

The Princess in the Red Dress

The Lunar Virtue Conclave is unbearable even before the gossip begins—or the class itself.

The hall hums the way it always does: too many voices layered on top of one another, laughter sharpened with envy, silk skirts whispering across polished stone floors.

I sit near the back, posture perfect, expression serene, every inch the princess they expect me to be.

The lesson begins, and as usual, it's pointless.

Rows of young women sit in stiff, polished silence while Matron Elswyth drones on about submission as strength and silence as beauty. She paces slowly, cane tapping against the marble floor as if punctuating every lie.

"A woman must never challenge her mate publicly," she says. "A sharp tongue invites correction."

Correction.

My jaw aches, but I keep my face perfectly smooth. I breathe. I survive it. I nod at the right moments. I smile when required. Inside, my wolf claws at the walls of my ribs—restless, irritated, seconds from shredding something just to stay awake, just to stay sane.

I can't avoid these classes forever. And my mother can only cover for me so long before her excuses run out. If my father's spies report that I've been skipping for a while, he'll call it defiance—not neglect—and that kind of attention is dangerous. So I attend. I nod. I play the perfect princess.

Matron Elswyth continues, voice syrupy with false wisdom.

"A woman must please her future mate. Lower your eyes. Temper your opinions. A woman's silence," she concludes with a satisfied exhale, "is her greatest virtue."

By the time the lecture finally ends, my jaw aches from holding it tight. Relief loosens my shoulders. Chairs scrape back. Women rise in little clusters, already buzzing with excitement now that their brains are free from suffocation.

I rise quickly, eager to escape before—

"Oh stars, did you hear?"

I slow down without meaning to.

"They've already finalized most of the list."

A pulse of white-hot anger ickers behind my eyes. So the news of my arranged marriage is no longer a secret. Everyone knows. It's only a matter of time before my father calls me and announces it officially.

I need to stop this.

"I swear, if I were her, I'd be glowing every day. I'd never stop smiling."

I stop walking. Not obviously—just a subtle pause as I blend back into the crowd. I'm easy to overlook when people are too busy gossiping about me to realize I'm standing right behind them.

"They say the list is enormous," another girl giggles. "Alphas from everywhere—north packs, border packs, even the warlands."

I drift closer, lingering at the edge of a tall column, hidden in plain sight.

"I'm so jealous of her," one sighs dramatically. "She gets to choose from hundreds of powerful, handsome men. Imagine that—men willing to kneel at your feet. Fighting just to claim you."

I roll my eyes internally.

Names spill like poison.

"Alpha Ronan of the Black Fang—did you see him at the last summit?"

"Oh gods, yes. I heard he slaughtered three rival packs without losing a single warrior."

"And Kaelor of Stone Ridge—did you know he broke an Alpha's spine during negotiations?"

"I heard Lord Draxen killed his own beta for questioning him."

"Please," another huffs, "none of them compare to Alpha Lord Kei."

The sound of the name hits me strangely—sharp and soft at the same time. My breath stutters before I can stop it.

Kei.

Of course I know that name. Everyone does. I first heard about him as a child—how he dared to challenge his father and claim his position, even as a boy. Now he leads the only pack strong enough to rival my family's.

Silence falls for half a heartbeat. It always does when his name is spoken—as if even gossip fears him.

And something stirs low in my stomach, unexpected and unwelcome, like wings brushing the inside of my ribs.

Butterflies.

I scowl.

Ridiculous.

"Kei of the Ashen Vale," one woman whispers reverently. "They say his pack is the strongest to ever exist."

"He never attends gatherings," another sighs dreamily. "Doesn't bow. Doesn't smile. Tall, scarred, quiet. The kind of man who could kill you and apologize with his eyes."

"I heard he wiped out an entire rebellion in one night."

My pulse pounds in my ears. Another wave of those damn butterflies erupts—violent, chaotic.

Dangerous.

That's what he is.

Not handsome.

Not charming.

Dangerous.

The kind of man mothers warn their daughters about in hushed tones. The kind of Alpha who doesn't need approval or alliances because people step out of his way in fear before he even arrives.

"He's terrifying," someone breathes. "He's the strongest of them all. And the most handsome."

"I'd still let him do whatever he likes with me—"

I clench my teeth as Jealousy aches sharp and ugly in my chest, catching me off guard. Not desire—never that. Something darker. Something possessive. The idea of them whispering about him, imagining him, claiming him in fantasies—

It makes my skin itch.

I hate myself for it. I don't know this man. I don't care about this man. I don't fall for names whispered in gossip circles like some foolish girl with stars in her eyes.

And yet—

My feet stay rooted, unwilling to move as their chatter continues to flood the air.

"She's so lucky," another woman gushes. "To be born and have men like that competing for her. A perfect life."

"Her life is perfect, truly," someone sighs. "And now she gets to be queen."

Me?

Queen?

I almost laugh.

"She should be celebrating," someone insists. "If men were lining up to marry me, I'd be ecstatic."

"Same. I'd do anything to be chosen like that. I would kill to have her life."

I grit my teeth. I want a world where women rule—but that dream feels distant with women like this. Pick me, ambitionless, spineless. They would kneel and beg for a man before they ever fought for a crown themselves. They disgust me.

I've heard enough.

I step out from the shadows. Their voices stutter and fall apart as they realize I've been standing there.

"Your Majesty!" one gasps, stumbling forward. "We... we didn't see you."

Of course you didn't.

"You're so lucky," she blurts, eyes wide with naive awe. The others rush closer, circling me like excited birds.

"Do you know how many women would kill to be in your position?"

I bite back the silent comeback that ickers through my mind:

I don't know about others, but I know you all would die for it.

"Have you seen the candidates?" another gushes. "The most powerful men alive will be yours. Alpha Ronan, Alpha Kaelor, Lord Draxen, Kei—oh gods, Kei—"

"Enough," I say, calm but cutting.

They freeze.

I look at them—really look—and a deep, bone-tired anger settles heavy in my chest.

"Every man on that list wants one thing."

They blink, confused.

"My title," I continue. "My position. The throne. Every single one of them wants my power."

A few exchange confused glances.

"They don't see a woman," I continue. "They see a throne with a pulse."

Silence spreads slowly.

"None of them love me," I add. "They love what they think I represent."

One woman gives a nervous laugh.

"But... that's how it's supposed to be, isn't it?"

I tilt my head. "Is it?"

More silence.

"What if," I ask softly, "Women ruled without kneeling? What if respect wasn't earned through obedience but through strength?"

Their faces pale.

"What if we lived in a world where women ruled? Where we weren't traded like rewards? Where our worth wasn't measured by how well we please a man?"

One of them whispers, horrified, "Your Majesty... that sounds... unnatural. Dangerous."

I smile faintly.

"It is."

Another woman makes a warding gesture, as if I've spoken a curse.

Suddenly everyone stares at me like I've grown a second head. Like I've said something blasphemous. Like the idea of women with power terrifies them more than men like Kei ever could.

I stare back, suddenly exhausted.

I sigh.

There's no point.

I turn and walk away. The door closes behind me, cutting off their murmurs, and I head straight for my room. The sound of those pick-me idiots still echoes in my skull.

My dress itches. My skin itches. My patience? Nonexistent.

All I want is to peel off these suffocating royal fabrics, drown myself in something strong, and erase this cursed day from existence.

But as a princess, I'm not allowed outside. Nor can I drink anything but water—it's "improper" for a lady. Alcohol is strictly forbidden for women; only men are allowed to touch it. Imagine that nonsense. I can't even hide it; I can't possess it because my father has my room searched daily.

I glance at the tall gold clock above my replace, and my lips twitch.

Shift change.

Almost time.

Perfect.

In twenty minutes the guards outside the east wing will be too busy switching positions to notice that their princess is slipping into the shadows where she absolutely does not belong. Their heads always get lost in saluting and posturing for dominance—men and their pathetic need to show off. It makes escaping laughably easy if you know what to look for.

And I do.

I start stripping immediately. My ceremonial dress hits the floor like a dead body. Then the corset. Then the layers of gold-thread underrobes meant to "protect my purity".

Purity.

I snort to myself.

My parents still think I'm a virgin—saving myself "body and soul" for my mate.

If they only knew that at seventeen I'd marched into a bar, picked the first handsome stranger who didn't look like he'd cry afterward, and deleted every expectation they'd ever had.

Best decision of my life.

I shake the memory off and pull my scandalous red dress from beneath my bed. I sewed it myself—one of the few rewards from the endless embroidery lessons I was forced to endure. It clings to every curve I have, silk poured over sin. The kind of dress a princess should never even glance at, let alone wear.

My father would have me executed on sight.

And tonight... I don't care if I become the princess who finally gets executed.