

Marked by the King

Chapter 1. The Hollow Moon Grounds

The car rolled to a crunching stop on gravel, headlights washing over towering pine trunks and the faint shimmer of lanterns strung like stars deeper in the woods. Selene didn't move.

She stared out the window, where soft firelight flickered from the base of the hill and up toward the Moon Hollow Grounds. Stone steps led into the trees—old, worn, sacred. The drums had already started. Slow. Ritualistic. Her stomach knotted.

Her father shut off the ignition, unbuckled, adjusted his cufflinks like they weren't fraying.

"Get out," he said flatly.

Selene didn't. "I told you I didn't want to come."

"And I told you this isn't about what you want," he replied, stepping into the cold air and slamming the door.

Of course it wasn't.

With stiff fingers, she unclipped her seatbelt and stepped into the open night. Pine needles crunched under her heels. Her breath fogged the air.

The dress she wore clung to her awkwardly—tight at the waist, slightly torn at the lace shoulder, the zipper barely fastened. Her hair was unraveling from a mess of crooked pins. One dug sharply into her scalp. She pulled it free and shoved it into her clutch.

Lanterns glowed all along the path. Shadows moved beneath the trees—other wolves arriving, most with regal posture and velvet-wrapped confidence.

She had none.

As they walked, voices lowered. A few turned to glance—just long enough to remind her she didn't belong here. Daughter of a lowblood diplomat. Packless by technicality. Rejected at the last moon ceremony by Lucan, the new heir to the Northwind pack.

The rejection still clung to her like smoke. She could feel the judgment in every look.

"You will behave tonight," her father said without looking at her. "Lucan may still offer."

Selene snorted, her breath fogging the air. “Lucan? The same Lucan who told me I wasn’t alpha material? That Lucan?”

“He was under pressure. Now he’s ascended. Things change.”

“Not that much.”

He stopped at the foot of the stone stairs, facing her. “If he offers you his hand again, you will take it. This is bigger than your pride. You owe me that much.”

Selene’s jaw tightened. “I owe you nothing.”

“You owe me your name,” he said, voice like ice. “The roof over your head. The protection I secured after your mother’s disgrace. You will not ruin this. Do you understand me?”

She looked away, heart thudding in her throat. “I understand.”

The mating hall opened above them—moonlight streaming down between gaps in the forest canopy. Stone walls wrapped in crimson banners rose from the ground like they’d always belonged to the land. Candles glowed in iron sconces. Wolves in silks and furs laughed, flirted, prowled.

Music played. Wine flowed. This was a festival of choosing. Of claiming.

Selene wanted to disappear.

She kept her eyes down as she entered. Her heels clicked sharply on the stone. She didn't look toward the main altar, didn't meet Lucan’s gaze across the crowd. She knew he was there. She could feel it in the way her spine prickled.

All she wanted was to sit. Be invisible. Breathe.

She slipped past a cluster of silver-dressed females and took the first empty seat she saw along the edge of the feasting rows, far from the altar. No one else sat at this table, and she was grateful.

Until her thigh brushed something solid. Warm.

She froze.

Then turned.

The man beside her was massive. Easily the largest person in the hall. His suit jacket looked strained across his chest, dark as smoke. His arms were bare to the elbows, covered in black ink—shifting symbols woven into predatory curves. His throat bore the

same markings, one stretching just beneath his jaw: a broken crown wrapped in coiled serpents.

She swallowed. Hard.

He wasn't just sitting. He was *waiting*. Silent. Still.

No one else sat near him. In fact, a ten-foot radius had formed around his end of the table. Like wolves knew to keep their distance.

Selene felt the heat of him next to her. The way his body almost radiated it. He didn't turn his head—but she could *feel* his attention.

And then, slowly, he looked at her.

His eyes were a metallic pale silver, unblinking.

"You're the first," he said softly, voice like gravel and wind, "to sit by me willingly."

Selene opened her mouth. Closed it. The music had changed—but she hadn't noticed. Her heartbeat was too loud.

She made herself speak. "Sorry. I didn't—didn't realize anyone—"

"You'd have walked away if you did," he said.

There was no accusation in his voice. Just fact.

She should've stood. She should've walked. Her body itched with instinct. **Danger**, her mind whispered. He was dangerous. His presence was like a cliff's edge—silent, high, and willing to let you fall.

But her wolf was still.

Still. Watching. Waiting.

"I'm not afraid," she lied.

He turned toward her fully now, the fabric stretching across his shoulders. "You should be."

The hair on the back of her neck rose.

He reached behind him without breaking eye contact, tugged off his blazer, and dropped it over her bare legs. The warmth of it wrapped around her like something stolen.

“I’m okay,” she said quickly, trying to hand it back. “Really.”

“I said,” he leaned closer, voice low, “**cover your legs.**”

Her breath hitched.

“They’re distracting,” he added, gaze sliding over her thighs, “and I don’t think I can hold back much longer... *my mate.*”

The word landed like a lightning strike. **Mate.**

She blinked at him, confusion and disbelief crashing like waves.

“What... what do you mean ‘mate’?”

He didn’t answer.

Instead, he leaned in, eyes glowing faintly now, the tattoo at his throat pulsing silver beneath the candlelight.

“You felt it,” he murmured. “Don’t lie to me.”

Selene stared at him.

Her wolf stirred. Her skin burned beneath the mark of his jacket.

And then the music stopped.

Voices fell quiet. The entire hall turned to look in their direction.

Her body tensed.

“What’s happening?” she whispered.

He looked her up and down, jaw flexing.

And then he answered, quiet enough only for her to hear.

“They’re staring,” he said, “because you just sat beside the Lycan King.”