



# The Alpha Bear Prince's Arranged Marriage: An MM Mpreg Shifter Romance (The Omega's Royal Arrangemen

**Author:** Lorelei M. Hart

**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** I knew I was going to mate for politics... I didn't expect to meet him on our wedding day.

Cole

My father taught me from a young age that marriage is a human convention, designed for fiscal and political gain. When he tells me at ten that my role as his son would include such a “convention,” it doesn't surprise me. It isn't as if he ever pretends to have made a love match with my dad. It was strictly business, just like it will be for me. Sometimes I hate being the prince. No, that's not true. It's most of the time.

Henri

Growing up, I had no idea my parents had signed me away to the neighboring kingdom. None. I lived this happy little life dreaming of finding my one true love, getting mated, and having a cabin full of pups. That dream came to a crashing halt on the day of my first shift. From that day on, my fathers kept me locked away with tutors, an “assistant”—AKA a babysitter—and the knowledge that in a year I would become the Bear Prince's mate. Suck.

**Total Pages (Source):** 25

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:33 am*

I stood at the window, watching the soldiers march back and forth, their feet crunching over the gravel.

“Why does it have to be gravel?” I’d asked my father, the king, as a child. “And why are the soldiers stamping their feet? Are they going somewhere?”

As an adult, I knew the answers to all three questions.

- 1) Father liked the gravel because the noise was so distinctive.
- 2) Because soldiers never walked anywhere, or ours didn’t.
- 3) No. It was all for show. If we were invaded, I had no idea if they knew how to use their weapons or if they’d run off, leaving me to defend my father and our heritage.

I flopped onto a settee, not a sofa or couch. Father insisted on it being called a settee. It could be worse. We could live in a drafty old castle and go to bed with bed warmers under a thick quilt. Though if the bed warmer was an omega instead of a long-handled metal thingie with coals inside it, I’d be up for that. Part of me was up now just thinking about it.

Instead of the castle my family had lived in for generations, my great-grandfather built a gaudy palace to show off our wealth. It was him who insisted the gravel driveway be maintained after his death.

Monarchies were full of traditions that were just that: traditions that had to be kept up. And that included marriage.

Mating, my bear insisted.

Yes, but we don't know any shifter families that are rich or important enough for the likes of Father.

Putting my feet on the settee, I thought back to the day of my tenth birthday when my father had sat me down and explained that even though we were shifters—I hadn't met my beast at that age—I was expected to marry to ensure the continuation of our dynasty.

I'd been in awe, imagining an omega riding in on a white horse and scooping me up. At that age, being a prince was still a novelty. I got to ride in a car or a carriage and wave at people lining the street.

My parents had brought in a hand-waving tutor to teach me how to swivel my wrist just so. I dutifully followed his teachings until I got older and fed up with being a prince. Now I often flicked my wrist or worse, flapped my hand, much to my parents' horror.

Dragging my thoughts back to arranged marriage, I steepled my fingers and sighed, because the time for my betrothal was nearing and Father hadn't given any hints as to who my intended might be.

It had to be someone filthy rich and they had to wield power, or their parents did. There'd be no point to the marriage if the boxes in those columns weren't ticked.

Being happy or in love wasn't a consideration for a prince. But once the ceremony was out of the way and my omega husband produced a child or two, we could ignore one another and find someone we loved to share our bed and our life. We'd appear together for important ceremonies, smile and pretend to enjoy one another's company. But behind the scenes it would be all business.

My parents lived like that, but they couldn't pretend they liked one another, which was why I was usually at Father's side during official engagements. Maybe when I was younger they got along, but as the years passed, instead of rubbing along together, they scraped like sandpaper. My dad's favorite expression when Father said something was to roll his eyes and mutter, "Oh, for heaven's sake."

A soft knock at the door interrupted my thoughts, and our housekeeper, Molly, popped her head in. My grin was genuine because she had been constant in my life when nannies and governesses had passed through. As a kid, she read me bedtime stories and tucked me in when we were between nannies and my parents had either forgotten it was my bedtime or they were wining and dining some bigwig.

"I made chocolate cake, and I've got coffee brewing."

I leaped up because anything chocolate always got my attention. "Yes, please."

"Here or downstairs?" she beamed.

"You know the answer." I tucked my arm in hers, and we skipped down the long winding staircase. But when we reached the first floor and were about to head to Molly's private "suite" as she called it, which was a tiny apartment in the basement, the main doors flung open and Father strode in.

He froze on seeing us, as though he wasn't certain who we were or he thought he was in the wrong place.

"Cole."

Oh, good, he remembered my name.

"Where are you off to?"

“It’s cake time.”

“Oh.” Father waved his hand, a dismissive action because he couldn’t fathom why anyone would get excited about a sugary, buttery, floury concoction when there were deals to be made.

He strolled toward his study, one security guy in front, the other at his heels, while his private secretary raced along at the rear, tapping at his phone.

Molly and I both let out a breath as the study door closed and peace reigned. I galloped down the stairs, not only because cake awaited but Father hadn’t dragged me into the study and told me to get measured for a suit to wear to my wedding. The inevitable had been put off for at least one more day.

The cake sitting on the table had lashings of thick chocolate frosting, and I bounced in my seat like a kid while Molly poured the coffee and cut a thick wedge of cake while slicing a smaller piece for herself.

I studied the light, airy cake and my mouth watered. The only positive thing about being a prince was sharing time with Molly. She understood that if I’d had a lousy day, time spent on her old sofa watching TV together while eating whatever yummy dish she or cook had made, soothed out the wrinkles.

My phone beeped, and without looking at it, I knew it was Father. He was the only one who used that app, and the sound always made me bang my head on the nearest wall.

“You’ve been summoned,” Molly noted.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:33 am*

“Have you finished your studies for the day?” Liam, my assistant asked.

The name was such a misnomer. He wasn't my anything. Liam worked for my fathers and had one job, to keep me on the right track so that when the day arrived, I could take my rightful place by my mate's side. It didn't sound that bad. Being the omega your mate deserved would be romantic... if you got to pick your mate, and I very much didn't.

“By studies, you mean...?” I was being fresh and it would irk him, but that was kind of the point. He'd been my shadow since my very first shift. I went from being excited that I finally got to meet my fox to a prisoner in less than five minutes.

It sucked.

“I mean going over the papers your father sent you about Prince Cole's lineage.” He wasn't taking the bait today. What fun was that?

“Yes, I did.” I got up from my chair by the window.

From where I sat I couldn't see much, and what little I did see was of my family's property, but it was something that wasn't these four walls.

“I was thinking maybe we could go into town tonight. I can dress up and no one will know it is me.” They probably wouldn't anyway. Aside from waving from the balcony from time to time, I didn't make any public appearances.

The official reason: Henri is the shy royal, devoting his time to his studies in the

hopes of one day making this a better world.

The real reason: my parents signed away my ability to mate to the neighboring kingdom when I was a child, and the worst part? They never told me until the day they whisked me away to “prepare” for my future.

I’d been that kid who dreamed of finding a knight who would save me from dragons and then profess his undying love. Or I thought that a sexy cowboy riding on a unicorn would find me when I was lost and take me home and declare his intentions to my father. He’d promise that he was the mate I’d never dared wish for.

I was the guy who used to randomly scent people, certain that fated mates were real and I’d one day find mine. And then I turned 22, met my fox, and discovered it was all a lie.

Love didn’t exist, only contractual agreements that would benefit both sides. My belief that my parents loved each other when they mated was shattered into a bazillion pieces when I discovered my dad had been part of a purchase agreement to acquire the Sapphire Mountains region to our south. Sure, the mountains were magnificent, but a living person? They were worth so much more.

Only to the kingdom, they weren’t, and that was how I came to be. I was to be their one and only child, my entire purpose in existing to further grow their empire. Or at least keep it safe.

My sister had been born the year I turned ten. I loved her fiercely, and while I wished that I didn’t have the royal duties that I had, not once was I ever jealous of Lavender. She deserved what she had in life.

“You know that you are not allowed out among the masses.” Liam closed his eyes. I did know this. I’d known it since the day I was told I had one year to prepare to be

the mate Prince Cole needed.

“Why do you constantly put me in this position?” he sighed.

“Hey, I’m not the one who agreed to keep the royal prince prisoner to prevent him from... gasp... getting it on.”

“The contract is clear. You must be a virgin or this contract is null and void.”

What he didn’t understand was that it didn’t make me want to hold onto my V card. If anything it had me wanting to lose it. During an exceedingly rebellious period I had in my late teens, I went so far as to beg my guard to take me. I think he almost agreed, too. But then someone ratted us out and he was reassigned ten minutes later.

Any perception of privacy that I had was an optical illusion. I wouldn’t be surprised if my parents got a daily pooping report. Served them right if they did.

“Then can we at least order pizza?”

“Fine. We can order pizza. The same as usual?”

“Yes, and get Lavender’s favorite, also. We are planning to watch a movie tonight.”

Or I planned to ask her to watch a movie. Unlike me, she had complete freedom, and for all I knew she had plans for the evening.

Liam excused himself, and I called my sister. I didn’t have a cell phone. No, that would be too progressive and give me too much information about my future. But there was a house phone that I could use to call my sister in her wing. At least there was that.



“What’s up, buttercup?” she sing-songed over the phone.

“Liam is ordering your favorite pizza. Want to watch a vampire movie?” Vampires were her weakness. I was pretty sure she wished they existed in real life.

“Or there’s a new vampire show that’s streaming. Oh...sorry.” Streaming was not a luxury I was allowed because it meant connecting to the internet. She hadn’t meant anything by the slip, and I wasn’t upset by it. “Yeah, a movie sounds great. I’ll bring one.”

Lavender didn’t understand any of what was happening with me. Part of it was her young age, but most of it was that she was a good person, the best of us, really, and she didn’t understand how people were traded like bargaining chips.

“Don’t bring a scary one.” Her collection had two factions; true love defies death and vampires eating their way to victory. There was no in between. I wasn’t a fan of romance movies anymore, but they sure beat having nightmares of people being connected to tubes as a part of a vampire feeding system.

She came over just as the pizza arrived, and we watched the movie, both of us picking apart the main character who was downright awful. We wouldn’t have many more opportunities to do this, not before my mating, and I wanted to savor every second.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:33 am*

Leaning back in my chair and listening to the familiar squeeze reassured me I was still in control of some aspects of my life. Father hated my old office chair and told me to get a new one. He sent me links and pics and even ordered one, but it arrived when he was out, and I gave it to Molly who then handed it off to the butler who had back problems.

I shook my head and twisted around, enjoying the chair's groaning. To think that an old chair gave me confidence that I was able to make my own decisions. I sighed. If only that were possible.

Grabbing the desk, I yanked myself forward and picked up the folder, bulging with papers, photos, and bank balances. How in the heck did Father's people doing deep dives and background checks get my intended's bank balance?

Hacking, I supposed. Let's hope they were good at their job and wouldn't get caught. I didn't want to be hauled off to court and jailed. I tapped my lips and pondered my choices. Being in jail might be a better option than an arranged marriage. I researched how to report a crime anonymously but decided I wouldn't get Molly's chocolate cake in prison.

I giggled as I pictured Molly bringing me cake while I was behind bars, with a file hidden inside. Not the type of file to hack my way through the bars and escape. Nope, it'd be one of Father's lists on how to make contacts with underworld head honchos while in prison.

Wedding preparation.

The words were emblazoned on the file, and I flipped it open. There were no pics, which was odd, and only a first name: Henri. That was probably done on purpose so I couldn't look the guy up online. If I set my mind to it, using all the information in front of me, I could find my intended. But what was the point? I'd meet him soon enough when he waltzed down the aisle.

Mate?my bear inquired.

Nope.

But as long as my husband-to-be didn't stick with me every hour of the day, I could maintain a double life. One with my fated, who I was yet to meet, and the other a public-facing relationship just for show. And money. And power.

I slammed my fist on the desk and some of the papers flew into the air before fluttering gently onto the wooden surface. Picking them up, I shuffled a few and read some of the details.

Oh, he was a shifter. My father didn't tell me that. That made the marriage so much easier. My husband would be searching for his fated while I was on the lookout for mine. This was perfect. We'd have an understanding that our marriage was in name only. I was buoyed by the news and bopped around the desk, shaking my ass.

It was the next best thing to finding my intended mate. Maybe we could help one another? One could act as a scout or we would trawl through dating apps together. We'd be more like besties than husbands. Or maybe brothers. I'd yearned for a sibling growing up.

Images flashed into my head of my husband and me going incognito and casing out clubs and parties, going on ski parties with the rich and famous while searching for our one and only. But there was a problem associated only with the wealthy and well-

connected. What if my mate was a teacher, nurse, or janitor? I'd never find them sipping cocktails in a mountain resort.

Damn. We'd have to be more inclusive in our search.

The door opened. Father never knocked because he was the king.

"Still using that damned chair," he snarled, his eyes more bear than human.

"Good morning, Your Majesty." I stood and bowed. On our first encounter each day, I had to address my father formally and nod. But subsequent meetings were more relaxed and I referred to him as Father.

"What do you think?" He jerked his head at the notes I was holding.

I didn't want to sound too enthusiastic. "Not bad."

Father jabbed his hand at the papers. He loathed anything less than glowing reviews. "The guy's a shifter. What could be better than that?"

My omega dad was a shifter too, but that didn't guarantee a happy ever after.

"He's promising."

I didn't go into details about my plans for my husband-to-be, my wingman in our mating game. The king was a shitty father and not a loving mate, but he didn't have a string of lovers that I was aware of. Not that he'd tell me if he had, because based on my father's thinking, I could weaponize that information against him.

"It doesn't mention what kind of shifter. Is he a bear?" Not that it mattered but hunting together was easier if we were similar and not a wolf and a hedgehog or a

bunny.

Father furrowed his brow, and his clenched jaw indicated he didn't want to respond and he was irritated I'd put him on the spot.

"What does it matter? You're both shifters. You're an alpha, he's an omega."

So my intended wasn't a bear but Father refused to tell me what he was because he thought I'd disapprove? A shifter was a shifter. And if the guy had been human, that was fine too but I would have either hidden my true identity or done the big reveal.

"Okay." I could almost see the steam curling from Father's ears. Best not to get him annoyed and have him blow up at me.

"You have a fitting this afternoon."

I nodded. There was no need to ask about the ceremony or the reception afterward. Everything, including the flowers, food, music and guests, would be taken care of by Father's minions. I didn't give a damn if the wedding cake was two tiers or twenty.

"Don't forget you need a haircut." He scratched his chin. "And maybe cut down on the chocolate c—" The words died in his throat as my bear snarled at him. He may have been king and my father, but he didn't get to tell me what to eat or comment on my weight.

"Okay, fine," and he stormed out.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:33 am*

“Why are we doing this again?”

My dad had come in with an entire entourage of people, all there for one reason, to help me with the final preparation for the wedding. And that was the part that perplexed me the most. I’d been told I was going to mate Cole. Mate. And now it was suddenly a wedding. A big-ass deal of a wedding at that.

“Because if you don’t have your suit made now it won’t be ready on time.” Great. He was in a mood, his voice carrying a “You better not think about testing me today” quality to it.

“I meant the wedding. If he is a bear and I’m a fox, why are we doing a human marriage?”

“Because a mating is between two people and the goddess. That’s it.”

“It can be three people, Dad.” Was I pressing my luck? Absolutely I was. A guy needed to find his entertainment somewhere, and since I wasn’t allowed to so much as walk in the garden alone, this would have to do.

“Because we live amongst humans and we need to abide by some of their customs. Weddings are contractual, and you know that. Please stop being difficult already so we can let these gentlemen get to work.

“Fine. But I want a purple suit.” I stepped up onto the little platform they set out for me.

“Or you will take the one the parents have picked out for you.” And by “the parents” he meant that he and my father had met with Cole’s family to discuss all of this. I hated it.

“Why have I not met him yet?” It wasn’t the first nor would it be the last time I asked this question.

“Because that’s not how it is done.” That was my dad’s stupid excuse for everything.

The tailors gathered round. They measured me, wrote things down, remeasured me a few more times just to make sure. They then stood back as the fashion designer whom Cole’s family sent over held up fabric swatch after fabric swatch up to my face and his assistant switched lighting sources. He said it was the only way to determine the correct hue that I needed.

They were all black, each and every one of them. There was no hue to it.

“I think we should go with the black one.” I was so done with standing there with strange hands on my body. And this was only step one.

They ignored me and kept talking to each other and eventually with my dad. As a surprise to no one, they went with black and would be back in the morning for my first fitting. I was thrilled when they left. That was until my dad began to speak. Then I wanted them to come back and shield me from my own embarrassment.

“As you know, the wedding day is going to be very important, but equally important is the wedding night.” Dad spoke matter-of-factly. That did make his words any less nausea inducing.

“Can we not? Please.” I begged the goddess to help me.

“No, honey. This is important. I know that you have no experience.”

“And how do you know that? Really, Dad. How do you? I shifted for the first time at 22. For all you know, I was the friskiest fox in town.” I hadn’t been. But it was plausible.

“Don’t make me tell you.” He spoke softly. “Please don’t make me tell you.”

Bile rose in my throat. “The reason none of my friends came to visit me wasn’t because you kept them out, was it? It’s because they were my Liam... pre-Liam. They were hired friends whose job it was to keep an eye on me. Am I right?”

I had never been under the illusion that my friends were true and always-and-forever friends. But I thought that had more to do with who I was by birth and not anything else. Not once had I suspected they had my friends on the payroll too. Although maybe I should have. Looking back at it.

“Maybe you should go.” I was too hurt for this conversation. Maybe later, but not now.

“I will leave. But I promised your father I’d have this conversation with you and I must before I leave.”

“Fine.”

“Your job is to fulfill the wedding contract and that includes consummation. After that, it’s for you two to figure out.” He got up and walked out, turning just before he did to tell me he was sorry one last time.

Relief flooded into me in his absence. I needed time to unpack all of this. Only I didn’t get the time. My father sent Liam to bring me to him only a few minutes later.



“Your wedding is nearly upon us, Son. I think we need to have a conversation about your two roles and how they blend together after the marriage.”

“What are you talking about? What two roles?”

“You are my son, and soon you will be married to the bear prince.” He signaled for me to sit. “This arrangement was designed to be beneficial to all, but without your communication and ability to help mold your future, the full benefits will not be reaped. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“That you want me to do your bidding while I’m mated to the bear?”

My father nodded.

“Fuck that noise, Father. I was your dutiful son for 22 years and how did you repay me? By keeping me prisoner while I awaited a mating I never asked for. Oh yeah, and there was the whole ‘my childhood was a lie’ thing too. That was fun.”

“How dare you!” He pointed to the door. “Get out, and the next time I see you, you better be ready to take your responsibilities seriously. People are depending on you.”

Screw that.

I stomped out of his office, past Liam, and straight to the courtyard. I needed to let my fox out and hunt something down.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:33 am*

“I look ridiculous!”

Sizing myself up in the ornate full-length mirror, I sneered at what was reflected back at me. A dark uniform, emblazoned with medals, ones I hadn’t earned in battle, unless you counted me attending high-level functions and investitures as war zones.

“I’ll clink as I walk into the chapel.”

The left side of my chest was heavy with metal attached on bits of coloured ribbons which I’d been given because I showed my face on important occasions. Real people in the real world got medals for an act of bravery or because they were the best in their line of work. Not princes and kings. We awarded ourselves a chunk of metal when we felt like it.

“It is what’s expected, sire. Your father, the king, would be disappointed if you didn’t wear them.” My valet, Thomas, brushed lint from my shoulder.

“He’d disapprove, more like it.”

Thomas didn’t respond. He would never speak badly of Father, and whether that was because he admired the man or he valued his job, I couldn’t say, but he had been loyal to me all these years.

Papa stuck his head in the door. “Stunning.” He kissed my cheek and made a face at the array of medals on my chest. “Walk slowly and don’t make any sudden movements.” We shared a smirk, and he left.

I stood unmoving in front of the mirror, memorizing the face of a man who was unmated and unmarried. After the ceremony, I'd never be single again. I might divorce or be widowed, but no one would ever call me single and carefree.

“Sire, it's time to go.”

The wedding was taking place in the palace chapel which sounded like a place big enough for a cozy ceremony with a few guests. But it was huge—similar in size to some cathedrals—and it would be full of people rubbernecking at my parents, me, and my intended. I was used to being stared at, but I wished we could have done this getting-married caper in private.

Thomas opened the door for me, and after one last glance at myself in the mirror, I strode out and hurried along the corridor. The contrast between me dawdling in the room and my brisk walk had Thomas asking if I was headed to the chapel or elsewhere.

I grinned at him thinking I was going to run away. But the wedding was inevitable, and it was best I get it over with. There would be food, toasts, and speeches, washed down with copious amounts of wine before I could sleep this evening, and I hoped my new husband wasn't the chatty kind.

As the weeks dragged on, he could stay elsewhere if he wished, but people kinda expected a newly married couple to spend their wedding night together. Not that we'd be in the same bed. The new suite for us as a married couple had been redecorated, and I'd made sure there was a bed in my attached dressing room. No one, other than Thomas, would be any the wiser.

But as I walked along the corridors where I used to play as a child, a scent slammed into me and almost knocked me over. I swayed, my heading spinning as I tried to make sense of it. Leaning on the wall, a huge painting of my great-grandfather on his

coronation day above me, I pieced together the puzzle.

Mate! My bear didn't need to work out anything. Instinct told him what or who it was.

You're right, but this is the lousiest timing.

On any other day, I could've had the visitor's log from our security officers along with the CCTV cameras positioned on every floor, and have narrowed it down to a handful of people. From there I would have been provided with addresses and names and have set up surveillance on their homes or offices and found my mate.

But I was on the way to a wedding—mine—and my mate would not be smiling as he walked down the aisle. Nope, he was elsewhere, maybe poking fun at a prince spending tons of money on a wedding when I should've been using it for charity.

I was letting my thoughts run away from me, and I hauled them back and wrestled with my uniform. This wasn't a catastrophe, but I needed to get the wedding and celebrations over with so I could find my one true mate.

After telling Thomas what I needed regarding the logs and footage, I headed toward the chapel, feeling lighter than I had in days. The universe was on my side. I'd have a husband for public events and a mate in my private life, assuming my mate and husband agreed. Maybe they'd gang up on me, because I couldn't keep them a secret from one another even if I wanted to. Father would proclaim my marriage from the palace balcony later today, so my mate would be aware of my matrimonial status. And my shifter husband would scent my mate on me.

The doors into the chapel opened and a thousand voices stilled as I waited at the entrance for quiet. Father had always taught me how to make an entrance, and he'd be furious if I walked down the aisle while people were sharing gossip or admiring each other's attire.

Staring straight ahead, I strolled down the rolled-out carpet and took my place near the altar. I caught Father's eye, and he gave an almost imperceptible nod. At least I'd done something right today.

The doors swung open again, and I caught a glimpse of my husband-to-be. He was wearing a very smart suit which must have cost a fortune, but he wore it so well. It fit him snugly in all the right places, and I was almost disappointed he wasn't my mate. But as he came closer, it wasn't his dazzling green eyes or his broad shoulders that caught my attention. It was his scent! The same one that had announced who he was earlier.

Mate! My bear urged me to rush up the aisle and claim him, but we had time.

A lifetime!

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:33 am*

I scented him the second I walked into the hallway leading to the chapel. He was here. My mate was here. Leave it to me to find my mate on my wedding day. They scented of shifter though, so they'd understand the marriage thing. I hoped.

My fox wanted to break through my skin and find him, but that wouldn't end well. My father didn't keep me completely isolated all of this time just so I could run off and find my true mate. Nope. He'd make sure I didn't get far, and with my luck, he'd also make sure my mate and I never crossed paths. This arrangement was too important for him to let it go for my happiness. He didn't give even half a shit about that.

I just had to go through with the marriage and figure it out from there. My soon-to-be husband would understand—he was a shifter too. For all I knew, he had a true mate as well. Maybe he'd become my partner and help me find my mate. Stranger things had happened.

My stomach dropped. The words of my father kept ringing in my head. We had to consummate this marriage. It wasn't optional. It was also all kind of messed up. That was a bridge I was going to have to cross when I came to it. First I had to survive the day.

I walked down the aisle to the front of the chapel. In a human wedding, I'd have chosen all of the people walking with me. There would've been groomsmen and my sister carrying flowers, and I wasn't altogether sure what else. Instead, it was security dressed like they were my besties. At least this ceremony didn't mean anything to me. If it had, all of that would've made it exponentially worse.

The scent kept getting stronger and stronger as I progressed. I wanted to look around, to figure out who it was. But I kept my head forward and did as I was told. There would be time to figure this all out later. But if I fucked up this wedding? I might be back under 24-hour babysitting, and then what? I'd be alone.

When I stepped in front of the altar and the person officiating the ceremony, I was sure it was them. They were older and not what I'd call my type, but scents didn't lie. This was getting more and more twisted by the second. And then the man had my future husband stand beside me.

I'd been wrong. So very, very wrong. My future husband was my mate. I was arranged to be married to my mate. Fate had a sense of humor, I'd give them that.

I looked at my mate and smiled, but he gave nothing away. I held onto the belief that maybe it was because we had to pretend we weren't mates. Why would that be? I didn't know. But it was better than the alternative: that he was rejecting our bond or possibly not even feeling it.

The ceremony was fine, I guess. I wasn't used to the customs of humans, so maybe it wasn't that great? But it had music and people pretending to cry with joy, so it was fine.

And then the part I was actually wanting to happen arrived. He told us we could kiss. I wasn't expecting a sensual kiss that knocked me off my feet or anything, but I was expecting far more than the quick peck I received. The kiss had been just enough that it had me begging for more.

After we were introduced as husbands, we walked out together. My husband offered me his arm, and I gladly accepted. My fox wanted his touch. Heck, I did too.

We were directed to stand in a line where a group of people all shook hands with us

and congratulated us. My husband—such a weird word—greeted them by name and position. These weren't just random wedding guests. They were there for politics. Each of them held some sort of political role. There was a president, a king, a prime minister, and even a few princes. It was the who's who of royalty. One after another, they congratulated us, and I played my part as the dutiful new spouse, all excited about our upcoming lives together.

Once the last hand was shaken, we were whisked away to a room on the other side of the palace. This place was freaking huge. And not even filled with character so that it was charmingly huge. It was gaudy as heck, and I was about to live here.

I was hoping we'd be able to talk at our next location. But no, instead, we had to get 42 billion photos. And not normal photos either. Each one was so awkwardly posed I doubted they'd get a single usable one out of it.

The photographer seemed nice enough. Zero percent of this was his fault. He had us standing here, there, and everywhere and each time posed in the most awkward position. It was dreadful just standing. All I could think about was my mate who stood beside me silently. He still had yet to acknowledge that he liked me, much less recognized me as his mate. Then again, I probably hadn't done so for him. Everything happened all at once. I was lucky I knew my name.

The entire day was such a fiasco. Hours went by—not in the “it felt like hours” way, but in the “three hours ticking off on the clock” way. And even then we weren't done. Someone came into the garden we were now in to tell my mate something. The person shooting us was not pleased, but what could he do? My mate was the next king.

“It looks like they're ready for us for dinner,” the man said. “It shall be a pleasant evening.”



We ended up sitting at the end of a long table, the room filled with people, all of them watching us intently. Everything we said was being listened to. Every bit of food we ate being watched. Which meant I ended up not feeling comfortable doing either.

I wanted to ask my now-husband what he liked to be called, if he even liked the food we were eating, if he had picked out the food to begin with or if that was done by a royal party planner. Just random questions that popped into my mind.

On the other hand, I wanted to tell him my name—even though he already knew it from the wedding ceremony—but it would be different. I could even tell him why my name was spelled weird. I wanted to form a connection with him. That would've been nice, but it didn't seem to be in the cards for us tonight.

Apparently, when you were royalty and you got married, there were expectations. And those expectations had very little to do with your happiness. Oh, well. It had to get better, right? We were mates, after all. Please let it get better.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:33 am*

I'd never believed in luck—until now.

I had entered into an arranged marriage willingly, even though as a shifter it should've been mating, but the human segment of our population wouldn't stand for us living together with no piece of paper proving we were husband and husband.

But my husband turned out to be my one true mate. There'd be no pretending or leading a double life. We wouldn't have to juggle us being husbands in public while quietly being mated in private. And I hadn't thought of the clusterfuck of my omega husband being pregnant with his mate's baby while the public would see it as mine. Thank gods we avoided that minefield.

The ceremony and long-ass boring speeches went as Father had planned—or his private secretary had done so on the express wishes of my father, the king—and we were now ready to eat and hopefully chat and get to know one another. My spouse hadn't said one word to me. Other than repeating his name, Henri, and saying "I do," he hadn't spoken since we met at the altar.

What the ever loving fuck had happened?

I'd never encountered a situation where one shifter met his mate and the other person didn't experience the mating pull. It could happen if one half of the couple was human, I supposed. But my husband was a shifter.

Mate him. My bear hadn't let up since Henri walked close enough in the cathedral for us to scent him. He didn't understand my omega husband not being the chatty type. That wasn't a consideration for a shifter beast.

As I stuck my fork in a mouthful of lobster, I snuck a glance at Henri. He was fiddling with the food on his plate. Father would be enraged at Raine, his private secretary, if my husband didn't like seafood. He's told him to suss out my husband and his family's food allergies, plus likes and dislikes, and if he'd made a mistake, heads would roll. Not literally, not like the old days. Instead, Raine might be demoted or fired.

"If the lobster isn't to your liking, there are twelve more courses coming." If Henri was ill, me telling me how much food was headed for his plate might roil his belly further. I grabbed an empty wine glass in case he wanted to puke.

"It's fine. I'm not hungry."

Fine. I would hear the king's voice rising to screech Level 10 as his new son-in-law described the finest lobster as just "fine."

Henri took a sip of water, ignoring the wine that came from our vineyards in the hills behind the palace. He didn't sound angry, more sad, and a ball of anxiety formed in my belly. Was being married to a prince, who would one day be king, so horrifying that it smothered his desire to mate?

Huh? My bear couldn't grasp the concept, and I had no words to smooth his concern.

We sat in silence through the rest of the very long meal, and Henri's reaction to the situation put a damper on my appetite. Like my new husband, I pushed the shrimp in white wine sauce course around my plate, along with salmon and the pizza with gold leaf sprinkled on top, until I caught Father glowering at me and steeled myself to eat most of what was put in front of me.

Taking a peek at my dad, I noted that he wasn't eating much either but was engaged in animated conversation with Henri's alpha father, a business titan, seated beside

him

The food was like a rock in my belly, and when the dessert arrived, I ate the ice cream—the cooling effect calmed my stomach contents—and left the cake studded with diamonds.

Father announced the next event was the ball, and everyone at the top table, including Henri and myself, rose. I offered my husband an arm which he took. If he hadn't, tongues would have been wagging.

We strolled in silence to the ballroom, smiles on our faces. Mine was plastered on and would have to be removed by plastic surgery. Knowing what was coming next didn't calm my nerves.

The first dance. I'd take Henri in my arms and we'd waltz around the ballroom before other couples joined in. I'd been taking dancing lessons since I was a kid, so a waltz was no biggie. There'd be no stepping on toes from me. But as I took my husband in my arms and his body molded against mine, it was as though we were made for each other, like we were two halves of a whole, and when the music started, the rest of the world fell away.

The crowd gathered around the edges of the dance floor blurred. Henri's cool breath washed over me, and my cock stiffened. Thank gods no one could see my arousal thanks to my husband shielding me. My lips rested against his ear, and I was tempted to nibble it, but my length swelled further, straining my pants.

I couldn't resist asking Henri once again if he was okay. While it was possible to whisk him away from the festivities before I was supposed to, I could tell Father we were eager to consummate the marriage. He wouldn't get annoyed at the prospect of a grandchild, one who would ensure our dynasty continued, would he?

I whispered against his ear, his scent so intoxicating goosebumps marched over my skin, reminding me of the guards outside my room each morning.

“I’m fine,” was his response, echoing what he’d said earlier. But his body stiffened and not the part I’d hoped.

He obviously wasn’t, his body giving him away and contradicting his words.

“I can’t wait to be done with all of this and get to my room.”

We continued dancing, neither of us missing a beat, but my smile was sagging. Henri had spat out the words “my room,” not ours. He couldn’t wait to be away, not only from the festivities but also me.

Despite the smile fixed on my face, my mood altered from optimistic and bubbly about our relationship to troubled.

What now?my bear asked.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:33 am*

We danced and danced, and people watched, and they watched. At first I was really cognizant of the attention we were receiving, but eventually it just faded away, leaving only Cole and me for a song here and another there.

It was amazing—being in his arms and enveloped in his scent felt so right, so perfect. But also...it was frustrating as fuck. I was so incredibly close and yet so far away. I wasn't sure if it was him or me or both of us that were the problem, but we were making a huge-ass mess of this entire situation, that was for sure.

Our conversation was pretty non-existent. He kept asking me if I was okay, and I kept on lying by saying that I was. And it wasn't that I wanted to be dishonest with Cole. I didn't. But we were surrounded by other people and his whispering in my ear reminded me of that.

I was grateful that people didn't try to tap into our dance. I wasn't sure I'd be able to handle being passed around the dance floor. As it was, keeping my beast at bay with Cole so very close to us, was challenging. If we were across the dance floor from him? Yeah, that would've been impossible. Sure, Cole and I were both shifters, but not everyone here was. Had I danced away from him and my beast decided to take over, it would quickly have turned into a disaster.

When the last song was played and it was time for us to go, he said, "Let me take you to your room."

"Okay," I replied, because really, what else was there to say? It wasn't like I could just change his mind. I wasn't even sure what his mind was. I'd wished he said "our," but it was me who said "my" first Ugh.

When I first learned about the wedding, I figured it would be awful. I was marrying a stranger, after all. But then I scented him and it sparked a hope that we would end up with the fairy tale wedding I'd once dreamed of. And now? Now I just wanted the night to be over because it was going from bad to worse.

Cole led me through the palace. I wasn't sure I'd be able to find my way back to the dance floor, if I had to. It was more a maze than a palace. Or maybe palaces were set up to confuse. I didn't even know. But in any case, it felt like we were a mile away and not simply in another part of the same building when we stopped in front of a door.

He unlocked it and turned the knob. When he opened it, I couldn't believe the size of the room. I came from wealth, and this shouted extravagance. We stepped inside, his scent strong in this space. It was very different from any room back where I lived. It felt... I don't know... off. Maybe that was just the vibes I was getting from my mate. Maybe I was just reading things that weren't there. Or maybe it was going to turn into a portal that led to another planet. At this point in the day, I'd believe just about anything.

"There's an ensuite over here," he said.

I looked around to see if my bags were there. They weren't. At least not in plain sight.

"Bags?"

"I'll deal with that in the morning." He shoved his hands in his front pocket. Was he nervous? And if those were nerves, was it a good sign?

"Thanks. I should probably get ready." My father's words echoed in my mind, the ones that said we needed to consummate.

What was the world's fascination with what other people did or didn't do in the bedroom? And the weirdest part of all of that was my body was 1000% in agreement with my father. My brain, however, kept telling me something was wrong and we needed to wait.

"I'll only be a minute," I said, reaching for the bathroom door.

"Take as long as you need. I'll see you later," he replied, walking out and shutting the door behind him.

At least I didn't need to be apprehensive about that part of our marriage. At least not for the moment.

I went into the bathroom, brushed my teeth, stripped down to my boxer briefs, and came back in and climbed into the bed... alone. Everything in here smelled like him. I wanted to snuggle into bed... so I did.

I'd never felt so relaxed, so safe. I waited and waited for him to come back, forcing myself to stay awake as long as I could. There were so many things we needed to talk about, starting with the fact that we were mates. But eventually, my eyes gave way, and I couldn't wait any longer. I fell into a shockingly deep sleep.

I woke with a start, for a moment forgetting where I was. When I remembered, I felt around, but he wasn't there. I inhaled deeply, tasting the air, hoping for a sign that he'd been back. There was none, the newest scent too faded away. He wasn't here and hadn't been while I was sleeping.

Wow, this marriage thing was a hot mess.

I thought about putting my clothes back on from the day before. But who wanted to wear dirty wedding clothes? And really, the security had been weird the night before.



Heading out there like I was on the walk of shame wasn't going to do anyone any good.

Maybe life here wasn't going to be much different than my life before this. Maybe I was going to be a prisoner here too. Not wanting to risk dealing with security, I went and took a shower, washing the sleep from me and giving me something to pass the time.

My stomach growled. It was ready to eat, and I was ready to see my mate. Too bad neither of those things were an option. Happy first day of marriage to me.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:33 am*

I paused outside Henri's room, my hand raised, ready to knock.

But I froze and stepped away. I stood nibbling a nail before putting my ear to the door like a damned stalker. I was hoping to hear him walking around or humming or on the phone. Shifter hearing was supercharged, and I'd pick up sounds and movements humans couldn't.

Not that my husband was human. He wasn't making a sound, but if he was in there and awake, he'd hear me going back and forth to the door.

What if last night was too much, the festivities overwhelming, and he'd taken off back to his childhood home? I couldn't drag him back, but father's lawyers could negotiate a deal. Before discovering he was my mate, that had been my plan.

Not now, though. I didn't know what to do because last night and today and forever should have been my happy ever after.

I leaned on the door and sagged onto the floor. Putting my head in my hands, I closed my eyes and tried to block the world out. But I jerked up and leaped to my feet. Henri might already be at breakfast, bemoaning that I'd taken off.

Taking the stairs two at a time, sometimes three and almost missing the last step and breaking my neck, I charged into the family dining room. Papa would be eating in his suite, Father would be in his office or attending a meeting or cutting a ribbon somewhere, so the place was empty.

My bubble of hope was pricked and the weight of despair in my belly increased as I

took a seat near the window. Instead of one of the staff bustling in with coffee just how I liked it, Molly did the honors, which was unusual.

“Is everyone having the day off after yesterday?”

The staff would have worked long into the night with only a skeleton staff on today. I mentally kicked myself I hadn’t told the chef to forget about making me a hot breakfast. I didn’t need a pile of pancakes plus my favorite garlic-and-herb sausages made right here in the palace kitchen.

And Molly should have been off duty. I’d caught glimpses of her last night but had been so preoccupied with my own problems, I hadn’t considered how hard she was working. I needed to pay attention to other people more, especially the ones who worked at the palace.

“Many of them.” She placed a frothy cappuccino in front of me, sprinkled with chocolate, just the way I liked it. I took a sip, deliberately making sure I gave myself a foamy mustache. Molly giggled because this was our little routine and had been for years since I’d begun to drink coffee.

Molly pulled up a chair opposite me and rested her chin on her hands. “Where’s your husband? Sleeping in after a long night?” She pursed her lips rather than framing them into a smile.

“Not sure.” I didn’t meet her eyes but rather studied the cocoa powder wobbling atop the froth.

Molly sighed. “The word around the corridors is that you didn’t share a room last night.”

My head shot up. I should have expected this. There was no privacy in a palace with

oodles of staff poking their nose into every nook and cranny. Molly's eyes shone with concern.

"You're the first to hear this." Even the king didn't know, and I saw no reason to inform him—yet. If he discovered Henri was my mate, he'd expect us to produce a passel of children and to be working seven days a week. With an arranged marriage, we had some leeway and expectations were lower. "But my husband is my fated mate."

Molly's mouth dropped, and she held up a hand before charging into the kitchen and returning with two more coffees and cake. I almost laughed because we always solved my problems with cake.

She pushed a large mug toward me and gulped a mouthful of her own brew before stuffing cake in her mouth. Once she'd swallowed, she said, "Spill."

In between gulps of piping-hot coffee and delicious sweet cake that offset the bitter coffee, I told her what had happened from the cathedral to the bedroom.

Molly didn't say anything until she'd finished her drink.

"This life is not like any other. You can't expect someone who has grown up as most people do, not having to think about the family's pedigree, the ceremonies, having servants choose your clothes, and people bowing at you, to adjust overnight. Mate or no mate."

"But I swear he hates me."

"Henri doesn't know you." She reached out and stroked my cheek. "You prepared for this life from the day you were born."

I supposed she was right. I didn't know anything else.

"Where is he? Do something nice for him."

"Like what?" My version of nice was a night at home, but Henri might like to party.

"If he's in his room, I'll bundle up some food while you go into the garden and get a bunch of flowers."

That wasn't the greatest idea. Last time I did that, Arnold, the head gardener shooed me out, saying I'd taken his prize orchid.

"Go and tell Arnold to help you."

Translated that meant babysitting me and glowering if I went near any flower I wasn't supposed to. But fifteen minutes later, I had a bunch of freshly cut flowers and a basket of food, including coffee, and I was at Henri's door.

This time I knocked, and a muffled voice told me to enter. I strode in, smiling broadly, but Henri was sitting on the sofa dabbing his cheeks. He turned away as I rushed over to him, his scent agitating my bear at being so close to our mate.

"Whatever the problem is, we'll fix it." I wanted to draw him into my arms, but we'd exchanged a handful of words since being declared man and husband. I placed a finger under his chin and lifted his head.

"How?" he sniffed.

“How?”

Cole was now kneeling in front of me, so close that I could feel his breath against my cheek. When he came in holding flowers and what I assumed was food, I was sure that I was imagining things. Those were the things of romance, not rejection.

I wanted him to be right, for this all to be easily fixed. I really did. I couldn't think of how we could fix this. How could we make this less awful? If he didn't want me... there was no turning that into cotton candy and rainbows.

He pulled off his shirt and wiped my tears with it. It was sweet and also distracting. His chest moved with his breath, and I longed to bend over and trace the planes of muscles with my tongue. I closed my eyes for a second, thinking of anything and everything I could that wasn't exploring his body.

And then my body betrayed me, and I sneezed. Being ever the classy guy that I was, I found myself blowing my nose into his shirt. When I opened my eyes again, I expected to see horror across his face. I didn't. He was looking at me with worry, over what I didn't know. My sneeze? Our marriage? My inability to control my emotions? It could've been any of it or something else entirely.

I focused on trying to pull myself together enough to have this conversation, averting my eyes from his bare chest.

“You didn't come back.” In hindsight, he hadn't specifically said that he would, but at the time, I'd assumed that was the plan.

“I know. I’m sorry. But I’m back now... and I brought food.” He indicated the meal he brought.

“Did your dad make you?”

“No, no, nothing like that.” He took a deep breath. “I just... I always knew that I had to do this,” he held up his ring finger, “that I had to marry for power and money, and I sort of resigned myself to it.”

“I didn’t know. Not until I was... older.”

His lips formed a perfect O.

“But my dad knew for years. I guess I was his commodity.” It was something I doubted I’d ever forgive him for.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”

“Nor could you have, and it’s not something you should be sorry for. This is on our parents.”

We talked back and forth about how we learned we were going to get married and how that impacted our lives. His story was very different from mine, but it sucked equally hard.

“I hoped that one day I would find my mate and somehow we’d be able to get over the hurdle that was my marriage.”

I stared at him, confused by what he was trying to get at.

“Another shifter would have understood—they would’ve been marrying for the same

reason as I was, right? Or so I thought. And then... and then I scented you. We're mates."

"I know." What a fucking relief it was to hear him admit it so freely. "I knew when we married. We're mates. We are in this together." How that looked, I still wasn't sure, but it would. I believed that fully for the first time since this all began.

"My mate, you deserve so much better than to be just forced together with me." He bowed his head.

"You're my mate. Even though this... it's not real." I held up my finger the way he had done to me. "It's a marriage—that's a human piece of paper. That doesn't mean our mating pull isn't."

I meant to stop there. We had already made good strides. But then... I needed to get it off of my chest. "I thought you hated me."

"No. Never. I thought you wanted nothing more than to stay a safe distance from me."

We'd both jumped to so many conclusions. Maybe we were perfect for each other after all.

"My first kiss was for the wedding guests."

"Your first kiss, not our first kiss?" he asked.

"Yeah. It was important to my father that I remain a virgin, and he saw to it that I was. I assumed it was a condition of the marriage."

"No. Maybe. I don't know. But if it was, both of our dads need to be brought into the



modern century.”

I agreed with him there.

“I’m sorry.” I reached for his hand. It was the first time I’d ever held someone’s hand that wasn’t my family or a very platonic-only relationship. It was different than I thought it would be. Not like when we danced, but equally intimate... possibly more so.

“I’m sorry too. I’m going to try and be better about communicating.”

“Same. Thank you for coming back. I didn’t like you not being here.” My beast was 1000 times happier having him in such close proximity.

Cole reached out and gently cupped my cheeks. “Is this okay?”

I nodded, butterflies going haywire in my belly. Cole leaned in and kissed me sweetly. This kiss was different from our first—it wasn’t a show. It was just the two of us, sharing this small, intimate moment. It was what my very first kiss should’ve been. When the kiss broke, he sat back on his heels and smiled at me, his eyes sparkling in the sunlight beaming in through the window.

“I brought you food and flowers. Do you like flowers?” he asked, offering a smile.

I nodded.

“Sit down and eat, and then afterward, I can show you around this place.”

“Maybe I should save the bread to leave breadcrumbs.”

He chuckled.

“It’s kind of a maze out there.” I might need a map.

“I’ll show you all the tricks,” Cole promised.

“Do you know where my clothes are?” I was wearing yesterday’s clothing which wasn’t the best impression to make on my first day here.

“Oh yeah, I asked about that. I’ll grab them for you.” They’d been put into his huge walk-in closet.

As he chatted, I told him a little bit about my family, and he told me a little bit about his. For the first time since all this started, I knew everything was going to work out the way it should. I knew that I was going to get my happy ever after, after all.

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:33 am*

“Come. Let me show you my home... your new home.

Henri gave me his hand, and I led him first to the throne room. It was rarely used, except for investitures and coronations, and the latter wouldn't occur until the king abdicated or he passed, neither of which I wanted to happen. My father was a difficult man, but I liked having him on this earth, living and breathing.

Putting a finger to my lips, we crept toward the thrones, and I sat in the monarch's and Henri in the consort's.

“Should we be doing this?” he whispered, his eyes twinkling for the first time since we met. “I'm guessing not.”

“Not.”

But what would the courtiers do if they found me other than reporting me to the king? Nothing. I'd get a tongue-lashing at most. That I could deal with as I'd been dealt them all my life. Henri and I were bonding over doing something naughty, and I'd catapult the gargoyles, whose heads jutted out over the forecourt, into space and swing from the chandeliers if it ensured Henri never cried again.

“Can we take a pic?”

“Only if you never share it with anyone other than your husband.”

“Husband and mate,” he corrected me.

Putting our heads together, he snapped a photo, and we studied it. It showed two young men, laughter on their lips and a light in their eyes. I'd treasure the photo until my dying breath.

"Where to now?"

He'd been in the chapel, ballroom, and the huge state dining room, so I led him along a mirrored hall and into another stateroom where I lay on the floor. Henri closed one eye and said the floor didn't look comfortable, but if it was a bed I wanted, he'd gladly share mine.

I wanted to drag him to my suite and undress him slowly, relishing his body before fucking him, but we'd had such a rocky start, I was determined to take it slow.

"Look up."

His mouth formed a huge O as he gazed at the frescoes depicting shifters in human and animal form.

"It's stunning, but what do humans say about the men becoming animals?"

So many similar paintings in castles, palaces, and cathedrals were of angels or otherworldly beings; animals transforming to men didn't seem a huge stretch, and humans marveled at the skill of the artists.

"They appreciate the artistry, not knowing that it shows real life and not a fantasy."

"Cole!" My father's ice-cold voice was a sign of his displeasure.

Poor Henri began to shake, and he leaped to his feet and bowed to the king. "I-I-I'm s-sorry, Your Majesty."

A thundering rage filled me as I got up and placed an arm around my husband. Ignoring Father's warning gaze, I straightened my spine as he'd always told me to do.

"I'm showing my husband, the man you arranged for me to marry, around his new home. Do you have any objections, Father?"

The tips of the king's ears reddened, and he fisted his hands, but I ignored his anger. Henri trembled beside me, and I held him close.

"Stop referring to him as your husband. We're all shifters here. You are mates, are you not?"

"You told him?" Henri turned to me.

Damn, I was hoping to keep that detail a secret a while longer so I could keep Father out of our lives during the so-called honeymoon period.

"No. But one thing you'll learn about a palace is there are no secrets."

"Thank gods for that. How long were you planning on keeping this a secret?" Father glanced up at the ceiling and looked away. He'd never appreciated the dedication and skill it had taken the artists to perfect the frescoes. Like the kings of old, he saw their devotion to their creativity as loyalty, because hadn't the goddess put our family on earth to rule and informed everyone we were special?

That was the lie I'd been fed all my life. We were no better than any of our "subjects."

"Was there something you wanted, Father?"

The king narrowed his eyes. He wasn't used to me disrespecting him.

“I want you to mark.” He turned to Henri who cowered behind me. “I suppose you’re the hold-up. It’s a simple process; you have sex, mark one another, and it’s done. That was the way your papa and I did it, Cole.”

Him bringing up Papa and comparing them to us rankled me, and I ground my teeth, something I did when I was stressed. But him blaming my mate had me fuming and tempted to punch his nose.

“Father, Henri is my husband and my mate-to-be. When we are ready, we will mate.” I made sure to emphasize we. Henri and I might have not been mated, but we were a pair and standing shoulder to shoulder against the outside world, and that included the king and his asshat courtiers who had spied on us and informed him we hadn’t mated.

Father’s nostrils flared, and he narrowed his eyes. I could take whatever he dished out, but I regretted that my new husband had to witness it.

“Just get it done,” he spat out, turning on his heel and storming out of the state room.

Henri turned to me, tears in his eyes, and when one trickled over his cheek, I caught it. “Please don’t cry.” I held up my finger, wet at the tip with my husband’s tear. “You are my husband, and I will protect you from my father’s wrath and the courtiers’ backstabbing.” I jerked my head at my wet fingertip. “What shall I do with this?”

He peered at it. “There’s not much left to do anything with.” He grinned and blinked away the unshed tears.

“It will be symbolic.” I led him onto the balcony. There were some tourists milling about outside the gates, and they pointed their phones at us. I grabbed Henri’s hand, and we tossed the tear into the air. The tourists thought we were waving at them, and they flapped their hands and took more pics.

“What now?” Henri asked, as spots of pink appeared on his cheeks.

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:33 am*

We didn't talk again until we were back in the room. I hated the way things went down with the king because he wasn't just a politician—he was my father-in-law and my mate's father. I felt bad about my feelings toward him, but, gods, he was awful. Not that my father was any prize. I very much expected Cole to feel similarly about him.

Both of them had one thing in common—they saw their sons as a means to an end, not children they should love and cherish and be proud of. If I ever became a father, I was going to accept the role as the gift that it was. I was going to love them and help them achieve their dreams, not mine.

The only plus side of my father looking at me as the pawn all these years was that he gave Lavender the life she deserved. She was happy and allowed to do pretty much what she wanted. Of course that was because in his mind she wasn't valuable and that sucked. But at least she hadn't been a prisoner to her position the way I had. And for that I was grateful. I needed to get in touch with her and let her know that all was going well. But first, I had to make sure it was.

“We should mark each other,” I said before the door had completely closed.

“No,” Cole said immediately and firmly. “We're not doing that. We're not making decisions about marking based on something my father said.”

Gods, he only made me want him more.

“Our parents controlled when we got married and to whom. Fate gave us our mates as those marriages. Now we get to decide... not my father... not your father... and not



obligation.” The way he went to bat for me, fate had done well by me. I might not have liked the way it happened, but I refused to be upset that it had.

I stepped into his arms and hugged him close. There was something so soothing about being in my alpha’s arms. It was like I was home.

“I agree.” I snuggled into his chest, longing to be completely covered by him, to be in a mate cocoon if that were a thing. Why couldn’t that be a thing?

“Alpha mine, we can’t do things because our families require it, because of stupid contracts or whatever the reasoning was behind all of that. But our beasts want this.” I pulled back slightly and looked up at him. “You can feel your bear pushing himself so close to the surface. I know you can because I feel him there too. Just by being in your arms, I feel his presence. He wants this.”

“Yes, he does. And I can feel your fox. He wants this, too.” It was barely a whisper, as if he were afraid if he said it too loudly that he might jinx it.

“He does, he wants it so bad. And yeah, maybe it’s the exact thing that our parents want from us, but that doesn’t mean we should deny ourselves, does it?” I pressed a kiss where my fox longed to mark him. “We can have it, right?”

He ran his hands down my arms and took my hand in his. We went over to the couch, or as he called it, “the settee,” and then laughed when I rolled my eyes at the antiquated term. There had to be a story there, and I’d ask him about it, but not today. Today, we needed to figure this all out.

“You had so much stolen from you,” he said, putting his arm around my shoulders. “Your first kiss was in front of a zillion people, and not because it was what you wanted, but because it was what was required of you.”

I wanted to argue that it was okay and that I didn't mind. But the truth was that I did mind. How I wished it could've been just the two of us, enjoying each other without worrying about photo ops and teens giggling.

"We need to have our mating be for you, omega mine. One hundred percent for you. And if that means we wait, we wait. But I refuse for you to have any regrets over when or how we mate."

This man, this bear who my beast recognized as my mate, he was a walking green flag.

"Thank you," I said, my voice trembling with emotion. Thank the goddess and fate for bringing him into my life. I couldn't have picked someone better than the man beside me. "I have wanted this since before your father told us that it was mandatory. I really have. But... I think... I would like it if we saved the rest of the mating for another time." My face burned like I was under a thousand suns. "You know, the other stuff."

"Are you sure you don't want to wait for it all?" he asked, his eyes searching mine.

"Yeah, I'm sure. More than sure. It will calm our beasts, give our families what they want, and won't take away from what I know is going to be a beautiful thing. Our first time making love will be for us."

He kissed my forehead. "I promise it will be just for us. They can meddle with every other part of this and already have—but I will not allow them to take that from you... from me... from us."

The longing in his eyes matched my own. We held each other, my fox coming to the surface and taking over, my teeth sinking into my mate's shoulder and he did the same to mine. There was no thinking or forcing, the way there had been with our

marriage. We both wanted this.

Our bond snapped into place, and a feeling of completeness came over me. It might not have been how I always pictured it, but this was special too. The connection of our mating bond solidifying like this—there was no better feeling in this world.

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:33 am*

As I was closing my laptop, an email arrived from Raine.

With my hand gripping the lip, I was tempted to close it, saying I hadn't seen it. But I caught the word "portrait" in the subject heading. Henri might like that, us dressing up and having an artist paint us.

Unlike in medieval times, a portrait painter wasn't a permanent fixture in the palace, but artists were hired for individual projects. Father was probably eager to get it complete so he could have a "hanging" ceremony, so I opened the email.

"What? How could that be?" I reread the attached message as Henri looked up from the magazine he was reading. "Father had someone paint our portraits from photos taken at our wedding."

Henri made a face. "Seriously? I'm not eager to see it because I was looking down most of the time, wondering what I'd gotten myself into, and when I glanced up, I probably resembled a frightened rabbit—no offense to bunny shifters."

Raine hadn't attached an image, so I could only rage at the decision and not inspect the finished work.

"We've been invited to view it." It was in one of the state rooms, and while Henri was reluctant to see it, I coaxed him by bribing him with cake and ice cream, the latter made fresh every day in the palace kitchen.

"Well." He wavered and put aside the magazine. "If you put it like that." He had declared earlier that the ice cream was the best he'd ever had.

We held hands as we strolled down the huge marble staircase, and I wondered how long it had taken the craftspeople centuries ago to hack out the marble from its source, craft it into blocks, and install it in the palace. I sent them a silent thank-you and hoped they were resting easy with the goddess.

The portrait sat at the back of the room, covered with a large piece of cloth. Raine bustled in, his lips set in a straight line, no doubt because I hadn't informed him we were here, though someone had.

He stood beside the portrait, and I asked why we hadn't been asked to pose.

"The king wanted this done with a minimum of fuss."

He flung off the cloth, and it fluttered to the floor as he gestured toward the portrait as if saying, "Ta-da." But his face fell as my mate and I stared at the painting.

His frown became a scowl as if our reaction was an insult to him personally. He pursed his lips, and his eyes narrowed.

"I'm sorry, Raine, but I'm sure you agree this is not up to the standard of previous portraits of just-married heirs."

I indicated my ancestors' portraits lining the walls. To be honest, most of them were scowling, possibly because they were hot, or wanted to be somewhere else or with someone else. Papa appeared to be about to flee, so perhaps not that different from Henri's expression. But if I knew anything about my father, he would not have entertained a request to redo the portrait.

"My husband and I are willing to sit for a new portrait." I glanced at Henri. "Today?" He nodded. "If you can get the artist here this afternoon."

My father's private secretary's eyes bulged and tinged with red, but he kept it together and nodded before stalking off. After lunch, which included huge scoops of ice cream, slathered with cream and chocolate mint sauce, we returned to the state room as the artist was setting up his easel and paints.

He bowed and Henri responded with a nod. He was getting used to the customs of monarchy. Father expected people to grovel and didn't acknowledge it.

Raine hovered around with a tablet, saying we didn't have much time and we'd need more than one sitting. An array of cloaks and crowns were laid out, and Raine huffed and puffed as he waited for us to choose.

I caught Henri's eye and stifled a giggle. While I didn't know what he was thinking, I pictured the wolf in the human fairy tale, *The Three Little Pigs*. If my mate had never read those tales, I would have to introduce them to him.

With Henri seated and me standing beside him, we spent an hour while the artist studied us and sketched us. The next session he would be slapping paint on the canvas.

Raine hurried us out as we thanked the artist, saying we'd see him next week. A new ambassador was presenting his credentials, and the king had requested our presence. I apologized to Henri as we got changed and were whisked back downstairs.

"It is always like this?" he whispered as I stood beside father and Henri was on my other side.

"Pretty much." I was adept at talking and hardly moving my lips so the reporters in the room couldn't lipread. We shook hands and smiled at the ambassador and her shifter mate, and then we were hustled out of the room, as it had to be set up for another function. Thank gods we were not expected to attend, and I ordered dinner to

be sent to our room.

“It’s an interesting life, Cole.”

I didn’t miss his emphasis on the word “interesting.” It was something, but we could make it our own, create charities and work toward a goal, something that would improve the lives of our people. I hated the word “subjects” because that suggested they were subjected to our will, and that hadn’t been true for centuries. The government ruled the country, we were just the pomp and glitz.

Henri yawned as he made his way to his adjoining room. I took a chance and asked if he’d like to share my bed. “Just to sleep in.” My beast did the bear equivalent of rolling his eyes, but my mate had been thrown into this new life, and I wasn’t about to do the same with our relationship.

Easing him in was my method, no matter how much I wanted him naked.

Henri paused, his hand on the door. “Okay.”

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:33 am*

Waking up with him holding me close brought a happiness I'd never known before. It was everything, and I never wanted it to end. He'd been so amazing the night before, showing me all of the love and patience I needed, while at the same time not making me feel coddled. Not once did I feel any pressure to do more.

I rolled over so that I could see his face once his breathing pattern told me he was awake. He smiled, his face beaming, mirroring the same happiness I felt.

"Did I wake you?" He pressed a kiss to my cheek.

"No, I woke up on my own." I hugged him closer. "I think I'm ready for more." I was pretty sure I was ready, but without any experience, I didn't want to promise something and then chicken out. At the same time, I needed him to know where my mind and heart were headed.

I knew I was ready for that kind of love... the physical kind. Just thinking about it had the lower half of my body stirring. It was a huge jump given how completely sheltered I'd always been, and with that came a bit of trepidation but not about Cole being the right one or this being the right time. It was more about me being good enough for him.

"There's something we have to do first," he said, kissing my forehead and climbing out of bed.

Relief and curiosity washed over me. The relief surprised me a tiny bit because I very much did want this. But also—jumping right in was huge.



“Get ready for the day.” He was bouncing on the balls of his feet. Whatever he wanted to do, it was a good thing.

“What do I wear?”

“Doesn’t matter,” he replied, smiling.

I wasn’t sure what hint he was attempting to give, if any, but I dressed quickly. If he was this excited about it, I was too.

He took my hand and led me through back corridors, away from prying eyes. It felt like a covert operation, and eventually, we came out in a huge garage. Seriously, there were more cars than a car dealership. This was coming from someone whose father collected cars.

“We’re gonna take this one,” he said, pointing to the most beat-up car there. “That’s Molly’s old car. When she got a new one, she left it here in case I ever ‘needed it’.”

I had a feeling she didn’t mean for sneaking out unseen with his new mate, but I wasn’t going to interrupt.

“Don’t worry. It’s not the first time I’ve used it. She knows sometimes I need to go to my place.”

“Okay,” I said, because what else was there to say? He wanted this to be a surprise or he would’ve given me all the information. As hard as it was, I tried to honor that.

We got inside the car. “Just keep your head down while we’re going. Hopefully, no one will notice.” Nothing sketchy there. Nope.

“Okay,” I repeated, still unsure of where we were heading.

He drove and drove, the entire time keeping his plans close to the vest. Eventually, he pulled off onto a little dirt road. Had this not been my mate, I might've been worried. Each mile we drove had us farther and farther away from society. It reminded me of the vampire movies Lavender loved so much.

“This is my family's land,” he explained as a clearing came into sight. I had a feeling his family was like mine and had a lot of land in a lot of different places. “I want us to shift together.”

My fox perked up at that. “I can't wait.”

We parked in a clearing and both shed our clothes as soon as we exited the car. Once my fox got word that I was going to let him come out and play, there was no holding him back. I wouldn't try, even if it meant not being able to fully appreciate the show in front of me.

I watched as Cole took off his shirt—he was gorgeous, the epitome of perfection. I wanted to close the distance between us and trace the planes of his muscles with kisses and licks. How he could love chocolate as much as he did and still look like this was impressive.

Once his shirt hit the ground, I took off my own. I didn't feel as big and powerful and sexy as he was, but he looked at me as if I held the world.

I took off first, happy when his bear chased after me. There was something so primal and at the same time playful about being his prey. And after he caught up with me, we did the game in reverse. It wasn't an unusual thing for shifters to do. But with Cole, it was different. It had a sexy edge to it.

We ran and played and ran some more. Cole was bigger than I by a ton in this form, but I was spry, and in the end, both of us won multiple rounds. Although, was there

only one winner? I would argue that our beasts both won each and every time by just having this carefree time.

When it was time for us to go, we made our way back to the car and shifted back. I didn't even pretend not to look; he was stunning and mine. There was no reason on this green earth to ignore that.

I crossed over to him, wrapped my arms around his neck, lifted up on my tiptoes, and kissed him. This kiss was different from the ones we'd had before. This was not a public display out of expectation, and it was no tentative peck. This kiss might've started out sweet, barely a brush of the lips, but it quickly grew deeper, stronger, more passionate. It was everything I never knew a kiss could be and more.

“Take me home, alpha. Take me home.”

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:33 am*

We tumbled into bed, arms and legs entangled, our mouths anchored on one another, hands grasping, tugging, and grabbing clothing. I fumbled with his pants, but my fingers were as useless as a newborn babe's.

We panted together, our chests heaving, and I mumbled into his mouth that this would go faster if we got our clothes off. I pulled away and studied his eyes, glazed with lust, his swollen mouth, and his tongue licking over his lower lip. This was his first time and I couldn't mess it up. What if I hurt him? I was kinda big.

We said nothing, catching our breath, until Henri tugged at my shirt and said with a shy smile, "We do this one at a time. I remove a piece of your clothing and then it's your turn." He paused. "If that's... that's okay?"

I poked out my bottom lip because I preferred to rip off his clothes and be damned. We could afford a new shirt and pants a hundred times over. But I agreed with a nod as he undid my buttons, one by one, until I was ready to scream. Why had we gotten dressed after shifting? Oh yeah, 'cause the staff and some members of the public might have seen us.

"You're killing me here." My mouth was on his ear, and he shivered.

"I hope not, because you're going to fuck me. Can't do that if you're... not breathing." He gasped and spots of pink appeared on his cheeks. "I said fuck."

"That's why we're going to do and I love that you said fuck." I lifted myself up as he tugged at my shirt.

“My turn.” I didn’t give a damn about buttons and tore his shirt to shreds.

His frown was so adorable I kissed it, poking my tongue into the tiny furrows and he shivered.

“Not fair.”

“Who said anything about fair?” I trailed a finger over his jaw. “I’ll play the prince card if I have to.”

“You wouldn’t.”

I shoved him onto his back and nestled between his legs, both hands undoing his buttons before tugging his zipper. As I yanked the pull tag lower, his breathing sped up, and he lifted his hips, allowing me to slide off his pants.

“Forget the rules.” He groped my crotch and rubbed his palm over the bulge.

Now it was my turn to pause as desire flooded my veins.

“You need help.” He wriggled out of his briefs, and his big beautiful cock bounded out, slapping me on the cheek. I licked the tip before grabbing Henri and placing him on top of me. He glided his ass over me, and I whimpered because while he was gloriously naked, my lower half was still clothed.

But the friction as he shoved his ass back and forth was bringing me dangerously close to climax. I had to be inside him when I came, when we both came. I gave his length a tug and tossed him back onto the mattress while I rid myself of my clothes.

I nudged his legs apart, and he wrapped his fingers around his cock and pumped. He gasped and bucked his hips while I kissed his thigh. Goosebumps paraded over his

skin, and I licked, lapped, and nibbled my way to his hole.

Henri put a hand on either side of my face. “Get your cock in me, Prince.” He squealed, “I said cock.”

He was adorable. His come-hither gaze sent my pulse racing, and I probed his slippery wet hole with my length.

I paused, relishing the moment when I eased in the tip, but Henri took hold of my dick and shoved the head in his puckered hole. We stared at one another, my eyes probably mirroring his, both of us stunned into silence.

“Does it hurt?”

He shook his head. “More, please.”

I hovered over him as my length filled his channel, watching his parted lips, the heavy breathing, his chest heaving with exertion, his eyes closing and a sigh escaping his mouth.

Our breath mingled, his sweet and minty, as I sank into him deeper, his channel so tight I slid in an inch at a time. And I had a lot of inches. When I finally filled him, his eyes snapped open, and he pulled me down for a kiss before his teeth tugged my lip. That delicious emotion, somewhere between pleasure and pain, took hold of me, and I arched my back, reveling in the tingling that spread to my fingers and toes.

I peppered kisses over Henri’s jaw before heaving myself up. I took in the slick coating my cock as I pulled out, the slick that made it easy to glide in and claim his ass.

“Stop adoring your huge cock and shove it in me. Fuck me hard, Cole.”

Placing both hands on either side of him, I thrust in. His eyes widened in surprise, and his body slid back while banging his head on the headboard.

“Sorry.”

“Keep going. I said fuck me hard, and that’s what you’re doing.”

Now that I had his permission, I rammed into him, again and again, and with each pounding I filled and stretched him. His dazed expression, coupled with unfocused eyes, his hands grasping my hair, and his tiny mewls told a story where words were unnecessary.

Henri bent his legs further and placed his feet on my chest. He pressed against me and grunted when I fucked him. His eyes smoldered with desire, and he angled his hips, allowing me to go in deeper. Our deep pants filled the silence in the room when he took me in to the hilt.

Desire clouded my vision as I gripped his ankles and shoved my dick in his hole. Henri clamped around me, heat radiated from his body, and he giggled and sent trembling vibrations spiking over my skin.

Sweat trickled into my eyes, and I blinked as he matched my rhythm. I pounded into him, and he pumped his cock. I couldn’t take my gaze off his hand as his fingers glided over the shaft. But desire forced my eyes closed.

Now we fucked, our whimpers, moans, and grunts punctuating the silence. Sweat trickled from our pores and dribbled over our skin, combining with slippery slick as our bodies slapped against one another

My body hummed as it anticipated the climax hurtling toward me. Henri mumbled my name, his feet pushing on my chest while he tossed his head from side to side, his

fingers frantically tugging his cock.

“Cole... Cole...” He didn’t finish the sentence before his body tensed, his face twisted, and cum shot out of his cock. He slumped onto the mattress, his legs limp as I rammed into him once more. I threw my head back and shouted his name as cum spurted into his channel and my knot claimed him.

We collapsed, our arms and legs wrapped around one another, and I pulled the covers over us, my lips rested on Henri’s brow before sleep claimed me



## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:33 am*

I lay in bed, doing everything I could not to move. I wanted to savor this moment, the first one waking up in my mate's arms after we had fully mated, Cole having now marked me both on the outside and the in.

Having never dated, I'd spent a lot of time thinking about what it would be like to be with someone like this. Would my first time be an awkward mess? Would I even come? Would it feel better than my hand or my toys? And then when I was told consummation was mandatory, my questions wandered to if my mystery arranged husband would be kind and gentle? Would he want to or would he be under the same edict I was?

What I hadn't considered was the feeling of waking up in his arms afterward. Yesterday, I'd been on top of the world after a little rest, his arms wrapped around me. But it was nothing compared to what I felt now. I was so happy I could burst.

"How long have you been up?" Cole said, his breath tickling the back of my neck.

"You don't want to know." I chuckled and rolled over to face him. I'd been up since three fifty-three in the morning, enjoying my quiet time in his embrace, our scents mingled together along with those of our joining. It was officially my new happy place.

"That early?"

"I can neither confirm nor deny that."

"Were you uncomfortable?" Poor sweet alpha was worried.

“No. I was just so ridiculously happy that I couldn’t sleep any longer. I can’t even explain it, but it’s like I’m whole for the first time.”

He rubbed his nose against mine playfully. “That’s what it’s like for me too. Last night was... I’m glad we waited.”

“I am too.” And extra glad that we stopped waiting.

“Let’s take a shower and head down to breakfast. I’d love for you to meet Molly.”

He’d told me about Molly numerous times. She was an important person in his life, a constant when nothing else, including his father’s attention, had been. She was like family to him, but not because she had to be—because she cared about him. She protected him like he was a sort of treasure for the family, one that needed to be both guarded and spoiled—with chocolate. And from everything he’d said about her, she filled that role because she genuinely cared about him. It was what I had so often wished Liam had been to me. But unlike with Molly, with Liam it was all about the paycheck.

We took a shower together, getting ourselves dirty again before we got ourselves clean. Then we walked down to the kitchen hand in hand. This time I didn’t feel completely lost. Maybe the day would come when I could navigate these halls without needing a homing beacon.

Molly was in the kitchen, just as Cole knew she would be. She greeted us with warm smiles and hugs, sincerity pouring off of her. I instantly liked her and was grateful to the role she played in his life. He deserved someone like her.

“Want me to get you both some breakfast?”

“We actually thought maybe you’d like to eat with us? I’d love for you to get to know

my husband.”

Cole’s words had her beaming. “I’d love that. But let me make it because... the?—”

“The egg incident of 2017.” My mate rolled his eyes, and they both laughed. I added it to the growing list of stories I wanted to hear.

If I were honest with myself, I didn’t love the way he called me his husband. True, we were married. But above that, and far more important, we were mates. I wanted to shout it from the rafters.

Doing so in a palace would probably get me thrown in the dungeon. Not that he’d mentioned there being one. Heck, I didn’t understand the difference between a palace and a castle. Probably just the floor plan was my guess. But in any case, being in the palace, there was mixed company. I understood the reasons why he called me husband. Didn’t mean I had to like it.

We sat down and ate together. Molly was an amazing cook. It wasn’t her role here, and I appreciated her taking the time. Conversation flowed easily. I learned about Molly’s family, she learned about mine, and we both learned that my mate thought chocolate for breakfast could be considered healthy if you argued it properly. It was a beautiful breakfast and one I hoped to repeat.

I really liked Molly. My mate’s father might’ve been a complete dud, but she made up for it. I was glad because he deserved all the goodness life had to offer, and if his family wasn’t going to give it to him, I was glad there was somebody who would.

After breakfast we went back to our room.

“What did you want to do today? I told my father that we had plans.”

“I was thinking... what if we FaceTimed with my sister.” I missed her and wanted her to see that I was happy... at last.

“Or she could come and visit. You said she loves vampires?”

I nodded.

“What if we watch that new show that’s streaming, the one just released and everyone can’t stop talking about?”

I knew exactly which one he meant, the one my sister had mentioned more than once.  
“I love the idea. I’ll call her.”

When Lavender arrived, she raced right over, hugging me tightly and telling me how happy she was for me the second we shared the news with her that we were fated.

The three of us spent the day binging the show, eating more popcorn and chips than should be legal, and jumping at the scary bits. Fine, it was only me who jumped, but that was okay. Finally, for the first time in my life, I had someone to hug me tight and reassure me that I was safe.

It was a good day. A very good day.

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:33 am*

“And this suit will be for your afternoon engagement with the president’s spouse.”

Sandy was tapping at his tablet while the royal tailor pinned the hem of Henri’s pants. My mate mouthed, “Help me,” and I asked Sandy if we could take a break.

He hesitated and agreed, saying, “Just five minutes, sir. You leave early tomorrow morning.

Sandy and the tailor scuttled out of the room, and when the door closed, I took Henri in my arms. “Almost done.”

“Not true. We haven’t started. You heard what he said. We’re outta here in the morning.” He pulled a thread from his jacket and felt the fabric between his fingers. “This material is excellent quality. I can’t complain about that.” He eyed himself in the mirror. “Tell me about the president and his husband.”

I opened the file Sandy had given me. He’d emailed it, but I preferred a hard copy that I could scribble on. Going over the points in the document, I reminded Henri that the president did not come from a privileged background but had been given a scholarship to college and worked as a lawyer before going into politics. I admired someone whose success was due to his own drive, hard work, with a bit of luck thrown in.

Unlike me who’d always been handed everything.

We went back and forth over the man’s details and his husband’s and the talking points Sandy had listed. We were representing our country and couldn’t cause a

diplomatic incident by saying something inappropriate.

While Henri was my husband and mate, his role wasn't equal to mine, and I would always be ahead of him, the first ushered into a room, first to shake hands, first to be seated. He would have to get used to that sadly.

Sandy bustled the tailor into the room, and they finished the fittings. Sandy had a spreadsheet of outfits, where and when they were to be worn, including the accessories, even the socks.

We spent the rest of the day in our suite before the next five days would be full-on with little time to rest.

On a government plane the following morning, we ate breakfast before having to get dressed for the meet-and-greet at the airport. Henri peered out the window as we descended through the clouds and bumped along the runway.

“At least I don't have to give a speech, unlike you.”

This wasn't the moment to inform him he would have to do just that in the future, but not on this trip. I was hoping to ease him into it, accompanying him to functions and sitting beside him the first time he stood up before an audience.

I remembered my first speech, a nerve-wracking experience, and I'd been preparing for it my entire life. I was fifteen and Father stood at my side, tension rippling off him when I stumbled over a word.

The plane taxied to its assigned position close to a long red carpet, and stairs were rolled to the door. I held my hand out to Henri, and he took it, his palm damp.

“I'll be with you the whole time.”

“And five steps ahead of me,” he grumbled as he patted his hair. He made an exaggerated grin. “Nothing in my teeth?”

I stood at the open doorway and observed the troops in formation on the tarmac, waiting for me to inspect them. It was a pointless exercise. It was doing something for the sake of doing it. It didn’t achieve anything. Much like a king or queen and a royal family.

I always wondered what would happen if I said one soldier had dirty boots or someone’s hair wasn’t short enough. Would our countries go to war?

Henri and I were determined we weren’t just going to cut ribbons and shake hands. We wanted to make a difference, and in between the fixed smiles and polite questions, we intended to make a difference in people’s lives. We’d debated different ideas every night but weren’t any closer to figuring out a possible first project.

I strode down the stairs. Henri was behind me. I didn’t need shifter senses to know he was there. The thumping of his feet on the metal stairs signaled he was two steps behind. We were met by the prime minister and his husband. We shook hands, and I introduced Henri. Polite conversation followed with questions about our flight and sending best wishes to my father.

I inspected the troops, keeping my eyes straight ahead and not searching for a smudge or a crease.

The day unfolded with us meeting the president, photos, and lunch before Henri and I went to our hotel to change clothes. We visited a school, and we both enjoyed reading stories to them and listening to them singing. More photos and inspecting projects the kids were working on before we were back in the car.

“Whatever project we come up with, it has to involve kids.” Henri peered at the new

city through the spotless window. “They’re the only genuine people we’ve met today.” He toed off his shoes and wiggled his toes. “Don’t suppose we can call in sick tonight.”

“Sorry, love. No can do.”

When the driver opened the door, there was a crowd of people outside the hotel cheering.

“Is that for us?” Henri asked as he hid behind me.

“I think so. Smile and wave.” I took his arm, and we posed at the hotel entrance, allowing photographers and the public to take pics, before escaping inside.

Dinner that evening was long, with ten courses, each one interspersed with a speech and toast. Henri was sitting opposite me, and he sent me many “How much longer?” looks.

Back in the hotel and finally in bed, Henri yawned and said, “Please tell me when you’re king, the job will involve more significant activities than raising a glass to someone who once did something.”

I couldn’t. It would take an age to change diplomacy, but we could leave our mark on the world.

“Cole? Your silence tells me more than any words.”



*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:33 am*

All of the official stuff was starting to get to me. I was used to being hidden away, and now all of a sudden, I was expected to be front and center for an entire population. I was ready to get off of the political train. Not that I could tell my father-in-law that. There was no way he'd understand. To him, my entire purpose had to do with optics. That and assuring power. Gods, I still disliked the man.

Cole must have figured out that something was wrong because he wrapped his arms around me as I looked out our window. "Do you want to go to bed early?"

I shook my head. I didn't hate sleep and going to bed early was better than a lot of options—a ton better if we were to do so naked. That wasn't what I needed today. I needed out of the palace and to have some fun.

"What do I want to do? I want to go bowling. Is there a bowling alley in here somewhere?" It had been called a "boring" activity to all of my friends growing up. Only, they were less my friends and more my staff. I just hadn't seen it at the time. I'd always loved it though, even if I was horrible at it.

"We're supposed to have one here somewhere. Let me check."

I appreciated what he was trying to do. He just hadn't realized that bowling was only half of it. I also wanted to get away from here.

"No, don't do that. That's not the kind of bowling I want to do."

"There are multiple kinds of bowling?"

There were, but that wasn't what I meant either.

"I want to go to a bowling alley where half the people are drinking pitchers of beer and still somehow hitting the pins. And other parts of the alley are filled with kids with the bumpers up, wearing ugly birthday hats, and they're still not even getting one pin with said bumpers. They don't care, though, because they are having the time of their lives. And I want that really crappy pizza they make there that probably doesn't fit the actual definition of pizza. I wanna go on a date."

"I've never had a date like this," he said softly.

I knew that. We'd talked about that part of our lives before we mated.

"Me neither." But still, I longed for something so ordinary. "What do you think?"

"I bet we can find a place." He started tapping away on his phone. "Right. Get dressed. I've made a reservation."

I hadn't known that bowling alleys needed reservations, but I wasn't going to argue with a date night. Just like the day we went shifting, we got ready, wove through the castle, and ended up at the garage. Only this time we had a driver. His father hadn't been too pleased when security had told him we left that day. It was creepy to think his father knew our comings and goings, but such was the price of his princehood.

We didn't take one of the fancy cars, instead shuffling into the back of a beat-up old SUV. I didn't ask where it came from. I didn't really care. The only thing that mattered was that we were doing this.

We weren't going as royalty, we were going as us. I'd dressed down. Being incognito for me was far easier than it was for my mate. Everyone had seen images of him from the time he was born. I was still relatively a nobody.

Cole made his hair all tousled with product and wore some big oversized glasses. He was trying to look like a joe schmo to avoid being caught as the prince. I wasn't sure how much that would work, but he seemed to feel good about it. And we did have security if it came down to it.

When we arrived, the alley was packed. On one side was a huge birthday party with about 50 kids all there to celebrate one of their own, just like I'd said I wanted. It was a pretty sure bet that there would be a party happening, but this one was different than my initial vision. It was fancy. My father hadn't been one to have big lavish birthday parties unless it benefited him. So, oftentimes, when he thought he needed to, he would do something like that for my sister. Never for me. Not once.

I tore myself from watching them. Tonight wasn't about the party, and it sure wasn't about my father. It was about my mate and me having fun. We rented the stinky shoes and found our lane.

"What do you want for your name?" Cole asked, setting up the scoreboard.

"I mean, I don't really have a say in that." I came with no silly nickname to put up there. How shortsighted of me. "Maybe something like 'Glitterific.'"

"Yeah, that sounds good." He typed it in.

"How about you?" If I was going to have one, he was too.

"Oh, I don't know." He tapped his chin with his fingers.

When he put his name up, it ended up being something cute too, and I couldn't help but make an awww sound.

"Fox Lover." To anyone seeing it, they probably thought one of us collected toy

foxes or something. But I saw it for the sweetness that it was.

We bowled, and he showed me how to hit more pins than gutters. For someone who wasn't a bowler, he did really well. I still wasn't any good at it by the end, and he won by a landslide. But it didn't matter because we had a blast.

And I did get one strike, which was pretty fun too.

Then we went to the bar and ate what was objectively the worst pizza known to man. And as bad as it was, I'd never tasted anything better. Because this pizza meant that I was here on a date with my mate. I was going to have the human experience of marriage and date night. It was the bond that only came with a mating. And I had my fated mate. I had everything and more.

I reached across the table and took his hand. "Thank you. This was the perfect date."

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:33 am*

“Do we have anything on today?” Henri said as he snuggled against my back.

“Nothing. No events or portraits, no meetings with foreign dignitaries, no choosing of menus for the next state dinner. Nothing. Nada. No.”

While neither of us mentioned it, we would be working on the charity concept we had for kids from disadvantaged backgrounds. But for my mate and me, that wasn't what we called round robin work; busy work. Like meetings to discuss the previous meetings and plan the next one.

But we could laze around in bed a little longer and maybe wander around the garden and pick vegetables for a salad tonight. We could call in on Molly and enjoy coffee and cake mid-afternoon.

“But I could show you the thing I've been keeping from you.” I sniggered as my mate fondled me and said my arousal was no secret.

By mid-morning we'd accomplished everything we wanted to do, and I'd arranged for the kitchen staff to prepare us a picnic. When I collected it, the chef was tugging at his hair, his cheeks a flaming red as he muttered, “The king likes his steaks raw, not burned to a crisp.”

I thanked the staff and got out of there lickety split.

Henri met me outside the kitchen, and I took the steps that led to the staff quarters.

“Are we having a picnic with Molly?” my mate asked as we got close to her room.

“No.” Molly was working, and as much as I’d love to have lunch with her, Father would not stand for the housekeeper playing hooky with his son.

“You’ll see.” We descended another set of stairs to the wine and storage cellars, and Henri shivered as the temperature dropped.

“You’re not going to show me the dungeons, are you?”

The palace wasn’t old enough for dungeons. There used to be a six-hundred-year-old castle here, but it fell into disrepair and my ancestors built the palace in its place. The castle had a dungeon, and there were diagrams and descriptions of the torture in the older books in the palace library.

“No dungeons here, my love.”

I strode to the cellar at the end that held Father’s vintage wine. Only he was allowed in here, but what he didn’t know was that I had discovered the secret door behind the wine racks when I was a bored kid.

Beside one of Father’s prized wines lay the old rusted key. He would never drink the wine in that bottle because it probably tasted worse than vinegar, but he liked telling people he owned it, one of only a handful in the world.

The door creaked and complained as I turned the key with both hands and thought of the craftspeople who forged the key in fire. Using my phone, I lit up the passageway, lined with cobwebs from generations of spiders. I’d not been here in a while, and the musty dank smell had my bear turning up his nose.

Henri made a face and reared away while plugging his nose with his fingers. “It’s so gross. Why are you showing me this?”

I put a finger to my lips. “It’s a secret, remember.” Tugging my mate forward, I stepped gingerly through the dust and dead insects while my mate stumbled behind me. When we reached a door at the other end, I used a key hanging on the wall and unlocked it. A blast of fresh air hit me in the face, and I shaded my eyes as rays of sunlight spilled into the dark space.

“Oh my gods, where are we?” Henri rushed out and brushed dust off his shoulders. “Is this private land?”

We were still on the place grounds but over the hill and surrounded by feathery grass, blue bells, and tall trees. The huge fence that separated us from the rest of the city was beyond the wall of trees.

Henri twirled around, his arms outstretched. “This is amazing. Why didn’t you show me this before?”

I explained that if we disappeared every day and one of the groundsmen discovered us, tongues would wag, and Father would hear about it, and the secret tunnel would no longer be a secret.

“Father would have the tunnel blocked if he knew I was sneaking out.”

We spread a blanket under a tree and enjoyed two hours of eating and dozing and discussing the future. It was the perfect place because no one knew we were here, and I’d turned the phone off. There were no doors to knock on and no schedules to keep.

Back in the palace, we strolled the corridors to our suite.

“The king wishes to see you both.” Raine startled me. He needed a bell the way he appeared all cat-like. We followed him, holding hands before he ushered us into Father’s private study.

I bowed to the king and Henri did the same.

“I was young once.” Father was standing at the window, hands clasped behind his back.

Henri and I shared a glance, and I anticipated him saying he was ill. While I’d been preparing to be king my entire life, I didn’t expect it to happen so soon. And no matter how much my father and I chafed against one another, I loved him and didn’t want anything to happen to him.

My mate gasped, perhaps anticipating bad news.

“And I know every inch of this place.” Father’s childhood had been lonely, having been brought up by nannies and governesses. He had little free time, and was always hounded to study.

“If you think I don’t know about the secret tunnel,” he glanced over his shoulder and grinned, “you have underestimated me.”

“Father, you never told me.” We could have had picnics, the three of us, Papa, Father, and me, before my parents’ relationship soured.

“I knew if you were curious enough, you’d discover it yourself.” My father reminisced with us for a bit longer before bidding us goodnight. Who knew he could be so sentimental. I liked this side of him and hoped this was a sign I’d see it more often.

“Your father is a sly old fox,” Henri noted as we left the king’s study.

“Oh really.” I slung an arm around his shoulder. “I thought you were the only fox in the palace.” I clamored up the stairs ahead of him. “Last one has to give the other a



blow job.”

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:33 am*

My stomach muscles ached, and though I thought I had the flu, I wasn't sure. I was a fox. In theory I should've been pretty immune to human germs. But there was no denying I felt like I'd been hit by a truck a few times and then stomped on.

I thought back to the night before—typical of my new life, my job had been to look handsome on my mate's arm at some political social event with little teeny hot dogs wrapped in biscuits. At least that part was good. Usually they had finger foods that I wanted no part of but had to eat anyway.

But now, I felt like I had been drinking all the champagne. And had I been drinking all night I'd have considered this a consequence I deserved. Only thing was, I didn't have any. Not one drop. I'd been drinking water and nothing harder.

My stomach lurched, and I jumped out of bed and ran as fast as I could, barely making it to the toilet in time to empty my stomach. I felt immediately better, although my body still ached in places I hadn't realized I had. I brushed my teeth and took a shower, letting the hot water soothe me. As I stood there with a towel wrapped around myself, that was when I saw my face for the first time. It looked like I hadn't slept in eons.

When I stepped back into our bedroom, my mate was up and stretching his arms wide. He froze as his eyes reached my face. "Are you okay?"

"I am now. Last night just wore on me." Probably. Maybe. I wasn't sure. I might've just been sick.

"How about I just go grab some toast from the kitchen?" My mate pulled on a pair of

sweats and grabbed a T-shirt.

I agreed, because no matter how I felt, I always wanted toast. It was my single favorite food, and if I had to pick only one thing to eat for the rest of my life, that's what it would be. My mate preferred his chocolate. A sweet tooth for my sweet alpha.

I didn't even pretend to get dressed, instead throwing on a pair of boxers and a T-shirt. Nothing about my outfit would've been father-in-law approved. Not even for hanging out at home. He said that a prince must always be at the ready. Was I a prince? Nope. But that didn't matter to him. My mate was, and therefore, all rules of decorum were mine.

To be honest, I was getting used to his ways. He wasn't a dick, not like my original impression of him led me to believe. He was just focused, and his focus was on his position. And in a way I got it. He was King, and as a king he had responsibilities I was only beginning to get a hint of understanding of. I still wished he had a better relationship with my mate. The whole Majesty thing when they met for the first time each day was over the top, even for those duty bound.

Cole came back in with toast, some juice, coffee, and what smelled like leftovers—at least that was my guess. The three paper bags with to-go containers kept it hidden from sight.

"You look a bit better," he said.

I gave a very non-committal, "Uh-huh," because I still felt awful.

"I ran into Molly, and I told her what was going on. She gave me this to give you," he said and handed me the smallest of the bags.

When I opened it up, there were two pregnancy tests inside. I pulled them out and

stared. The more I stared, the more it made sense. Lately I'd been falling asleep early when possible, I puked this morning, and I had a few weird questions from a couple of security people yesterday, asking if I was arguing with my beast. In isolation, they could be explained away, but all together like this, they seemed to be adding up to being pregnant, too.

"Does that mean I need to eat cold toast?" I asked, chasing away the thought. I didn't want to get too excited about having a baby if this was me being sick. Also, my stomach was starting to beg for food... the complete opposite of what it had wanted less than an hour earlier when it demanded all of the food gone.

"Of course not."

I reached for it, but the second I made a move, I found myself staring back at the test. There was no way I could wait. It was weird that I contemplated doing so for even a second. Not even the best toast in the world was going to stop me from taking this test.

I ran into the bathroom, took the test, and came out, joining my mate while the test did its thing. According to the box, reading it early or late pretty much guaranteed bad results. Three minutes didn't sound like a long time. It wasn't even enough time for Cole to have made my toast in the first place. But as we waited three minutes, as the box instructed, it felt like the longest three minutes ever.

The timer went off, and my mate grabbed my hand and squeezed it. "Either way, I love you." He brought our joined hands up and kissed mine before the two of us walked into the bathroom together.

I grabbed the test, unable to even pretend to play it cool.

"I want it to be pregnant," I confessed. "I'm scared. Are you scared?"

“I want it too. And you know what? It’s going to be positive,” he reassured me. “My beast agrees.”

“And then we’ll be dads.”

“Yep.” He kissed my temple. “That’s how it works.”

“And then what?”

“And then we’ll figure it out... together,” he said, holding me close. “Right now, let’s just enjoy this moment. We’re probably about to become new fathers.”

Slowly I turned over the test, and sure enough, there were two pink lines. We were going to be dads.

“I’m worried about the baby.”

Henri stood at the door of the bathroom, a hand on his flat belly.

My stomach dropped, and bile slid up my throat. I raced to him and brought him to the bed. Multiple scenarios sprinted through my mind, the worst being... no, I couldn’t put it into words, but I had to get him to a doctor.

With the phone in hand, I said, “Calling an ambulance, now.”

But Henri grabbed the device and turned it off. “No, babe. It’s not an emergency, though I love how you didn’t freak and did the right thing.”

I did almost lose it, but I was glad I kept it together.

“I worry the baby’s not growing enough. I’m three months along and no bump in sight.” The easiest thing would be to tell my mate everyone was different and his belly would expand in time. But I was no medical professional and me being blasé about his concern wouldn’t help. His job was to carry the baby, mine was to support.

“I can call the palace doctor.” Like the portrait painter, we no longer had a full-time physician living on site but a trusted doctor who attended us here when necessary.

Henri made a face. “I’d prefer a fox shifter midwife, if that’s okay.”

“Whatever you want, love. I’ll make it happen.”

I worried about what would happen if the king got wind of us seeking medical treatment outside of those approved by him, but Henri was my mate and the one carrying the baby.

He scrolled through his contacts and made a couple of calls, at one point pausing the conversation to ask if we could meet the midwife at their office. I nodded, willing to do whatever was needed to assure my mate our little one was thriving and to secure our privacy from the palace gossips.

Rather than taking the main stairs, we went to the back of the palace, hoping to leave via the staff entrance. Not that my father would bar us from leaving, but I refused to upset Henri when he was already worried about our child.

But as we reached the exit, Papa emerged from the shadows. Henri gripped his chest and even I was taken aback, not having scented my omega dad.

“Hurry, before the king finds out, or you’ll get an hour-long speech about why medical matters should be handled in-house.” He added that there was a car and driver waiting. “Your father would love to stage manage this pregnancy of his first grandchild, so go now before he insists on coming with you and taking notes.”

I kissed his cheek and steered Henri outside. The car belonged to Molly so didn’t have our special RF number plates, and the driver was Molly’s assistant. While I hated that nothing was a secret within our walls—and Father was certain to find out—we could escape before he confronted us.

The fox shifter midwife was located outside town, in a small leafy village. The scent of fox permeated the place when we got out, and Henri explained all the cottages belonged to midwives.

“All foxes, all the time in this village.”

He headed to one with a red roof that reminded me of the human fairy tales Father insisted I read as a child “to help me understand humans.” Those stories terrified me, a bear shifter, and in the days since we’d discovered Henri was pregnant, my beast begged me never to read any to our child or him!

The door opened and a middle-aged woman with a mop of auburn hair greeted us. She introduced herself as Lainey before shutting the door and closing the curtains. If I’d been anywhere else, I’d have been worried, but Henri assured me she was protecting our privacy.

After taking Henri’s details plus his blood pressure, she asked what the problem was, and my mate burst into tears. “I’m not doing a good job of protecting our little one, as they’re not growing.”

“Let me be the judge of that.”

My mate lay on the table, and Lainey ran the ultrasound wand over his belly. A distinctive thudding filled the room. Henri and I shared a glance.

“Is that what I think it is?” My mate entwined his fingers with mine.

“That’s your baby’s heart, a very healthy heartbeat.”

Lainey measured our little one, saying they were on the seventieth percentile.

I asked what that was, and she explained our child was bigger than seventy percent of other babies at this stage.

“But I’m so small.” Henri looked at me as if asking for support.

“There are so many factors that determine when an omega begins to show,” Lainey



told us. “I know saying ‘Don’t worry’ won’t help, but call me any time and we can talk whenever you want.”

Wow! My human friends who were parents didn’t have doctors or midwives who were on call 24/7 during the early days of pregnancy.

We agreed to return once a month for a checkup.

“Has that assured you?” I asked my mate as we were driven back to the palace.

He nodded. “It’s silly, I know, but I was so looking forward to having a big belly and flowy shirts and everyone patting my bump.”

“What about swollen ankles and cravings?” We’d been reading books and blogs, and Henri had cringed at the pics of puffy ankles.

He giggled. “You got me. I am not looking forward to that.”

We passed a convenience store, and my mate asked Alfie, the driver, if we could stop.

“The cravings are starting. I’d love some salt-and-vinegar chips.”

Alfie offered to get a packet, and I handed him my debit card.

“Not one packet. A lot. As many as they have, please, Alfie.” Henri licked his lips. “I can smell them now, and I’m imagining the salty vinegary flavor on my tongue.” He patted my arm. “Sorry, babe. They’re not your favorite, I know.”

“It’s okay. I’ll put a peg on my nose whenever you eat them.”

He placed his lips on my ear. “Or you could do something else when we get home, perhaps. Something with your tongue...”

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:33 am*

To say I was huge would be an understatement of epic proportions. I was freaking ginormous. Most of the time, I didn't notice. Sure, I had a belly, but I'd had one for quite a while now. But sometimes... sometimes, I'd walk past a window, catch a glimpse of my reflection, and see my body, and for a split second I would wonder who was in the reflection. Yes, I was so round that I didn't even recognize myself.

Unlike some dads-to-be on the internet in the parent groups, I didn't mind being huge. I was a home for our growing baby, and that was the most important thing. But on the practical sides of things, it was sometimes a pain in the butt.

I hadn't seen my dick in a week, and did I need to stare at it? No. But I did love watching my mate as he sucked me down, and now I couldn't always get a good angle. Hardly the end of the world. I also had days where I had two different shoes on because I couldn't see my feet. I'd resorted to sandals because the actual act of bending down to tie my shoes was pretty much impossible and some days my foot just slid into the wrong ones.

"You're overly pensive." Cole cupped my cheek and smiled sweetly at me.

"Yeah, I think I am," I admitted. "But not on anything real. I was just thinking about being pregnant and our baby and the meaning of life. You know, the norm."

He placed his hand on my belly. "I think about our baby a lot, too. I can't wait to meet them. I hope they look like you."

"Hey, I was hoping they looked like you. Don't steal my ideas." I chuckled, and our baby kicked.

Cole bent down in front of me and talked to my belly. “I know, little one. We’re talking about you. But only because we love you so much.”

He kissed my belly and then righted himself. “What would you like to do today?”

“Don’t we have a whole lot to do?” My father-in-law had given us a list of things we needed to do this month, just like he always did. He called it our “agenda.” If my memory was right, some people were coming from another nation to talk about agriculture. I knew it was important, and now that I was used to the way things worked around here, it wasn’t that bad. Parts of it were actually growing on me.

He shook his head. “Spending time with my pregnant mate is far more important than nodding and smiling at some delegates that my father is meeting with.”

I had to agree with him there.

“And before you ask, yes, my father knows and approves.” He brushed some hair from my brow. “So if you could do anything you want, what would you want to do?”

“I’d like to go to the bookstore.” I didn’t even need to think about it. I’d been thinking about it a lot, nonstop. “They’re having a special exhibit or something featuring local children’s authors. And I’ve been wanting to add to our library for when our sweet one arrives.”

My mate agreed. “That would be a nice way to spend the afternoon. And maybe afterward we can stop for ice cream.”

I’d been having ice cream cravings nonstop, and I squeed at his suggestion.

We had a driver take us to the next city over, to the largest bookstore in the region and the one having the event. When we got there, I felt like a kid in a candy store. I’d

always loved books, adored them really. I could easily have spent all day in there browsing the aisles looking for the perfect sci-fi novel. But today wasn't about me. We were here to spoil our little one.

Today was going to be far more fun than finding books for myself.

"We need to fill our baby's library." Which was not a true library, but more of a reading nook we'd created for them. It already had a lot of books. They were one thing I'd been picking up since the day I discovered I was pregnant. Lavender brought over a bunch of her favorites from when she was little, too.

"I figured today we could go through the exhibit and then the kids' section and see what early readers I would like for our child."

"Yeah. If they love books as much as we do, they'll appreciate it. And if they don't, learning to read will make school easier, and they'll appreciate that. So that's pretty much a win-win."

We picked up one of every book on display from the local authors. It was a nice way to give back, and really, with Cole's position, if he only picked one or two, rumors would get out about his purchases and they'd get an unfair advantage over the others. One from everyone was the way to go.

After that we walked into the kids' section and were immediately greeted by a woman who asked if we needed help finding anything. The second I gave her my laundry list, I realized she had just been making polite chit-chat, thinking I needed one book. Once she saw that wasn't the case, she called her coworker over, and we went to work.

Did we go overboard and buy more books than we currently had carved out space for? Absolutely. Was it also one of the best times I'd ever had at a bookstore? Also,

yes. And the look on the cashier's face when she told us our total was absolutely priceless.

"Thank you." I looked at the books in the back of the extended SUV we'd been driven there in. Boxes and boxes and boxes of books.

"Don't thank me for providing for our child. I feel honored to be able to do so."

"I was thanking you for indulging me." I leaned into his side. "I know it's silly, but I want them surrounded by adventure."

He pulled me into his arms. "I won't let our little one have the isolated life you had." Sometimes he saw me oh too clearly. "I promise you."

He said it like a vow. Our baby was so lucky to have him as their dad.

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:33 am*

“You ready for this?”

Henri and I stared at the driveway lined with chauffeur-driven cars. All morning vans and trucks had trundled in the service entrance and set up who knew what. This was Father’s doing, and we’d agreed.

We’d made a pact with him. We’d participate in pointless ceremonies that involved old-time uniforms and customs so the public, including tourists, could take pics of us. In return, he couldn’t interfere with how we raised our baby. He could participate in the little one’s life as a grandfather, and we would decide if and when our child was introduced to the intricacies of royal life.

Though we’d signed off on the “we’ll attend functions” aspect of our job, Father was a crafty old beast. According to him, baby showers were included in royal functions. In ancient times, welcoming a child into the royal fold was when noble families showed their allegiance by giving the child land, gold, and jewels—even a contingent of soldiers.

I supposed not much had changed, except now it was a party and kids were also invited.

“No, but we’d better get it over with.” Henri clasped my hand and lay his head on my shoulder. “We could say we’re otherwise engaged. Did we send an RSVP?”

My shoulders shook as I giggled, imagining Father’s face when Raine told him we weren’t attending the baby shower.

“Let’s go. We smile, wave, chat, accept congratulations, and then you say you’re exhausted and we retreat to our suite.”

My mate elbowed me. “So I’ll get the blame for us disappearing from our own baby shower.”

The baby was ours, but the shower was all the king’s doing.

We took the elevator, a recent addition, because Henri couldn’t be heaving him and his bump up steep staircases. The staff opened the large double doors, and my mate and I froze. I took in the scene in the state room that spilled out through the side doors into the palace grounds.

Flowers of every color adorned the tables and walls, including antique ornate furniture. The flowers’ combined perfume rushed at me, and my eyes stung and I sneezed. I almost turned and dragged Henri out, thinking his reaction to the flowers would be more intense than mine.

“It’s beautiful,” Henri gushed.

“It is?”

“Mmmm. And all this for our baby.” My mate unhooked his arm from mine and strolled toward the towering cake with at least ten tiers. The room was crowded with stuffed bunnies, bears, unicorns, dragons, tigers, and foxes.

When I caught up to my mate, he whispered that Father had consulted him about where to get a toy fox.

“My father, the king, was asking about stuffed toys? I didn’t think he knew they existed.”



Henri scooped up a cupcake, with lashings of icing swirled on top, and took a bite. “This is heaven.”

“A bite for me?” I pleaded as my mate grabbed another one.

“Get your own. These are all mine.”

He pecked my mouth, and I licked the residue of frosting. Mmmm, it was good. Maybe Molly had a hand in baking them rather than an outside caterer. She did pride herself in all things baking, and I’d been her willing guinea pig all these years.

Outside reminded me of county fairs that Papa had taken me to where we cut the ribbon to officially open the fair. There were carousels, kids blowing bubbles and making sandcastles, ring tosses and tin can tosses, three-legged races. It was a beautiful chaos with more laughter, handholding, and back-slapping than I’d ever encountered at the palace.

Like the decorations inside, everything was pastel colors, including the balloons swaying in the breeze. It was more carnival than baby shower, but who said we had to stick to the same old rules about baby showers? Father had gone all out, and I looked around for him, wanting to thank him, because Henri was going from one activity to another, oohing and ahing and accepting congratulations.

And the guests were people who’d won an invitation in a lottery, not diplomats and bigwigs from industry.

“Your husband seems to be enjoying himself.” Father appeared beside me, dressed casually, which was unusual. He used the word husband rather than mate, as we were surrounded by humans. “And so does your papa.”

It was rare to have my omega father attend a function if he wasn’t forced to, but he

was on the carousel with Sandy's son, waving to me as his horse rose up and down. I'd never seen him so giddy. It was a good look.

"Thank you, Father. You've outdone yourself."

He patted my back. "My actions in the past may have seemed cruel, Cole, but I was preparing you for a life that doesn't forgive mistakes. You'll never have to worry about money, but this isn't for everyone."

"That's why we want our child to explore life outside the palace." I was often lonely growing up, as Father didn't want me associating with kids from town. One of the reasons Molly and I were so close. She filled that gap.

"Come and try your hand at the ring toss." Henri bowed at Father before steering me away.

"You think you can beat me, do you?" I rolled up my sleeves.

"I was a champion ring tosser as a kid."

I grabbed the rings, made of thick rope, and tossed one at the target. It teetered and flipped on its side and plopped onto the ground. Damn. I thought this was easy, but there was skill involved, something I was lacking.

But Henri studied the target for a minute, aimed, and threw the ring. "Yes!" he shouted and high-fived a bystander.

Well, damn. I should have practiced. I tried again and failed. But my mate was successful each time, and he won a stuffed bear. He handed it to a child nearby who hugged the toy and thanked my mate. Both Henri and I had tears in our eyes at how happy that small act had affected the little boy.

“That was so kind of you, love.”

“We have so much.” He tucked his arm in mine. “And we need to share what we have more. I want our baby to see and be a part of that.”

I thanked the universe for the thousandth time for putting Henri in my life.

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:33 am*

“I want to tell you something, but I don’t want you to be mad,” I said, realizing an instant too late that I probably had him worrying.

I was holding my phone which had been buzzing on a pretty consistent basis. I knew what it meant, but I had been trying to figure out how to tell my mate. I didn’t want to follow the royal birth plan and hadn’t been able to figure out how to avoid it. Now that my contractions were getting closer and closer together and stronger, at least according to my app, time had run out.

Cole, of course, would want me to have the labor and delivery immediately. He didn’t know how I’d been feeling on the subject, and I felt bad about that. The truth was, I didn’t want to put him in a position where he had to openly defy his father. Only problem was that what I was going to ask him to do would be exactly that.

“I’m not going to be mad,” he said, sitting beside me. “Do you want me to go find a way to get some weird craving?” That had been a constant theme lately, so it wasn’t really that shocking his thoughts headed in that direction first.

“No, not that.” It would’ve been so much easier if it was. “I think I’m in labor.”

He popped out of his chair, fishing his phone out of his pocket. “I’ll call the midwife.”

I shook my head.

“That’s the thing. I don’t want to call the midwife. Not here. I want this baby to be ours for just a little bit. No country’s newest darling, not our fathers’ legacies. I just

want them to be ours. And I don't know how to do that."

A contraction that had been building subsided.

"Can we make this happen?" I hated doing this to him. I really did. But if I didn't at least ask, I was going to regret it.

He thought about it for a full minute. "Yeah, I think I can make this happen. They'll probably want to swab for DNA later. Swabbing doesn't hurt, right?" He hadn't been stalling. He'd been trying to figure out all the possible outcomes. Gods, I loved him.

"Yeah, that's fine." I hated that whether the baby was legitimately ours or whatever mattered, but with royalty, I supposed I understood the point, even if I detested it.

Cole made a bunch of phone calls. "Okay, we need to get out of here. How long between contractions?"

I hadn't really been counting and had to check the app for the answer. I had enough time between them to get all the way to the car.

"Let's go."

We went straight to the garage. Cole said we would deal with any issues as we came upon them but that he didn't want to waste time being stealthy. When we reached the garage, it was Molly behind the wheel of the SUV.

"I don't want to get you in trouble, Molly." Molly mattered to me. Doing things like this for us put her at risk, and I wasn't willing to accept that. She wasn't even driving her own car. It was a royal one, which was a choice I wouldn't have expected.

"Doesn't matter if you do," she said, turning on the car. "I got my nest egg all worked

out. I get fired? Well, oh well. Besides, it will look like I'm on an official royal errand driving this, so they'll leave me alone."

I wasn't sure how true that was, but as the contraction started, I didn't care. My mate helped me into the back seat, and I lay down, curled on my side.

"How about we just worry about the king later?" She started the engine. There was no stopping her.

I didn't like the plan, but I couldn't argue. The pain was starting to build as she drove us off the property.

I wasn't really sure where we went or how we got there; I was too focused on managing the pain during the trip. My mate did the best he could to talk me through the contractions, but they sucked. And not the good kind of sucking.

We ended up parked in front of a little cabin. It couldn't have been that far away, the sun was still in the sky. Each contraction felt like a week, my timing was all off.

When we got there, the fox midwife was already there. Someone had called her. I had the best mate ever or the best Molly. Both. They were both the best. If only one of them could take the pain from me.

"We're here," Molly called in, and the midwife came out with a smile on their face.

On the wall beside her was a picture of Molly when she was much younger. I quickly realized that this was Molly's home. Or one of. She did live at the palace during her work week.

"Are you sure you are okay with me having my baby here?" It was a big ask.

“Of course, that’s why I have my cabin—to share it with family.” She hugged me and told the midwife she’d be in the other room if needed.

There wasn’t much discussion after that. The contractions started getting harder, more frequent, and longer... so much longer.

My mate helped me undress, and I paced for a while until I couldn’t stand up anymore. He helped me into the bed, and Lainey gave me a quick exam, letting me know I could push as soon as I felt the urge.

It wasn’t long until I did. “Just listen to my words. I’ll guide you,” she promised. But I didn’t hear any of her words past that. Between the pain and my own cries, the only thing that registered was my mate’s hand squeezing mine tightly.

I pushed and pushed and pushed. And just when I thought I couldn’t push anymore, I did.

A few minutes later, our sweet daughter came into this world, kicking and screaming. It was the most glorious sound I’d ever heard. The midwife cleaned her up just enough to get her on my chest for her first meal and covered with a light blanket.

“Congratulations, dads. You have a beautiful little girl.” She let us know she’d be in the other room if we needed her and stepped out to give us privacy.

“She’s... Thank you, mate. She’s perfect.” Cole’s eyes filled with tears as he looked down at our daughter.

“She looks like you. Is it weird that I wish my sister could be here to meet her?” And then, as if on cue, and before Cole could answer me with more than his knowing grin, there was a knock on the door. It was my sister.

“Surprise. A little birdy told me there’s someone here to meet.”

“Birdy?” I asked.

“Birdy... bear... same first letter.” She sat on the edge of the bed. “What’s her name?” She looked at me, and I looked at Cole.

We both answered her at the same time, “Molly Lavender.”

It might not flow off the tongue like poetry, but it was the perfect name for our perfect little girl.



*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:33 am*

“Don’t you think that’s a little bit over the top?” Lavender pointed to the cake sitting on the table, decorated with little plastic bugs.

It wasn’t just a little over the top. It was beyond over the top. The thing was larger than the wedding cake my mate and I had for our royal wedding. But that was what happened when you had my father taking care of the cake.

Honestly, as over the top as it was, I was grateful—grateful that he had decided he wanted to be a part of his grandkids’ lives in a way he hadn’t been in mine. When baby Molly was born, I saw a change in him. Sure, he was still power-hungry and worried about work nearly all of his waking hours, but he was now also the papa who got down on the floor, rolled the ball, made silly faces, and read one of the gazillion books we had for her.

He wasn’t the only one whose heart she melted. My father-in-law, the king, saw a similar transition too. He would let his guard down from time to time and just play with her. And now that she was the oldest of three, both men’s mushy, super-sweet grandpa moments only grew.

“Next time, you should put them in charge of the chips.”

“Can you even imagine?” She rolled her eyes, and I pictured a whole entire flowing river of nacho cheese sauce or something equally extravagant and just not needed.

“I can, and maybe we need to think of something else.”

“Like napkins.” She chuckled. Although he’d find a way to make those extravagant,

also.

We finished our walk around to make sure the room was all set up and ready for the twins' birthday party. They were very big into bugs, so the theme for the party was Snail-ebrate. Even little Molly looked at us weird when we said that was going to be the plan for this party, and she loved themed everything. Now that it was all put together, it was absolutely adorable.

For Molly's first birthday, we had the typical "royal" birthday. The people celebrated with her via a parade. It was awful. Even my father-in-law agreed.

Back at home, we had a little cake, and the three of us enjoyed time together. We sang, ate too much cake, and watched her open her presents. The perfect end to a not-so-perfect day.

It was then that my mate and I decided that was what we were going to do from now on—family only. Extended family, but no one else. We didn't need to show off to the nation or any of that. Birthdays were a day to celebrate the important people in our lives and that was that.

Only my father must've forgotten about the "family" part, based on his cake purchase. Either that or he thought we were going to each eat our weight in cake.

"Everything looks great." My sister shoved her list in her pocket. "I'll go get Molly if you want to round up the twins."

Molly was with her Molly, her "grandmother." They were making a present for the boys. I wasn't sure what it was, but it involved food coloring, a lot of salt, and some pipe cleaners. It didn't matter. The boys would love it anyway. They were at the age where everything was magical and wonderful, and I loved that for them. My wish for their birthday was that it would always be that way for them.

I went back to our quarters and found Cole with the twins. They were wearing butterfly wings with a shirt that had spider arms sewn on the seams, polka dots plastered everywhere, and a little green make-up on their nose. I wasn't sure what kind of bug they were, but they picked each and every element and were very proud of their outfits.

"I was looking for our kids. Have you seen them?" I asked Cole.

"Nope. Just a couple of bugs here." He shrugged

"Daddy, it's us," Edwin said.

"No, you're not little boys, you're bugs." Cole tapped his nose. "Adorable bugs at that."

"Come on, Daddy. You know who we are." Fred tugged on my shirt.

"Well, if you're little boys, it's time to go to your party."

The four of us walked down, and halfway there, we met up with little Molly, my sister, and Molly. My daughter had two gift bags, both decorated by her. She was party ready.

"Dad is already in the room. He texted me four times already," Lavender said.

"Yep, that sounds like him."

"And he's worried that the cake isn't nice enough," she added.

Cole broke into laughter. "Please tell me he was saying that sarcastically."

"You still don't know my father, do you?" She let out a sigh and shook her head, only

fueling my mate's laughter.

We walked inside, and to my surprise, I found my fathers with the royal family, including extended family, along with a few of my own aunts and cousins. Each and every one of them were coloring ladybugs on a mural that we had pinned up for the kids.

"Guess that activity's a hit," Cole said as he took out his phone and snapped some pictures. The twins ran over to hug their grandparents, aunts, and cousins, dragging Lavender, Molly, and Molly with them. They then all joined in the mural fun.

"It's a pretty special day." He kissed the top of my head. "You did a great job with the planning."

"It's not about the planning or about the day. It's about that right over there." We looked to see our kids enveloped with all the love that, sadly, we hadn't really seen growing up—not to this extent.

Our mating had brought more to our families than the money and power they had originally sought after. It brought love and a sense of family both sides had veered away from over the years. And for me, it brought me the happy ever after I never thought I'd have.

"It really is." He took my hand, and the two of us walked over to add our own ladybugs to the mural.