

## I Am Not My Mother

The first scream splits the clearing before the whip ever lands, and I don't inch. I learned long ago not to.

The woman is on her knees in the dirt, wrists bound behind her back, hair torn loose and matted with sweat and dust. Her mate stands behind her, chest puffed out, jaw locked in righteous fury—as though he is the one who has been wronged.

He cheated. Everyone knows it. The sharp, undeniable scent of another woman still clings to him.

Her crime was simply speaking back.

Daring to confront him.

Daring to raise her voice.

Daring to ask why.

The whip cracks again. Blood beads, then runs.

She cries out, a sound so raw it slices straight into my chest. Pain tears through her body, through her bond. She feels everything. He feels nothing.

They are chosen mates, not fated.

That means her agony does not echo in his body. He doesn't feel the bite of the lash. Doesn't feel the way her back arches in pain. Doesn't feel the humiliation crawling up her spine as hundreds of eyes watch her break.

His heart does not fracture with hers.

How convenient.

"Louder," someone mutters from the crowd.

I sit on the makeshift throne carved from stone and bone, my spine straight, my face locked in calm indifference. To my right sits my father—the Alpha King of all packs—his broad shoulders relaxed, his gaze cold and observant, watching with the detached patience of a man overseeing routine work. To my left, my mother.

Silent. Always silent.

Her hands are folded neatly in her lap, knuckles pale, gaze fixed somewhere far away, as if she learned long ago how to disappear while still breathing.

The woman being punished does not even belong to this pack. Most of them don't, but punishments like this are common. Too common.

Alphas from other packs bring their women here when discipline becomes inconvenient and they don't want blood on their own grounds. When the punishment needs to be seen. When fear must be taught publicly. The royal clearing exists for this exact purpose.

This way, no one has to feel guilty.

In our world, women are not people.

We are wombs with legs. Hands meant for scrubbing coors raw, for cleaning blood we did not spill, for cooking meals we will never be thanked for. Mouths meant to stay shut—unless praising our mates or crying in gratitude for being chosen at all.

Some even say the Moon Goddess is not a woman. That she must be a man. The Moon God. As if even the heavens could never be ruled by a woman.

The lash falls again.

The woman collapses forward, sobbing, her body trembling violently, her voice hoarse, her throat raw. No one moves to help her. No one ever does.

Her mate doesn't look at her.

He has already forgiven himself.

"Enough," my father says calmly.

The crowd murmurs approval as the punishment ends.

Approval.

My stomach twists.

The first woman is dragged away by guards like discarded meat, and another is shoved forward.

This one doesn't even receive the illusion of sympathy.

She stands trembling as the accusation is read aloud—indelible. The word hangs heavy in the air, sharp with disgust. Her head is bowed, shoulders shaking so hard her teeth knock together.

Her mate stands to the side, eyes hollow, jaw clenched—not in anger at her, but in shame.

She didn't choose to betray him. She was forced. A high-ranking social wanted her. Cornered her. Threatened her family. Took what he wanted.

Took her.

Left bruises she hid beneath long sleeves and silence, but the truth doesn't matter.

It never does.

"She lacked purity," someone shouts.

"She tempted him," another adds.

"She deled the bond," a councilman announces.

She is stripped of her rank beneath the unforgiving sun—declared Omega, declared worthless. The ogging begins again, harder this time, as the crowd erupts—not in horror, but in cheers.

The social who ruined her stands nearby, grinning as hands clap his back.

"A real man," they praise him.

My ngers dig into the armrest of the throne. I can't breathe. The air feels thick—poisoned with sweat, blood, and satisfaction.

Then they bring out the third woman.

She screams before they even touch her. She is young. Too young. Eyes wild with terror as she thrashes against the warriors restraining her.

"I won't," she sobs. "Please—I won't—"

Her mate steps forward, furious at the deance. She refused his mark. Refused to surrender her body and soul to him. That, apparently, is unforgivable.

They force her to her knees.

My throat burns as disgust rises so fast it nearly chokes me. I feel it crawling up my spine, clawing at my ribs, begging to be released as a scream, a command, a m\*\*\*\*\*e.

I can't watch anymore. My head dips—just enough to breathe.

"Lift your head, Ravelle."

My father's voice cuts sharp through the noise.

I obey, raising my chin.

"You must see this," he says, his eyes fixed on the woman being broken into submission. "This is what happens when women forget their place. When they believe feelings matter more than duty."

He leans closer.

"Remember this. Perfection is the only thing that keeps you safe. Obedience. Silence. Grace. You are fortunate—you will be a queen, not like them. But do not forget..."

His gaze hardens as it locks with mine.

"You are still a woman."

The clearing blurs.

"You will never be king," he says softly, as if offering comfort. "You will kneel to your mate as your mother kneels to me. This is the way of the world—to endure. To obey. To live as your mother does."

I glance at her. As always, she pretends not to feel my gaze—pretends she cannot hear her own worth dying inside her.

I school my face into softness like the perfect daughter. The harmless one. The girl who couldn't hurt a y—just like her mother.

He believes it.

As he continues speaking, something warm slides from my nose down to my lip.

Blood.

My blood and I don't wipe it away.

This is how I survive him. How I keep his words from rooting inside me. Pain grounds me. Pain reminds me I am still here—and I will ght my way out.

The crowd cheers as the mark is burned into the girl's skin.

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The cheering follows me all the way back to the palace.

It clings to my skin like the smell of blood that never truly washes off. I walk through the gates with my head high and my spine straight. Guards bow, servants avert their eyes, but no one dares speak to me.

I reach my room and shut the doors myself. I rip the ceremonial cloak from my shoulders and let it fall to the oor like shed skin. My hands shake now that I am alone—now that there are no watchful eyes. My wolf prowls beneath my ribs, teeth bared, furious and grieving.

Fated mates are rare. Everyone knows it. You have to travel—cross borders, spend fortunes. Only traders, emissaries, and warriors ever nd theirs. The rest settle for chosen bonds. Political bonds. Convenient bonds.

Cages wrapped in ribbons.

My parents are the perfect example.

My mother—true blood of the Alpha King, granddaughter of the last ruler who won the throne by strength instead of mating tradition—should have ruled. The crown was hers by blood, by birth, by right.

Instead, she knelt because her mate was male, because her womb mattered more than her spine.

I would rather die.

A sharp knock slices through my thoughts.

I don't answer, but the door opens anyway.

Of course it does.

My mother steps inside, still dressed in her formal robes, silver embroidery glinting at the cuffs. She looks every bit the queen they forced her to become—composed, graceful, and obedient. Her gaze icks to the discarded ceremonial cloak on the oor before coming back to my face.

"After the punishment assembly," she says softly—not angry, never angry—"you were expected in the women's hall."

I turn fully toward her. "I'm not going."

She closes the door behind her as though sealing us inside this moment.

"That is not a choice you have," she says gently. "The women are waiting for you. You have duties."

"Duties?" I let out a short, empty laugh.

"Ravelle—"

"I watched women get broken in the dirt today," I snap. "Forgive me if embroidery feels... inappropriate."

Her lips part, then press together. She releases a slow breath. "I have told you a thousand times—that is not our place to question."

There it is.

Our place.

"You know the rules," she continues. "This is how things are. You are emotional because of what you witnessed today—"

"What I witnessed," I cut in, "was women being broken like animals while you sat there and did nothing. Like always."

Her face pales. "There is nothing I can do for them. My hands are tied."

"Are they?" Heat burns through my chest. "Or did you just never ght for them?"

"There's nothing I could ever do for them."

"That's a lie. If you had never given up the throne..." My voice lowers, sharp with betrayal. "A crown that was yours. You bowed your head and told yourself it was destiny."

That one lands.

She inches as if I struck her.

"You think I chose this?" She snaps—then forces her voice soft again. "I did what I had to. The mate bond—"

"—is a leash," I nish. "And you wrapped it around your own throat. He isn't even your fated mate, for goodness sake."

Her jaw tightens.

"You were born to rule," I press, stepping closer. "Grandfather knew it. The council knew it. Everyone knew it. And still you stepped aside. Still you knelt."

Her voice trembles. "I survived."

"At what cost?" I demand. "You sit beside him every day and fade a little more. You don't speak unless spoken to. You lower your eyes like the women in the clearing."

Her eyes glisten. "You don't understand."

"I understand perfectly," I say coldly. "And that's why I refuse."

She reaches for me. I pull away before her ngers can brush my sleeve.

"Mother. I won't live your life. I won't give up my throne just because he's my mate, because of some outdated tradition that says his c\*\*k as a man makes him more worthy."

Her breath stutters.

"I am not you," I say, every word carved from bone. "We have different destinies. I am me. Her. Myself."

She searches my face, fear bleeding through her composure. "Ravelle... this world will destroy you. You will be crushed," she whispers. "This world does not forgive women who want more."

"I don't want more," I say. "I want what was already mine."

She shakes her head. "You cannot be king."

My wolf rises behind my eyes, powerful and unbowed. "Watch me."