

### When Kings Collide

Kei

Fire.

My home is on fire.

Flames tear through rooftops like starving beasts finally unleashed. Timber cracks. Sparks explode into the night sky. Smoke rolls thick and black, swallowing the stars above Ashen Vale.

Ashen Vale.

The name tastes bitter now.

Every structure I rebuilt with my own hands. Every wall reinforced. Every patrol route redrawn. Every training ground carved from stubborn earth.

Burning.

Wolves shout over one another. Some are half-shifted—claws out, fangs bared, fur bristling through skin as instinct battles discipline. The air reeks of smoke, blood, and panic.

And I know.

I fucking know who did this.

My father.

The old Alpha who refused to die quietly.

He promised he'd return.

He waited. And he struck when I was gone.



"Shit," I breathe, jaw tightening so hard it aches.

He came through the weak link.

Of course he did. He ruled this pack before I ever led it.

Ashen Vale is divided into three defensive sectors.

The northern ridge—stone cliffs and narrow passes—is nearly impenetrable. I stationed my strongest warriors there. Rotational watch every two hours. Double sentries at night. Steel traps hidden beneath leaf cover. No one crosses the northern ridge without my permission.

The eastern boundary connects to neighboring allied packs. Reinforced gates. Signal horns. Elevated watchtowers. My brother commands that side when I'm away. It is layered with patrol lines—inner and outer circles. We can mobilize a hundred warriors from that quadrant in under three minutes.

Unbreakable.

But the western edge—

The forest line.

The border wrapped in thick woodland, stretching wild and open.

Most wolves prefer living there. Easy access to the trees. Freedom to shift and run. No walls. Just nature.

It feels safer.

It isn't.

I fortified it, but not like the others. Hidden alarms. Rotating patrols.



Scouts in the canopy. But it relies on one thing above all else—

An Alpha present.

My presence. Or my Beta's.

And I took my brother with me.

Damn it.

Why didn't I think of this?

Ravelle's cuffed hand jerks as I move. I don't release her. I can't especially not now. The chain between us snaps tight as I drag her through smoke and chaos.

"Form water lines from the southern well!" I roar. "Shift and clear the perimeter! Kill anyone not bearing our mark!"

Warriors rush past, coughing.

"Alpha!" one shouts. "We can't contain it! The fire's spreading too fast!"

"Then break the structures before it spreads further!" I snap. "Tear down what you must!"

Another wolf stumbles toward me, fur singed, skin blistered. "Alpha—we can't! People are still inside!"

The words hit harder than the smoke.

More screaming erupts from the western sector.

The forest edge.

Of course.



I drag Ravelle forward again, scanning for threats. My wolf claws at the surface, furious, demanding blood.

Then I see him.

My brother.

He runs toward me through the haze, ash streaked across his face, shirt torn, eyes blazing. He had returned earlier in wolf form with the warriors who escorted me to the palace.

“Alpha!” he shouts.

I meet him halfway.

“We managed to pull some of the children from the outer houses,” he says, breath ragged. “But more are still trapped near the tree line. The flames cut off the back routes—we can’t reach all of them.”

Behind him, another roof collapses with a thunderous crash.

The heat slams into us like a wall.

“Did you find the attackers?” I demand.

My brother drags a soot-streaked hand down his face and shakes his head. “None. No tracks. No fresh scent. It started before dawn—before most of our people were awake. Whoever did this was gone before the first scream.”

That lands worse than anything else.

No open raid. No confrontation.

Calculated.



My father's style.

He isn't here for territory.

He's here to cripple me.

To show my wolves I failed them.

"They covered their trail," my brother continues grimly. "Whatever they used masked the scent. The forest swallowed it."

I stare at the burning western sector. "Then there's only one possibility."

He meets my eyes.

We both know.

"Him," my brother says. "He's the only one who knows our weaknesses like this."

Cold fury spreads through my chest.

"I was thinking the same," I say quietly. "That man did this."

Not my father.

Not anymore.

My brother's mouth tightens. "So it's really him."

"Yes." My voice is steel dragged over stone. "He promised he would return. I just didn't expect him to strike so soon—especially while I was away."

My grip tightens unconsciously around Ravelle's hand. She stands beside me, silent, absorbing everything.



This is what she walked into.

This is what I brought her to.

The strongest pack in the region.

Engulfed in flames because I left it without its Alpha.

My wolf surges forward inside me, rage flooding every vein.

I lift my head and unleash my Alpha presence outward—violent, commanding, absolute.

Every wolf within range feels it.

Then a colder thought strikes me.

“Mother?”

The possibility punches straight through my ribs.

My brother sees the shift in my expression.

“She’s safe,” he answers quickly. “The fire never reached the main territory. She’s in the safe house.”

Relief doesn’t come easily—but it steadies me.

My mother’s residence is separate from the main pack dwellings, hidden deeper within the inner territory. A fortified safe house surrounded by hundreds of loyal warriors stationed in rotating camps. Guard towers stand at every approach. No outsider reaches that perimeter without crossing a wall of trained soldiers first.

My father would never penetrate it.



The flames never touched it.

Another building collapses in the distance, showering sparks into the sky. The screams are fewer now—but sharper. More desperate.

My brother looks at the burning western sector, then back at me. “What do we do about the rescues? Kei... we can’t save everyone. The fire’s too wide. The heat’s too strong. If we keep sending wolves in, we’ll lose more.”

The weight of leadership settles heavier than the smoke in my lungs.

I close my eyes for a brief second and draw in a slow breath that tastes like ash. When I open them, the hesitation is gone.

“Focus on rescuing the male pups.”

The words fall like a blade.

My brother blinks. “The... what?”

“The male pups,” I repeat, my voice cold. “They are the future warriors. The future Alphas, Betas, commanders. Pull them out first.”

Behind me, Ravelle’s breath catches sharply.

“In this world,” I continue, merciless, “strength is survival. Males grow into fighters. Leaders. Protectors. Without them, this pack dies.”

I feel her turn toward me as if I’ve struck her.

“What?” she snaps. “Are you serious right now?”

I ignore her and keep addressing my brother. “Save the male children. The pregnant women. And the women with high fertility. We need the



bloodline to continue.”

“So what?” she shouts. “The girls just burn? The young girls screaming right now—what about them?”

I don’t look at her.

“Kei!” she yells, stepping in front of me. “You can’t rank lives like that. They’re children.”

“This is not a debate,” I snap, finally turning on her, frustration flaring hot and ugly. “This is triage. This is war. I will not let my father win.”

“So girls are what, then?” she fires back. “Useless? Just bodies to clean and cook and spread their legs for your precious bloodline?”

My wolf bristles at the challenge, but I force my voice to remain flat. “That’s how the world works.”

Her eyes blaze. “No. That’s how your world works.”

“I don’t have time for your speeches,” I growl, turning back to my brother. “Do what I said. Now.”

My brother nods immediately. “Yes—”

He’s cut off by Ravelle’s voice.

“What about the young girls?” she demands again, practically screaming over the roar of the fire. “What about the ones who never had a choice? You’re just going to leave them?”

I don’t answer.

I don’t need to.



"Take these cuffs off," she says suddenly.

I stare at her. "What?"

"Take them off," she repeats, her voice steady and dangerous. "Now."

"This is not the time for your games," I snap. "We're in the middle of—"

"I can put out the fire," she cuts in.

The claim is so absurd that a sharp, disbelieving laugh escapes me. "You can what?"

"I can put out the fire," she says again, holding my gaze without flinching. "All of it. In one minute. Then everyone lives. Regardless of gender."

I stare at her.

My warriors can't stop it.

My strongest fighters can't contain it.

I can't fucking stop it, and she believes she can?

"There's no way," I say coldly. "You're not a witch. You're not some mythical force. You're a woman. You might be the princess—the Alpha King's daughter—but even the Alpha King himself can't stop a fire like this."

The flames crack and roar behind her, devouring another roof. Sparks whirl between us like furious spirits.

She steps closer anyway.

Close enough that I feel the heat radiating from her skin. Close enough to



see that there isn't a single flicker of doubt in her eyes.

"Take the cuffs off," she says. "And if I don't put out the fire... you mark me instantly. Deal?"

For a moment, I forget how to breathe.

Mark her?

She offers it like it's a coin tossed across a table.

Marking is not a threat you gamble with. It is sacred. It is binding. It is ownership carved into flesh and soul. It is forever.

And she throws it at me like a dare.

Shock hits so sharply that my wolf recoils.

Does she understand what she's offering?

If I mark her, she becomes mine in a way no law can undo.

No escape.

No crown to shield her.

And yet—

It would be a complete victory.

I search her face for hesitation. There is none.

I glance at my brother. He studies her, not with mockery, but with calculation.

"Let her try," he says at last. "We're running out of options."



I scoff, jaw tight. "Fine. But if you fail..." I step closer, lowering my voice so only she can hear. "I mark you in front of everyone. Forcefully, if I have to. And don't you dare go back on your word."

The fire roars behind her, lighting her hair in molten gold. Ash drifts between us like falling stars.

"I won't," she says evenly, the chain between us clinking like a warning bell.

My brow furrows. "You're very confident."

"You know why?" she asks.

The heat presses in. The pack burns. My wolves wait for my command.

I don't answer.

Her eyes blaze brighter than the flames consuming my home.

"Because I am not some fragile princess you drag around in chains."

The wind shifts, carrying sparks past her shoulders.

Then she looks me dead in the eye and says—

"I am the fucking King."