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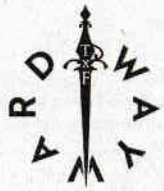
Also by Lauren Palphreyman

The Wolf King trilogy

The Wolf King
The Night Prince

THE WOLF KING

LAUREN PALPHREYMAN



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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

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

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.*

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 and wild – 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.

'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 the south – 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.

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.

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

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