

The Price of Choosing Her

I come alone this time.

No warriors anking me.

No claws itching beneath my skin or threats riding my shoulders like armor.

This isn't a siege.

It's a negotiation. And negotiations only work when you don't walk in smelling like blood. Gods help anyone who mistakes that for weakness.

Unlike the last time I stepped into this palace—when I came ready to burn it down stone by stone, my wolf half-mad, my men barely holding me back, the scent of my missing mate burning a hole straight through my ribs.

Now?

Now it's different.

I walk in steady, my emotions checked, because every reckless move I make puts her in danger—and that's a line I will never cross.

Still... the palace hits me like it always does.

I've been here a few times for business meetings, but I never stay. I always return to my pack the same day. Most of the time, I send Kael in my place and let him deal with the politics and pretty words.

The palace gates open without resistance, heavy iron groaning like they recognize me.

Massive marble pillars. Gold-veined eors. Ceilings so high they look like they're daring the gods themselves to look down.

It's something out of legend. Magnificent. Untouchable. Built to humble alphas and break men.

Power is soaked into every stone. Wealth that could feed a dozen packs for generations is carved into these walls like it means nothing.

This place has haunted my dreams since I was a boy.

My brother and I used to whisper about it in the dark—about sitting on that throne, about having the kind of power no monster could ever take from us again.

We wanted this throne. Not for vanity—but for power. For protection. For the resources we'd need to wipe our father from the world before he burned everything we loved to ash.

Funny how fate laughs.

Because here I am... choosing an omega over a crown.

And no—I don't regret it.

An omega. Ordinary, they'd say.

Except nothing about her is ordinary.

Like I told my brother, if the Moon Goddess wanted me crowned king, she would have made the princess my mate. Fate doesn't make mistakes. People do.

She doesn't.

She gives me her instead.

And nothing—nothing—outranks that bond.

The palace is crowded today. Too crowded. The air smells of ambition and false smiles.

A ceremony.

Right.

I remember Kael telling me today is the princess's arranged marriage.

To Alpha Darius—so I shouldn't cause trouble.

I snort quietly.

Darius. Second-strongest pack. First in insecurity. A man who's spent his life trying to outrun my shadow since we were teenagers—and choking on the dust instead.

Poor bastard still doesn't realize shadows don't bleed.

And my brother is angry that Darius took that from us. He's desperate—for me to be king, for us to nish what we started, for our father's head to nally roll.

I get it.

I just don't agree anymore. Everything has changed.

Kael doesn't understand the mate bond. How it rewires you. How it turns kingdoms into background noise.

I leave him with my mate because he's the only one I trust enough to protect her.

I swear to the Goddess—if he betrays that trust—

The thought doesn't nish.

As I walk deeper into the palace, conversations die mid-sentence. The crowd parts. They always do. Heads bow. Even alphas step aside, their instincts screaming at them to make room, their wolves pressing low inside them.

I don't push or glare.

My aura does the work for me—and today, it rolls out unchecked.

I hear the whispers anyway.

"That's Alpha Kei of Ashen Vale."

"The one who rejected the throne."

"He chose an omega over a kingdom."

A few words cut sharper than the rest. Coward. Fool. Weak. Idiots.

No one says them to my face. They know what I'm capable of.

Smart.

An elderly man steps into my path, draped in ceremonial robes heavy with authority and dusted with arrogance. One of the king's elders. I recognize the sigil stitched into his collar. His eyes sweep over me with something between reverence and disappointment.

"Alpha Kei," he says, his voice polite and tight. "Your visit is... unexpected."

"Life's full of disappointments," I reply calmly. "I'm here to see the Alpha King."

His brows lift. "We received your letter. I must admit, the council was quite disappointed by your absence. Had you arrived earlier, you might have secured the princess's hand, but —"

"I'm not here for that," I cut in.

He blinks.

"Didn't you read the part where I said I found my mate?" I ask mildly. "Why the f**k would I come begging for another man's daughter?"

His lips thin. "It's unfortunate. Truly. It would have been... ideal for the strongest alpha to mate with the king's daughter."

He keeps talking.

Something about alliances.

About bloodlines.

About destiny—written by old men who've never bled for anything in their lives.

"Enough," I growl.

The word cracks like thunder. The elder pales, swallowing hard.

"I'm not here for your politics. I'm here for my mate," I say again, my voice low and deadly calm. "Now take me to the Alpha King."

A tense pause.

Then he bows. "Of course. His Majesty is in his ooe—nalizing preparations for the wedding," he says stiy.

I follow him down the marble corridors, my steps steady, my wolf pacing beneath my skin like a loaded weapon.

Negotiate.

Ask questions.

Find out what she did.

Find out why she was caged.

Find out what it will cost.

And then—

I will pay it.

And if the Alpha King refuses?

Then today won't end in vows and celebration.

It will end in re.

I remember the rst time I met the Alpha King. Years ago, he came to Ashen Vale himself—no elders, no delays—to "assess" my pack. His word, not mine. I remember thinking it was strange that a king who rarely leaves his walls would show up at my borders.

I was barely more than a boy then, freshly crowned after tearing my father off his position with my own hands. I remember the way his eyes measured me like a blade testing armor.

He looked at me like I was a curiosity.

A dangerous one.

Now I'm the one walking into his territory.

The elder leads me to a wide set of doors and announces me.

I step inside.

The Alpha King stands behind a massive desk buried under documents, dressed in ceremonial robes of gold and midnight blue—all authority and weight, like a man trying to drown in duty before his daughter's wedding. He looks powerful and very much like someone who expects the world to bend.

I dip my head. "Your Majesty."

He looks up—and for a second, genuine surprise ashes across his face. Then he stands and returns the bow, which earns my respect more than all the marble in this palace.

"Alpha Kei. The rst time I saw you, you were barely more than a boy," he says, eyes sharp but not unkind. "A dangerous one—but a boy all the same. You took your father's place with your own hands. It's a shame you didn't take my palace too."

For some reason, every time he sees me, he likes to drag up old stories.

A corner of my mouth lifts. "It was the Moon Goddess's will that I didn't. Who knows? I might've become too powerful."

He laughs—actually laughs—and the sound lls the room like thunder rolling over mountains.

"Condent as ever," he says approvingly. "I like that. And I heard—you found your fated mate."

"I did."

"Not everyone is blessed like that," he says, nodding. "You made the right choice. Thrones can wait. Fate doesn't."

We talk for a few minutes—about packs, borders, trade routes, the growing unrest in the northern territories, the constant headache of keeping wolves from killing each other over pride and land. Alpha talk.

The kind where every word is polite and every sentence is a quiet measurement of strength.

It's almost... normal.

Then the door opens.

And normal dies.

Alpha Darius strides in like the world is a stage built just for him—tall, broad, dressed like he's already practicing for statues.

"My future son-in-law," the Alpha King says, clapping a hand on his shoulder, pride obvious in his posture.

Darius grins and dips his head. "Father-in-law."

The way he says it makes my wolf bare its teeth.

His eyes slide to me, slow and smug, like he's measuring trophies. "I see the famous Alpha Kei decided to visit after all—to watch what he gave up," he says. "Still chasing omegas instead of crowns?"

I bite my cheek, hiding my smile. "Still chasing my shadow instead of building your own?"

The Alpha King's smile tightens, just a little. "You should remember, Darius, how fortunate you are. If Alpha Kei had pursued this position, you'd still be standing in line—working twice as hard just to stay in second place."

That does it.

I laugh outright this time, not even trying to hide it.

Darius's jaw exes.

He recovers quickly—too quickly. "No need to worry about competition anymore. I've already secured my position," he says proudly. "I've proven I'm worthy of it."

"Oh? Really?" I drawl.

"Yes. I've already secured my future. I've marked and mated the princess."

The room falls dead silent.

The Alpha King's smile vanishes. "You... what? You mean you marked and mated my daughter. Before the wedding night?"

"Yes," Darius says, grinning wider, his chest pung out. "No woman can resist me. She came to me herself. Offered me wine. I didn't even have to seek her out."

Something about the way he says it—too proud, too smug—sits wrong in my gut.

The Alpha King looks unsettled. Not angry. Not pleased. Just... wrong-footed. Almost as if what Darius is saying sounds unbelievable, like a myth he's being asked to swallow.

"You mean Ravelle came to you?" he asks slowly. "Are you certain it was my daughter? You know how stubborn Ravelle is. You've seen that yourself."

Ravelle.

My heart stutters. Flutters. Does something stupid and traitorous.

My wolf perks up like it's just heard its favorite word.

Why does that name feel like it belongs in my bones?