

CLAIMED BY THE RIVAL ALPHA

Chapter 4

Selenal did not like where I was being taken.

The realization settled deeper inside me with every hallway Beta Bastien led me through. Blackbourne Castle was nothing like Nightbane.

Nightbane was elegant, beautiful and warm. But Blackbourne felt colder somehow.

The walls were darker stone, the guards sterner, the atmosphere heavier. Even the servants moved with more urgency, lowering their heads whenever warriors passed.

I already noticed no one laughed loudly here and no one lingered around idly. Everything felt disciplined and strict.

Beta Bastien stopped in front of a wooden door and knocked twice before opening it.

A sharp voice immediately answered from inside. "If another servant broke my washing basin, I swear I'll—"

The woman stopped speaking the moment she saw Beta Bastien.

She stood behind a cluttered desk with several rolled parchments piled around her. Her gray hair was tightly wrapped beneath a scarf and her expression looked permanently irritated.

"My lord Beta," she greeted quickly.

"I brought someone new," Beta Bastien replied and her eyes shifted toward me instantly.

The irritation returned immediately. "She looks delicate."

I frowned slightly.

Beta Bastien ignored the comment. "The Alpha wants her registered into the workforce."

The woman blinked in surprise but nodded quickly afterward. "Very well."

Beta Bastien glanced at me briefly. "Behave yourself." Then he left.

The moment the door shut, the woman folded her arms and stared at me like I was a problem already forming. "What can you cook?"

I blinked. "What?"

"What. Can. You. Cook?" She reasked through clenched teeth.

"Oh." I hesitated. The truth was embarrassing. "I... never cooked before."

The woman stared at me blankly. "Not even stew?"

I shook my head slowly and she looked horrified. "What sort of useless upbringing did you have?"

I stayed quiet.

She sighed heavily before grabbing a parchment. "Can you scrub bathing rooms?"

"I suppose." I said unsure.

"How fast?"

I blinked again. "I've never timed myself cleaning a bathing room."

Her expression suggested I was personally ruining her day. "Laundry?"

"A little."

"Sweeping?"

"Yes."

"At least there's hope for you." She dipped her quill into ink. "Name?"

I froze instantly. My real name could not be used here. Not when everyone in the realm likely knew the Alpha of Nightbane's daughter.

The pause stretched too long and the woman narrowed her eyes suspiciously. "Well?"

"Selena," I answered quickly before catching myself.

My stomach tightened as I tried to think of a better last name. "Savano," I added immediately. "Selena Savano."

The woman scribbled it down carelessly. "Rank?"

I hesitated again. "I'm an omega." The lie tasted strange in my mouth.

I was an Alpha she-wolf. Not as powerful as my father, of course, but still born Alpha blood yet pretending otherwise suddenly felt safer.

The woman pointed toward the door. "Follow me."

I obeyed quietly.

The deeper we moved into the lower levels of the castle, the more uncomfortable I became. The polished royal corridors slowly disappeared, replaced by narrow hallways crowded with servants carrying linens, food trays, and buckets of water.

"This section houses the castle workers," the woman explained sharply. "You wake before sunrise. You work until assigned dismissal. No laziness. No stealing. No fighting."

"What happens if someone breaks the rules?" I asked carefully.

She gave me a humorless smile. "Penalties."

Something told me not to ask further. Eventually, she stopped before a wooden door and pushed it open.

"This is your chamber." I stepped inside slowly and the room was small. Very small.

Three narrow beds occupied most of the space while a single candle flickered near the wall. Clothes hung from pegs above wooden trunks and the tiny window barely allowed moonlight inside.

Two girls looked up immediately. One frowned the moment she saw me while the other smiled brightly.

"New girl?" the smiling one asked.

"Yes," the headmistress replied. "Try not to let her destroy anything." Then she left and Silence followed briefly.

The girl who frowned returned to folding clothes without another glance at me.

The other approached happily instead. "I'm Marquee."

Her smile was warm enough to ease some of my nervousness. "Selena," I replied carefully. "Savano."

"It's nice to meet you."

Unlike the other servant, Marquee looked genuinely kind. She had soft brown skin, bright eyes, and a gentle voice that instantly felt comforting.

"You can use the empty bed," she said, pointing toward the corner.

"Thank you."

The other girl snorted quietly but Marquee ignored her.

"Don't mind her," she whispered. "She dislikes everyone equally."

That almost made me laugh. Almost.

Marquee sat beside me afterward while I awkwardly tried arranging the thin blanket on my bed.

"So, where are you from?"

My chest tightened slightly as I tried to think of something. "A small village," I lied.

"Oh." She smiled. "I'm from the western side of Blackbourne territory."

"What rank are you?" I asked, almost regretting why I did.

"Omega," she answered easily. "You too, right?"

I nodded. The lie felt heavier now.

Marquee stood afterward. "Come. I'll show you around before morning duties start."

The castle seemed even larger from the servants' routes. Marquee guided me through kitchens, storage halls, bathing chambers, servant stairways, and endless corridors.

"You'll mostly clean this section," she explained while showing me one of the large bathing rooms. "The headmistress hates dirty floors more than she hates breathing."

I glanced around nervously. "I've never cleaned something this large before."

"You'll learn quickly." She spoke casually while explaining everything.

Where fresh linens were kept, How meals were distributed, Which warriors flirted too much, Which servants stole food and finally—

"How much are we paid?" I asked curiously.

Marquee smiled proudly. "Twelve silver varoks every week."

"Varoks?"

"You've never used varoks before?"

I quickly recovered. "Not often."

She nodded thoughtfully. "Well, twelve is decent pay. Unless you get penalties."

"What kind of penalties?"

"Breaking dishes. Arriving late. Ignoring orders." Her face grimaced slightly.

"Once, someone spilled wine on one of the Alpha's guests and lost an entire month's pay."

I winced.

Suddenly, voices echoed nearby and Marqee immediately stepped aside respectfully.

I looked up instinctively to know what's going on and that's when I saw him. Alpha Kael.

He moved through the hallway beside Beta Bastien while several warriors followed behind them. His expression remained cold and focused, his dark cloak shifting slightly with each step.

Even surrounded by others, he commanded attention effortlessly.

Then suddenly—The mate bond stirred sharply inside me and warmth rushed through my chest without warning.

Kael slowed slightly as his gaze lifted and our eyes met. Everything around me faded for one brief moment.

The connection between us pulsed intensely beneath my skin, almost painful in its strength.

But then—He looked away first. Coldly, like the bond meant nothing and my chest tightened painfully.

I watched him continue walking without another glance toward me.

Marqee leaned closer immediately after they disappeared. "That's Alpha Kael."

"I know." I said still not taking my eyes away from him.

"He's terrifying."

I stayed quiet but terrifying is not the word I would have used. Confusing felt more accurate because why reject his own mate?

Every story I grew up hearing about the mate bond painted it as sacred. Powerful. Desired.

Something wolves spent their entire lives longing for. So why did he look at me like I was a burden?

The ache in my chest deepened slightly. Finding my mate was never supposed to feel like this.

Back in the chamber later that night, Marqee sat beside my bed while brushing out her hair. "Do you have any spare clothes?" she asked.

I looked down at my damp outfit. "No."

She frowned sympathetically. "You can borrow one of mine tomorrow until you save enough varoks."

Before I could thank her, a knock sounded at the door.

The unfriendly girl groaned. "Who is it?"

A guard stood outside when she opened it."For Selena Savano."

Confused, I approached slowly and the guard handed me a leather bag. Then he left immediately.

Marquee blinked. "What's that?"

I opened the bag carefully and Inside were several clean dresses, undergarments, and even a thick fur-lined cloak.

My breath caught slightly as I stared at them.

Marquee stared openly. "Who bought all that for you?"

I forced myself to shrug casually."I don't know."

That was another lie. I know it's from Alpha Kael and the realization settled heavily inside my chest.

He refused to claim me, refused to acknowledge our bond and yet he still made sure I had clothes. Why?

The questions followed me long after the candles were blown out for the night.

I lay awake staring at the ceiling while the others slept.

My thoughts drifted endlessly back toward Father as Everything still felt unreal. Part of me desperately wanted to believe I misunderstood what I heard outside his office.

Maybe there was another explanation. Maybe—But the ledger existed. The records existed. The girls existed and Father had said yes.

Tears burned my eyes again.

How had he become someone capable of that? The memories hurt now.

Every smile, every embrace and every promise of protection were they ever true?

I suddenly wondered if Mother truly died giving birth to me like everyone claimed or if that had been another lie too.

Exhaustion eventually dragged me into sleep despite the storm of thoughts inside my head. But peace never came.

In my dream, I walked through a dimly lit room surrounded by shadows and the air felt cold and wrong.

Large wolf figures moved around me slowly but deformed. Their bodies were twisted unnaturally, their eyes hollow and glowing faintly in the darkness.

Fear gripped me instantly as they circled me silently. They kept coming closer. I tried backing away, but there was nowhere to run.

Then suddenly—A figure appeared behind them. The wolves snarled violently before retreating into the darkness.

My breathing shook as the figure stepped forward and it's Alpha Kael. Bare to the waist and his skin glistened faintly beneath the dim light while dark markings curved across his chest and arms. He looked dangerous and beautiful.

My pulse quickened immediately as he approached me slowly without speaking.

I should have been afraid but instead, warmth spread through my body. "Kael," I whispered.

His gaze darkened slightly as he reached for me. His fingers brushed my waist gently before sliding upward, sending heat rushing through me so suddenly that my breath caught.

The mate bond pulsed violently and my heart raced harder as he pulled me closer against his bare chest.

"You keep thinking about me," he murmured near my ear.

The deep sound of his voice sent shivers through my body while his hand moved along my neck slowly before settling against my cheek. I melted into the touch instantly.

His thumb brushed my lower lip then lower. My breathing became uneven as his hands explored places I had never imagined could make my entire body react this way.

Heat pooled deeply inside me and every touch made it worse.

My fingers clutched his shoulders while he lowered his mouth toward my neck. "Kael..."

Then suddenly—My eyes flew open with cold sweat covering my skin while my chest rose and fell rapidly.