and get hurt.”

“Damek is right,” Dad says. “This is a rescue mission and you don’t have the training. I know you used your succubus powers to get away from Prince Lucas when he took you, but we can’t risk it. You’re too important.”

I take another deep breath. “Sorry. You’re right. I’m just ready to know that Mom is safe.”

She’s going to be home soon.

At least, I hope so.

“The council will be meeting this afternoon to decide what to do with the Nodin Clan,” Dad says. “Since you’re to be the crown princess of the Rune Clan, you are to be present.”

I swallow hard. “What?”

“You and Damek both.” Dad glances at Damek, then at me. “You deserve to know their fate. Neither of you will be voting since you’re not the head of your clan, but you will get to speak.”

Speak?

In front of people?

I nod. “Okay.”

At least I have a heads up so I can think about what I want to say.

A few minutes later, I stand outside and watch the vans pull out of the driveway. There are at least fifty people between the Scott and Rune clans going on the rescue mission, not to mention the other clans that are meeting them there.

Damek squeezes my hand and I lean my head over, letting it thump against his side. He wraps an arm around me and squeezes me to his side.

“Everything is going to be okay,” he promises.

I believe him when he says it.

TRIAL

The next two hours are tense as we wait around my dad's phone, waiting for news.

Every time his phone makes a noise, my heart speeds up, which causes everybody to look at me. But it's not as if I can help it. I'm anxious.

When Dad's phone rings, I sit up straighter.

He shakes his head, silencing the ringtone. "Not them."

I sit back in my chair feeling dejected.

I wish I could've gone with them to rescue her, but I understand why I couldn't.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:01 am

Lucien sits down on the other side of me. “You okay, Maddie?”

“I’ve been better,” I admit.

Damek squeezes my hand. “They’ll call soon.”

Lucien relaxes in his seat. “I admit, it’s harder to be on this side of things, waiting to see what happens.”

I grin. “Yeah, I agree.”

Lucien nods. “Right, Dad told me you got kidnapped too. He said you enthralled Prince Lucas and he just let you walk right out.”

“Yeah. I had no clue I was powerful enough to do that.” I chew on my bottom lip. “Before that, I could’ve sworn I was more vampire than succubus. I didn’t think my succubus magic was strong.”

Part of me still wonders if it’s a fluke thing...

Julien sits down on the other side of Lucien. “Maddie thinks she’s not attractive. But I explained to her that she and I look alike. Since I’m gorgeous, she is too.”

Lucien narrows his eyes at Julien. “Sometimes I wonder if you were adopted.”

I laugh.

Julien crosses his arms over his chest. “You are just jealous because I’m hot.” He grins at me. “Right, Maddie? We’re the cute ones.”

“I’m staying out of this,” I say.

Julien looks at Damek. “You’re on my side, right?”

Damek cocks an eyebrow. “I agree that Maddie is gorgeous, but I don’t particularly think the two of you look alike.”

Julien puts a hand on his chest. “I’m wounded. I thought you and I were going to be friends.”

“Children,” Dad says, giving Julien a look. “No arguing.”

As soon as Dad turns his head, I stick my tongue out at Julien.

“Dad, Maddie stuck her tongue out at me!” Julien tattles.

Dad looks between the three of us. “Aren’t you guys too old to fight?”

“Siblings are never too old to argue.” Lucien relaxes into his seat. “Having Maddie here is great. I finally have somebody on my side.” He turns to me. “Mom and Dad always sided with Julien—he’s their baby so they love him more.”

“We do not,” Dad says.

I’m sure they don’t love Julien more, but they definitely baby him. I’ve been around long enough to see that.

Lucien and I share a look, but we don’t argue with him.

Dad's phone rings again and I glance toward the screen. When I see Kaine's name pop up, my heart races knowing that it's him who is supposed to call with news.

Dad picks up the phone and puts it to his ear. "Kaine."

"We've got her," Kaine says.

My entire body relaxes at his words.

They've got my mom.

"We're about to board a plane," he continues. "We also have King Nodin and his family in custody. We will be bringing them back for a trial."

Page 71

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:01 am

“Excellent. I will make sure the council is ready when you get back,” Dad says.

“Is Mom okay?” I ask.

Dad relays what I said to Kaine.

“She’s fine—she fought them the entire time she was there. I don’t think I’ve ever seen anybody so mad in my life,” Kaine says.

I laugh, knowing Mom must’ve been very ticked off to be kept as a prisoner. She’s always had a temper and nobody can force her to do something against her will—I’m pretty sure that’s the reason I exist. She was mad at my grandfather for trying to force her into a political marriage.

Once they hang up, the rest of us leave Dad’s office so he can make phone calls to any remaining council members who need to be here for the hearing. Lucien talks to everybody else and tells them the good news.

Damek stays by my side, comforting me. My heart feels so full and happy, knowing that my family is safe. The Nodin Clan will be judged for their crimes and they won’t be able to hurt anybody ever again.

And me... I get my dream guy. Nothing could be better.

Damek presses a kiss to my lips. “I’m relieved they found your mom.”

I let out a breath. “Me too. I didn’t want to have the wedding without her. I was

worried it might take months to find her. I'm relieved that wasn't the case."

"Two more weeks." He shakes his head. "I know that two weeks isn't long, but it feels like forever."

I grin. "Two weeks and we start our lives together. It won't be so bad of a wait. Besides, I kind of like the anticipation."

"So we should postpone so you can have a long traditional succubus engagement," Damek teases.

I press a finger to his lips. "Absolutely not. Don't even mention that. We've waited long enough."

He kisses my finger. "I tried to get you a year."

"And I appreciate that." I stand on the tips of my toes, trying to reach his lips. He bends over to meet my mouth.

The sound of a throat clearing has us pulling back.

"Madeline, Damek," Dad says. "If you two would get ready. The council will be meeting as soon as they get back with the Nodin leaders."

Translation: don't make out where everybody can see us.

Right.

I grin at him. "Sorry, Dad."

He gently pats me on the back and grins.

Damek and I do step back from each other, but he keeps giving me these heated looks and I know he's thinking about kissing me.

Two more weeks, I remind myself.

A little later, the front doors are thrown open as Kaine and about fifty guards lead King Nodin, his two sons, and the rest of his family toward the meeting room. It's a relief to see Lucas Nodin in handcuffs.

They can't hurt us anymore.

Mom walks in a few paces behind the crowd. She is surrounded by guards. I run over to her and the guards make room for me. I throw my arms around my mom and she squeezes me back.

"Are you okay?" I ask her.

"I'm fine," she says. "Don't fret over me."

"Madeline," Dad calls.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:01 am

“I’ve got to go,” I tell her. “I’m glad you’re okay. I love you.”

“I love you,” Mom says.

Damek, who is standing just behind me, holds my hand as I turn away from my mom. Together, we walk behind my dad into the conference room.

When we walk inside, I freeze in the doorway as I make eye contact with Lucas Nodin. He glares at me when he sees that Damek and I are holding hands. Damek steps between us as he tugs me along with him. I decide not to look Lucas’s way again—he isn’t worth any of my attention.

The trial begins with Lucien talking about his time with the Nodin Clan. When it’s time to give my testimony, I look at the council members, doing my best to ignore Lucas even though I can feel his eyes on me. Kaine gives the testimony for my mother. Since she’s not a vampire, she’s not allowed at the trial. But she wouldn’t want to be here anyway, not since she just got back from being kidnapped. Mom hates stuff like this anyway.

Once we finish, the council calls for a recess to discuss a proper punishment. I expect the recess to take a long time, but they’re back within ten minutes.

I gasp when the punishment is announced.

The Nodin leaders are to be stripped of their titles. They will be sent to Supernatural Island. The rest of the Nodin Clan will be questioned—those who are innocent will be free to join the Scott or Rune clans, and anybody guilty will be charged according

to the severity of their crime.

I sag in relief knowing that the Nodin Clan will never be able to hurt me or my family again. They'll never be able to hurt anybody. It's more than I could've ever hoped for.

23

WEDDING

Mom cries when she sees me. I do my best to blink back my tears.

“There has never been a more beautiful bride.” Mom chokes the words out. “Madeline, I am so proud of you.”

Today, I am fulfilling the alliance and marrying Prince Damek.

I also happen to love him very much.

I never expected this. When I first came here, I never imagined that I would find love. And when I heard of the alliance, I didn't even dream that happiness would be possible.

But then I met Damek and everything changed.

The door creaks as it opens behind me. I swivel around to face my dad. He stands in the doorway, staring at me.

“Madeline, wow.” He steps forward. “You are so beautiful.”

I step closer to him and hug him.

My dress is red—a traditional color for a vampire bride. Succubi and incubi don't have traditional dress colors, but I'm happy to follow this vampire tradition.

Our ceremony is a mix of both succubus and vampire traditions. Damek insisted that I should celebrate both sides of me and he's right.

When I first moved to my dad's estate, I didn't like either side of me. I hated being half vampire on principle. I thought they had rejected me. And I hated my succubus side because I was always an outsider. Coming here has taught me that it's okay to be both. I love both sides of me.

The door opens again and I look over to see Eden walk in. She smiles at me and my heart warms.

"You're beautiful," Eden says.

Maybe I should feel strange being in a room with Dad, Eden, and Mom, but I don't.

Mom will be going back home after the wedding, but I enjoyed her time here. It was nice to feel like my family was whole. And I will never forget Eden's sacrifice in allowing my mother to stay here. She had every right to hate my mom, but she accepted her forme.

I hug Eden and she squeezes me back.

"Are you excited?" Mom asks.

I take a shaky breath. "Excited and nervous."

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:01 am

I'm excited about spending my life with Damek—I know there is nobody else I'd rather bind myself to.

There is a knock on the door. When the door doesn't open, I yell for whoever it is to come in. Kaine pokes his head inside.

"It's time for everybody to take your seats," Kaine says.

I take a deep breath and look at Dad as Eden and Mom leave the room.

Today, my dad is going to walk me down the aisle. When I was a small child and I imagined my wedding, I always wished that my father would be around for this moment. As I got older, I gave up on that dream but having him here means more than I expected.

"Princess Madeline, you look beautiful," Kaine says.

I look at my old advisor and smile. "Thank you, Kaine."

"Prince Damek is lucky." He turns away, closing the door as Mom and Eden walk out.

I look at Dad. "I guess it's almost time."

Dad looks at me with tears in his eyes. "I regret a lot of things when it comes to you, but I am so glad that you're here now. I hate all the things I missed out on in your life."

“All that matters is that you’re here now. I’ve always dreamt of the day my father would walk me down the aisle. I’m glad you’re here.”

He hugs me tightly. “I love you.”

“I love you too, Dad.”

A few minutes later, Dad walks me down the aisle.

The moment is everything I ever wanted, but it’s better than I imagined. When I thought of my wedding day, I never realized how in love I would be. I didn’t know it was even possible to feel like this.

Damek waits at the front for me, wearing a tux. He looks absolutely breathtaking. As I walk toward him, his eyes never leave mine.

Any nerves that I felt are completely gone as Damek and I say our vows to one another. Promising to love him forever is the easiest promise I’ve ever had to make.

When the ceremony is over, we don’t head to a big celebration—this is one succubus tradition I was glad not to follow. Instead, we leave for our honeymoon.

Damek and I decided we wanted a quiet honeymoon, so we’re going to his family’s vacation home on the island where he proposed and I couldn’t think of a better place to go.

When we get on the plane to leave, Damek looks at me with an expression that I can’t quite read.

“What?” I tilt my head to the side as I study him.

“I’m starting to regret our honeymoon destination,” he says.

“Why?” I ask. “I think it’s perfect.”

“It’s the plane ride.” He frowns. “It’s far too long. We should’ve stayed the night somewhere close by. This entire trip is going to be torture.”

I chew on my lip to stop the grin.

Okay, maybe he’s right about that. It’s definitely going to be a long trip, but it’s still not as bad as the traditions I’m used to. I tell him so and he groans.

“How do incubi handle hours of celebration? I think I’d go crazy,” Damek says.

I laugh at how impatient he is.

To be honest, I’m a little impatient too, but I know it’ll be worth every moment of waiting.

“We’ve got the rest of our lives together.” I lean my head on Damek’s shoulder.
“This is just the beginning.”

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:01 am

He squeezes my hand. “I still can’t believe you agreed to marry me. I feel like I tricked you somehow. How is this real? How are you mine?”

“You’re mine too,” I remind him. “This goes both ways.” I sit up so I can look at him. “This really is going to be a long flight.”

“I told you.” His fingers trace gently along my cheek as he tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. “You looked beautiful in your dress. I’m selfishly glad you decided to wear red.”

“I wanted to follow both of our traditions.” I shrug, trying to show him it’s not a big deal.

“It meant a lot to me,” he says.

I lean forward and press a kiss to his lips.

He groans. “This plane ride is going to be torture enough without you kissing me.”

I give him my best innocent look. “Then you should stop being so kissable.”

“Kissable?” he asks.

I nod. “Your lips were just beginning to be kissed.”

“You are trouble.” He shakes his head.

“And you love it.”

“Absolutely I do.” He kisses me—once, twice, three times. “I love you, Madeline Rune.”

My stomach twists when he says my new last name. “I like that sound of that. I love you too, Damek Rune.”

EPILOGUE

The absolute last thing I want to do when I’m nine months pregnant is go to a wedding. But since it’s my older brother getting married, I don’t exactly have a choice.

“I’m huge,” I complain to Damek as I walk out of the closet in my dress.

“You’re beautiful.” He kisses me on the top of my head.

“You always say that.” I narrow my eyes at him.

“Because it’s always true.” He puts his hands on my forearms. “I know you don’t believe me, but nothing is hotter than you carrying our child.”

My stomach flips at his declaration.

It’s hard not to feel beautiful when Damek says things like that.

It’s been just over a year since our wedding and it has been the happiest year of my life. Being married to Damek makes me happy—we have a good life.

My back hurts on our car ride over. Even with a pillow, I can’t get comfortable. The

chairs at the wedding are going to be so, so much worse. Damek tries to rub my back to ease the tension for me, but nothing helps.

When we eventually get to the Scott Estate for the wedding, we are ushered to our seats in the front. I sit down directly beside Eden. She must sense that I'm uncomfortable because she turns fully to me.

“Are you okay, Madeline?” Eden asks, concern coloring her features.

I nod. “My back hurts.”

“It's not labor, is it?”

“No. No way. I've still got two weeks until my due date and the healer doesn't think it'll happen this week,” I tell her.

She nods but doesn't look convinced.

“It’s just back pain,” I say, trying to convince her.

She’s unable to respond as Lucien walks in. He stands at the front of the long aisle. Music starts playing and everybody stands for his bride’s walk down the aisle. When I stand, I feel something warm run down my legs. For a frightening moment, I think I’ve peed myself, but then I realize what’s just happened.

I tap Damek’s arm.

He glances at me but then looks at the bride walking down the aisle.

I smack his arm harder.

He turns to me raising an eyebrow.

“My water just broke,” I say as quietly as possible, but because we’re at a vampire wedding, everybody hears. The music abruptly stops and everybody turns to look at me. I do my best to smile. “You guys should continue. Damek and I will just...” I shove at his arm, trying to get him to move. He doesn’t budge. He just looks at me, his eyes wide and his jaw agape.

Julien rushes to my side. “I’ll take you to the healer.”

That gets Damek moving. He grabs a hold of my hand and tugs me along.

“Good luck, Maddie,” Lucien yells from the front.

I wave at him.

Well, I wasn't exactly picturing going into labor today at Lucien's wedding, but at least he doesn't seem upset about me disrupting the ceremony.

Julien and Damek both guide me from the room. Once we're far enough away that I can speak, I turn to Julien.

"You don't have to come. You can go back to the wedding."

Julien smirks. "Are you kidding? And miss the birth of my niece or nephew? No thanks."

"It might take a few hours. Labor isn't always quick..." I cut off as pain shoots through my back. I have to stop walking and brace myself on Damek.

"Are you okay?" Damek asks.

I don't answer him. I just breathe through the pain and squeeze his hand like I'll get relief if I squeeze hard enough.

The pain stops as quickly as it started.

I stand up straighter. "We should hurry."

Damek doesn't need any more of a push. He lifts me from the ground and carries me at a quickened pace. He calls the healer as we head to the Rune estate. She promises to meet us there.

The entire drive home is a mix of excitement and pain as Damek speeds down the highway. Julien braces himself on the back of our seat.

“Are you okay, Maddie?”

I grit my teeth. “I’m in labor—what do you think?”

Julien cringes. “Right, sorry. Dumb question.”

But the pain eases. “Sorry. That was rude. Next time, ask me when I’m not in the middle of a contraction.”

It feels like it takes forever but it’s only a matter of minutes when we arrive home. Damek helps me out of the car and Julien runs in front of us to open the door. The healer is waiting for us and her eyes bulge when she checks me.

“You’re ready to push,” she says.

“WHAT?” I shout the words at her.

“How long have you been in labor?” she asks.

Page 76

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:01 am

“I haven’t,” I say.

“She’s been complaining about her back hurting since last night,” Damek says. “She had trouble sleeping because it was hurting so bad.”

“Wait, does that mean I don’t get pain medicine?” I ask.

“No time,” the healer says. “I need you to push for me.”

Thirty minutes later, I gave birth to a baby girl. She was born with blonde hair and blue eyes. Julien claims that she looks ‘just like him.’ And she does a little bit.

The entire family arrives shortly after she’s born—even Lucien and his bride. They’re all shocked when they see that the baby was born in the short amount of time it took to hold the wedding ceremony.

It’s the happiest day of my life. And I know that being married to Damek, I will have many days ahead that are just as joyous.

The end.