

Owned by the Alphas | The Choosing

The Choosing

It was quiet on the way back to the village. The wolves stayed in the city as per the tradition, and I sulked in the corner of the front carriage.

My body was deliciously sore, aching in the best places, and I had marks everywhere but I didn't care. The other girls did, giving me a wide berth, even in the carriage.

We had been split evenly this time, and nobody had said a word. We had been given dresses from the alphas as a "thank you for your offering," and they were beautiful.

All of us looked way too rich for the village. Usually we wore our hair in braids, but it was down today, and our dresses were made of fine silk and lace like the beds we had been claimed in.

Mine was a deep green that reminded me of Nikolai's eyes. I was pretty sure that's why he had chosen it. It was tight across my breasts, pulling them up in a desirable way that, again, I'm sure was on purpose.

The sleeves had gold cuffs on the upper arms, were sheer, and floated around my hands, long and sufficiently annoying. The rest flowed down my body, brushing my skin with luxury every time I moved.

It was nicer than the village dresses, but I didn't need fancy clothes and it didn't change the fact that I was not going to be my own person after today.

When we pulled up at the village, everyone was there waiting, cheering. Such a celebration.

I climbed from the carriage after the other girls and everyone cheered again. We stood there and welcomed the congratulations and thank yous.

Nobody came to hug me, so I slipped away, walking around the chaos, heading for home, when someone called me.

"Lorelai."

I spun back.

“Lucas.” I grinned and ran into his arms. He held me against him until I pulled back.

“Little sister. How are you?” he asked.

He was wearing military clothes, all black, cargo pants, a button up, a badge with the Werewolf Territory crest—just a roaring wolf head—and a blade at his hip.

I shrugged. “Home. You?” I asked, walking with him along the trail from the middle of the village to our hut.

“I’ve been better. The villagers are expecting me to pick a wife today, and I’d rather pick a husband.” He grimaced.

I raised my brow at that. “So pick a husband.” I shrugged.

“Cute, little sister. But you and I both know that’s not the way it works.”

He sighed, and I pursed my lips. I knew very well.

“Well, I’d rather not marry at all,” I offered, and he smirked.

“Must be our cursed blood. Ruining us for marriage.” He laughed and so did I.

He walked straight, his hands behind his back. My father had trained him well, a true soldier, and I envied that he had something meaningful to do.

“Must be.” I snickered, then turned toward our hut.

“Mother and Father didn’t want to meet me at the carriages with the rest of the village?” I asked, trying not to let that sting.

He chuckled at that though. “No, but that is probably a good thing. You have marks all over your neck from the city savages, little sister. They are probably going to have a tantrum, and no doubt Father will sanction the wolves for coin and goods as an apology for their behavior.”

He smiled and I shrugged.

“Hmmm,” was all I could manage, my mind running back to my night with the three alphas. A night I wouldn’t forget anytime soon.

I didn't want to.

Lucas led me inside my and Mother's hut, his hat tucked under his arm, opening the door for me as I went in. And wanted to walk straight back out again.

Moans and grunts filled the tiny hut, paired with the banging of Mother's wooden headboard against the wall. I wasn't getting any sleep with that going on.

I walked back out and sat on the grass, looking out toward the empty meadow at the back of our house. Lucas followed and sat down next to me.

"So, what has life been like here for you?" he asked, and I shrugged.

"I grew up with girls and women that were terrified of me. That's about it. You?"

"Trained with Dad. Learned about the wolves, the vamps, us. All the wars. Same stuff everyone learns," he said, looking out at the meadow with me.

It was sunny but the wind was brisk, and I shivered, wrapping my arms around myself, my dress brushing the green grass.

"We don't get to know that stuff."

And we should, but it wasn't my place to question anything. I had no say, and normally I didn't care about that, but the marriage thing? Really wish I got a say about that.

"You know, the council says the vamps are planning something. There's been activity at the border the last few weeks, a couple of humans missing from the villages, even some sightings.

"They're keeping it all under wraps, but I want you to be careful, yeah? Look out for Mom," he said, yanking a dagger from his boot and handing it over.

I took it and twirled it between my fingers, then nodded. "Sure. But aren't you and Dad staying now that we're both eighteen?"

He shrugged. "Dad said technically but that we'd be mostly back in the men's village because of training and managing the men."

That was shit.

“So why don’t me and Mom come over there? I’ll be married, so will Mom.”

He gave me a wistful sigh, then shrugged sadly. “You can ask.”

But we both knew what Dad would say. I picked up a daisy and spread its stem, then chucked it away.

“Think they’re finished?” I asked, looking over my shoulder at the hut.

Lucas lay down and put his hands behind his head, closing his eyes to the sun in the sky.

“Maybe,” he said simply, so I lay down next to him and within seconds, fell asleep.

I woke to my mom’s soft face and voice. I was back inside.

“Sweetie,” she said, and I groaned, rolling over in my bed, wincing as my body ached with the movement. “We must get ready, love,” she continued, and I opened an eye.

The stupid choosing ceremony.

“I’m not going.”

I wasn’t getting married, and the crowd had looked women heavy, which meant multiple wives to the same men. They didn’t need me.

“Lorelai, I know it was hard on you, the offering night always is, but it’s over with. They can’t hurt you anymore, and your father has already sent word to the alphas about the state you’ve come back in. It is unacceptable, winter born or not,” my mother said, tears in her voice.

I shot up at the mention of the alphas. “He did what?”

“We will be compensated, love, you will. That’ll help with tonight’s ceremony. I’ve even had the village seamstress put together a stunning dress to cover most of the werewolves’ indiscretions.”

She smiled like she was doing me a favor. She really had no idea. I loved her, but she was wrapped up in tradition, and I was not traditional.

“Mom, I don’t want to be married,” I said plainly, but she sighed.

“Well, I didn’t at your age either, but it’s the way things are,” she said, then stood and walked over to the dress lying over my vanity.

It was long and black, with a slit for me to show off my cleavage but with fabric that tied at my neck. My leg slit was on the opposite side than normal so my bite and claw marks wouldn’t show.

I hated it. I’m sure I would look stunning in it, but I wasn’t ashamed of my night with the alphas.

“Look how well they did.” Mom beamed, and I ran out of energy to break her heart.

The ceremony was happening, and I had to go through with it, so I plastered a smile on and tried, for her sake.

“It’s beautiful. Thanks, Mom.”

Her smile brightened. “Get dressed and meet us in the living room. Your father wants a word.” She smiled.

I nodded, and she left.

I slipped into some black panties and a black corset undergarment, then pulled the dress on. It was beautiful, I hadn’t lied, but I hated what it represented.

Swallowing back the tears in my eyes, I pulled the ties of my dress closed at the side and into a bow, then brushed out my hair. When I went into the living area, my parents and brother were waiting for me.

Lucas had straightened up, brushed back his hair, and had his hat on. He was ready too.

I cleared my throat as my father talked to Mom. His head snapped up when I did, and he smiled.

"Sweetheart. You are sensational. I have at least three lieutenants who are very excited to meet you." He grinned, and I smiled tightly.

"Did you tell them I'm winter born?" I murmured, and he scowled. He hated it when I brought that up.

"It didn't come up. Now, are you ready to go meet your future husband?" he asked proudly, like it mattered whether I was ready or not.

"Not really."

"Lorelai!" Mother scolded, but I shrugged.

"Sorry," I said, but I didn't mean it.

"Lori, let's just get through this, okay?" Lucas interrupted, and I looked to him.

I shouldn't be the one complaining; he was the one getting the short end of the stick. I sighed and nodded.

"Fine, let's go."

We made our way toward the center of the village, where another bonfire roared. The night was dark with the new moon, only stars and fire to light the night.

I walked behind my family, trying not to drag my bare feet, but I couldn't help it. I missed the alphas. Their easy smiles and banter that made them seem more human than the ones I shared a village with.

I missed their touches, their taste. And I would never have it again.

The thought sucker punched me, and I held my stomach. Lucas stepped back and wrapped his arm around me.

"We're going to be okay, Lori. Our shadows will protect us, no matter what," he whispered, and I gasped, looking up at him.

He winked, and I leaned closer.

"What do you know about the shadows? You have them too?" I asked, but he didn't get a chance to answer because my mother dragged me off to the girls' side of the raised wooden platform. Dad took Lucas to the other.

I looked over, but he was getting a stern look from my father, pursing his lips in return. I looked at Mom, who tugged at my hair.

“You should’ve braided it, dear,” she said, fussing with the straying strands.

I shrugged. “We both know they won’t be looking at my hair.” I sulked.

My mother sighed and pulled me a little away from the other girls.

“Honey, I know this is hard, that it seems like silly traditions, but they have kept us alive all these years. We can’t risk changing anything, especially when dealing with volatile creatures such as the wolves. Please.”

Her voice trembled, her chin wobbling as she fought back her own tears.

“Just please try to give this a chance. You may not be in love at the start, but that love can grow, like it did with your father and I. You just have to be willing to try,” she pleaded, and it broke my heart to see her try so hard to please my dad when he should love her anyway.

She was amazing, and I needed to do this for her. I rolled my shoulders back and took a deep breath.

“Yeah, Mom. I’ve got this, I’ll behave,” I promised, and she smiled, sniffing a little, then hugging me.

I hugged her back as if it was the last time I would see her, then pulled away.

“Good girl. Once you’ve been chosen, we’ll be allowed to see you.” She smiled, then left off the platform as my father left my brother.

My eyes caught Lucas’s, and I smiled. He gave me a tight one back and nodded. I nodded back. We were okay, we were going to do this.

I smoothed down my dress, then went to wait with the other girls as the mayor of the women’s village and the mayor of the men’s both fronted the crowd, who were all standing around the bonfire.

Mr. and Mrs. Cranshaw had been the mayors and on the council since I was born and were ridiculously old. I wasn’t even sure whether they aged anymore, just stayed old with wrinkling skin, gray hair, hunched backs, and annoyingly slow speech.

“Welcome.” Mrs. Cranshaw smiled. “To tonight’s choosing ceremony.”

Everyone clapped as I fiddled with the strands on my sleeve, looking down.

“Tonight, we welcome back our offerings, thank them for their sacrifice, and reward them with a union of marriage,” Mr. Cranshaw carried on, and I fought not to roll my eyes.

Yes, make it sound desirable, that’d help.

They rambled on about the werewolves and the territory, and I tuned out, waiting for the bit that was making my heart race. The choosing part.

Finally, the mayors started calling names forward of the men. They showed them off, gave them each a speech of accomplishments and body description. Then the girls.

Mine was embarrassing, humiliating, degrading, but I hadn’t expected much, being who I was.

“Daughter of our very own general, Mr. Valarian, we have Lorelai Valarian. She is five feet ten with a slender build and full breasts. She has dabbled in various village activities but prefers solitude.”

I had actually said I like my space more than people, but they had taken liberties.

“She is winter born but was a carriage one nomination for the offering night, chosen by our very own alpha. That being said, she has been marked by the alphas and is promised generous compensation. Lorelai, everyone.”

Barely anyone clapped; it had been silent since the winter born thing. I stepped back into line and looked down, going back to my own mind, to my happy place that now consisted of three alphas.

I ignored all the choosing that began happening, the names getting called out as the men wrote the names of their first picks on pieces of paper.

The first round of choices was read out. My name wasn’t said once. I was okay with that, but my mother looked heartbroken.

The double ups had to barter coin, land, and goods to win the woman they wanted. Perfect Portia's family got another farm, some coin, and even a mutual family agreement on first baby names.

The ceremony had only just begun when a loud bell rang through the village. I froze. I knew that bell.

"The alphas! The alphas are coming!" one of the military men on security screamed down from the watch tower, ringing the bell that signaled the alphas' presence.

I scanned the crowd for my mom and dad as Lucas ran over. Everyone was panicking, running to hide, to do whatever they thought they were meant to, but I stayed there.

"The alphas never come down more than once a year. The offerings, that's all they ever take from us," Lucas said over the chaos as the mayors failed to calm everyone down.

My heart raced, but not the same way as everyone else's. I was excited. I got to see them again.

I ran down from the platform and over to the road that led to the city, waiting. Lucas followed with a smirk.

"Something tells me those marks you wear were not given without invitation."

"I never said they were." I smirked back.

He nodded, a smile on his lips.

"Then you are the reason they are coming. They've never marked an offering. It violates our agreement, and they've never come down after the offerings before," Lucas said, putting his hands in his pockets.

"I should be so lucky," I scoffed, but he looked at me knowingly. I hoped he was right.

My father came up behind me then, followed by my mother.

"Come, Lorelai, we'll wait for your father and brother at the hut," she said, trying to pull me away, but I shook my head.

“I want to stay,” I said, and she gasped.

“They’ve done enough to you, dear.” She trembled, her eyes going to my hidden neck and body.

But I’d had enough.

“They didn’t do anything to me!” I shouted, and some of the chaos quieted. I took a deep breath. “Nothing I didn’t want them to.”

My mother looked at me like I had grown an extra head. My father looked like he would have slapped me if we weren’t surrounded by people, or like he was still considering it.

“There is no time for this. We must greet the alphas as normal.” Mr. Cranshaw finally got his shit together and started rallying everyone back into position as the alphas’ carriage stopped before the center of the village.

I stood my ground, ready to face them, whatever my dad had said to them to get them to come down.

The door opened and Nikolai’s eyes found mine, that deep green making me smirk.

He got out, followed by Braxton and Derik. They were fully dressed this time, all in devastatingly well-fitting black suits with ties the colors of their respective areas and a gold Werewolf Territory pin.

We were deep green, Brax was blue, and Derik an earthy brown. Their respective emblem was on the bottom of the ties, and each one of them exuded power. No bullshit, stern faces. Nothing like they had been with me.

My body grew hot at the sight of them, my eyes finding Nikolai’s again. I saw the smile that played on his lips before he tore his gaze away. Everyone was silent as their shoes crunched over the concrete toward my family.

“I believe we owe someone compensation for our horrible mistreatments of her body last night,” Nikolai growled.

Nobody moved. The roaring of the bonfire was the only sound. My father cleared his throat and stepped forward, smoothing down his own clothes, standing straighter.

"Yes, well, we believe that is fair for the consequences of those indiscretions," my father said, and I had to give it to the man, his spine was straight, he didn't cower under the alphas' glare.

"Consequences?" Braxton prompted, his voice much deeper than the one I'd heard last night. His hair was in a topknot, the blue braid wrapping around the base of it. I wanted to untie it again.

"Not a single suitor has come forward. Her name was not called." My mother trembled, and she sounded as heartbroken as she looked.

I grabbed my mom's hand and rubbed it with my thumb. "It's okay, Mom. That's not the alphas' problem," I said, but she sniffled, and my father clearly disagreed.

"It *is* their problem. No markings, that was the deal. You have broken the contract," he snapped, and Derik stepped forward.

"Indeed. And we have a solution." He smiled in a conniving way.

I narrowed my eyes at what they were up to. They went to the stage then, and we turned to watch them with the rest of the silent crowd. They shook the mayors' hands up there first.

"Welcome," they said in barely audible voices as Nikolai went over to the pieces of paper in the glass bowl on the podium.

"These are the names?" he asked.

Mrs. Cranshaw nodded.

Nikolai grinned and grabbed a piece of paper. He wrote on it, then put it in the bowl. Derik and Braxton joined him and did the same thing. Then they each pulled the pieces of paper out, making a show of it.

My heart was beating so fast. I had no idea what they were doing, but I hated standing out this much. I already did for who I was, and I wanted to slink back into the shadows.

"I pulled out her name," Nikolai said, slamming it down on the wooden podium.

Braxton held his piece of paper up. "Me too." He grinned and jumped off the platform with Nikolai.

Derik read his out. "What are the chances?" he played, then joined the other two in circling me, cutting me off from my family.

I eyed them all. "What are you doing?" I hissed.

"Choosing." Nikolai smirked, and I gasped.

"What do you mean? You can't... This is a human thing," I stammered, and Braxton laughed at that.

"You don't want to be ours anymore, Spitfire?" he asked, the joking gone.

I went wide-eyed at him. Was he serious, be theirs? What did that even mean?

"We owe you compensation, beautiful, for breaking the contract. As payment for what we did to you, you'll live in the city with us, with all the riches and all the compensation you could ask for." He sneered at my dad.

"Please, no. Anything but that. She needs to be here, she is to find a husband, her future is everything to me, please don't take it from her," my mom begged, tears in her eyes.

She had no idea that I was considering going with them where there was no scorn or derogatory crap because of my birth. No marriage. No husband.

But then I'd answer to three alphas, and what if their attitude on offerings night was just a mask? What if they were nothing like that normally? I was terrified, but I was more scared of staying, so I knew what I wanted.

I turned to the alphas and cleared my throat. "If I said yes, if I went with you, what would that mean exactly?" I asked.

Nikolai gave me a stunning, cunning grin as he walked forward, holding my chin up so I had to look into his eyes.

"It means we'd own you, human."

That should scare me, should make me say no, but instead it had me even more excited and nodding my head despite my family begging me not to.

The decision was made. I was going to be owned by the alphas.

Whatever that meant.