

Over My Dead Body

Kei looks at me like he's trying to peel me apart layer by layer and count the sins in between.

It shouldn't hurt. It does.

His gaze is a weight on my chest—heavy, unrelenting, almost physical. I can see the wheels turning in his head, grinding, rearranging every memory he has of me into something sharper and more dangerous. For one stupid, treacherous second, I think he doesn't feel it.

Then his jaw clenches.

The look in his eyes—pure, raw hurt—punches straight through me, and guilt blooms hot and ugly behind my ribs. I crush it down just as fast. He never asked who I was. He was too busy trying to mark me, claim me, prove something to his world, his wolf, and his damned pride to even learn my name.

Too busy trying to get between my legs to learn my story.

Yes, he chased me when he thought I was only an omega. He held me like I was something broken after seeing my cuffed hands. Made me feel safe. That almost makes it worse. Maybe, once, he deserved the truth, but it still isn't my fault.

I did what I had to do to survive.

His eyes darken, and I recognize that kind of anger—the quiet, leashed kind that's far more terrifying than shouting. Too many things churn in them: betrayal, fury, and something dangerously close to hunger. His wolf is right there, pressing against his skin, a storm trapped behind bone and discipline.

He's holding me like I might vanish if he lets go.

I hate that my body notices.

I hate it more that it responds.

A bitter thought cuts through me: he's no different from his brother who dragged me back here like a bargaining chip—my freedom traded for Kei's crown. And now Kei stands here, staring at me like I'm both a knife in his back and a throne beneath his feet. Of course he's angry. I almost cost him the throne that was not meant for him. Now he must think he's truly the future king.

Over my dead body.

I lift my chin anyway. If he wants a ght, he'll get one.

"So," he says. One word, but it lands heavier than a roar.

"Did you enjoy it?" His voice is low, even, but there's a blade hidden in it. "Laughing in my face? I must have looked like a fool, thinking you were just an ordinary omega."

His ngers tighten on my arms.

"Do you have anything to say about your lies," he continues softly, "or should I start counting them myself?"

The hall is still too loud, too full of people pretending not to listen. He doesn't look at any of them. He doesn't need to.

I meet his gaze without blinking. "You never cared enough to ask even my name," I say. My voice doesn't shake. "You wanted something to claim. Something to conquer. A woman you could tame with the bond."

My eyes rake over him in a slow, deliberate move. "So don't stand there and pretend this is about your broken heart. You're relieved. The princess is your mate. The crown is safe. No one else gets the throne meant for you. Isn't that what this is really about?"

His eyes ash.

"Someone else almost took what was yours," I add, colder now. "That's why you're angry. Not because I lied. Because for a moment, you might have lost being a king."

His grip tightens—just enough to remind me he could break me in half if he wanted to. Heat sparks where his ngers dig into my skin, and my traitorous nerves are. The mate bond hums low and insistent, a warning wrapped in a threat.

"Maybe you're right," he says quietly, dominance rolling off him in suffocating waves. "So tell me, Princess—what should I do with liars like you?"

I open my mouth with something sharp and venomous—

—and my father's voice cuts between us.

"Wait. Let me get this straight. You're telling me my daughter is truly your fated mate?"

The words echo through the hall.

I don't look away from Kei. He doesn't look away from me.

"Yes," he says, steel in his voice. "She is. Ravelle is my mate." Then, twisting the knife, he adds, "The princess's mate."

I shiver when he says my name. I hate that part of me wants to hear him say it again, like a prayer.

Damn it.

"My, how gracious," my father says dryly. "I suspected it when you spoke of your mate being magically cuffed by me—especially after Darius claimed he had marked my daughter, which was nearly impossible to believe. And now, seeing all this unfold?" His gaze icks to me. "Unbelievable. The Moon—whoever—has a sense of irony. I can't believe you're my daughter's mate. Lucky me."

"Your Majesty, the saying is true," an elder chimes in. "When one door closes, another opens."

My father laughs. Actually laughs. He looks pleased. Elated.

"Congratulations, Alpha Kei," he declares. "You are ocially the heir to the throne. You are my daughter's mate, which means you were destined to be the future king."

"All hail the future king!" my father commands, his Alpha King voice crashing through the hall.

And just like that, the room moves.

People drop to their knees in a wave—silk, armor, and pride striking stone. Even my mother bows her head.

I gaze at kei. For a moment, he closes his eyes, like he's drowning in the praise, and I know his wolf is drinking it in.

Rage explodes in my chest. This is exactly what I was running from. No man—mate or not —will ever take my place. Not my crown. Not my future. I am the king.

I twist in Kei's arms, trying to tear myself free, but it's like ghting a mountain. He doesn't even shift. He just holds me there—immovable, infuriating.

"Get off me," I hiss into his chest, humiliation burning hot.

He leans in, his breath brushing my ear. "Stop ghting me," he murmurs—and it shouldn't sound like a caress. It does. "You're not powerless because you're weak without your wolf, Ravelle. You're powerless because you're mine."

The bond ares—hot and blinding—and my knees nearly betray me. I hate it. I hate him for knowing exactly how to say it.

"You don't own me," I snap, and I hate how small it sounds even to my own ears.

His mouth curves—not into a smile, but into a promise. "We'll see."

Behind us, my father laughs again—but this time it isn't warm. It's ugly. Loud. The kind of laugh meant to remind everyone exactly who holds the knife. I can see it in his eyes—he's enjoying this.

"You'll tame her," he says to Kei, his tone cheerful and sharp as a blade. He waves a dismissive hand at me, as if I'm an unruly animal instead of his daughter. "She's the most stubborn she-wolf this realm has ever produced. Takes after me, unfortunately."

A few elders chuckle. One of them actually laughs.

My gaze nds my mother. Her eyes stay on the oor. She has gone back to being a coward —and for the rst time, I don't even blame her.

He snorts. "From the moment she learned to speak, she thought she was meant for more than obedience. To lead. Nonsense. Delusions." He scoffs. "A female king. Can you imagine that madness?"

The words land like stones.

More laughter ripples through the elders and alphas. It crawls over my skin.

His gaze slides back to Kei. "Being her fated mate is a blessing, so use it to your advantage. She won't be able to resist the pull of the bond. Mark her immediately. Mate her. Give me my next male heir. She's yours to claim. She'll kneel eventually." He smiles. "They always do." He glances at my mother as he nishes, with a glare.

Something in my chest cracks.

Kei doesn't interrupt him.

Doesn't correct him.

Doesn't even frown.

He smirks.

It's only a slight curve of his mouth—but it's enough.

It isn't cruel.

It isn't mocking.

It's interested.

Like he's watching a challenge unfold and deciding how best to win it.

That smirk does it.

Not the cuffs. Not the throne they're trying to force on him.

That smirk—at my father's words, at my humiliation, at the idea of breaking me—is the nal push.

I stop struggling.

The hall goes quiet.

I look past Kei—at my father, at the kneeling court, at the future they're already carving out of my spine.

"Kei being my mate changes nothing,"

My voice cuts clean through the room.

My father turns sharply. "Watch your tongue."

"No," I say, steady now. "You should know me better than anyone here. You always said it yourself—I am the most stubborn she-wolf this realm has ever produced. Did you really think I was born to bow to any man? To kneel? To be handed over like a prize?"

Murmurs stir through the hall.

"I wasn't born to be owned," I continue, my voice rising. "I wasn't born to be broken. And I certainly wasn't born to be silent."

I turn my head and nally look at Kei.

"He may be my fated mate," I say without inching, "but that doesn't mean I need him, or that I will give myself to him willingly. He is no different from the rest of you men—so why should I accept him as my mate?"

A few heads lift. No one breathes.

Kei's hand slides—slow, deliberate—up my arm, stopping just short of my shoulder. Sparks explode under my skin, hot and traitorous.

His voice drops, meant only for me. "What are you trying to say, Ravelle?"

His eyes search my face, hunting for doubt.

He won't nd any.

"What I'm saying," I reply clearly, every word sharpened by rage and certainty, "is this."

It's my turn to smirk.

"I, Ravelle—only daughter of Alpha King Lucian, the one born of prophecy and heir to this throne—reject you, Alpha Kei, as my mate."

The words tear through my chest as I say them—like ripping out something still alive—and yet... nothing answers.

No echo.

No answering howl.

Because my wolf isn't here.

She isn't just my power—she's the one who carries the bond.

And without her, my rejection has no teeth.

Still, the hall inhales as one.

Gasps.

Shock.

Horror.

My father roars, fury ripping through the hall. "What did you just do, you foolish, ungrateful girl? You have committed a mortal sin! You deserve death! This is an abomination!"

Kei doesn't look at him.

He looks at me.

And then, calm as a blade sliding free—

"I, Alpha Kei," he says, his voice iron and unyielding, "reject your rejection. And it will be over my dead body before I ever let you—or the throne—go."