

Chapter 4. The Ceremony Breaks

The moment the words left his mouth—She’s already been claimed—the hall erupted.

Gasps. Growls. A wine glass shattered on stone. Wolves turned sharply, postures shifting with instinctive unease, their bodies reacting before their minds could catch up.

Selene stood paralyzed.

The weight of a hundred eyes hit her like a storm wall. Her pulse thundered in her ears, too fast, too loud, her breathing shallow as if the room had shrunk around her. Her body was frozen in place, every nerve lit with raw electricity. It felt like her blood had turned molten—no, not blood. Wire. Live, dangerous, threaded ~~with~~

The mark on her collarbone burned beneath the thin fabric of her dress—glowing now, not faintly, not subtly.

Fully.

Everyone could see it.

She didn’t cover it.

She couldn’t.

Her father’s ngers closed around her wrist—hard, tight, like a vice meant to anchor her or warn her. She didn’t look at him. Her gaze stayed locked on Alaric.

The Lycan King.

He stood at the back of the ceremonial hall, bare-chested and still, silver gaze cutting through every whisper, every breath, like a blade of cold moonlight. The tattoos carved across his chest glinted where light touched them—jagged, ritualistic, half-symbol, half-scar. None of them made him look weak.

They made him look inevitable.

The Elders stood frozen.

For the rst time in years—decades—none of them spoke.

Selene didn’t breathe.

Then came the second voice.

Low. Measured. Controlled—but brimming with thunder just beneath the words.

“That’s a lie.”

Lucan.

He stepped forward from the front ranks of the Northwind wolves, his ceremonial ~~armor~~ behind him, shoulders squared, chin high. He didn’t look at Selene. He looked at Alaric, eyes molten with fury.

“Lucan, don’t,” someone hissed behind him.

But he didn’t stop.

“The bond hasn’t been tested. No Elder bore witness. He has no right.”

Alaric’s reply came like rolling thunder—quiet but carrying.

“She bears my mark.”

“You could’ve forced it.”

“She didn’t ght.”

“She didn’t choose.”

“She didn’t have to.”

Lucan’s restraint snapped.

He lunged across the ceremonial ~~floor~~ in a blur of motion.

Gasps tore from the crowd. Dozens of wolves moved, but the Elders moved faster.

Three of them shifted mid-air—cloaks discarded, bones cracking, fur exploding ~~across~~They slammed into Lucan just before he breached the sacred circle. Bodies hit stone with a crunch of claws and momentum, pinning him down hard. His snarl echoed like thunder in the rafters.

Selene inched.

Alaric didn’t move.

He stood like a mountain. Unshaken. Unimpressed. Silent.

“ENOUGH!” the High Elder bellowed, voice ~~amplified~~ by ancient power that cracked the very air.

A magical shockwave burst outward, rippling through the stone like a low explosion. The crowd silenced instantly.

Lucan froze beneath the Elders’ grip, chest heaving, golden eyes locked on Alaric with something between hatred and heartbreak.

The High Elder stepped forward, robe trailing light across tber.

“Selene of Whiteshade,” he said, his voice heavy with centuries, “come forward.”

Her body refused atrst. Her feet stayed rooted.

But something deeper—older—dragged her forward. Not the bond. Not quite.

Instinct.

Fate.

She moved.

Alaric didn’t break her gaze. He didn’t smile. He didn’t smirk.

He was simply there. Grounded. Unyielding. As if the world might shift around them, but he would not.

She stopped at the edge of the sacred circle. The High Elder approached slowly, raising a hand toward her collarbone.

“Do I have your permission?” he asked.

She hesitated.

Then nodded.

His ngers passed just above her skin. No contact—just sensing.

A silver mist bloomed at his fingertips, stirred by something beneath hæsh.

Magic reacted.

The Elder inhaled sharply. “It is real.”

The hall erupted in murmurs.

“It’s incomplete,” said another Elder—older, thinner, sunken eyes and a voice like gravel. He stepped forward, gaze cutting. “There was no rite. No exchange of vows. The bond is premature.”

“She was manipulated,” Lucan growled from theor. “This isn’t consent.”

“She didn’t resist,” Alaric replied. “And the bond doesn’t lie.”

The Elders looked to one another. Quiet calculations passed between them—worry and caution cloaked in ritual silence.

Selene found her voice. Barely.

“What happens now?”

The High Elder looked at her with something almost like pity.

“If the bond is not sealed properly, and not declared in full view, it will continue to grow—erratic, unstable. Eventually… it may consume you both. Or kill you.”

Gasps rippled across the room.

Selene’s knees buckled slightly. She caught herself.

“Then seal it,” Alaric said.

“No,” Lucan snapped. “Challenge mæst.”

The room inhaled.

Even Alaric blinked—once, slowly.

“You want to ght me?” he said, voice low andæt.

Lucan shoved o the wolves pinning him, staggering upright, blood on his lip, golden eyes ablaze. “If she is to be claimed, then I demand trial by combat. He’s not even of a pack anymore. He’s exiled.”

Whispers surged.

Challenge. Ritual combat. An ancient law, almost never invoked—but still binding.

The High Elder opened his mouth, then stopped.

The hall waited.

Alaric turned to Selene. And in that moment, the room ceased to exist.

His voice came quiet, steady.

“Do you want him to ght me? Is that what you want?”

Her heart thundered so loudly she could barely hear herself breathe.

Lucan moved closer, softer now. “You said you felt something between us. Bonds can be wrong. I made a mistake last year. I was a coward. But I never stopped wanting you.”

She stared at him.

Her mind screamed.

Her wolf was silent.

Then Alaric spoke, and everything else dissolved.

“You’re already mine.”

Her voice cracked. “I don’t know what I want.”

“You don’t have to know,” Alaric said. “You only have to feel.”

Her mark pulsed.

Harder. Hotter.

The re crawled across her chest and into her spine.

She closed her eyes.

“I need time.”

“There is no time,” the High Elder said gently. “Moonfall approaches. By law, you must choose by the end of the Rite.”

Selene backed away, breath shallow, heart surging ~~like~~water behind her ribs.

“No, I can’t—”

The oor tilted beneath her.

Sound blurred.

Her knees buckled.

She didn’t feel herself fall.

But she felt him catch her.

Arms strong and unrelenting, holding her as though nothing—no law, no rite, no Elder—would separate them.

A low growl built in his throat. Protective. Primal.

Wolves nearby stepped back.

The last thing she heard before the world tilted into blackness was Alaric’s voice—quiet, lethal, spoken to no one and everyone all at once.

“Touch her again… and I will tear out your spine.”

Then darkness took her.