
THE
WOLF
KING
LAUREN PALPHREYMAN



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The Wolf King trilogy

The Wolf King
The Night Prince

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THE WOLF KING

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1



Dog fights are barbaric.

They say the fighters in the ring revel in violence. They say the wolf inside them is always looking for a release. Even on nights like tonight when the moon is not full and they look like men.

And don't they deserve violence for what they have done to our lands?

Yet how many will die? And for what?

I shift on the wooden chair, tugging at the high collar of my gown, then pushing an errant strand of red hair out of my face. It's hot in here. Too hot. Claustrophobic.

When I stepped out of the carriage two days ago, the rugged landscape of the Borderlands called to something deep inside of me – even though I have never been this far north before.

Thinking of what lies beyond these stone walls makes me want to rip off this dress and escape this castle. I want to tear through the untamed grass and feel the wild dandelions

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between my toes. I want to smell the pine trees and hear the wind howling through the mountains.

Instead, I take a sip of water and clasp my hands tightly in my lap. I try not to flinch at the crack of bone that resounds through the Great Hall as one of the males is thrown across the floor. Blood splatters the flagstones by my silk slippers.

Lord Sebastian, sitting on the other side of my father, looks at me, something cruel and hungry in his gaze as he observes my discomfort.

I wonder if he's thinking about tomorrow night, our wedding night.

The thought makes me feel even sicker than the fight.

'Your daughter doesn't approve, Your Highness,' he says to my father, only partially misreading the distaste that must be showing on my face.

'She is a woman,' my father replies simply.

I bristle. Of course that is all my father sees when he looks at me.

It doesn't matter how many lords I have sweet-talked on his behalf, or how many balls I have attended to serve as a pretty distraction while he makes his plans for the war.

It doesn't matter that I agreed to this marriage to strengthen his kingdom.

'Of course.' Sebastian nods, leaning back in his seat as though he doesn't notice the crown atop my father's neat white hair. 'These creatures are unpleasant to behold for those of the fairer sex. Though surely she gains enjoyment from them killing one another. The wolf clans have ravaged our lands for centuries. They murder, and brutalize, and steal. To any woman travelling alone, unlucky enough

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to encounter one, they bring about fates even worse than death.' He arches an eyebrow. 'If you know what I mean.'

'I do,' says my father.

Sebastian sips his ale. 'Though I suppose your women don't encounter many wolves down south – thanks to my armies guarding the border.'

'An honourable duty in service of our great kingdom.' My father doesn't deign to look at the lord. 'And one that comes with its rewards.'

'Oh, indeed.' Sebastian's eyes darken.

I try not to recoil. I will my body to be a statue, a vessel for the soul within. I allow my mind to glide across those wild mountains, even though I can never go there myself. Even though I will always be a prisoner to castle walls, and a woman's body.

A prisoner. Or a prize. That is all I have ever been. I will be both when I am wed to the lord in exchange for his continued allegiance to my father.

'If she has some sentiment for the creatures, however—'

'She does not.'

'Still, she should know that not only is this beastly aggression in their nature, there is glory in fighting, too,' says Sebastian. 'People throughout the Borderlands learn the names of the top fighters. And those who win their matches tonight will be moved to the more spacious kennels and fed a good supper. Concubines will tend to them too, to help them release their wolf in different ways.' He drums his fingers against his cup. 'As distasteful as that may be.'

'Indeed,' says my father.

I watch the muscular, shirtless forms in the ring, snarling

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and bloody. There is certainly cause to be wary around wolves. And yet, as I look at the murderous eyes of the crowd, the coin passing hands and the way my father's lip quirks as one of the warriors is pummelled to the ground, I wonder if all men are monsters deep down.

I glance at my betrothed. He isn't muscular, or rugged, or nearly as tall as the monsters in the ring. His dark hair is tied neatly at the nape of his neck, not wild like those north of the border wear theirs.

But there is something cruel in the angles of his face, and the way his dark eyes keep running up and down my body. I have been around monsters my whole life, and I can recognize the one that lurks beneath his pale skin.

I think I would prefer someone who looked like a monster to one who was adept at hiding it.

One of the wolves tears out the other's throat. He grins, and crimson spills down his chin. Nausea rises within me but Lord Sebastian merely smiles and claps as though he is watching a theatrical performance.

'Good show, good show.' He clicks his fingers at a couple of stewards. 'Escort him to the kennels and clean this up. Then bring the next ones in.'

The stewards balk, but lead the bloody wolf away as the Great Hall echoes with noise. People exchange coin, make new bets and refill their cups.

I can't stop looking at the body though.

It's so still. It looks so heavy. It makes my body feel heavy, too. Perhaps he was a monster. Perhaps he had a wolf beneath his skin that came out when the moon was full. Right now, he just looks like a man. A dead man. A

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man who will never run through those howling mountains again.

Two stewards cross the hall, grab his arms and drag him across the stone floor as though he is a piece of meat.

I take a sip of water to steady my trembling hands. At my side, Lord Sebastian and my father enter into a conversation about army numbers on the northern border.

I'm putting my beaker back down on the table when silence falls. It is followed by an excited murmur as two more males – two more wolves – enter the ring.

My attention is first taken by the one in front. He is young. Too young for this kind of violence, wolf or not. He must be sixteen at most – four years my junior. His coppery hair sticks up in tufts as if he's been frantically running his hands through it. There is fear and sadness etched into his expression, yet his jaw is set. It's as if he knows there is no hope and has resigned himself to his fate. Something in that expression feels familiar. It fills me with anger that I don't dare to summon for my own situation.

When I turn my gaze to his opponent, I see why he knows that hope is lost.

'It took five men to bring the big one in,' Lord Sebastian tells my father. 'He killed three of them. He doesn't talk much, but we think he's one of the alphas – possibly from the Highfell clan. Quite a specimen, isn't he?'

The larger male is as wild and rugged as the mountains where he must have come from. He's tall, with a strong jawline, and his muscular body looks like it is carved from rock. His unkempt hair is dirty blond, almost the colour of straw, and it's shorn closely to his head at the sides in a style I have

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never seen in the south. He stands, still and expressionless, and the crowd howls and screeches like the wind around him.

'Indeed.' My father runs a hand over his neat white beard. 'And what was he doing this far south?'

'Who knows with these creatures.'

The alpha looks at me. Those eyes . . . they're the dark green of the forest, and they brim with hatred. No one has looked at me like that before. My mouth dries as we stare at one another.

And yet my soul stirs.

'It won't be much of a fight,' my father says, as if he is discussing the weather, not the fates of two living beings.

'No.' Sebastian smiles cruelly. 'We thought we'd break him in tonight. We have something a little more exciting planned for him at the celebrations tomorrow night.'

The alpha stares at me, his jawline hard. He is still as stone, but there is violence in his eyes. I will myself to be that statue again, to be that vessel for my soul, and I look right back at him even though my heartbeat skitters.

'Well,' says Sebastian, clicking his fingers at the wolves in a manner that could be deemed brave or foolish if it weren't for the armed guards standing around the ring. 'Begin.'

A muscle feathers in the alpha's jaw.

Nausea rises in me as the young man's face drains of colour. He's going to die, and everyone – he, the alpha, the crowd – knows it. He doesn't break eye contact with the man who towers before him.

He is brave, then.

Courage, I will him, remembering that my mother said the same to me once. *Have courage, little one.*

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The alpha's big fist clenches at his side. It could be my imagination, but I think the younger opponent dips his head –as if in submission.

A growl vibrates in the alpha's throat, and in it I feel the ripple of hatred and rage that he is about to unleash. It claims me too. Hatred so thick and bitter I can taste it. Hatred at this towering giant for what he is about to do.

He roars – loud andwild – a war cry that ricochets off the stone walls of the hall.

The fight is over in minutes. It's bloody, and violent, and I hear the crack of bone at some point, along with howls of pain from the younger man. The alpha holds him down on the ground, a hand curled around his neck.

He raises a fist to deal the death blow – pausing with it in mid-air as if savouring the kill.

The young one looks into my eyes rather than at the monster on top of him.

And I cannot bear it.

This is not right.

'Stop!' I jump to my feet.

The alpha stills. The crowd quiets. Sebastian looks at me, eyes narrowed, while a muscle tightens in my father's jaw.

My heart is pounding in my chest.

Yet I do not sit back down.

'This is not sport.' I force my voice to sound steady, even though my knees are shaking. 'This is murder.'

The air in the hall thickens. The crowd turn their anger, their bloodlust, from the wolves to me. The alpha's shoulders rise and fall, hard.

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My breathing quickens. I shouldn't have said anything. I am a woman. A statue. It is not my place.

Yet I do not sit back down.

'Putting down an animal is hardly murder,' says Sebastian, a bite to his tone. 'Or does my betrothed have a thing for beasts? Do you know that they take their women like dogs? I have heard that some women—'

'That's enough.' My father's command rumbles across the hall.

Sebastian dips his head to the king. 'I did not mean to offend, Your Highness.'

'Aurora is tired. She will excuse herself and go to bed,' says my father.

I have disappointed him, and shame heats my cheeks.

But I don't move.

Neither does the alpha. His arm is still raised, his gaze trained on his victim as he awaits the conclusion of our conversation. The boy's wide eyes hold mine. Tears and blood stain his cheeks.

'Let him live.' My mouth is as dry as bone.

Sebastian is barely containing his rage. He clearly does not like to be challenged in front of his people. 'What use is he to me alive, my love?'

'He is young. Fit. Put him to work in the stables.' I want to disappear, but I force myself to look at him, to smile. 'A wedding gift to me, my lord.'

Sebastian appears to consider. He stands and takes my hands; his fingers are cold and curl around mine like a vice. I push down the disgust that is rising inside me at his touch. He smiles back.

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'Very well, my love. A wedding gift.' He leans close, bringing his lips to my ear. 'You know, if you have a fondness for these creatures, and wish to be taken like a common mutt, that can be arranged tomorrow night after the ceremony. Who knows, perhaps I will throw you into the kennels afterwards. Perhaps I will even let this alpha have a go with you, seeing as you have denied him his kill.'

Every muscle in my body hardens as the monster I knew was lurking inside him makes his presence known to me.

He releases me and turns to his people.

'The fight is over,' he says, and the monster slips back beneath his skin. 'A gift to my betrothed, who is as gentle-hearted as she is beautiful.'

The muscles in the alpha's shoulders are knotted and hard. Hot, raw anger radiates from him. It's as if the wolf inside him is furious that he doesn't get to kill someone.

He drops his arm to his side.

I'm breathing fast. My dress is too tight and the air is too hot.

The alpha stands and turns away from the crowd. He lets a couple of guards cuff him.

'Put them back in their kennels,' says Sebastian. 'The winner can go to the nicer ones. It's only fair, and he will need his rest for what we have planned for tomorrow. Put the loser back with the rest. If he survives the night, we will find a job for him as my betrothed wishes. These creatures prey on the weak, though, so I doubt there will be much left of him by morning.'

A couple of armed guards lead the alpha away through

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the oak doors at the end of the hall, while a steward hurries forward to drag his opponent off the floor.

'My betrothed – like many women from thesouth – hasn't the stomach for this sport, and why should she when she is such a beautiful flower? She will be taking her leave now, before the next fight. She needs to prepare for tomorrow night.'

His eyes harden, and my heart thuds frantically against the cage I keep it in. I dip my head regardless, and, steadying my trembling hands, I curtsey.

Without a backward glance, I hurry across the ring. I try to ignore how my skirts trail in the blood as I head through the doors.

Just ahead, the two fighters from the ring are being escorted away.

The alpha is almost at the end of the corridor. Behind him, the young wolf is drooping over the shoulder of the steward, his breathing ragged. He is not in good shape. If someone does not tend to his wounds he won't be working in the stables any time soon. And if what Sebastian says is true –about wolves preying on the weak . . .

'Wait!' I internally curse the shake in my voice. I should not be afraid. This is to be my home.

The alpha stills, and the torchlight from the corridor flickers across his hard profile. Though he's twenty feet or so away from me, his body heat washes over me. His scent does, too – sweat and blood and the mountains. My heart races, but I turn my attention to the injured boy.

'Take the young one to the nice . . . *kennel*.' The inhuman word catches in my throat.

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I know these men are not human – even though they look it. I know that, being from the south, I've not had to face constant attacks from the wolves like the people of the north have. Perhaps if I had, I wouldn't judge. The way the alpha fought in the ring proves the wolves have little mercy within them.

Still, it feels wrong.

Ahead, the muscles in the alpha's arms tense. He looks as if he's going to turn around.

But then the guards push him through the next set of doors and he's escorted away.

I let loose a breath.

The steward who is propping up the boy turns to me, his thick eyebrows knitting together. 'The lord said—'

'I am to be your lady, and I'm the daughter of your king.' I stand straighter.

I have played pretend all of my life. I have smiled when my heart was breaking; I have laughed when I have been disgusted. I have swallowed my rage when a lord has been handsy with me on the dance floor at a ball.

I can play the part of the formidable lady of this castle.

I raise my chin. 'Put him in the nice kennels, and make sure he has a decent supper.'

I skirt past the two of them, and make my way through the labyrinth of stone corridors to my chambers in the northern wing.

There are a couple of handmaids waiting for me, and I allow them to dress me for bed in a long-sleeved white nightdress that reaches my ankles. I dismiss them, walking past the four-poster bed to stare out of the window at the

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rugged mountains in the north. The sky is lit by a crescent moon.

A growing restlessness writhes inside me as the trees sway in the distance and the wind batters the walls of the stone castle. What I said to the steward was true. Tomorrow I will be the lady of this castle. Yet I have no power.

I never have.

I have no power to take my leave of this place – to breathe in the scent of heather and fern, to bathe in babbling brooks or drink in local taverns. I have no power to speak to whom I choose, or form friendships, or fall in love.

And I have no power to save the young wolf who will surely meet his end – if not tonight, then tomorrow, when he is deemed not fit to work and put back into the bad kennels.

I grit my teeth, then I grab a cloak from my wardrobe and throw it on.

Powerless as I am, I cannot do nothing.

The memory of my mother's voice chases away the fear.

They will make you feel as if you have no choice, she told me before she died. *But there is always a choice. Have courage, little one.*

Perhaps I have the power to do one small thing before I am wed to the lord and left here to rot. Even if getting caught could mean losing my life.

Even if it may put me in close proximity to that monstrous alpha.

I put up my hood to hide my recognizable red hair. Then I grab a satchel and slip out of my room.

I am going to the kennels.

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2



The castle is quiet, most of its inhabitants sleeping or at the dog fight, so I reach the staircase leading down to the kennels undetected.

As I walk onwards, the air gets colder and damper. It's as if I am heading into the jaws of a great beast – the darkness below a hungry mouth waiting to swallow me.

When I'm faced with the two guards flanking the heavy iron door at the bottom, I adjust my hood to make sure my hair is hidden. I pray to the Sun Goddess that they do not recognize me. Beneath my cloak, the weight of my satchel is heavy against my thigh. It's full of the items I stole from the apothecary – fabric for bandages, alcohol, willow bark and water. Items that reveal my intent to help the enemy.

'All right, love?' says one of the guards. 'What are you doing down here?'

I still my nerves. I remember what Sebastian said about how the wolves are rewarded for their wins.

'I've been sent from the brothel,' I say, making my voice sound as husky as I can.

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The guard who spoke snickers and opens the door. He passes me a key.

'It's silver,' he says as I take it. 'Burns if it comes in contact with their skin. But if they try anything, give us a knock and we'll come put them down.'

The other guard looks at me with disgust when I slip inside. I am disgusted too. Disgusted at the thought of a woman coming down here and providing such a . . . service to these creatures. Disgusted that he believed I am one of those women.

When they lock me in, I am faced with a long corridor – a damp stone wall adorned with flickering torches on one side, and tall iron bars on the other.

The air is musky with mildew and sweat and blood, and my breath mists in front of my face. There is no one in the cell on my right, but ahead I can hear a man snarling something under his breath, followed by whimpers.

Pulling my cloak close to me, I make my way down the corridor.

Someone growls from the shadows on my right and I hurry on to the next cell, where the wolf who won the fight that took place before the alpha's is leaning against the bars, a grin on his bloody face. As I pass the cell after that, a male with dark tangled hair walks alongside me.

'Hello, sweetheart. I've got something in here for you.' He grabs his crotch through his green kilt. 'Do you want to come and see?'

I look away, quickening my pace. I reach the final two cells.

The alpha is sitting against the wall with his arms resting

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on his raised knees. He's snarling something through the bars at the shuddering form huddled on the floor in the middle of the final cell. My jaw sets. Hasn't he tormented the boy enough?

He shuts up as I approach and I feel his full attention on me as, hands shaking, I slip the key into the lock.

'You shouldn't be here, princess,' says the alpha as the lock clicks and I slip into the cell. His voice is as gruff as gravel and it's thick with the accent of those north of the border.

My face is concealed by my hood, so I don't know if he has recognized me by some other means. Perhaps that is what he calls all women.

I kneel on the straw by the young wolf, then shrug off my cloak so I can access my supplies.

The male in the green kilt whistles as my nightgown is revealed. A low growl reverberates in the alpha's throat, and he quietens.

I ignore them both as I slip off the satchel.

I am no stranger to healing – my mother was ill for a lot of my childhood, and she often had bruises and scrapes. But this young male looks particularly bad. His face is bloody, and he's writhing in pain.

'Shh.' I push the coppery hair off his sticky forehead. 'It's okay. What's hurting? Tell me what's wrong.'

I feel the alpha's eyes on me. 'I dislocated his arm,' he says.

'Be quiet,' I snap.

I wet a rag and start to wipe the blood from the young male's face. Surprisingly, the bruising beneath it is not as

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bad as I expected. The cut across his eyebrow looks like it has already healed, and his nose is crooked, but barely swollen.

'Bring him over here so I can deal with him.'

The boy winces.

I turn to glare at the alpha. 'Haven't you done enough?'

He stands up and leans against the bars between the two cells, dangling his big arms through the gaps. It's cold in here, and even though he's dressed in nothing but a kilt, his body heat washes over me.

My pulse quickens. If he stretched, he could almost touch my hair. His expression gives nothing away as he watches me.

'You're brave to come here,' he says.

On my knees and in my nightgown, he seems even more imposing than he did when he was causing havoc in the ring. Even with the bars between us.

'I've faced worse monsters than you.'

I'm not sure if it's a trick of the torchlight flickering across his face, but I think the corner of his lip twitches.

'Bring the lad to me,' he says. 'And let's see how brave you really are.'

I turn away from him and lift my leather flask to the boy's mouth. He takes a small sip of water before grimacing and laying his head back on the dirt. He's clutching one of his arms, and it looks red and swollen. I run my hand softly over his elbow and he groans. If I bandage it up tightly before it starts to heal, and create a sling, it might help. First, I pull the willow bark from my satchel.

'For the pain,' I say.

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'They said you were a beauty, but I didn't know you were a redhead,' says the alpha.

'What has that got to do with anything?'

'Not a hair colour you tend to see south of the border. Perhaps you have ancestors in the Northlands.'

'I don't.'

I put the willow bark in the boy's mouth and he chews, looking up at me with bloodshot eyes.

'My people say those with red hair have fire in their souls,' says the alpha.

I glare over my shoulder. My mouth dries at the intensity in his gaze and I swallow. 'I don't.'

'Hm.'

I turn back to the shuddering boy.

'Stop your whining,' says the alpha.

Something wild and angry grows inside me, and before I can tame it, I find myself on my feet, whirling to face him.

'How dare you speak to him.' At my full height, my eyes align with his shoulders and I have to tilt back my head to glare up at him. 'Look at him. He's just a boy . . . and you . . . you did that to him. You're a bully. And a monster. And a bloody horrible *brute*.'

This time, I'm sure the corner of his lip quirks. 'No fire in your soul, huh?'

'He's just a child. And you were going to kill him. Are you pleased with yourself? Have you no shame?'

All the humour drains from his face and his expression darkens. 'It was your *betrothed* that put me in that ring.'

'So you bear no accountability for your actions? Is that what you're saying?'

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A low growl reverberates in his throat. 'I had no choice.'

'There is always a choice,' I snarl back. 'It may not be an easy choice. But it's a choice nonetheless.'

His breathing is hard, and he swallows – as if pushing down whatever emotion my words have provoked. 'What would you know about choices, *princess*?'

'Enough.'

He drags his teeth over his bottom lip. 'I wonder if you'll be so brave when there are no bars to separate us.'

'There will always be bars to separate us.'

'Will there?'

My heartbeat quickens at his tone – at the implication in it – and from the curl of his lips I wonder if he can hear it.

He turns his attention to the boy as though he is done with me. 'Get over here,' he snarls.

'No,' the boy whimpers.

'Stop being such a bloody great wuss.'

'I told you to leave him alone,' I snap.

'And I told him to get over here.' The alpha's eyes narrow on the boy. 'And it's the second time he's disobeyed me in as many days.'

'Why on earth would he obey you?'

He sighs as though I've asked the most exasperating question in the world. 'What is he wearing?'

'What?'

He nods at the boy, and I look down at him – at his pale slender chest, then the red tartan kilt he wears.

'And what am I wearing?' he asks.

I turn back to the alpha, noting his kilt, made from red

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tartan. My gaze inadvertently drops to his calves, which are as thick as tree trunks. I swallow hard.

'They're the same, aye?' he says.

'So?'

'So! You destroy our lands, steal from us, do your experiments on us, kill us, imprison us, and still you don't know a damn thing about us.' He shakes his head, and sighs. 'We're from the same clan. He's one of mine. The wee shite's called Ryan.' He glares at the boy. 'And if he doesn't get his arse over here, then he won't be coming with me when I leave.'

'I . . . Why would he . . .' I frown. 'What do you mean, when you leave?' I fold my arms and look pointedly at the cell he is confined within. 'I hardly think you're going anywhere anytime soon.'

He shifts, folding his corded forearms through the bars. 'No?'

'No.'

'Why do you think I'm here, princess?' He looks pointedly around his dank cell. 'For the accommodation?'

'You're here because you're an enemy of the kingdom. And you're a prisoner. And a wolf. And,' I add, somewhat shrilly, unsure of why he's getting under my skin so much, 'because you killed three men and almost killed this poor boy.'

He shrugs a big shoulder. 'Be that as it may, I don't plan on staying for long.'

I grit my teeth, my breathing faster than it should be. I don't know what's wrong with me. I am a master of my emotions. I have been all of my life. I have pushed them

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down far enough that most of the time, I forget they are even there.

Why is this prisoner – this *wolf* – provoking this wildness inside me? 'So, what? You actually think you're going to escape?'

'Aye.'

'If you're so certain, why on earth would you tell me? That's not very smart, is it?'

'What are you going to do, princess? Tell your *betrothed*?' He shakes his head. 'I don't think so. Because that would mean telling him you came down here. And I don't think you'll want him to know about that, will you?'

My blood turns cold and the alpha smiles wickedly.

'Now *you* have a choice, princess. Bring the lad to me so I can fix his arm, then you can make him a sling. Or leave him here to suffer.'

'That's . . . that's why you want him to come to you?'

'His shoulder is dislocated.' He points at the whimpering form on the ground. His hand is close enough that I feel a waft of air at the movement. 'Look at how his arm is jutting out at that angle. If I don't pop it back into the joint, he'll lose use of it until he can see a healer up north. And that'll slow me down. Bring him to me so I can fix it. And be quick about it.'

He speaks like a man who is used to people doing as he tells them. Yet he is in no position to be barking orders at me.

'You were going to kill him,' I say.

'And you stopped me. And now I'm going to save him. But only if you do as I say.'

I furrow my brow. 'If this is a trick to . . . to try and get

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the key from me or something, you should know that it's silver, and there are armed guards outside anyway.'

'Aye, I figured as much. It's no trick. And I don't need you to get me out of the *kennels*.'

He says the word with the same distaste as I did earlier.

I look into his eyes, almost evergreen in the darkness. Again, I feel that strange tug on my soul. And for some strange reason I believe him.

I sigh and, as if sensing my submission to his will, he inclines his head. 'Bring the lad to me.'

I take a deep breath, then I crouch down. 'Ryan,' I say softly. 'You need to get up so we can help you.'

He groans. 'I don't want to.'

'You have a choice,' I tell him. 'But if you choose not to get up, you'll likely die.'

'I wish I'd never come here.' He glares over my shoulder.

'Aye, I wish you hadn't too,' says the alpha darkly. 'But here you are. So stop acting like an insolent pup and do as you're told.'

Ryan's sharp jaw sets, and he looks as if he's about to throw a temper tantrum. But then he sits and I see the alpha is right. His shoulder is swollen and his arm is out of place. It must hurt.

I help him up, and he drags his feet across the dirty floor as I lead him across the cell.

'Good lass,' says the alpha.

Something heats inside me. Who does he think he is, speaking to me like that? He's a prisoner, someone from the wolf clans no less, and I'm the king's daughter. I glare at him but he has already turned his attention to Ryan.

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He turns the boy around, then pulls him backwards into the bars, hooking a large arm across his chest. He grabs his good shoulder to hold him steady. Ryan whimpers, his breathing growing rapid, as the alpha takes hold of his other forearm and runs his hand down it.

The alpha's eyes flick to mine. 'Why do the guards think you're here?'

'I . . .' I force myself to meet his gaze, even though I feel suddenly warm. 'I told them I was from the brothel.'

He smirks and my cheeks flame. 'That should work.'

He makes a sudden movement.

'FUCK!' roars Ryan.

The horrible wolf in the next cell chuckles. The alpha grins, too.

'Ah, be quiet, you big wuss.' He musses Ryan's hair as the boy mutters obscenities under his breath. He shoves him gently towards me. 'You'll need to make a sling for—'

'I know,' I snap.

I lead Ryan to the wall and sit him down, grabbing the fabric from my satchel and crouching before him. His face is bright red and his breathing is shuddery as I slide the bandage beneath his forearm, then bring the top end around the back of his neck.

'You don't like being told what to do,' observes the alpha.

'No one likes to be told what to do.'

'Some people like it.' I can hear the smirk in his tone and I look up at him, confused. He shakes his head. 'Never mind.'

He watches me in silence as I tie the two ends of the bandage together above Ryan's collarbone.

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I'm just finishing up when the main iron door screeches open.

I still, panic writhing inside my stomach as I imagine what Sebastian will do to me if he catches me here.

A woman's sultry laughter seeps through the darkness and I let loose a breath.

'Who's been a good boy?' she coos, as if speaking to a dog, and I tense. 'Who's a good boy and deserves his treat?'

The horrible wolf who whistled at me chuckles. 'I've been a good boy.' He leers. 'You can come in here, sweetheart.'

'Oh, yes?' Her sweet rose-scented perfume permeates the dank air as her footsteps get closer. 'And what about you? They say you're an alpha. Is that true? I've always wanted to bed an alpha.'

I look over my shoulder.

A pretty woman with long blonde hair leans against the bars of the alpha's cell. Her lips are painted bright red, and her cheeks are rosy. Her dark cloak hangs over one shoulder and reveals that she's not wearing anything underneath.

She flutters her eyelashes, but the alpha keeps his back to her.

'No?' she coos. 'Are you sure? How about now?'

She drops her cloak, revealing her naked body. I tense, my eyes widening. I have never seen anyone unclothed before. A muscle twitches in the alpha's jaw and his gaze remains on me.

'Very well, pet.' She pouts. 'I suppose you'll just have to watch.'

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She unlocks the door to the next cell and saunters inside, hips swaying.

'That's it, sweetheart,' leers the horrible wolf, looking her up and down. 'Get over here. I've got something for you.'

He pushes her to her knees and my heartbeat starts pounding too fast, too hard, as she smiles up at him. What is she doing? Why is she . . .?

The alpha before me shifts to the side, partially blocking them from view. 'It's time to leave, princess.'

His low voice doesn't cover the wet sucking sound that comes seconds later, and the horrible things the wolf is snarling under his breath in the next cell. All the warmth drains from my body and I'm frozen.

Is she . . .? With her mouth?

'Princess.' There is a command in the alpha's tone.

I'm distracted by the blur of movement in the shadows of the cell beyond as the wolf flips the woman over so she's on her hands and knees, and mounts her from behind.

If you wish to be taken like a common mutt, that can be arranged tomorrow night after the ceremony. Sebastian's threat floods my mind and my heart beats faster, a trapped bird unable to escape its cage.

The man grunts, thrusting harder, his face twisted and ugly. The woman's hair swishes in front of her face as her whole body jerks. Her hands slide through the dirt and her knees scrape against the cold hard ground. She must be in pain. And the sounds she's making . . .

Dots dance in front of my eyes.

Tomorrow night. Tomorrow night this will happen to me.

The shadows tighten around me, bind me. I can't move.

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I can't breathe. I'm trapped. A prisoner. I'm always a prisoner. I cannot escape this.

Who knows, perhaps I will throw you into the kennels afterwards.

The woman's moans become louder, high-pitched.

'That's it,' snarls the wolf. 'Take it, you dirty little bitch.'

'*Yes*,' she cries back. '*Yes*.'

Perhaps I will even let this alpha have a go with you, seeing as you have denied him his kill.

My throat tightens. I can't swallow. I can't breathe. I clutch my chest. The darkness swims around me. The air is liquid and I'm drowning in it.

'Princess,' the alpha barks. 'Look at me.' His rough voice cuts through the swirling whirlpool that is sucking me under –strong and demanding obedience.

Slowly, I turn my head.

'That's it. Keep your eyes on me.' He's crouching down so he's almost at my level, big hands curling around the bars between us. I don't know when he moved. 'Deep breaths.'

I do as he says, and some of the tightening of my chest loosens.

'That's it. Breathe in. Breathe out.' The raging waters become lapping waves as his voice washes over me. 'Breathe in. Breathe out.'

Everything feels far away. Horrible sounds echo around the cells, but I keep my gaze fixed on the face in front of mine. I keep breathing. His expression is unreadable.

'That's it. Easy now.' His voice is surprisingly gentle. 'Good lass.' I snap back into my body. 'Are you okay?'

'Fine,' I say, my tone clipped, my voice hoarse. Because

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I'm not, and he knows it, and now I am weak. I avert my gaze, but something pulls it back again. 'I'm fine.'

He studies my face, and I study his. He's younger than I first thought. Beyond the warrior physique, layers of grime and unkempt hair, there is brightness in his eyes and a youthful glow to his skin. I think he may be in his mid-twenties at most.

The noises behind him get louder and faster. 'You'd best be taking your leave now, princess. The lad's okay. You did a brave thing coming here.'

I turn to Ryan, who is watching me with a strange expression.

The horrible wolf roars.

Ryan's nose wrinkles. 'I wish I'd never fucking come here,' he mutters again.

I take a deep breath, then stuff the spare bandages and the water flask back in my satchel. I throw on my cloak, pulling the hood over my head. It takes me two attempts to do up the fastening due to my trembling fingers.

I hurry out of the cell and lock it behind me.

The alpha stalks across his cell as I pass, his eyes dark. I'm only a few paces away when he says something.

I halt. 'What?'

For a moment, all I can hear is the horrible panting sound from the next cell.

'He won't touch you,' says the alpha – his voice barely audible.

'Who?'

'Sebastian. He won't touch you.' His tone is so dark, so certain. I turn to face him – raising my head to meet his gaze.

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'He is to be my husband,' I say softly.

Again, I am reminded of the rugged mountains when I look at him. His stance is dominant, powerful, and his face could be carved from rock. His eyes, though . . . those eyes . . . Something that looks like remorse, or regret, passes over them.

'No,' he says, his voice equally quiet. 'No, he isn't.'

Does his plan for escape involve murdering Sebastian? Something inside tells me I should feel *something* about that. Sadness. Gladness. *Anything.*

I feel nothing.

I wonder if my body, this vessel that I trap my soul within, is slowly turning to stone. A statue for men like Sebastian to look at that has no purpose, no desire, no feeling.

And yet . . . as the alpha stares at me, something stirs.

I swallow hard. Then I look away – averting my eyes from the horrible wolf and the naked woman – and hurry to the main iron doors.

I feel the alpha's eyes on my back as I'm let out of the kennels.

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3



I am to be wed tomorrow, and I cannot sleep.

I lie in bed, the covers pulled up to my chin, listening to the wind howling outside of the window. Shadows dance across the ceiling, and there is a bite to the air now there are only embers in the grate.

I was trained for this.

I was trained to be beautiful and silent and obedient. I forged a prison for my wild and angry soul and I waited for the day to come when I was to be wed.

A small part of me dreamed that one day I would fall in love like the princesses in my mother's stories, that one day I would be free.

But I always knew there would be no happy ending for me.

So I waited and I dreaded.

And now it is here.

Tomorrow I will marry a man who makes wolves fight as if they are dogs. Who threatened to take me like a mutt. Whose leery eyes make my skin crawl.

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A man who I do not know, I do not love.

He won't touch you.

The alpha's promise resounds in my mind. I should tell someone what he said. I should tell someone he means to escape. I should tell someone he made a threat to the lord, to my betrothed. He is a wolf. An enemy.

Yet I lie here in the darkness, listening to the wind howling outside the castle.

And I remain as silent as I was trained.

It was an idle threat, anyway. There is no way that he can escape.

We are both prisoners within these walls.

Still, I glance at the silver letter opener on the bedside table before sleep finally takes me.

***

Sometimes I dream I am a statue in the palace gardens. People wander around me, commenting on my shape, my form.

Her eyes look almost alive, they say, *when the light hits them.*

And all the while, I'm trapped inside myself. Screaming. But my lungs are stone and my lips are hard and my mouth tastes like old cemeteries. So no one hears me, no one cares.

Other times, I'm back in that church and I'm so scared I think I'm going to pass out.

I don't cry, though. Father doesn't like it when I cry. And the priest is in front of me with his crop.

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I didn't sin, I protest.

Oh, child. All women sin. Your mother was a sinner, and you are a sinner too. Do you want the Sun Goddess to be angry? No? Good. Turn around.

Other times, I'm running. I'm running through the forest as fast as I can. The wind is in my hair, and twigs snap beneath my bare feet. I am free, but I am afraid. Because something is chasing me and I fear what will happen if it catches me.

My mother's voice ricochets off the trees as I burst into the moonlight.

Wake up, Aurora.

Wake up!

***

My eyes jolt open.

Rain hammers against the walls, and the fire in the grate is completely out. As my vision adjusts to the darkness, I realize what woke me. There is faint shouting coming from somewhere within the castle.

I frown, my breath misting in front of my face.

Outside, something howls. The wind?

The door to my chambers bursts open and I sit upright, grasping the bedsheets.

'What is the meaning—?' The words die in my throat.

The horrible dark-haired male from the kennels prowls into the room. He's still wearing the green kilt from earlier, but now he wears a linen shirt and boots as well. He smells acrid, like sweat mixed with something else unpleasant.

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His gaze homes in on me and there's something predatory in it. 'Hello, sweetheart.'

Visions of his face, twisted and red, as he mounted the woman in the cells, flash before my eyes.

Two other men flank him, wearing the same green tartan. The bald one is tall and muscular with a dark beard and a serious expression. The other has rat-like features and mousy-brown hair that hangs to his chin.

Blood drips from their daggers onto the flagstones.

My heart stills. Time slows down.

One of them – the muscular one – closes the door behind him.

'You were right about her, Magnus,' says the rat-like one. 'She's quite a beauty.' He sniffs the air and grins. 'Mm. So sweet and innocent too.'

'Aye.' Magnus's thin lips curl into a twisted smile. 'Not for long, though.'

I scramble from the four-poster bed and almost trip over my covers. I grab the letter opener from my bedside table and brandish it before me. Even though it is made of silver, it is a pathetic means to defend myself against three bloodthirsty wolves.

They know it too.

The rat-like one snickers as Magnus stalks closer.

'Leave now.' My voice is shaking. 'And Lord Sebastian will let you live.'

'Your lord is a bit busy right now,' says Magnus. 'It's just us, and you. I thought we could take the time to get to know each other better. What do you say?'

I want to clutch my arms over my body as he looks me

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up and down, but I do not want to lower the small blade. My nightdress is too thin and the rat-like one leers at my breasts. My nipples are hard due to the cold.

'Get. Out,' I hiss.

Magnus chuckles. 'Come on, sweetheart. There's no need to be like—'

The door to my room swings open.

'*Out*.' A low growl comes from the doorway.

The three males stiffen.

The alpha stands there. He's wearing a crumpled white linen shirt and high boots as well as his red tartan kilt. His face looks like it is carved from thunder and stone. '*Out*.'

Magnus swallows, then a smile twists back onto his face and he turns. 'It's just a bit of fun—'

'*Now*,' says the alpha.

The alpha is bigger than the other three wolves, and there's something in his eyes that promises death. Magnus seems to realize that, and shakes his head.

'Come on, lads. Time to get the fuck out of here.' He grins and gives me a mock bow. 'Until we meet again, Your Highness.'

The alpha shuts the door behind them. My mouth is dry and my head is whirling. Is he my saviour? Or does he have something even worse in mind?

'Are you hurt?' he asks.

I hold up the letter opener and curse my trembling hand.

'I'm sorry about them. Their whole clan—' His green eyes darken. 'They'll pay for it later.'

'You need to leave.'

'Aye. I do.' He swallows, and his gaze moves from the

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wardrobe to the crescent moon through the window. As the silence extends between us, I hear more shouting in the castle. 'Do you have a warm cloak?'

'Why?'

'It's cold outside.'

'I don't see why that is of any relevance to me,' I say, my voice higher in pitch than I'd like it to be.

A flicker of regret crosses his face. 'Aye, you do.'

A humourless laugh escapes my lips and I step back. 'You can't possibly think I'm going with you.'

'You are, princess.'

'You . . . you won't hurt me,' I say.

He sighs. 'That's where you're wrong. I won't kill you. And I won't lay a finger on you in the way those bastards were threatening. But you're coming with me. And if I have to overpower you in order to make that happen, I can't promise that won't hurt.'

I narrow my eyes, tilting my chin up. 'I helped you, earlier.'

'Aye, you did. And I appreciate that, princess. I really do. It doesn't change the fact that I'm taking you with me.'

When he steps forward, I brandish the letter opener before me. 'Stay back.'

The blade is laughably small in relation to his huge build, but he raises his hands placatingly. 'Please calm down.'

Emotions that have lain dormant inside me for years awaken.

'How dare you tell me to calm down.'

Every time my father, or the priest, or my brother dismissed me for daring to show emotion flashes before my eyes and feeds the wildness growing inside me.

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'You come into my chambers in the middle of the night' – I slice the blade through the air – 'thinking you can steal me from my bed.' I cut the space between us. 'And you act as if I am overreacting?'

I jab the letter opener at his stomach and he grabs my wrist.

I still. His hand is callused and strong as it wraps around the bone.

'*Get off me*,' I hiss.

He bends my wrist and the tiny blade hits the stone floor and clatters. Crouching down, he picks it up. He winces when the silver comes into contact with his skin.

'You can have this back when you behave yourself.'

When he pockets it, I kick his chest. He grabs my ankle, putting a hand on my lower back to steady me. Our eyes meet, and my breath hitches at the intensity of his expression.

'What do you want with me?' I ask.

'I think you can help me end this war.'

I shake my head. 'Kidnapping me will only worsen it. You're going to get yourself killed, you fool.'

'If that is the price I must pay to save my people, I will gladly pay it. So, what will it be, princess? Will you grab your cloak and walk out of this room with me? Or am I going to throw you over my shoulder? You have a choice. It's not a very good one.' He mimics my words from earlier, a grim smile on his face. 'But it's a choice nonetheless.'

'You bastard.' I shake my head. 'You can't possibly think you'll get all the way out of the castle.'

I can hear shouting and the thunder of hooves in the grounds below.

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'See? They're coming for you.' I jerk my head towards the window, and a strand of red hair catches in my mouth. 'If you go now, you have a chance to—'

Before I know what's happening, he's on his feet, and I'm over his shoulder. I shriek, punching his back.

'Are you insane?' I snarl. 'They'll skin you alive for—'

He throws open my wardrobe and the words die in my throat at the inopportune moment for my threat.

In the current circumstance, guilt should not flood so powerfully through my chest at the sight of the wolf coat that hangs there. Nor should I want, desperately, to tell him that it was there when I arrived.

The wolves have been attacking my people for centuries, yet I can't bring myself to agree with some of Sebastian's more barbaric practices.

He stills, the muscles in his back tightening.

Then he grabs a different fur and heads out of my chambers.

I punch him between his shoulder blades again, but I don't put my full force into it.

Perhaps it's because his mood has darkened and I'm afraid. Or perhaps it's because a small part of me is glad I'm being taken away from my fate with Sebastian, despite how frightening this wolf may be.

'You won't get away with this,' I growl, regardless.

'I will. Now be quiet.'

'Where are you taking me?'

'Home.'

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4



Shouts fill the castle and torchlight flickers as I'm carried through a labyrinth of stone corridors.

I struggle against my captor, but his thick arm only tightens around my waist.

I don't know where I'd run to even if I did escape him. Sebastian? My father? Would that be any better? Would it be worse?

Trapped as I am, something wild seems to have been knocked loose inside me. It rattles around in my chest and I do not feel the hopelessness I should be feeling. The anger I have caged since my mother died surges hot and free through my veins.

I am not stone. I am not a statue.

I am fire.

And somehow it has taken this man, this beast, to make me see it.

I pound against the alpha's back. 'Get off me, you bloody horrible brute.' My hair catches in my mouth. I kick my bare feet and hit nothing but air. 'Get off me.

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You'll die for this, you horrible—' I cut myself off as we turn a corner.

There are two guards lying in a pool of blood. The alpha steps over the bodies, and I'm forced to stare down at their lifeless faces as he continues onwards.

The reality of my situation slams fully into me.

These men are dangerous. They're killers. They're wolves.

Of course being taken away from my homeland by the enemies of my people is worse than staying. Of course it is. And yet . . .

The alpha cuts through one of the servants' passageways, almost as if he knows where he's going, even if I am lost, and a scream from a lady-in- waiting pierces my ears. She catches my eye as we pass, then runs in the opposite direction, her dark hair falling free from her cap.

The alpha won't make it out of here.

They'll imprison him until the full moon, then skin him alive.

The thing that's been knocked loose in my chest becomes frantic. My heart pounds wildly in my chest.

'She's gone to get help, you horrible brute,' I hiss at him. 'There are guards stationed only a couple of minutes away.'

'Aye?' he says, his voice low. He quickens his pace, half running down the servants' staircase. 'Thank you.'

I cling on to his shoulders, my fingers digging into his muscles, my body jolting against his back. 'I wasn't . . . I wasn't trying to help you!' I say, shrilly.

Although I wonder, as I say it, if that is entirely true.

The alpha goes left, then right, bursting into a wider corridor. I recognize the mural of warriors slaughtering wolves

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on the wall. It shows our victory in the Battle of the Beasts a century ago, and it is close to the western entrance hall.

He is almost free of this place. I am almost—

'Halt.' A male voice cuts through the quiet.

The alpha stills. Two guards block the corridor ahead. They have the sigil of the Southlands, a sun, painted on their shields. My father's men.

'Is that the princess?' one says incredulously.

The other chuckles. 'Oh, I don't envy you, dog. Do you know what they do to your kind up here?'

The rattle of swords signals three more guards stepping into the corridor behind us. I breathe in sharply.

'Don't kill it,' says one of them – a burly looking man with the silver star of the Borderlands on his breastplate. 'Lord Sebastian will want to spend some time with this one.'

The alpha's body stiffens. 'I'm going to need to put you down for this, princess,' he says softly.

My breath hitches as he slides me down his front and places me on the flagstones. The guards are charging, but everything feels still. His eyes bore into mine and they are as green and alive as the forest.

Don't run, he seems to be telling me. *Don't run.*

He pushes me aside. I flatten myself against a mural as he dodges the swing of a sword. He grabs his attacker's head and twists. A sickly crack fills the hall before he hurls the body into the next soldier, who skids into the wall. He roars and charges.

Blood and muscle and steel blur in front of me as he takes on three men at once.

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He is a force of nature. He swings, and blocks, and dodges each lethal blow that comes his way. He impales one soldier on his own sword, then rams another into the far wall – smashing his head against the stone with such force that the chandelier above trembles.

My body trembles as though the decision that's rattling inside my body is a tangible, living thing.

I should run.

But I don't want to stay in this castle.

There are two paths ahead of me and I am lost. I do not know which one to take.

The alpha picks up a sword from the floor. He thrusts it through the chin of another guard, causing blood to spill from his mouth.

The horror of it forces me to face what the alpha is: a killer.

I flee down the corridor to my right, my bare feet slapping against the cold ground. My hair flies loose behind me, and my long nightdress bunches at my ankles. I'm breathing fast, and my heart is pounding.

I run wildly, frantically. This place is new to me and, though it is supposed to be my home, it is cold and unfamiliar. I am lost in a labyrinth of stone and there is a beast in here and I don't know the way out.

'Princess, wait.'

I turn.

The alpha stands in the corridor behind me. His shirt is slick with sweat, and his biceps strain against his sleeves. He walks slowly, carefully, towards me. He's like a predator, trying not to scare his prey.

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'Princess, do you really—'

He tenses when he reaches me, as if he hears something I cannot, then he hooks an arm around my waist. My breathing sharpens as he draws me into a shadowy alcove. He pulls my back flush against his chest.

I am aware of every ridge of his torso, and the quick pounding of his heartbeat. His breaths are hot and uneven by my ear. His scent floods my nostrils – heat and sweat and the mountains. It overwhelms me. I still, even as my blood pounds through my body and my heartbeat hammers in my ears.

A scream builds in my chest, and he clamps his hand over my mouth.

'Find her!' Lord Sebastian snaps. 'Find her now! She is my betrothed and I will not have her taken from me. If they touch her, if they defile her, she is of no value to me! Do you understand?'

I feel the slight growl building in the alpha's chest.

For a moment, we are both breathing fast as Sebastian rants, just a few feet away, about the importance of my purity. Slowly, the alpha drops his hand from my mouth. It's as if he's daring me to scream.

'I need her with her virtue intact. Do you understand?' says Sebastian. 'Find her. Find her!'

'Yes, my lord.'

The voices fade away.

I breathe out slowly. For a moment, neither of us move.

The alpha drops his arm and I step away. His face is as dark as thunder as he stares down the corridor.

'Do you really want to stay?' he asks.

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'What difference does it make? I am a prisoner either way.'

'Aye.' He runs a hand over the back of his neck. 'And I can't promise you it won't be dangerous up in the Northlands. My people don't much care for humans. But I promise you that I'll protect you.' He swallows. 'And I'll give you the choice. Run now, and I won't follow. Come with me, and no one will touch you. I swear it on the Moon Goddess.'

He holds out his hand for me to take. I am trembling as the decision builds in my chest. My soul is rattling against its prison, wild and screaming.

The alpha's gaze is unwavering. It's as though there is no doubt in his mind what I will do.

'What do you want with me?' I ask.

He drags his teeth over his bottom lip, as if deciding whether to tell me. 'Sebastian has something of ours. We want it back.'

I let out a bitter laugh. 'You want to hold me ransom. You think he will make a trade.'

'Aye,' he says.

And there it is. My 'choice'. The two paths that lie before me.

A choice between two men. Two killers. Two monsters.

Only it's not much of a choice at all, is it? Again, I am nothing more than a prize – an object – to be passed between men. A burst of hysteria builds up inside me and spills out of my mouth in a manic giggle.

'There it is,' I say. 'That's what this is all about! Well, you heard what the lord said. If I am defiled then I am of no value to anyone.'

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'That's not why I'll keep you safe.'

I stare at his open palm, then I look down the corridor in the direction that Lord Sebastian went in.

'I heard what he said to you,' says the alpha, his voice quiet. 'At the dog fight.' When I meet his eyes, there is a surprising amount of anger contained within them. 'I will keep you safe. Then I will set you free. I swear it.'

I don't know if it's that word – free – that makes my heart beat faster, or whether it's the look on his face. Even though I am a statue, and statues don't move, my fingers twitch at my sides.

'I swear it, princess,' he says.

And somewhere beyond the adrenaline that's pumping through me, a thought begins to form.

If I can gather intelligence on the wolves, perhaps I can finally prove to my father that I am more than just a prize to be won.

And, if I help my father win his war, he will have no use for Sebastian.

Perhaps I can escape my fate on my own terms.

'What does Sebastian have that belongs to you?' I ask.

There's a click behind me and the alpha looks over my shoulder.

'Step back, my lady.' A guard grabs my arm and pushes me behind him, his musket trained on the alpha. 'They're silver bullets, so don't do anything stupid. Hands behind your head.'

Slowly, the alpha raises his hands and clasps them behind his neck.

'On your knees, dog.'

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