BRIDE



ALI HAZELWOOD



SPHERE

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To Thao and Sarah. I could knot do this without you,
and I wouldn't even want to.

PROLOGUE



This marriage, it's going to be a problem.
She *is going to be a problem.*

THIS WAR OF OURS, THE ONE BETWEEN THE VAMPYRES AND the Weres, began several centuries ago with brutal escalations of violence, culminated amid flowing torrents of varicolored blood, and ended in a whimper of buttercream cake on the day I met my husband for the first time.

Which, as it happens, was also the day of our wedding.

Not quite the stuff of childhood dreams. Then again, I'm no dreamer. I only ever contemplated marriage once, back in the gloomy days of my childhood. Following a few too-harsh punishments and a poorly executed assassination attempt, Serena and I concocted plans for a grand escape, which was going to involve pyrotechnics-based diversions, stealing our math tutor's car, and flipping off our caregivers in the rearview mirror.

"We'll stop by the animal shelter and adopt one of those shaggy dogs. Pick up a Slurpee for me, some blood for you. Disappear forever into Human territory."

"Will they let me in if I'm not Human?" I asked, even though

that was the least of our plan's flaws. We were both eleven. Neither of us could drive. Interspecies peace in the Southwest region relied, quite literally, on me staying the hell put.

"I'll vouch for you."

"Will that be enough?"

"I'll marry you! They'll believe you're Human—my Human wife."

As proposals went, it seemed solid. So I nodded solemnly and said, "I accept."

That was fourteen years ago, though, and Serena never married me. In fact, she's long gone. I'm here alone, with a giant heap of expensive wedding favors that'll hopefully fool guests into overlooking the lack of love, genetic compatibility, or even previous acquaintance between me and the groom.

I did try to arrange a meeting. Suggested to *my* people that they suggest to *his* people that we could grab lunch the week before the ceremony. Coffee the previous day. A glass of tap water the morning of—anything to avoid a "How do you do?" in front of the officiant. My request was escalated to the Vampyre council, and resulted in a phone call from one of the members' aides. His tone managed to be polite while heavily implying that I was a cuckoo nutbird. "He's a Were. A very powerful and dangerous Were. Just the logistics of providing security for such a meeting would be—"

"I'll be marrying this *dangerous* Were," I pointed out evenly, and a bashful throat was cleared.

"He is an Alpha, Miss Lark. Too busy to meet."

"Busy with . . . ?"

"His pack, Miss Lark."

I pictured him in a home gym, tirelessly working on his abs, and shrugged.

Ten days have passed, and I have yet to meet my groom. Instead, I've become a *project*—one that requires a concerted effort from an interdisciplinary crew to look weddable. A manicurist coaxes my nails into pink ovals. A facialist smacks my cheeks with relish. A hairdresser magically hides my pointed ears under a web of dark blond braids, and a makeup expert paints a different face on top of mine, something interesting and sophisticated and zygomatic.

"This is art," I tell him, studying the contouring in the mirror. "You should be a Guggenheim fellow."

"I know. And I'm not *done*," he reprimands, before dipping his thumb in a pot of dark green stain and swiping it over the insides of my wrists. The base of my throat on both sides. My nape.

"What's this?"

"Just a bit of color."

"What for?"

A snort. "I pulled strings and researched Were customs. Your husband will like it." He whooshes away, leaving me alone with five odd markings and a newfound bone structure. I squeeze into the bridal jumpsuit that the stylist begged me not to refer to as a onesie, and then my twin brother comes to retrieve me.

"You look stunning," Owen says flatly, distrustfully, squinting at me like I'm a fake ten-dollar bill.

"It was a team effort."

He gestures for me to follow him. "I hope they vaccinated you for rabies while they were at it."

The ceremony is supposed to be a symbol of peace. That's why, in a heartwarming display of trust, my father demanded an all-Vampyre armed security detail for the ceremony. The Weres refused, which led to weeks of negotiations, then to a near break of

the engagement, and finally to the only solution that could make everybody equally unhappy: staffing the event with Humans.

There's a tense atmosphere, and then there's *this*. One venue, three species, five centuries of conflict, and zero good faith. The black suits escorting Owen and me seem torn between protecting us and killing us themselves, just to get it over with. They wear sunglasses indoors and mutter entertainingly bad code into their sleeves. *Bat is flying to the ceremony hall. I repeat, we have Bat.*

The groom is, uninventively, *Wolf.*

"When do you think your future husband will try to kill you?" Owen asks conversationally, looking straight ahead. "Tomorrow? Next week?"

"Who's to say."

"Within the month, for sure."

"For sure."

"One has to wonder if the Weres will bury your corpse or just, you know. Eat it."

"One has to."

"But if you care to live a bit longer, try tossing a stick when he starts mauling you. I hear they love to fetch—"

I halt abruptly, causing a slight commotion among the agents. "Owen," I say, turning to my brother.

"Yes, Misery?" His eyes hold mine. Suddenly, his indolent, insult-comedian mask slips off, and he's not my father's shallow heir anymore, but the brother who'd sneak into bed with me whenever I had nightmares, who swore he'd protect me from the cruelty of the Humans and the bloodthirstiness of the Weres.

It's been decades.

"*You know what went down the last time the Vampyres and Weres tried this,*" he says, shifting to the Tongue.

I sure do. The Aster is in every textbook, albeit with vastly different interpretations. The day the purple of our blood and the green of the Weres' flowed together, as bright and beautiful as the blooming flower the massacre was named after. *"Who the hell would enter a marriage of political convenience after* that*?"*

"Me, apparently."

"You are going to live among the wolves. Alone."

"Right. That's how hostage exchanges work." Around us, the suits hurriedly check their watches. *"We have to go—"*

"Alone to be slaughtered." Owen's jaw grinds. It's so unlike his usual careless self, I frown.

"Since when do you care?"

"Why are you doing this?"

"Because an alliance with the Weres is necessary to the surivival of—"

"These are Father's words. It's not why you *agreed to do this."*

It's not, but I'm not about to admit it. *"Maybe you underestimate Father's persuasiveness."*

His voice drops to a whisper. *"Don't do this. It's a death sentence. Say you've changed your mind—give me six weeks."*

"What will have changed in six weeks?"

He hesitates. *"A month. I—"*

"Is something amiss?" We both jump at Father's sharp tone. For a split second we're children again, again scolded for existing. As always, Owen recovers quicker.

"Nah." The vacuous smile is back on his lips. "I was just giving Misery a few pointers."

Father cuts through the security guards and tucks my hand into his elbow with ease, like it hasn't been a decade since our last physical contact. I force myself not to recoil. "Are you ready, Misery?"

I cock my head. Study his stern face. Ask, mostly out of curiosity, "Does it matter?"

It must not, because the question isn't acknowledged. Owen watches us leave, expressionless, then yells after us, *"Hope you packed a lint roller. I hear they shed."*

One of the agents stops us in front of the double doors that lead into the courtyard. "Councilman Lark, Miss Lark, one minute. They're not quite ready for you." We wait side by side for a handful of uncomfortable moments, then Father turns to me. In my stylist-mandated heels, I nearly reach his height, and his eyes easily catch mine.

"You should smile," he orders in the Tongue. *"According to the Humans, a wedding is the most beautiful day of a bride's life."*

My lips twitch. There's something grotesquely funny about all of this. "What about the father of the bride?"

He sighs. *"You were always needlessly defiant."*

My failures spare no front.

"There is no going back, Misery," he adds, not unkindly. *"Once the handfasting is complete, you will be his wife."*

"I know." I don't need soothing, or encouragement. I've been nothing but unwavering in my commitment to this union. I'm not prone to panic, or fear, or last-minute changes of heart. *"I've done this before, remember?"* He studies me for a few moments, until the doors open to what's left of my life.

It's a perfect night for an outdoor ceremony: light strings, soft breeze, winking stars. I take a deep breath, hold it in, and listen to Mendelssohn's march, string quartet rendition. According to the bubbly wedding planner who's been blowing up my phone with links I don't click on, the viola player is a member of The City's

Human Philharmonic. *Top three in the world*, she texted, followed by more exclamation points than I've used in my cumulative written communications since birth. I must admit, it does sound nice. Even if the guests glance around, confused, unsure how to proceed until an overworked staffer gestures at them to stand.

It's not their fault. Wedding ceremonies are, as of a century or so ago, exclusively a Human thing. Vampyre society has evolved past monogamy, and Weres . . . I have no clue what Weres are up to, as I've never even been in the presence of one.

If I had, I wouldn't be alive.

"Come on." Father grips my elbow, and we start down the aisle.

The bride's guests are familiar, but only vaguely. A sea of willowy figures, unblinking lilac eyes, pointed ears. Lips closed over fangs, and half-pitying, mostly disgusted looks. I spot several members of my father's inner circle; councilors I haven't met since I was a child; powerful families and their scions, most of whom fawned over Owen and were little shits to me when we were kids. No one here could even remotely qualify as a friend, but in defense of whoever came up with the guest list, my lack of meaningful relationships must have made seat-filling a bit of a challenge.

And then there's the groom's side. The one that emanates a foreign kind of heat. The one that wants me dead.

The Weres' blood beats quicker, louder, its smell coppery and unfamiliar. They are taller than Vampyres, stronger than Vampyres, faster than Vampyres, and none of them seems particularly enthused at the idea of their Alpha marrying one of us. Their lips curl as they eye me, defiant, angry. Their loathing is so thick I taste it on the roof of my palate.

I don't blame them. I don't blame anyone for not wanting to be

here. I don't even blame the whispers, or the catty comments, or the fact that half the guests here never learned that sound carries farther than shit.

". . . she used to be the Collateral with the Humans for ten years, and now this?"

"I bet she likes the attention . . ."

"—blade-eared leech—"

"I give her two weeks."

"More like two hours, if those animals—"

". . . either stabilize the region once and for all, or cause full-out war, again—"

"—think they're actually going to be fucking tonight?"

I have no friends on the left, and only enemies on the right. So I ground myself and look straight ahead.

At my future husband.

He stands at the end of the path, turned away from me, listening to what someone is whispering in his ear—his best man, perhaps. I can't get a good look at his face, but I know what to expect from the picture I was given weeks ago: handsome, striking, unsmiling. His hair is short, a rich brown cut to a buzz; his suit is black, well fitted across his broad shoulders. He's the only man in the room not wearing a tie, and yet he manages to look elegant anyway.

Maybe we share a stylist. As good a starting point for a marriage as any, I suppose.

"Be careful with him," Father whispers, lips barely moving. *"He is very dangerous. Do not cross him."*

What every girl wants to hear ten feet from the altar, especially when the hard line of her groom's shoulders already looks cross. Impatient. Annoyed. He doesn't bother glancing in my direction,

as though I'm inconsequential, as though there are other, better things for him to do with his time. I wonder what the best man is whispering in his ear. Maybe a mirror copy of the warnings I got.

Misery Lark? No need to be careful. She's not particularly dangerous, so feel free to cross her. What is she gonna do? Chuck her lint roller at you?

I snort out a soft laugh, and that's a mistake. Because my future husband hears it, and finally turns to me.

My stomach drops.

My step falters.

The murmurs quiet.

In the photo I was shown, the groom's eyes looked an ordinary, unsurprising blue. But as they meet mine, I realize two things. The first is that I was wrong, and his gaze is actually an odd pale green that borders on white. The second is that Father was right: this man is very, *very* dangerous.

His eyes roam over my face, and I immediately suspect that he must not have been given photos. Or maybe he just wasn't curious enough about his bride to check them out? Either way, he's not pleased with me, and that's obvious. Too bad I've cut my teeth on disappointing people, and I'm not about to start caring now. It's on him if he doesn't like what he's seeing.

I square my shoulders. A small distance separates us, and I let my eyes pin his as I close it, which is how I see it all happen in real time.

Pupils, widening.

Brow, furrowing.

Nostrils, flaring.

He watches me like I'm something made of maggots and takes one deep breath, slow. Then another, sharp, the moment I'm

delivered to the altar. His expression widens into something that looks, for an instant, indecipherably shaken, and I knew it, I *knew* that Weres didn't like Vampyres, but this feels beyond that. It feels like pure, hard, personal contempt.

Tough shit, buddy, I think, lifting my chin. I step forward, again, until we are standing in front of each other, this side of too close.

Two strangers who only just met. About to get married.

The music wanes. The guests sit. My heart's a sluggish drum, even slower than usual, because of the way the groom looms over me. Leaning forward to study me like I'm an abstract painting. I watch his chest heave hungrily, as if to . . . *inhale* me. Then he pulls back, licks his lips, and stares.

He stares and stares and *stares*.

The silence stretches. The officiant clears his throat. The courtyard breaks into bouts of puzzled mumbles that slowly rise to a sticky, familiar frisson. I notice that the best man has unsheathed his claws. Behind me, Vania, the head of my father's guards, is showing her fangs. And the Humans, of course, are reaching for their guns.

All through that, my future husband still stares.

So I step closer and murmur, "I don't care how little you like this, but if you want to avoid a second Aster—"

His hand comes up lightning fast to close around my upper arm, and the warmth of his skin is a shock to my system, even through the fabric of my sleeve. His pupils contract into something different, something *animal*. I instinctively try to wriggle free of his grasp, and . . . it's a mistake.

My heel catches on a cobblestone and I lose my balance. The groom stops my fall with an arm snaked around my waist, and a combination of gravity and his sheer determination wedges me

between him and the altar, his front pressing against mine. He cages me, pins me, and stares down at me like he forgot where he is and I'm something to be consumed.

Like I'm *prey*.

"This is highly— Oh, *my*," the officiant gasps when the groom growls in his direction. Behind me I hear the Tongue and English—panic, screams, chaos, the best man and my father snarling, people yelling threats, someone sobbing. *Another Aster in the making*, I think. And I really should do something, I *will* do something to stop it, but.

The groom's scent hits my nostrils.

Everything recedes.

Good blood, my hindbrain hisses, nonsensical. *He'd make for such good blood*.

He inhales several times in rapid succession, filling his lungs, pulling me in. His hand moves up from my arm to the dip of my throat, pressing into one of my markings. A guttural sound rises from someplace low in his chest, making my knees weak. Then he opens his mouth and I know that he's going to tear me to pieces, he's going to maul me, he's going to *devour* me—

"You," he says, voice deep, almost too low to hear. "How the fuck do you smell like this?"

Less than ten minutes later he slips a ring around my finger, and we swear to love each other till the day we die.