

### Not Free, Just Claimed

Kei's eyes are pure murder, already calculating a thousand ways to end him, to make him beg, before my father roars—indirectly saving Darius from Kei's ultimate wrath.

"You fool!" My father's voice shakes the hall. "You dare speak and act after your disgrace?" He points sharply at Elena's crumpled form on the floor. "You marked and mated another woman and still have the nerve to claim my daughter in front of her fated mate?"

His voice drips with contempt. "You should be on your knees, thanking Alpha Kei for saving my kingdom from the humiliation you brought upon us."

Darius stammers, panic leaking from every pore. "I was deceived! This was her plan—the princess planned this! She should be punished! Can't you all see—this was all her doing!"

"And you fell for it," I say sweetly, tilting my head, eyes gleaming. "Like the fool you are. Funny, really. You thought you could claim me, break me into pieces. Instead... I made you lose everything."

His face twists.

"Oh, the great Alpha Darius," I continue mockingly, meeting his eyes, cold as ice. "Tamed by a mutt." I let the words hang. "Funny... that was your own word, wasn't it?"

My father sneers. "Do us all a favor and step down as Alpha. You are neither worthy nor intelligent enough to rule if a woman can deceive you so easily."

Whispers explode around us.



Darius's shoulders slump. His head bows. Humiliation crushes him.

And then—

"Darius... I loved you," Elena's voice shakes, desperate, breaking. "Why are you still chasing her? The throne? Why can't you see me? Your obsession?"

Tears streak her face. "I did everything for you. Everything. Can't you see? Didn't you enjoy last night? I gave you the best of me. I gave you everything—"

Something in Darius snaps. His wolf takes over instantly.

"You fucking bitch!" he snarls. "You dare speak after you cost me my throne?"

He moves too fast.

A blur.

A flash of claws.

Elena doesn't even scream—just gasps, hands flying to her throat as she collapses. Blood darkens her fingers. The bond between them flickers, then dies.

Silence crashes over the hall.

My stomach twists painfully.

Pity—sharp and unwanted—flares in my chest. She loved him. And he killed her without a second thought.

"You bastard!" I scream at Darius, my voice raw and tearing. "You killed



the only woman who managed to love a monster like you!”

Elena can’t die like that. It’s all my fault — my selfishness, my manipulation to escape an arranged marriage with Darius.

I turn to my father, waiting — begging — for him to unleash hell.

He doesn’t. Instead, he only lifts a hand in a lazy, careless gesture.

“Throw him out of the palace,” he says mildly. “For disrespecting my throne room and shedding blood.” His gaze flicks to Elena’s body. “Dispose of it. Bury her without ceremony.”

My blood boils.

“How can you do this?” I shout. “He murdered an innocent woman in cold blood — because she loved him!”

My father turns to me slowly, his eyes empty.

“Innocent?” he scoffs. “That bitch deserved it. That’s what happens when people forget their place.”

The words hit harder than any slap.

“I told you, Ravelle,” he continues calmly, cruelly. “You were only special because you are a princess. Nothing more. If you had been an ordinary woman with that defiance, you would have died long ago — just like her.”

The silence that follows is vicious.

It presses in from every side, thick and suffocating, as if the palace itself is holding its breath — waiting to see if I will finally break.



I don't.

I laugh.

It's ugly. Sharp. A sound with teeth.

"And if you weren't my father," I say, my voice steady even as something feral coils in my chest, "we both know that without this cuff, I would've killed you a long time ago. Just like her."

Gasps ripple through the hall.

My father's eyes flash—not with hurt, not with shock—but with amusement.

Then Kei moves.

"Your Majesty," he cuts in, calm—dangerously calm—"the key to the cuffs."

My breath hitches.

Every muscle in my body locks as I turn toward him. For a heartbeat, I forget how to breathe. Forget how to hate. Forget how to stand.

The key.

My father's face breaks into a pleased smile—proud, smug, and vile. "Ah. Yes. Of course." He gestures lazily, as if handing over a trinket instead of my chains. "You are her new owner now. You should have it."

Owner.

The word scrapes my skin raw.

Kei steps forward and takes the key.



When he turns back to me, my heart is hammering so loudly I swear everyone can hear it. He stands close—too close—and for the first time since this nightmare began, his gaze isn't cold or furious.

It's unreadable.

My breath stutters as he kneels slightly and fits the key into the cuff around my wrist.

This is it, I think wildly. He's going to use this. He's going to tame me—like they all want. Like my father expects. Like the court is waiting for.

The lock clicks.

One cuff falls open.

The sound is deafening.

Shock tears through the room.

Through me.

I stare at my freed hand like it isn't mine, like it might vanish if I blink. My fingers tremble. My chest aches.

He freed me.

My heart flutters—traitorous, painful—and for one reckless second I think—

He's going to do the impossible.

Then Kei doesn't reach for the second cuff.

Instead, he lifts it.



And before I can speak—before I can even process—

He snaps it shut around his own wrist.

The metal seals with a sharp click.

The world explodes.

“What—” My voice comes out broken. “What are you doing?”

A roar of outrage tears from my father. “Have you lost your mind?” he snaps. “You are making the most dangerous mistake of your life!”

Kei doesn't even look at him.

“She needs her wolf,” Kei says flatly. “At least for her sanity.”

And then—

I feel her.

A whisper at first. Weak. Fragile. Familiar.

Miss me?

My knees nearly give out.

Tears burn behind my eyes as my wolf curls back into my mind—exhausted, but alive. I'm not whole... but I'm no longer empty.

Kei straightens, the chain binding us together, his presence anchoring mine whether I want it or not.

He finally looks at my father.

“I will take her back to my pack by tomorrow,” he says evenly. “And



when I return, she will be nothing but a tamed, obedient queen.”

My wolf snarls despite being weak.

“And then,” he adds, his eyes cutting to me—dark, promising, dangerous—  
—“I will take my rightful place as king.”

My heart pounds.

Because I don't know what terrifies me more—

That he freed me...

Or that he bound himself to me instead.

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