

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat c 1

(Elena)

The dirt has settled flat. No fresh mound anymore — just cold ground and a stone with his name on it.

Viktor. Dead a year. We were married for three. Three years of duty, of cold beds, of him looking through me like I was part of the furniture. I don't cry anymore. Stopped six months ago and haven't missed it.

Behind me they're whispering. Pack members. They think I can't hear, but I'm an Alpha — my hearing is sharper than their gossip.

"She can't do it alone."

"A female Alpha never lasts."

I keep my back straight, hands clenched at my sides. The wind cuts cold off the mountain and I let it. Let it freeze whatever's still soft in me.

A year. I've kept this Pack breathing for a full year — and let's be honest, Viktor wasn't much help when he was alive either. He was weak. I was the one actually leading. But a widow doesn't get credit for that. A widow gets pity, or suspicion, depending on who you ask.

Footsteps crunch across the frozen grass behind me. Heavy. Deliberate.

"Elena."

Marcus. My mother's brother. He's been hovering around me like something waiting for roadkill all year. I don't turn around.

"Uncle."

He comes to stand beside me, looking down at the grave. His face is kind. It's always kind. That's what makes my skin crawl.

"You've been out here too long," he says. "Come inside."

"I'm fine."

"The council needs you tonight."

I turn and look at him properly — gray beard, warm eyes, that gentle smile he wears like a mask. My gut twists the same way it always does.

Viktor died in his sleep. No wounds. Nothing the healers could find. Just stopped breathing, healthy wolf in his prime. Marcus was the last person to see him alive. Brought him tea before bed.

I have no proof. Only the feeling, and feelings don't win arguments.

"What meeting?" I ask.

He sighs like he's carrying something heavy. "The elders worry. You're young, Elena. Strong. But the packs outside our borders smell weakness when there's no Alpha male standing beside you."

"I am the Alpha."

"To us, yes. To the wolves outside—" He shrugs. "They don't see it that way."

"So what do they propose?"

He licks his lips. Here it is — the thing he's been building toward this whole conversation.

"The Moon Goddess chooses our mates. The Alma bloodline has always been blessed by her. She would want you to take another mate from that family. Keep the Pack stable."

I stare at him. "The Alma family. The same family whose parents were executed for treason. The same family whose only surviving son was banished as a rogue."

"Rhydian Alma. Yes."

Almost laugh. Almost. "You want me to marry a boy who bit off an elder's fingers? Who got his first wolf killed in an illegal fight at sixteen? The one they say murdered three wolves who came to bring him back?"

"He's twenty now. The bloodline is pure—"

"Was it the Moon Goddess's idea?" I ask. "Or yours?"

His smile doesn't move. "The elders consulted the omens. The bones. She speaks through us, Elena."

She speaks through us. And my uncle happens to be one of the elders. Been whispering in their ears for months.

"I'm not marrying a rogue," I say.

"Then Shadowpine will attack. They're already testing our borders — you've seen the scout reports. You know what's coming." His voice drops. "They will burn our villages. Your wolves will die. And no, they won't follow a widow forever."

He's not wrong about the threat. I've seen the tracks. The near-misses at the border.

But Rhydian Alma is a brat raised on gold and cruelty, whose parents sold out their own Pack for money. When the elders came to arrest his father, he attacked them. Banished at seventeen, been living feral in the mountains ever since. They should have executed him. They didn't.

And my uncle wants me to drag him home and put a ring on his finger.

"No," I say.

The smile finally slips. "Elena—"

"No." I step close enough to smell the mint on his breath, close enough to watch the pulse jump in his neck. "I will lead this Pack the way I have for a year — with my teeth and my brain. I don't need a mate. I don't need a man. And I won't bring that animal into my home."

Something ugly flickers behind his eyes. Hungry. Then it's gone.

"The vote will happen," he says quietly. "If you refuse the Goddess's will, the council will act."

"They can try."

He turns and walks a few steps, then stops and raises his voice — loud enough for the crowd behind me to hear every word.

"Emergency council meeting. Tomorrow at dawn. In front of the whole Pack."

Gasps ripple through the crowd. Excited whispers.

I feel the trap close around me.

I watch him walk away, hands shaking — not from the cold.

Then I look down at the grave one last time.

Did you kill him? I ask silently. *Did you clear the path for this?*

The dirt doesn't answer.

I close my eyes. One breath. When I open them, my face is stone.

I refuse.

But Marcus called the vote anyway. In front of everyone. At dawn.

And now I have until morning to figure out how to survive my own family.