

The Woman I Never Knew

Because if they think this ends with me broken—think cuffs make me powerless—

Then every single one of them is already dead. They just don't know it yet.

"Take her back to the cage. Not her chambers."

My father doesn't even look at me as he lifts his hand. A few Alphas laugh openly—men who would beg at my feet in another world.

"Lock her down until her wedding day," he continues coldly. "Increase security. If she so much as dreams of escaping, every guard on duty will lose his head. Along with his family."

Fear sharpens obedience faster than loyalty ever could.

The guards don't meet my eyes as they move. Hands clamp around my arms—rough, unforgiving—dragging me from the throne so violently my knees scrape against stone, as if I was never meant to sit there at all.

I don't give them the satisfaction of screaming. I let them drag me because this isn't the end.

They throw me back into the same silver-lined cell and slam the door shut, the sound crawling straight into my bones. It's too close to memory, and I force myself not to remember again.

My chest heaves as the magic cuffs hum against my skin, suppressing everything I am. I sag against the wall, breath shaking.

I test the chains again.

Nothing.

My wolf is silent—locked away so completely it feels like someone carved her out of me and left the hollow behind.

Without my wolf, I am truly nothing.

Frustration burns hot and useless in my chest. For the first time, the thought slips in—

What if I just... end it?

Death sounds almost pleasurable, far better than marrying that bastard.

The thought comes suddenly, sharp and tempting.

I glance down at my bound wrists. My chained legs. The reinforced silver lining of the walls.

Then I laugh—dry, humorless.

I can't even kill myself properly. Even death has rules here.

And worse—

If I die now, they win.

"No," I mutter, teeth grinding. "I live."

And when I do, I'll make sure every last one of them regrets letting me breathe.

The door opens not long after.

Two guards enter, carrying a tray of food.

"Eat," one of them snaps, shoving it toward me with his boot.

I don't move.

He crouches, smirking. "Alpha Darius doesn't like his women skinny. You need some flesh on you if you're going to survive his bed and be useful."

The other snorts. "Princess won't be a princess for long."

They laugh.

My head lifts slowly.

I memorize their faces.

Every scar. Every sneer.

"What are your names?" I ask quietly.

They blink—then grin wider.

"Why?" one mocks. "Planning to cry them in your sleep?"

"No," the other adds with a laugh. "She's planning to cry about us to her daddy."

"No," I say softly. "I'm memorizing them."

He laughs louder. "For what? So you can beg us later?"

I smile.

"So I don't forget the names of the first men I ever kill."

Their laughter falters—just a fraction.

Then the first one scoffs. "You're nothing. Your own father said it. Less than a mutt."

I tilt my head. "Then take these off," I say, rattling my cuffs. "Say it again without the chains. I dare you."

Silence stretches; they don't move.

I smile. "Come on, boys. If I'm nothing—prove it."

Cowards.

The door suddenly slams open again.

"What is going on here?"

The voice is sharp. Cold. Regal.

The guards stiffen.

I freeze.

The Queen steps into view.

My mother.

For a heartbeat, I don't believe it—like I'm seeing a mirage.

She looks furious—not soft, not fragile. Her spine is straight, her chin lifted, her eyes burning with something I've never seen before.

Wrath.

The guards straighten instantly.

"Y-Your Majesty," one stammers.

She doesn't look at them at first. Her gaze goes straight to me—my chains, the raw marks on my wrists, the tray of food kicked across the floor.

Something dark ickers behind her eyes. Then she turns on the guards.

"What do you think you're doing?" she snaps.

"Your Majesty—we were ordered—" one begins.

She cuts him off, her presence suddenly suffocating. "Ordered to mock royalty? To demean the blood of the throne? You will pay for every word you spoke here."

"We—we were following orders," the other guard says quickly. "The Alpha King said—"

She raises a hand.

They stop breathing.

"I don't care what he said," she replies coolly. "You will pay with your lives for looking down on royal blood."

The guards exchange nervous glances.

One swallows. "No one is allowed in the cell, Your Majesty. The Alpha King—"

My mother reaches into her sleeve and produces a seal.

My father's seal. Gold. Heavy. Undeniable.

She holds it up. "The Alpha King ordered me here," she says sweetly. "To prepare the princess for her future husband. To ensure she can... fulfill her duties in bed."

The words taste bitter in my mouth.

She steps closer, daring them to object.

I inhale slowly, watching my mother do something I have never seen her do in my entire life.

She stands her ground.

"Are you going to stop me?" she asks softly.

Her voice isn't loud. It doesn't need to be. It slides under the skin like a blade.

"Because if the princess fails to fulfill her role," she continues, eyes never leaving them, "the blame will fall on whoever stood in my way."

The silence that follows is delicious.

The guards go pale. One swallows so hard I hear it from where I sit. Another's hand trembles on his spear.

"Get out," she orders.

They scramble instantly like startled rats—boots scung, heads bowed. The door slams shut behind them.

And just like that, I am alone with my mother.

I stare at her.

Really stare.

Because this woman—this quiet shadow who has spent her entire life lowering her eyes, folding herself smaller, speaking only when spoken to—has just dismissed the Alpha King's private guards.

And she did it without inching.

I don't recognize her.

And that terrifies me more than the arranged marriage ever did.

"You..." My voice cracks. I clear my throat. "You raised your voice."

She exhales sharply, almost a laugh. "Don't sound so shocked."

I am shocked.

I am stunned.

I am unraveling.

My mother has always been obedience made flesh. She has lived her life bent—head bowed, back curved, words swallowed before they ever reached her tongue. I have never seen defiance on her face. Never seen defiance. Never seen her command anything except silence.

And yet here she is.

Standing in my father's domain.

Unpunished.

Allowed.

The realization hits me hard.

"How are you here?" I demand. "He was supposed to—"

"To punish me?" she nishes quietly.

My gaze drops then—really drops—and I see it.

The layers.

Too many layers.

Long sleeves despite the heat. A high collar brushing her jaw. Fabric chosen not for comfort, but for concealment.

She follows my stare and gently pulls one sleeve back just enough.

Purple. Yellow. Green.

Bruises bloom like rot beneath her skin.

My stomach twists.

"He didn't let me in," she says softly. "I paid for this visit."

Rage roars through me so fast I nearly choke on it.

"So you came to teach me how to spread my legs," I snap, because if I don't turn this into venom, it will turn into tears. "Is that it, Mother? Did you really come to teach me how to have sex?"

She inches. Just a little.

"It was the only way your father would let me see you," she says. "I told him I was responsible for your behavior—and that it was only right I corrected it by teaching you properly."

I laugh.

It comes out sharp. Broken. Ugly.

"I would rather die than let him hand me over like some dog and marry that beast."

She doesn't argue.

Instead, she kneels.

Actually kneels—right there on the cold stone floor—and takes my hands in hers. Her palms are rough. Warm. Familiar. They tremble.

"Please," she whispers. "Stop fighting fate. Obey your father and get married."

My throat burns.

"You know I'd rather bite my tongue to death than do that."

A sigh slips from her, fond and tired all at once. "Stubborn little girl. My precious."

She studies my face as if she's memorizing it.

"So," she continues quietly, "what can you do to get out of here? Because you know your father would rather die and bite his tongue—just like you—than let you walk free."

I swallow.

"I know, Mother." I squeeze her hands. "Which is why I need your help."

"With what?"

"I need you to send a message to my mate."

Her eyes widen.

"Your—Ravella," she breathes. "You met your mate? When?"

"The day Father caught me sneaking out," I say quickly. "I already met him at the hotel accidentally."

Her lips part in shock.

"So all that sneaking out..."

"Finally paid off," I mutter.

She studies me for a long moment, then slowly shakes her head. "I knew."

I blink. "You knew I was sneaking out, and you didn't stop me?"

"Because I wanted you to live," she says simply, and something in my chest breaks open.

Her expression hardens. "But listen—we have to pretend I'm truly here to teach you. The guards will report everything to your father."

I grimace. "That's disgusting."

"Yes," she agrees dryly. "Now spread your legs and look miserable."

I snort despite myself and do as I'm told, glaring at the door.

She launches into a fake lesson—nothing graphic, just enough murmured nonsense and sharp instructions to sell the performance. Her tone is clipped, almost scolding, like she's correcting posture.

And while she "teaches," I whisper everything.

"My mate is the Alpha of the strongest pack," I murmur. "He's staying at the biggest hotel in the city. He thinks I'm an ordinary omega—I mask my scent."

Her breath stutters.

"I want you to send him a letter," I continue. "Say the omega is seeking work in the palace. As one of the Alpha King's maids."

She freezes.

"He'll come," I whisper urgently. "And maybe—maybe he'll save me from this marriage."

She looks at me like she's seeing me for the first time.

"You speak of him..." she hesitates. "With warmth. You never needed a man to save you."

"I know," I say quietly. "I'm surprised to find out he isn't completely a selfish bastard like the rest."

"I will do whatever it takes," she says firmly, "to send your message to him."