

Marked by the King - Chapter 3. The Unseen Brand

Selene couldn't look away from the glow beneath her skin.

It shimmered like moonlight trapped under glass—just above her heart, threading faint silver veins outward in an intricate, spiraled shape. Not painted. Not scarred. Not tattooed.

Something older. Something inborn.

Something she hadn't chosen.

She touched it with trembling fingers, half-expecting it to vanish. Instead, a sharp heat flared under her skin, and a pulse echoed through her chest—not hers. Not entirely.

Alaric's hand closed gently over hers.

“Don't,” he murmured. “It'll burn more when you do.”

She flinched at his touch and stepped back. His hand fell away without resistance, though something flickered in his eyes. Not regret.

Restraint.

“Is it permanent?” she asked.

“Yes.”

The word landed in her stomach like stone tossed into still water. No ripple. Just weight.

Her back hit a tree trunk. The bark bit into her bare skin through the thin fabric of her dress. Cold. Real.

“I didn't agree to this.”

“You didn't have to,” he said, voice low. “The bond doesn't need permission. It only needs truth.”

“This—this isn't how it's supposed to work,” she whispered. “There's supposed to be a ceremony. A vow. A—”

“Witnesses?” he asked, tilting his head. “Sanctioned by Elders who would've sold you to the highest-bidding pack?”

She looked away.

She couldn't deny it. Her father had practically wrapped her up in ribbon and handed her to Lucan like she was a tool, not a daughter. All those talks about alliance, about duty—none of them asked her what she wanted.

But still...

"This mark," she said, her voice cracking, "what does it mean?"

Alaric stepped closer—close enough that his scent wrapped around her like mist: warm spice, wild pine, and something darker beneath. It wasn't just a scent. It was a memory waiting to happen.

"It means you're mine."

Her pulse stuttered.

"It means," he added more softly now, "your wolf called to mine. That she found me. Even when your mind tried not to."

Her fingers twitched, still hovering over the mark. It pulsed again—soft, slow, alive.

"But I didn't choose this," she whispered. "I didn't want this."

He nodded. "I know."

She looked up at him, heart in her throat. In that second, there was a flicker of something raw in his face. A fracture in the stone.

"I didn't either."

That broke something open inside her. She wasn't sure if it was fear or relief.

"But I'll protect it," he said. "Even if you run."

She closed her eyes.

"I don't even know you."

"You'll learn," he said. "The bond will show you."

The wind stirred between them, brushing through the trees like unseen fingers combing hair.

Far in the distance, a bell tolled. A low, resonant note that rippled through the trees like a warning.

Selene's eyes snapped open. "That's the signal. The claiming rites are starting."

Alaric nodded once. “Go back.”

“Are you coming?”

“No.”

She hesitated. “They’ll know.”

“They already know.”

“What will they do?”

He smiled—but it was sharp, humorless. “They’ll try to tear you from me. They’ll say the bond is flawed. Corrupted. They’ll threaten to destroy it.”

“Can they?”

“Only if you let them.”

She stared at him, heart hammering.

“Will I see you again?”

His gaze softened—just a little.

“You’ll feel me long before you see me.”

Then, without sound, he vanished into the trees.

—

Selene’s legs felt unsteady as she picked her way back toward the distant lights.

Her hands still shook.

Her mark still burned.

But she walked anyway.

The forest thinned, and the throb of drums and distant laughter met her like a gust of heat. She stepped through the final veil of trees and into the ring of lanterns and firepits that marked the ceremonial hall.

Inside, the air was thick with music, clinking glasses, and the metallic tinge of tension.

Couples were already forming near the altars—draped in ritual sashes, some wide-eyed, some resigned. The Elders stood at the dais, tall and cold in robes threaded with silver and tradition.

As she stepped into the room, the air shifted.

All eyes turned.

Whispers bloomed instantly, hissing from one side of the hall to the other like fire catching dry grass.

Lucan stood near the front, arms crossed, jaw tight.

When he saw her, his gaze dropped to her collarbone. His eyes narrowed.

Even under her dress's sheer fabric, the mark glowed faintly—silver spirals, impossible to mistake.

His face went pale.

Then red.

Then... still.

Too still.

She stepped to her place, head high, spine locked like steel.

Her father appeared at her side, voice low and furious. "What did you do?"

"I didn't do anything," she said.

"You disappeared. With him."

"I didn't know who he was."

"That's not how it works," he hissed. "He marked you."

"I didn't ask him to."

"Then you should've fought it."

"I couldn't."

"Then you've doomed us both."

She didn't answer.

Because maybe she had.

The hall fell silent.

The lead Elder stepped forward, his voice booming with magic.

“Let the claiming rites begin.”

Her body went cold.

One by one, names were called. Pairs approached the altar. Questions were asked. Oaths were spoken. Some wept. Some trembled. Some smiled like their whole world had come full circle.

Each pair was asked:

“Do you accept the bond?”

If both said yes, the bond sealed with the power of the mountain. If either said no—it shattered. Forever.

Selene’s name was close.

She could feel it like a wire tightening across her throat.

Then, something strange happened.

The Elder paused.

His nostrils flared.

“I smell...” he began.

But he didn’t finish.

Because a howl shattered the air.

Low. Wild. Impossible.

Every head turned toward the darkened edge of the hall.

From the trees, a massive silver wolf emerged.

Scarred. Gleaming. Silent.

Alaric.

He passed through the arch like a storm wearing flesh. His claws clicked against the polished floor, moonlight weaving through his fur like ribbon.

No one stopped him.

No one dared.

He shifted mid-stride—fluid, unapologetic, utterly bare.

The bond glowed at his throat like a sigil written in flame.

His eyes met Selene's across the hall.

And he said, without raising his voice:

“She's already been claimed.”