

## Chapter 3

Audriana POV:

We walked side-by-side, a strange and silent pair cutting a path through the registry hall. The few wolves still lingering stared, their eyes drawn to the raw power Caden radiated. He ignored them as if they were furniture. I tried to do the same, focusing on the rhythmic click of my heels against the marble, a sound that grounded me in the surreal haze.

We stopped at the central registration desk, the same one I had stood at less than an hour ago, my heart full of hope. The old clerk, a wizened Beta named Elmsworth, looked up over his spectacles. His eyes widened slightly as he took in Caden, then flickered to me, a flicker of recognition and confusion in their depths.

"We need to register a binding," Caden said. His tone left no room for questions.

Elmsworth pushed his glasses up his nose. "Of course, sir. The preliminary paperwork, if you please..."

Caden didn't bother with paperwork. He reached into the inner pocket of his suit jacket and produced a slim, black card made of some unidentifiable metal. He slid it across the polished walnut. It made no sound.

Elmsworth took the card, his hand trembling slightly. He swiped it through a scanner attached to his terminal. The screen beeped, and the clerk's face went from professionally placid to pale with what looked like pure, unadulterated fear. He shot a terrified glance at Caden, his mouth opening and closing like a fish.

He stood impassive, but he subtly shifted his body, his broad shoulder blocking my view of the monitor, obscuring whatever damning information was displayed there.

He turned his head slightly, his voice a low murmur meant only for me. "My family has certain privileges within the Alliance. It expedites the bureaucracy."

It was a gross understatement, and we both knew it. This wasn't privilege; this was power on a scale I couldn't comprehend. But I just nodded, filing the information away.

Elmsworth, now sweating visibly, fumbled beneath the counter and produced two scrolls of what looked like actual sheepskin parchment, tied with a silver cord. He unrolled them with reverent hands. These weren't the standard digital forms. This was the old magic. The kind that couldn't be broken.

"The Eternal Vow," he whispered, his voice trembling.

Caden took the offered quill without hesitation. I accepted the other, its feather cool against my fingers. I stared at the intricate, glowing runes that lined the edges of the contract. This was real. This was happening. For a heartbeat, my hand faltered. The memory of Gabe's rejection, the searing pain, was still a fresh wound. Was I really about to chain myself to another Alpha, a stranger, so quickly?

Caden's senses were as sharp as his features. He felt my hesitation.

"Second thoughts?" he asked, his voice low and smooth, but with an undercurrent of steel that suggested backing out was not an option.

I lifted my head, my eyes meeting his. I thought of Hailee's triumphant smile. I thought of my grandfather, already calculating how to sell me off. I thought of a life spent as a pariah, a rejected mate.

My resolve hardened. This was not a chain. This was a sword.

I dipped the quill into the inkpot and signed my name-Audriana Sullivan-at the bottom of the parchment. The ink flared with a soft, golden light as it touched the runes. My handwriting was sharp, angry.

Caden followed suit, his signature a bold, authoritative slash of black.

"Your hands," Elmsworth instructed, his voice barely a whisper.

We placed our palms simultaneously over the large, embossed Alliance seal in the center of the contract.

A soft, silver light pulsed from the seal, warm and alive. It flowed up our arms, a tingling sensation that was both unnerving and strangely pleasant. The light coalesced at our wrists before sinking into our skin, leaving a faint, shimmering mark that looked like two intertwined wolves, barely visible unless you knew to look for it. A mate mark. A binding mark.

The skin on my wrist burned, a constant, physical reminder of the vow I had just made.

Caden's hand moved, his long, warm fingers closing around my wrist. His thumb brushed over the new mark, a gesture of casual ownership that sent a jolt of pure electricity through my system. It was the spark of recognition, magnified a thousand times by physical contact.

I snatched my hand back as if I'd been burned, my breath catching in my throat. My heart hammered against my ribs, a wild bird trapped in a cage.

His eyes darkened, a flash of possessive heat in their depths, but it was gone as quickly as it came. He turned back to the clerk, his face once again an impassive mask.

Elmsworth, looking relieved to have survived the ordeal, quickly stamped the documents and handed Caden two small, leather-bound booklets. Our official certificates of binding.

"It is done," the clerk breathed.

Caden passed the booklets to his silent assistant, who had materialized at his side, without a second glance.

We turned to leave. As we reached the massive doors of the hall, Caden stopped.

"This arrangement," he said, turning to face me. "It remains between us for now."

I raised an eyebrow, waiting for the explanation.

"My family... is complicated," he said, the corner of his mouth twitching in what might have been a grimace. "The transition of certain responsibilities is at a delicate stage. I do not wish for you to be drawn into it prematurely."

It was a plausible lie, and one that suited me perfectly.

"Good," I said, my relief palpable. "I'm in the middle of a major acquisition at work. The last thing I need is my personal life becoming a distraction." I pushed it a step further. "And with my current workload, moving in together would be... inconvenient."

His eyes narrowed, studying me, assessing my attempt to draw a boundary. I expected an argument, a command. As my Alpha, my husband, he had the right to demand it.

But he surprised me. He gave a slow, deliberate nod. "Inconvenient," he repeated, tasting the word. "Very well. We will maintain separate residences. For now."

The unspoken words hung in the air between us. I let out a breath I didn't realize I'd been holding. My shoulders, which had been tensed up to my ears, relaxed a fraction.

He pushed open one of the heavy glass doors, holding it for me. The cool evening air rushed in, a welcome relief from the charged atmosphere of the hall. He gestured for me to go first, a simple act of courtesy that felt strangely protective.

I stepped out into the twilight, leaving the registry hall behind, bound to a man whose name I had only just learned, a man who was now my husband.

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