

CLAIMED BY THE RIVAL ALPHA

Chapter 3

Kael Mate. She's my mate!

The word slammed into me like a physical blow. For one dangerous moment, everything else disappeared.

The rain, the forest, the smell of blood from the dead rogues, none of it mattered anymore. All I could feel was her.

The female sitting in front of me stiffened too, her breathing uneven as our eyes locked in stunned recognition. The bond stirred violently beneath my skin, waking instincts I had spent years mastering.

'Mine.' My wolf surged forward instantly at the realization, demanding closeness, demanding protection, demanding her.

I hated it immediately. Her scent wrapped around me despite the rain soaking us both. Wildflowers and storm air. Soft, but dangerous to my control.

She was beautiful. Too beautiful and those wide eyes staring at me with confusion and wonder nearly made me lose every ounce of sense I possessed.

"No. Absolutely not." I grabbed her arm roughly and shoved her off the horse. She gasped as she hit the muddy ground.

The bond screamed in protest inside me but I ignored it.

"My Alpha?" My beta Bastien called from ahead, confused.

"Keep riding," I ordered sharply. She stared up at me in shock, rain dripping from her hair and lashes.

"You pushed me," she whispered.

I tightened my jaw. Of course I did because this could not happen. Not to me and definitely not with her, the daughter of Alpha William Vale.

"Get up," I said coldly.

She slowly rose to her feet, still staring at me as though trying to understand what had just happened.

"You felt it too," she said softly.

I said nothing but silence was enough to answer her question.

Her expression changed instantly. Joy flickered across her face so openly that my wolf nearly lost its mind again.

"We're mates." The way she said it almost sounded hopeful and happy.

My chest tightened unexpectedly. Then I crushed the feeling before it could grow. "No," I said flatly.

Her smile faltered. "What?"

"I'm not accepting this."

Confusion filled her face immediately. "You... you cannot reject a mate bond without a formal—"

"I know exactly what I can and cannot do."

Her brows furrowed as she stepped closer. "But why?"

Because fate clearly enjoyed mocking me. Because after everything I had built, everything I had sacrificed, the Moon Goddess had decided to tie me to the one bloodline I despised most.

I pulled the reins sharply and rode past her but she followed.

"My father was going to sell me," she called after me. "I left Nightbane behind."

"That changes nothing."

"How does it change nothing?" I remained silent.

The forest path widened slightly ahead as Bastien and the others slowed their horses to wait for me. I could feel Selena still walking behind mine despite the mud and exhaustion weighing her down.

"She's Stubborn!" The trait irritated me almost as much as it intrigued me.

I had imagined meeting my mate before. Every wolf did, especially when I was younger.

Back then, I thought she would be someone powerful. Someone ambitious. A woman who understood leadership, war, and sacrifice.

Someone who would stand beside me while I reshaped the realm. Not the pampered daughter of Nightbane. Not Alpha William's precious princess!!!

My grip tightened around the reins as old memories resurfaced. I still remembered the first time I stood before the werewolf council as Alpha of Blackbourne Pack.

I was young then. Too young, according to most of the older Alphas seated around that stone chamber.

But I still spoke. I had stood before them and demanded resistance against the vampires.

I wanted no more tribute, no more fear and no more selling our people to monsters.

And Alpha William Vale had opposed me immediately. "The treaty preserves peace," he had argued calmly before the council.

"Peace bought with our women," I had snapped back.

His gaze had hardened then. "You speak recklessly because you are inexperienced."

"And you kneel because you are afraid." The chamber had erupted after that. It was the beginning of everything.

Before then, I had respected him. Truthfully, I admired him. Nightbane was the strongest pack in the realm, and when I inherited Blackbourne after my father's death, we were nowhere near their level.

We were small, weak and insignificant but I built Blackbourne with my own hands.

Expanded our borders, strengthened our warriors?, established trade and eliminated rogue infestations.

All these turned us into a pack powerful enough to stand beside Nightbane rather than beneath it and all of it had been with one goal in mind. 'To unite the realm against the vampires.'

I thought Alpha William would eventually stand with me. Instead, he disappointed me worse than anyone else.

"You are walking too fast," Selena suddenly complained behind me. I glanced back briefly and saw she looked exhausted already.

Good. Maybe she would finally stop following me.

"Then turn back and leave."

Her expression hardened stubbornly. "No." I looked away again.

"You don't understand," she continued. "I cannot go back there."

"That is not my concern."

"You're my mate." The words irritated me more than they should have.

"I do not care." That's a lie and my wolf knew it. I could still feel the bond pulling at me with every step she took behind my horse. It's annoying, dangerous and distracting.

"My father betrayed me," she whispered shakily. "I have nowhere else to go."

For some reason, that finally made me stop. The rain had weakened now, leaving only cold wind moving through the trees.

I looked down at her carefully. She was soaked, shivering, frightened, and clearly exhausted beyond her limit.

But despite all that, she still lifted her chin stubbornly while staring back at me.

'Interesting.'

Then she said something that truly caught my attention. "Make a deal with me."

I frowned slightly. "What deal?"

Her breathing remained uneven as she stepped closer. "You hate my father."

"That is hardly a secret." I said with a shrug of my shoulders.

"You want Nightbane weakened." Now she had my full attention.

She swallowed before continuing carefully. "I can help you."

I narrowed my eyes. "Explain what you mean."

"I grew up in that castle," she said quickly. "I know Nightbane's operations, patrol routes, trading systems, supply movements... everything."

My expression remained unreadable, but interest flickered sharply inside me.

She continued. "I know their weaknesses." Silence followed as the rain dripped softly from the trees around us.

"You would betray your own pack?" I asked carefully.

Her face tightened painfully. "My pack betrayed me first."

I studied her closely. Desperate people were dangerous but useful.

"And what exactly do you want in return?" I asked.

"Protection."

"From your father?" I asked, staring intently at her.

"And the vampires." Her voice trembled slightly at the last word.

I looked away briefly, considering taking her in would create problems. Massive ones but the opportunity standing before me was difficult to ignore.

Nightbane's inner workings, its weaknesses and its vulnerabilities. These are information powerful enough to reshape the balance between packs and she was offering it willingly.

My wolf stirred again, sensing the shift in my thoughts. I ignored it immediately.

"This changes nothing between us," I warned coldly.

She blinked. "What?"

"The bond means nothing to me."

The hurt flashing across her face irritated me for reasons I refused to examine.

"If you stay in Blackbourne," I continued, "you stay because of the agreement. Nothing else."

After a moment, she nodded slowly."Fine."

I looked toward Bastien."Put her on your horse."

Her expression fell slightly at that.

Good. Distance was necessary.

Bastien helped her onto his horse while I turned mine toward Blackbourne territory once more.

The ride back remained quiet. That night had been my eighteenth rogue hunt within Blackbourne lands.

Two weeks ago, rogue attacks had increased near our trade routes and border roads. Merchants started refusing travel through our territory. Supply caravans vanished.

So I handled it myself. One infestation at a time and now, tonight's hunt marked the final rogue zone on my map.

At least one problem was solved.

By dawn, Blackbourne Castle finally appeared through the fog.

I watched her stare at it silently while Bastien guided his horse through the gates.

Unlike Nightbane's polished beauty, Blackbourne was built for survival. It has stone walls, heavy towers and warriors everywhere.

The moment we dismounted, I grabbed her arm and led her inside while she stumbled slightly trying to keep up.

"My Alpha," Bastien called carefully, "perhaps she should rest first."

"She can rest later." I dragged her straight into my office before finally releasing her.

She immediately rubbed her wrist with a glare. "You could have asked me to follow."

"And you could stop talking." Her eyes narrowed instantly.

'Interesting.' Most people lowered their heads under my tone but she challenged it.

I walked behind my desk calmly. "You are under my protection now," I said. "But do not misunderstand the arrangement."

She frowned slightly.

"I will not claim you." The words landed heavily between us.

Confusion crossed her face again. "Why?"

I ignored the question. "You will not receive affection from me. No special treatment. No promises."

Her expression slowly hardened. "You truly hate me because of my father."

"I do not hate you." At least, not yet. "But I do not have time for distractions."

She crossed her arms stubbornly. "I'm not a distraction."

My gaze swept over her soaked appearance. "You are exactly that."

Annoyance flashed across her face. "Then why bring me here at all?"

"Because you're useful."

The honesty clearly stung her.

Good. Better disappointment now than misplaced expectations later.

"If you want to remain in Blackbourne," I continued, "you must earn your stay."

She blinked. "What?"

"What skills do you have?"

"I can fight."

I almost laughed. "You?"

"I trained growing up."

"With palace instructors," I replied dryly. "That is not real combat."

Her jaw tightened. "I can still help."

"With what?" She was silent as I expected. She had been raised as a princess. Protected, sheltered and useless outside political value.

Finally she muttered, "I can learn."

I leaned back slightly before looking toward Bastien who had just walked in.

"Register her into the castle workforce."

She stared at me in disbelief. "The workforce?"

"She needs food and shelter. She works for both."

"I am not a servant."

"You are now."

Anger flashed across her face instantly. "I disagreed with this."

"I do not care." I said with a shrug of my shoulders.

Before she could argue further, Bastien gently guided her toward the door. She looked back at me once more, furious and hurt all at once. Then she disappeared and Silence filled the office afterward.

I exhaled slowly before pulling open one of the drawers in my desk. Inside rested another ledger. It's not trade records but rather Rogue territories operations and elimination plans.

I scanned the final marked location before drawing a line through it.

"Done." All rogue infested areas within Blackbourne territory had finally been cleared.

The office door opened again moments later and Bastien returned alone.

"She is furious," he informed me.

"I expected that."

He crossed his arms. "You are pushing your mate away."

I looked up coldly. "She is Alpha William's daughter."

"She is still your mate."

"Attraction changes nothing."

Bastien sighed heavily. Then his expression darkened slightly as he placed another document on my desk.

"The yearly tribute list arrived this morning."

My jaw tightened instantly. Another women shipment for the blood sucking vampires.

Every instinct inside me screamed to burn the paper immediately. To refuse, to fight but reality was crueler than pride.

I still lacked the resources to survive open war against them. Slowly, I took the document and signed it.