

Destiny, Rearranged

I take my seat near the back, folding my cuffed hands neatly on the desk, and exhale slowly.

At least Matron Elswyth isn't here yet. She's late, and for that I thank the Moon for small mercies. Without her droning voice reminding us that women exist to kneel and spread our legs in the name of tradition, my mind can actually breathe. Enduring her without my wolf would be pure torture.

I'm halfway lost in my thoughts when someone steps into my space.

"Congratulations on your marriage," a cheerful voice chirps.

I look up.

Two girls stand in front of me.

The first looks excited—practically vibrating with it. The second looks like she's swallowed poison and decided to blame me for the taste. No—worse. She looks like she wants to poison my tea instead.

"Your wedding is tomorrow," the excited one continues. "How do you feel?"

"The same," I reply atly.

That does not go over well.

The other girl scoffs. "You don't look happy. One would think it's your funeral, not your wedding."

"Maybe it is," I reply, unimpressed.

She does not move so I give her a lazy once-over.

"Happy?" I smile thinly. "There. Now shoo. I'm thinking."

"You don't deserve to be the future queen," she snaps. "It's unfair. You were just born into it. If I were in your place, I'd treasure it. I'd die—hell, I'd kill—to be in your position and marry Alpha Darius."

The cheerful one gasps. "Elena, stop. You can't speak to the princess like that."

Ah.

Elena.

So that's her name.

Elena sneers. "I'm only telling the truth. Alpha Darius was meant to be mine. My father was arranging it. And then this—" she gestures at me like I am a disease—"princess b***h stole him from me."

I arch a brow. "Stole implies effort. I didn't even want him."

"That's worse. You don't even appreciate what you're taking from me."

"You can't change destiny," the other girl says weakly. "You weren't born royal. She's the princess."

"Exactly." Elena's eyes burn as they lock onto mine—pure hatred. The kind that does not fade. The kind that ferments.

And then—something clicks.

A sharp, dangerous spark.

I lean forward slightly, lowering my voice. "You said you'd kill to be in my shoes."

Elena blinks. "What?"

"You'd kill to be queen," I murmur. "You'd do anything, wouldn't you?"

Suspicion and confusion icker across her face—then greed swallows them whole.

"Yes," she says slowly. "Of course."

I smile.

Not kind or cruel.

Calculated.

"Then meet me in the ladies' room after class."

Her confusion deepens—but curiosity wins.

"What for?"

My eyes glint. "Maybe destiny needs a little help."

Before she can respond, the doors swing open.

Matron Elswyth enters, spine stiff, her expression already disapproving.

"Take your seats," she snaps.

Everyone scrambles back to their places like startled birds forced into order.

I lean back calmly, my heart racing—not with fear.

With possibility.

For the first time in days...

I have a plan.

The moment the class ends, the guards are already at my side. They move fast—too fast.

"Your Highness," one says stily and already reaching for my arm, "you are to be escorted back to your room immediately."

I clasp my cuffed hands together and smile sweetly. "I need to use the toilet."

They exchange a look.

"You may do so in your chambers."

I tilt my head. "Oh? And would you like me to do it in front of you instead?"

Their faces blanch.

"I'm serious," I add mildly. "Keep insisting, and I'll relieve myself right here. I'm sure the Queen would love to hear how her daughter was denied basic dignity."

Both of them stiffen.

I lift my cuffed hands pointedly. "Also—have you forgotten I'm chained? Where exactly do you think I'll escape to? The clouds?"

They glance at each other, clearly weighing their heads against my bladder. Reluctantly, they step aside.

"...Quickly," one mutters. "You have ve minutes."

"Generous," I murmur, already moving.

The moment I push into the ladies' room, I see her.

Elena is pacing like a caged animal—eyes wild, hands twisting in her skirts. The second the door shuts, her gaze snaps to me.

"You came," she breathes.

I lock the door.

"Listen to me carefully," I say, my voice low and sharp. "You want to be Alpha Darius's wife, yes? You want to be queen. Princess. Everything."

Her face lights up in a way that is...unsettling. Like I've handed her the moon.

"Yes," she says fervently. "With all my heart. I'll serve him—worship him—adore him. I'll give him heirs, power, loyalty—everything he needs." Her voice trembles with obsession. "Being his would be a dream come true. I've loved him for years. Years."

I smile thinly.

She sounds unhinged.

Perfect.

"Then take off your clothes," I say calmly, already reaching for mine. "And put on mine."

She freezes. "What?"

"You heard me."

Her eyes ick over my silk gown, my jewelry, my cuffs. "You'd give this up so easily?" she asks. "Just like that? Don't you want to be queen anymore?"

I pause mid-motion and glance at her.

"Do you want it or not?"

"Well—yes, of course," she says quickly. "But don't you want it anymore?"

I hiss and turn toward the door as if I'm done. "On second thought—"

She lunges for me, gripping my arm desperately.

"Wait! I want it. I want it more than anything—with my whole heart." Her lips curl, desperation souring into cruelty. "At least you nally realized you don't even deserve it."

My jaw tightens.

I almost hit her.

Almost.

"Then this should be easy," I say evenly. "You know where his room is, right?"

"Of course. Best room in the high-ranking quarter. I pass by it often."

Of course you do. Weirdo.

"Then go," I say. "Make him yours. Now."

I hold her gaze.

"Change."

She doesn't hesitate this time. She starts undressing quickly, reverently, as if this is a sacred ritual. We exchange clothes in tense silence.

When she is fully dressed in mine, my stomach drops.

She looks like me.

The same build. Nearly the same height. The same dark hair spilling down her back. It is horrifying how alike we are.

I pull the scarf from my neck and hand it to her.

"Cover your face. My clothes are soaked in my scent," I say. "You have to be fast—before it fades. Go to his room. Offer him wine. Don't let him think. Don't let him look too closely."

Her smile is feverish. "I know what to do. I've waited my whole life for this."

"You don't have much time," I say sharply. "Make sure he marks you."

She nods eagerly. "He won't know?"

"Not until it's too late," I say softly. "If he marks you, it's done. Tradition will bind it. By the time the truth comes out, you'll already be his—forever."

She swallows, shaking with excitement. "You won't take it back? You won't change your mind after he's mine?"

I meet her eyes. "Don't worry, I won't."

Her smile is radiant. Unhinged.

"Your Highness," a guard snaps from outside. "You're taking too long."

"I'm coming," I call hoarsely. "My throat is sore."

I turn back to Elena. "Tell them you're going to spend the night with Alpha Darius. Immediately."

"It will be a dream come true for me."

I step aside as she rushes out, a scarf pulled low to hide her face, my scent clinging to her like a lie wrapped in silk.

The door clicks shut.

I listen—heart pounding—as the guards hesitate... then agree. Surprised, but obedient.

Elena plays her role well. Far too well.

When their footsteps fade, I move like a shadow. Like I was never meant to be seen at all.

No one stops me as I slip through the corridors. No one looks at me twice. I don't run—running is loud and desperation. Running gets you dragged back by the throat.

The cuffs around my wrists hum softly—a low, relentless pulse of my father's magic. Possessive. Unforgiving. I feel it constantly, like a warning carved into my bones.

You are not free. Not yet.

I tug my sleeves lower, posture loose, head bowed just enough to pass for a servant late on an errand. No one questions me. No one looks twice.

Because if they did, they would see the smile ghting its way onto my face.

This isn't an escape. That would be foolish. The cuffs would scream my location the moment I crossed beyond royal territory. My father would turn the world upside down, and I would be dragged back in chains before nightfall.

No.

This is a delay.

A chance to nd a solution—to do the impossible and break these cuffs myself, even if it costs me years of my life. Even if I have to sell my soul or burn through magic, no one was meant to survive. And while I'm at it, to see Darius disqualied.

Two birds. One stone. Tradition shattered.

If he cheats on me with Elena—if he marks another woman as his—the council will have no choice once the truth comes out. Even if they'd rather choke than admit it.

My time is limited.

Especially since Kei never came.

I told myself not to wait. And yet, my heart clenches in disappointment. Foolish of me to think he would save me. Foolish to hope.

Depending on anyone else would be weakness—and I refuse to die that way.

I will watch my enemies fall—one by one—before I join them in hell.

I reach the palace gate, ngers brushing the cold stone archway. Freedom hangs just beyond it—sharp, intoxicating.

Just a little farther.

My thoughts spiral, rage and resolve twisting together, and I don't see the uneven stone beneath my foot.

I stumble forward with a soft curse—

Strong arms catch me before I hit the ground.

Solid. Warm. Unmistakable.

My breath punches out of me as I'm hauled upright, the scent of pine and steel slamming straight into my chest.

I look up.

The last eyes I expect to see.

Green.

Not gentle green.

Predatory green.

The kind that watches storms gather and decides whether to become one.

Kei.

The realization crashes into me all at once—how much I missed him. How deeply. How impossibly. We met only once, yet the sight of him steals the air from my lungs like he has been carved into me ever since.

His mouth curves slowly, dangerously, as though he has been waiting for this moment all along.

"Miss me, mate?"