

A Throne Surrounded by Wolves

Lord Kaelros clears his throat, drawing the attention of the entire throne room—mine included.

"According to tradition," he announces, his voice carrying effortlessly through the vast hall, "each man will present himself in order. He will demonstrate his strength, skill, or worthiness—whatever he believes sets him apart. The princess will then decide."

A murmur ripples through the crowd.

One of the men—broad shoulders, heavy jaw, ego leaking out of every pore—steps forward with a scowl.

"Why," he demands loudly, "must we impress a woman?"

The room stiffens, and my father doesn't hesitate.

"She is not just a woman," he says coldly. "She is the future queen. Impressing her is the least you can do if you wish to be king."

For a split second, I freeze.

I had been ready to speak—ready to cut the man down myself, to remind him exactly who sat on that throne. My tongue is already sharpened, my spine straightening—

And then my father does it for me.

His words echo through the hall, firm and unquestionable.

A ripple of approval follows. The man shuts his mouth immediately.

I almost laugh.

From the outside, he looks righteous. A proud Alpha King defending his daughter. A father who values his child.

They don't see the chains hidden beneath silk. They don't hear the screams swallowed by palace walls. They don't know that the same man who "defends" me here is the one who has spent my entire life trying to break me into obedience, piece by piece.

The irony is almost poetic.

The parade begins.

Names are announced. Packs called. Titles shouted like battle cries, each man puffed himself up like a prize beast at auction.

One crushes stone with his bare hands, dust raining to the floor.

Another shifts partially, eyes glowing as he boasts of battles won and enemies slaughtered, his wolf snarling just beneath his skin.

A third draws his sword and performs a flawless, dramatic routine meant to awe—steel flashing, muscles flexing, ego on full display.

I rest my cheek against my knuckles.

Bored.

"Next," I say flatly.

Rejected.

Another man steps forward, voice dripping with pride as he lists his territory, his wealth, his bloodline—how many warriors answer to him, how many lands he's conquered.

I don't even look at him.

"No."

Gasps ripple through the hall.

He stiffens, shock flickering across his face as guards escort him away like discarded trash.

It goes on.

And on.

Power-hungry bastards wrapped in muscle and ambition, tripping over themselves to impress a woman they secretly resent. They talk about lands they'll rule, wars they'll wage, heirs I'll bear—as if my body is just another crown jewel to claim.

I yawn.

At some point, my eyes slide shut.

I actually fall asleep.

The sound of my name jerks me awake.

"...Princess?"

I blink slowly, lifting my head.

"Oh," I say mildly, glancing around. "Is it still going?"

The man standing before me flushes red with anger.

"No," I add lazily. "Next."

By the time the line thins, the throne room feels different—tense, brittle, like glass stretched too far.

Only a handful remain.

My father's jaw is clenched now, fingers digging into the armrest hard enough that the wood groans beneath his grip.

I lean closer to him and whisper sweetly, "Is this really the best you could gather? Because I'm not inspired."

His eyes ash.

I smile wider.

An elder rises abruptly. "Are these all the Alphas from the strongest packs?"

Another hesitates. "Not all. The strongest is missing. Alpha Kei is absent."

His name hits me like a blow straight to the chest.

Damn the mate bond.

I thought I had buried him—locked away the memory of his mouth at my ear, the heat of his hands, the dangerous thrill humming beneath his skin when he touched me like I belonged to him.

But his name alone drags it all back.

Kei.

My heart stumbles—sharp, traitorous.

Worse still, just hearing his name eases the ache coiled in my ribs, like pressure releasing that I hadn't realized I was carrying.

He was supposed to be here.

He was supposed to be standing among these men—arrogant, dangerous, impossible to ignore.

"Why isn't he here?" slips out before I can stop myself.

If he were, he would have seen the truth—that I am not an omega, not weak, not disposable. He would have seen me on this throne.

And the thought of him seeing me like this—bound, silenced, paraded like breeding stock—twists something sour in my gut.

Still... I'm relieved he isn't here.

I don't want him to see how a princess is treated like a dog in her own palace.

And yet—of all the Alphas—he should have been the most eager. The most ruthless. The greediest bastard of them all, hungry for the crown.

A warrior suddenly rushes in, breathless, dropping to one knee. He hands a sealed letter to the elders.

One elder breaks the seal and reads aloud.

"Alpha Kei sends his apologies for his absence," he begins. "He regrets that he cannot attend. Fate intervened. While on his way here, he found his fated mate—unexpected, undeniable—and he will not dishonor her by leaving her side. No throne is worth losing what the Moon herself has chosen for him."

The hall goes silent.

Even I stop breathing.

Then—

Chaos.

"He gave this up for a mate?"

"Pathetic."

"Foolish bastard."

"A woman over a crown?"

"What kind of Alpha chooses love over power?"

Someone scoffs. "She must be nothing special. No woman is worth abandoning a throne—especially not for a princess."

Sharp, cruel laughter follows.

I stare ahead, stunned.

So he chose her. An ordinary omega.

Not power. Not the throne. Not the princess.

And yet—I know some of the Alphas standing here have mates of their own. Wives. Women waiting for them. Yet they still came, hiding it, lying, clawing for power like starving beasts.

Something twists in my chest—sharp, unfamiliar, dangerously close to respect?

"Maybe you're not the monster they say you are," I think grimly.

An elder snaps, "Princess, you must choose. This has gone on long enough."

I stand.

The room stills.

I turn slowly, letting my gaze rake over the remaining men.

"I see nothing worth choosing," I say calmly. "Only men desperate for power and terrified of losing it."

Outrage erupts.

Elder Morthan slams his staff against the floor. "Mind your tongue, girl!"

I laugh softly.

"Oh," I say, tilting my head. "You're upset?"

I look directly at him. "Where's your son?"

His face darkens.

"I thought he'd be first in line," I continue pleasantly. "Or is he still crying after what I did to him?"

The hall falls deathly silent.

"Did you know," I add thoughtfully, "that he barked like a dog when I broke his pride?"

A collective inhale.

I lift my cuffed hands. "Remove these, and I'll make you bark too. Try me. I'll make all of you kneel."

My father surges to his feet so violently his chair crashes backward.

His face is flushed—not just with rage, but humiliation.

The elders don't miss it.

"I warned you, my king," one of them says sharply. "You indulged her too long."

"She should have been bound before she grew this bold," another adds, contempt dripping from every word. "Before she forgot what she is."

"A female with power but no man to contain it is a threat," a third sneers. "To herself. And to the kingdom."

I savor it—the way my father's jaw tightens, the way his authority cracks under their words.

He hates this.

He hates being exposed.

I enjoy every second of it.

"Enough."

His voice splits the room like thunder.

"This ends now," he snarls, glaring at me. "If you won't choose—then we will."

The elders huddle, murmuring furiously in agreement. They break apart at last.

One of them steps forward, voice heavy with false ceremony. "We have decided."

My gaze drifts—not to the elder, not to my father—but to the men.

They part slightly, like wolves instinctively giving space to something dangerous.

He steps out.

Tall. Broad. Built like a war forged him and forgot to smooth the edges. Dark hair cropped short, eyes the color of wet obsidian—cold, assessing, already measuring how I'd break. His aura presses outward, thick and suffocating, second only to Kei's from what I've heard.

Alpha Darius of Blackmoor.

The second strongest pack in the realm.

Of course.

Power marries power. Violence weds control.

His mouth doesn't smile—but his eyes do. Slowly. Intentionally. Like he's already picturing me on my knees.

I hold his stare.

Unblinking.

Unbowed.

The elder announces his name, his pack, his victories—territories seized, rebellions crushed, rivals executed. Each word lands like a nail in a coffin they're building around me.

Darius inclines his head just enough to be respectful.

Not to me.

To my father.

I watch it all with a strange calm settling into my bones.

Helpless.

Yes.

Furious.

Absolutely.

"Your wedding will be in one week," my father announces.

I laugh.

"You can chain me, dress me, drag me to an altar," I say lightly. "But I won't mate him. I won't bear his mark."

My father nally looks at me—not as a daughter, or even as a disappointment, but as a problem.

He turns to Darius instead, his voice echoing across the throne room.

"You have my permission," he declares coldly, "to take her by force if necessary."

The words hit like a slap.

My blood freezes.

"With those cuffs," he continues, gesturing toward my bound wrists, "she is no different from a mutt. Break her. Claim her. Do what you must to make her submit."

A few men chuckle.

Others look away—uncomfortable, but silent. Cowards.

Darius's grin nally spreads.

He leans toward another Alpha, not bothering to lower his voice.

"Oh," he murmurs pleasantly, "I would love to tame the princess."

Something inside me stills, and it's not fear or despair.

I lift my head and meet his gaze fully now.

And I smile, not sweet or nervous.

The kind of smile you give a man standing too close to the edge of a cliff.