

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat

Chapter 11: Teaching him how to kiss

I wake up because something is wrong.

Not wrong like danger. Wrong like — warmth. Too much of it, pressed against my back, breath on my neck that isn't mine, and an arm thrown over my waist like whoever it belongs to has been asleep long enough to get comfortable and completely forgot they hate me.

I lie still.

My first thought is Viktor. Cold, automatic, the way four years of marriage wires your brain. Then the smell reaches me — smoke and pine and something younger, something wilder — and I remember.

Rhydian.

My husband.

God help me.

I can feel him breathing. Slow and even, still asleep, his chest rising and falling against my back in a rhythm that has absolutely no right to feel as good as it does. His arm is heavy across my ribs. His knees are tucked behind mine. At some point in the night we folded into each other like we'd been doing it for years and neither of us noticed.

I should move. I'm about to move.

Then he shifts.

Not awake — just shifting, the small unconscious adjustments of sleep — and his face turns into the back of my neck and his lips brush my skin and my entire nervous system stops working correctly.

I don't move.

His lips do it again. Still not intentional. Just sleep, just warmth, just a boy who hasn't been close to another person in four years gravitating toward heat like something starving.

Then he goes still.

The breathing changes. Shallower. Slower in a different way. The way breathing changes when someone is suddenly very awake and trying to seem like they're not.

He knows. He's realized.

I wait to see what he does.

His lips touch my neck again — and this time it's deliberate.

Just barely. The lightest possible contact, the kind you could still blame on sleep if you had to. But deliberate. I'd bet my Pack on it.

My heart does something inconvenient.

I keep my breathing even. Keep my body still. Let him think he's the only one awake, because I want to see — genuinely want to see — what he does when no one's watching him perform defiance.

Another kiss. Slightly more certain. Slightly lower, closer to my shoulder.

His arm tightens across my ribs. Not grabbing — just tightening, like he's checking I'm still real.

I close my eyes.

I've spent a year in this bed not being touched. Viktor never held me in his sleep. Viktor slept on his side with his back to me and three feet of cold sheet between us. I used to lie awake counting the ways absence can hollow a person out.

And now this boy — this infuriating, untrained, terrified boy who bites people when he's scared — is pressing his mouth against my neck like I'm something worth moving toward.

He doesn't know what he's doing. That's the thing. That's what makes it worse.

"You're awake," I say.

He goes rigid.

Dead still, every muscle locking up at once, lips frozen against my skin. A beat of silence where I can feel him deciding whether to deny it.

"...yeah," he mutters against my neck.

"How long?"

"Few minutes."

Liar. "Okay."

Another silence. He doesn't move away. Doesn't move closer either — just stays exactly where he is, arm still over my ribs, mouth still near my shoulder, suspended in that particular kind of paralysis that happens when you've already committed to something and can't figure out how to walk it back.

"You could have stopped," I say.

"I know."

"But you didn't."

I turn over.

It takes him by surprise — he pulls back fast, giving me room, and by the time I'm facing him he's already got that guarded look on, jaw set, eyes doing that thing where they go flat to hide what's behind them. But his ears are red. His hair is a disaster. And his mouth — God, his mouth is slightly parted and his lips are still soft from sleep and he looks nothing like the snarling rogue they dragged into my hall.

He looks like a twenty-year-old boy who just got caught.

"Hi," I say.

He blinks. "...hi."

I reach up and push the hair back from his face. He goes very still at the touch — not flinching this time, just still, like something that's learned to hold itself carefully.

"You want to keep going?" I ask.

His throat moves. "That depends on what *going* means."

"Means what I told you last night. Slow. You watch, you copy, you learn." I hold his gaze. "Nothing you're not ready for."

Something crosses his face that isn't quite belief and isn't quite hope but lives somewhere between the two. Then it disappears behind the usual armor.

"Fine," he says. Like he's doing me a favor.

I take his hand.

He lets me, which is still new enough that I notice it every time. A week ago he was ready to bite my fingers off. Now he lets me hold his hand and tries very hard to look like he doesn't care.

I bring his hand up between us and hold it palm up.

"Watch," I say.

I lower my head and press my lips to the center of his palm. Just that. Just my mouth against the rough skin there, the callouses from four years of fighting, the faded scar across the heel of his hand that he never told me about.

He makes a sound. Small. Involuntary. Like I pressed on something bruised.

I lift my eyes to his face without lifting my mouth. Watch him feel it.

His jaw is tight. His eyes are dark. He's staring at me like he doesn't have words for whatever is happening to him right now.

I open my mouth against his palm. Let my tongue trace a slow line from the base to his middle finger.

"Your turn," I say.

He just looks at me.

"Take my hand," I tell him. "Do what I just did."

His hand finds mine — he takes it too tight at first, corrects himself, loosens up. He stares at my palm like it's something he needs to memorize before he touches it.

Then he lowers his head.

His lips land awkwardly — a little too far to the side, pressing too hard, the way he does everything the first time. But then he adjusts. Slower. His mouth opens against my skin and his tongue touches my palm and it's tentative and unpracticed and I feel it everywhere.

"Better," I breathe. "Softer. You're not trying to prove anything."

He pulls back and looks up at me and something about the way he does it — through his lashes, lips slightly wet, a line between his brows like he's concentrating very hard — does something to my chest that I choose not to examine.

"Like that?" he asks.

"Like that."

He does it again. Takes his time. His tongue traces the lines of my palm like he read somewhere that they mean something and he's trying to figure out what. His other hand has found my wrist at some point and his thumb is resting against my pulse point, not pressing, just — there. Feeling it.

My pulse, which is not behaving.

"Now here." I turn my wrist toward him, the inside where the skin is thin.

He doesn't hesitate this time. He presses his mouth there, and when his tongue touches the inside of my wrist I have to remind myself to keep breathing evenly. He lingers. I don't tell him to stop. His lips drag up slightly, following the vein, and he pauses there like he felt my pulse jump.

He did. I know he did.

He lifts his head and looks at me, and there's something in his face that's new — not the hunger, not the fear, not the defiance. Something quieter. Something that looks almost like **power**. Like he's just realized he has some and doesn't know what to do with that yet.

"You liked that," he says.

Not a question.

"Keep going," I say instead of answering.

His mouth curves. Just slightly. Just one corner, barely a movement.

I guide his hand to my throat — lay his palm flat against it so he can feel my pulse there too, faster than I'd like, fast enough that there's no point pretending otherwise. His eyes drop to my mouth. Come back up.

"Can I—" He stops.

"What?"

"Can I kiss you." He says it all one one breath. "Actually kiss you. Not — not like yesterday, not in front of everyone. Just—"

"Yes," I say. Before he finishes.

He moves slowly. Nothing like yesterday's desperate claiming — this is careful, the way he handles things he's afraid of breaking. His hand stays against my throat. His nose brushes mine first, and he pauses there, breathing the same air, and the pause is long enough to be its own kind of intimacy.

Then his mouth finds mine.

Soft. Uncertain. Nothing like what he's capable of being. His lips press against mine and stay there, not moving, like he's forgotten the next step.

I tilt my chin up slightly. An invitation.

He takes it. His lips part and move and this time there's no clash of teeth, no missing, no disaster — just him trying, feeling for where to go, following every small signal I give him. His hand slides from my throat to my jaw. His thumb brushes my cheekbone. I don't tell him to do that. He just does.

When I pull back, his eyes take a second to open.

His hair is everywhere. His lips are red. His chest is rising and falling too fast and he knows I can see it and he doesn't even bother pretending.

I'm breathing harder than I meant to.

I press my fingers against my own lips for a second. Look at him.

He's watching me with those gold eyes and something between satisfaction and disbelief, like he's not sure he's allowed to feel both things.

"Well?" he says. Low. A little rough around the edges.

I let the silence sit for a beat. Let him wonder.

"That's—" I take one breath. "—a good start."

Something breaks open in his face.

Not wide, not dramatic — just one corner of his mouth pulling up slow, the way the sun comes up when you've been awake long enough to watch it. His first real smile. Not a sneer, not a bitter curve, not armor wearing the shape of amusement.

A real one. Small and reluctant and completely unguarded.

Gone in three seconds. He catches himself and reins it back in and looks away, jaw working like he's trying to decide if he's embarrassed.

But I saw it.

And now I know what I'm working with.

Tip: You can use left, right, A and D keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat

(Rhydian)

The question sits in my chest for most of the morning.

I don't ask it right away. That's not how I work anymore — four years of surviving on instinct means you don't just open your mouth and hand people things they can use against you. You wait. You watch. You make sure the ground is solid before you put your weight on it.

So I watch her instead.

She gets up before me, moves around the room doing ordinary things — splashing water on her face, retying her hair, pulling on her boots with the kind of practiced efficiency that tells you she's been dressing alone for a long time. No one helping her with buttons. No one handing her things. Just herself, moving through her own space like she's learned to take up exactly the right amount of it.

I lie on my side and pretend to be half asleep.

She knows I'm watching. She doesn't say anything about it.

At some point she brings food — bread, dried meat, two cups of something hot that smells like herbs and bark — and sets it on the small table by the window. She sits down, tears off a piece of bread, and starts eating without ceremony, looking out at the grey morning sky like she has a list in her head she's already working through.

I sit up. My shoulder pops. I wince.

"Cave damage," I say, to explain it, to no one in particular.

She glances at me. "There's salve on the chest by the bed."

"I know."

I don't get up to get it. I pull on my shirt instead and sit on the edge of the mattress, elbows on my knees, looking at the floor between my feet.

The question is still there. Getting heavier.

"Come eat," she says.

I go. I sit across from her and pick up the bread and eat half of it before I even taste it because that's still how I eat — fast, automatic, like someone might take it. She doesn't comment. She just refills my cup when it gets low and slides the dried meat closer to my side of the table.

Small things. She keeps doing small things.

That's the problem.

"Why are you kind to me?"

It comes out flatter than I meant it. More like an accusation than a question. She looks up from her cup and her grey eyes do that thing where they go still and careful, taking their time.

She doesn't answer right away. She finishes chewing. Sets her bread down. Folds her hands around her cup.

"Specific question," she says finally.

"Is it?"

"You could mean a lot of things."

"I mean all of them," I say. "The salve. The food. The—" I stop. Wave a hand in the direction of the bed in a way that hopefully covers everything that happened this morning without me having to say it out loud. "Why."

She looks at me steadily. The silence stretches long enough that I almost take it back — almost tell her to forget it, it doesn't matter, I was just talking — but she speaks before I get there.

"Why does it bother you?"

"It doesn't bother me."

"You asked like it bothers you."

"I asked because I don't understand it." I turn the cup in my hands. The clay is warm. "People don't just—" I press my mouth together. "Nobody's ever done these things and not wanted something back. There's always a price. My parents taught me that before the elders did."

Something crosses her face at the mention of my parents. Not pity — I'd leave the room if it was pity. Something more like recognition.

"Everything has a price," she agrees. "I'm not pretending it doesn't."

"So what's yours?"

"A mate who can stand beside me without falling apart." She says it simply. "A pack that stays intact. Marcus losing." She tilts her head slightly. "Those are my prices."

"That's it?"

"That's a lot, actually."

I look at her. She holds the look without flinching, the way she always does, and I have this feeling I get sometimes around her — this uncomfortable, disorienting feeling like I'm standing on a floor that turns out to be glass, and below it is something I don't have words for yet.

"You could've gotten all of that by breaking me," I say. "Would've been faster."

"Broken things don't hold weight," she says. "I need you to hold weight."

It's not romantic. It's not soft. It's completely practical and somehow that makes it easier to sit with than if she'd said something gentle.

I eat the rest of the bread.

Outside the window the sky has gone from grey to a flat, heavy white. Snow coming. I can smell it — that particular cold-metal smell that gets into everything just before the first fall of the season. I used to love that smell in the cave. Meant predators stayed home. Meant I was left alone.

Now it just means winter.

"I used to count," I say. I don't know why I say it.

She doesn't ask count what. She just waits.

"Days alone. In the cave." I turn the cup again. "First year I kept track. Scratched marks in the rock next to where I slept. Then I stopped because—" I shrug. "Because what was the point. It wasn't going anywhere."

Elena is quiet for a moment. Then, carefully — "How many marks were there. Before you stopped."

"Two hundred and something." I look up. "I stopped counting around month eight."

She holds my gaze. "That's a long time to be alone."

"I managed."

"I know you did."

And something about the way she says it — not **you're so strong** or **that must have been so hard**, just **I know you did**, simple and certain like she looked at the evidence and reached a conclusion — something about that undoes something in me that I wasn't aware was tied.

I look away. Out the window. The first flake of snow drifts past the glass.

"I don't know how to receive things," I say, to the window. "Anything. Food, help,—" I stop. "Whatever you were doing this morning. I don't know how to just—let things in. It feels like a trap. Every time."

"I know," she says. Same tone. Same quiet certainty.

"That doesn't bother you?"

"It's just where you're starting from." She stands, collecting the cups, setting them aside with the unhurried economy of someone who is never performing anything. "It's not where you stay."

I watch her move around the room. The way she checks the fire without thinking about it, adds a log, doesn't make a production of anything. She lives inside herself so completely. Like every room she's in becomes hers not because she takes it over but because she never needs anything from it.

I've never been like that. Even before the exile I was always reaching for something — more money, more status, more proof I existed.

I wonder what it would feel like. To just be enough in a room.

"Come here," she says.

I look over. She's moved to the bed. Sitting on the edge of it, watching me with that patient look, and I feel the familiar pull of resistance — that automatic bristling thing my body does whenever someone tells me where to go — but under it, something else.

Something that wants to.

I go.

I stand in front of her and she looks up at me and for a moment neither of us says anything. The snow is coming heavier outside now, I can hear it starting against the window, that soft insistent sound.

"Sit," she says.

I sit beside her. Our knees almost touch. My hands find my thighs like they always do — something to hold onto.

"Lie back," she says.

I go still. "What?"

"On your back." She nods at the pillow. "Just lie down, Rhydian."

Everything in me wants to argue. I can feel the argument forming — *why, what are you going to do, I'm not some—* but I look at her face and there's nothing threatening there, nothing predatory. Just that same patient certainty.

I lie back.

The mattress takes my weight and I stare at the ceiling and try to remember how to breathe normally, which turns out to be difficult when you're aware of every single point where your body touches the bed.

Elena moves beside me. I hear rather than see it — the small sounds of her shifting, settling. Then her hand finds my chest and lies flat there, over my heartbeat, like she did that first night.

I close my eyes.

"You're going to feel things," she says quietly. "And you're going to want to pull away from them. Don't."

"I don't—"

"You do. You pull away every time something feels good. Like you don't trust it to last." Her thumb moves. A small slow circle. "So this is the lesson. You lie here and you feel it and you don't run from it."

I open my mouth. Close it.

Her hand moves up to my shoulder. Squeezes once, then releases. Then she leans down and presses her lips just below my jaw — so light I almost think I imagined it, but my pulse jumps so hard I know she felt it.

"Don't overthink it," she murmurs against my neck. "Just be here."

Be here. Like it's simple. Like being here isn't the hardest thing I've done in four years.

Her mouth moves down. To my throat. She doesn't rush — she takes her time the way she takes her time with everything, like she's got nowhere to be, like I'm worth the patience, like—

I exhale. Long and shaky and completely out of my control.

She makes a quiet sound of approval against my skin. And it does something terrible to me — terrible meaning I feel it in my stomach, in my hands, in the backs of my knees, in every place a body stores the things it hasn't let itself want.

My hand finds her arm without me deciding to move it. Just finds it, holds it lightly, my fingers wrapped around her wrist.

She doesn't stop. She keeps going, slow and deliberate, her mouth finding the base of my throat, the jut of my collarbone, moving with a certainty that makes me feel simultaneously like the most and least powerful person in the room.

I'm shaking again. I hate it. I can't stop it.

"I've got you," she says quietly. Same words as the nightmare. And my chest does that cracking-open thing I can't explain and can't prevent.

After a long time she lifts her head and looks down at me. Her hair has come half loose. There's colour in her face. Her grey eyes are darker than usual and she's looking at me like—

Like something she wants to keep.

I don't know what to do with that. I genuinely don't know what to do with that.

"Why," I say. My voice comes out wrecked. "You never answered. *Why* are you kind to me."

She looks at me for a long moment. Her thumb traces my jaw.

"Because no one ever was to you," she says simply. Like it's obvious. Like it's just math.

Then she straightens. Rolls her shoulder. Gives me that look — the one that means the lesson isn't over.

"Now roll over," she says. "I'll teach you the other side of pleasure."

I stare at her.

"Trust me," she says. And almost smiles.

God help me — I do.

I roll over.

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat

(Elena)

Marcus comes to find me after breakfast.

He doesn't knock. He never knocks — it's a small power move he's been running since Viktor died, walking into rooms like he already owns them, like he's just waiting for the paperwork to catch up. I'm standing at the window with my second cup of tea when the door opens and there he is, gray-bearded and composed, wearing that particular expression of his that sits just inside the border of concern.

Rhydian is still in the room.

He's pulling on his boots in the corner, head down, and he goes very still when Marcus walks in the way prey animals go still — not from fear, I've learned, but from the specific focus of something deciding whether to attack.

Marcus doesn't look at him. That's deliberate too.

"Elena." He folds his hands. "The council has a concern."

"The council can wait until I've finished my tea."

"It's about your—" a pause, weighted, "—husband."

Rhydian's boot hits the floor.

"Specifically," Marcus continues, smooth as always, "about whether he's capable of functioning as a proper Alpha male. Whether he can fight. Whether he can lead. Whether—" he spreads his hands gently, "—the investment the Pack has made in this arrangement is going to yield anything of actual value."

I look at him over the rim of my cup. "He's been here less than two weeks."

"The border situation with Shadowpine isn't waiting for him to settle in."

It's a reasonable point. That's the thing about Marcus — his arguments are always built on something real. The poison is in the framework around them, not the facts themselves.

I set my cup down.

"Fine," I say. "Training yard. One hour."

Marcus nods once, satisfied, and leaves without acknowledging Rhydian at all.

The door clicks shut and the room is quiet for a moment. I can feel Rhydian's eyes on my back.

"You're going to spar with me," he says. Not a question.

"Yes."

"In front of people."

"That's generally how training yards work."

A beat. "What if I lose."

I turn around. He's standing now, both boots on, arms crossed, and there's something in his face that's trying very hard to look like it doesn't care and getting maybe sixty percent of the way there.

"Then you lose and you learn something," I say. "That's the point of sparring."

"I mean—" He stops. Looks at the wall briefly. Back at me. "What if I lose badly. What if I can't—" Another stop. His jaw tightens. "I've been alone for four years. Fighting off rogues and hunting alone. That's not the same as—"

"Rhydian."

He looks at me.

"I'm not putting you out there to humiliate you," I say. "I'm putting you out there because Marcus needs to see that you exist. That's all."

He's quiet for a moment. Then, quieter than usual: "And if I can't give him that?"

"Then we figure it out," I say. "Together."

The word sits between us for a second. He looks at me like he's trying to find the catch in it.

He doesn't say anything. But when I head for the door, he follows.

The training yard is half frozen.

The ground is hard, the last of the overnight snow pressed flat and grey under a sky that can't decide whether it's done yet. A handful of Pack warriors have gathered at the edges — not a crowd, but enough. Word travels fast here. Always has.

Marcus stands near the fence with two elders, making a point of looking relaxed.

I don't spare him more than a glance.

I pull my outer coat off and drop it on the bench. Roll my sleeves back. Rhydian is standing a few feet away doing the same — jacket off, sleeves up, and I can see the bandages on his wrists, white against the cold red of his hands.

He's looking at the yard. Not at Marcus, not at the audience. Just the yard, taking it in, measuring it the way he measures every new space he enters. Old rogue habit — always knowing where the exits are.

"We'll go light," I tell him, low enough that it's just for him. "Don't try to win. Try to stay in."

"I know how to fight," he says, a thread of irritation in it.

"I know. That's what worries me."

He looks at me.

"You fight like a rogue," I say. "All instinct, no form. In front of these people I need you to look like you've been trained, not like you're trying to survive. There's a difference."

Something moves in his face. He doesn't like it — I can see that, the small tightening around his eyes — but he's getting better at the space between what he feels and what he does with it.

He nods. Once.

We face each other.

The yard goes quiet in that particular way yards go quiet when people are watching something they're not sure about. I can feel their uncertainty — about him, about this, about what it means for the Pack that their Alpha female is standing in frozen mud across from a rogue she married eight days ago.

Rhydian looks back at me and his eyes are gold in the flat winter light and completely, entirely unafraid.

That's the thing about him that surprised me first. For all the flinching, for all the nights waking up screaming, for all the trembling hands and the walls and the biting — when he's on his feet with space around him, the fear disappears. Something else takes over. Something that four years alone made and I'm starting to think I can't fully understand yet.

I move first.

Nothing serious — a testing strike, checking his reaction time, seeing how he reads movement. He deflects it cleanly without thinking, steps to the side, and I see exactly what I expected: beautiful instinct. Raw and unpolished and fast.

He doesn't counter. Remembers what I said. Just resets.

Good.

I come at him harder. He blocks, shifts his weight, loses his footing slightly on the frozen ground and recovers in a way that looks almost intentional if you don't know what you're watching. I catch the flash of frustration on his face — hates the ground, hates not being in control of his own body — and I file it away.

We go back and forth like that for a few minutes. Testing. Getting a feel for each other's rhythm. And underneath the mechanics of it there's something else happening, something I don't have clean words for — this growing awareness of him as a physical presence, the way he moves, the way he breathes, the way he watches my shoulders instead of my hands which is actually exactly right and not something I taught him.

"Stop dropping your left," he says.

I blink. "What?"

"You drop your left shoulder right before you switch direction." He's breathing a little harder but his face is almost — **interested**. "You've done it four times."

Something hot flickers in my chest that is definitely not attraction. Absolutely not.

"Focus," I say.

He almost smiles.

I come at him faster, no more testing, and this time it's real — real pressure, real footwork, moving him around the yard, making him work. He handles it better than he should. Better than someone who learned to fight in a cave against wolves trying to take his food. His instincts are sharp in a way that formal training sometimes actually ruins, and watching him figure out the difference between surviving and sparring in real time is—

He catches my wrist.

Both hands — quick, decisive, using my own momentum against me — and then everything happens fast: I'm turning, he's behind me, his arm across my chest and his weight pushing me forward and I hit the yard wall with both palms flat on the fence and him at my back, breathing hard, and—

And I'm pinned.

The yard is completely silent.

I can feel his chest against my shoulders. His arm still across me, not pressing now, just there. His breath is warm on the back of my neck, ragged from exertion.

For a moment neither of us moves.

Then his mouth touches the back of my neck.

Not accidental. Not training. Just — his lips, against my skin, right at the base of my hairline, warm and deliberate and there.

Everything in the yard is very still.

"Lesson learned, wife?" His voice is low, right against my ear, and there's something in it I've never heard from him before. Something that isn't anger and isn't fear and isn't the performance of either.

Something that sounds a lot like him.

I bring my elbow back into his ribs.

Not hard — well, somewhat hard — and he makes a genuine sound of surprise and his arm drops and I spin away from the fence and push him by the shoulder and he stumbles back two steps and then—

I laugh.

I don't plan it. It just comes out — real, startled, not a polished Alpha laugh but an actual helpless sound because his face is absolutely priceless. The shock of it. The way his hand went to his ribs and then the way he looked at me like he couldn't decide if he was offended or—

"You *elbowed* me," he says.

"You pinned me."

"That's— I was sparring—"

"So was I."

He stares at me. His hair is completely destroyed. There's a flush across his cheekbones from the cold and the exertion and possibly from whatever that was at the fence, and he's looking at me with his mouth slightly open like he's arrived somewhere he didn't expect to be.

"You laughed," he says.

"I know."

"I've never heard you—" He stops. Something shifts in his face. Softer and then quickly covered.
"You should do that more."

I look at him.

The yard is still watching. Marcus is still at the fence and I don't need to look at him to know his face is doing something complicated.

I pick up my coat from the bench. Shake the frost off. Slide my arms in.

"Again tomorrow," I say. "Five AM."

"Five," he repeats, like it personally offends him.

"Four-thirty if you keep complaining."

He opens his mouth. Closes it. Shoves his hands into his jacket pockets.

But when I walk past him toward the Pack house I catch it in my peripheral vision — just for a second, just a flash, before he locks it down.

He's smiling.

Not the small reluctant one from before. Something wider, something that makes him look twenty and young and like someone who hasn't had quite enough reasons to smile yet but is quietly, privately, beginning to collect them.

I don't let myself smile back until I'm through the door.

Then I do.

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat

Marcus has always believed that the most dangerous men are the quiet ones.

Not the wolves who throw chairs at council meetings or posture at borders with their chests out. Not the ones who issue threats in raised voices and expect to be feared for the volume. Those men are predictable. Manageable. You can see them coming from a mile away because they need you to.

The quiet ones — the ones who smile and pour tea and ask after your children and remember the names of your sick mothers — those are the ones who have already decided how things end before you've finished your first sentence.

Marcus has always been quiet.

He moves through the Pack house in the hour before dawn when the corridors are empty and the kitchen fires are just being lit and the one cook on early duty is too busy with her bread dough to notice an elder moving past the doorway with his hands in his pockets. He's walked these halls for thirty years. Nobody questions him. Nobody has ever questioned him.

That's the thing about becoming part of the furniture. You go invisible. And invisible men can go anywhere.

The water room is at the back of the main house — a stone chamber built over the spring that feeds the whole settlement, running pipes to the kitchen, the washrooms, the infirmary. It's locked, but Marcus has had a copy of the key for eleven years. Made it himself, actually, from a wax impression, back when Viktor's father was still alive and Marcus was already thinking ahead.

He's always thinking ahead.

The room smells like cold rock and minerals. The spring murmurs in its channel, dark water moving, catching nothing in the low lamplight he carries. He sets the lamp on the ledge and stands there for a moment doing what he always does before anything important.

He breathes.

In. Out. Slow and even. The way a man breathes who has made peace with the kind of person he is.

He reaches into his inner pocket and removes the vial.

It's small. Barely the length of his thumb, dark glass, sealed with wax. He holds it up to the lamp and looks at the liquid inside — pale amber, almost nothing, the color of old honey. You'd mistake it for water if you weren't looking for it.

Varek's people have contacts in the southern territories. Herbalists who work for coin and don't ask questions. This particular compound is derived from a root that grows in river silt — tasteless, odorless, water-soluble, and at low doses profoundly effective at suppressing the immune response in wolf shifters. Not fatal. Not immediately. Just — diminishing. Headaches first, then fatigue, then the slow draining of the particular vitality that makes wolves what they are.

Enough to make a Pack feel human.

Enough that when Shadowpine comes in three days, what meets them at the border will be wolves who are half of what they should be, and the outcome will be what outcomes always are when a weakened thing meets a prepared one.

He breaks the wax with his thumbnail.

The smell that escapes is faint. Almost herbal. Something you might encounter in a healer's cabinet and think nothing of.

He tips the vial into the spring.

Watches the amber thread dissolve into the current, spreading, thinning, becoming nothing in seconds. Gone. Untraceable. Exactly as promised.

He stands there watching the water for a while after.

This is the part that separates him from the wolves who think violence is the point. Violence is never the point. Violence is the last tool, the crude one, the one you pick up when you've failed to be subtle enough. What he's just done is surgery. Clean. Precise. A dozen men screaming at the border would accomplish nothing — but this, this quiet moment in a stone room before dawn, this changes everything.

Elena will feel it first. She's strong, stronger than he'd like, but she's also been running on insufficient sleep and the emotional toll of managing a volatile rogue husband and the political pressure of a Pack that's watching her every move. Her body will welcome the excuse to flag. She won't know that's what's happening. She'll think she's tired. She'll push through it because she always pushes through things, that's her nature, it's actually what he respects about her even now.

She'll push through it right up until she can't.

The boy is another matter.

Marcus had assumed Rhydlan would be simpler. A half-feral rogue, malnourished, traumatized — he'd expected someone barely functional, someone Elena would be managing like a problem. Someone who could be pointed in the right direction and trusted to implode on his own.

He saw the training yard this morning.

He watched Elena laugh.

He's been watching Elena for a year and he's never seen her laugh.

Something tight moves through his chest at the memory and he refuses to examine it too closely because the thing about being a quiet man is that you get very good at not examining things too closely.

The boy is a problem. That's the conclusion. Not the wreck Marcus planned for but something rawer, something that's been sharpened by four years of survival into a shape he didn't account for. And Elena — Elena is doing the thing he should have anticipated, the thing Viktor never did because Viktor had no interest in anyone but himself. She's reaching into the boy and finding whatever is salvageable and pulling it out.

If she gets another month with him, Marcus thinks, she'll have turned that rogue into something genuinely dangerous.

He cannot give her another month.

He pockets the empty vial. Picks up the lamp. Takes one last look at the water moving quietly in its channel.

Then he walks back to his chambers.

His room is sparse. Always has been — he finds excess distasteful, which is perhaps the one point of genuine principle he possesses. A narrow bed, a desk, a bookshelf with the actual texts of the elder's charter and a few volumes of Pack history. A chest at the foot of the bed with a lock that nobody has ever asked about.

He opens it now.

Inside, wrapped in cloth, is the antidote.

Also from Varek's contacts. Also tasteless, also water-soluble, also precise. Administered to his own cup of water each morning in exact proportion to body weight — he's been dosing himself for the past week, ever since the compound arrived and he started the preparations. He won't be weakened. He'll move through whatever comes in three days at full strength, the only wolf in the territory who has any idea why everyone else feels like they're moving through sand.

He re-wraps the cloth. Closes the chest.

Then sits on the edge of his bed, which he does every night when the day is done, and folds his hands, and thinks.

He thinks about Viktor. About the boy Viktor was — the one Marcus watched grow up in this Pack house, the one their Alpha chose over Marcus without a second thought because Viktor carried the right blood and Marcus only carried competence. He thinks about watching that boy become Alpha at twenty-eight while Marcus stood in the hall and smiled and said the right things.

He's been saying the right things for twenty years.

Viktor dying was never about grief. Marcus hasn't grieved anything since his wife, fifteen years ago, a fever that took her in four days and left him with nothing but the specific clarity that comes from losing the last thing you were protecting yourself for. After her, the ambition stopped being personal. It became — architectural. The right structure, the right arrangement, the right man in the right place.

He just happens to be that man.

Elena is a good Alpha. He'll grant her that, quietly, in the privacy of this room where no one can hear it and use it against him. She's better than Viktor was — sharper, more present, more actually invested in the wolves she leads. Under different circumstances, in a different arrangement, he might have been content to advise her.

But she suspects him.

She's been too careful around him since Viktor's death, too watchful, filing things away behind those grey eyes and saying nothing and waiting. She's building a case he can't afford to let her finish.

Three days.

He goes to the window. The Pack house is dark and settled, the settlement quiet below, a few lights in the far cottages where early risers are starting their days. Somewhere across the yard is the room where Elena sleeps. Where the rogue is sleeping too now, probably, in that bed that was Viktor's, taking up space that was never meant for him.

Marcus watches a light move across a window.

The eastern grounds, he thinks. That's what it cost. Varek's price. Hunting grounds that belong to this Pack, that fed this Pack's children for three generations, signed away in a hollow between dead trees in the dark.

It burns. He won't pretend it doesn't burn.

But what's the use of land if you don't have the seat. What's the use of any of it.

He turns from the window.

Three days of the compound in the water. Three days of Elena's Pack slowly, imperceptibly losing their edge. Then Shadowpine comes — coordinated, sharp, hitting the eastern border precisely where his intelligence told Varek they'd have the thinnest patrol. And in the wreckage of that, a piece of the rogue boy's clothing, planted precisely, smelling of him and nothing else.

The Pack's grief will do the rest. Grief and rage and the need for someone to blame.

He's not going to have to do anything else.

The quiet kind of murder.

He crosses to the chest. Touches the cloth wrapping. Counts the doses inside — enough for four days, one extra in case. Everything accounted for.

He should sleep. There are council meetings in the morning. He needs to look like a man with nothing weighing on him, which is, after all, simply his natural expression.

He lies down. Pulls the blanket up.

Closes his eyes.

Three days, he thinks. *Then Shadowpine comes.*

In the water room at the back of the house, the spring moves through its channel in the dark, quiet and constant and carrying everything he put into it toward the pipes that feed every cup, every basin, every breath of steam in every room.

The Pack sleeps.

And Marcus, for the first time in months, sleeps too.

c 15

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat

(Rhydian)

I notice it first in the training yard.

Not because I'm looking for something wrong — I'm not, I'm trying to remember the footwork Elena drilled into me yesterday without making it look like I'm thinking about footwork, which apparently is the entire point of footwork. But I notice it because four years of surviving alone rewired something in my brain that I can't switch off. The part that's always cataloguing. Always measuring. Always asking *what's different today.*

What's different today is Brennan.

He's one of Elena's senior warriors. Thirty-something, solid, the kind of wolf who moves like he was built for it — efficient, economic, no wasted motion. I've watched him run drills every morning since I got here because watching other people train is how I've been trying to catch up without anyone noticing I'm behind.

This morning he drops his sparring partner's strike that he caught clean two days ago.

Not a close thing. Not a matter of timing or a tricky angle. Just — drops it. His arm comes up and then it's like the message gets lost somewhere between his brain and his body, and the strike lands on his shoulder, and he shakes his head like he's trying to clear water from his ears.

His partner doesn't say anything. But I see the look.

I keep moving through my own warmup. Don't stare.

But I'm watching.

By the end of the session I've counted seven separate moments that don't fit. A warrior who trips on flat ground. Another one who sits down between drills when she didn't sit down yesterday or the day before. A young wolf, couldn't be more than nineteen, who goes pale in the middle of a run and walks the last hundred meters with his hand pressed to his temple.

Headaches.

I know what headaches look like. I lived in a cave — in damp, in cold, in altitude that took some getting used to. I know the particular way a body moves when something inside it is wrong.

These wolves have headaches.

I don't say anything at breakfast.

I sit across from Elena and eat and watch her face and try to figure out if she's feeling it too, if there's something behind her eyes today that's different from yesterday. She looks the same. Reads

the same note three times before setting it aside, which isn't like her. Rolls her shoulder once, twice, the way you do when a headache is sitting at the base of your skull and won't commit to being a full headache yet.

She catches me looking.

"What," she says.

"Nothing."

She holds the look for a second, then goes back to her cup.

I turn my own cup in my hands. The water in it is from the main house supply — I know that because I watched the kitchen girl fill it from the same pitcher she fills Elena's from every morning. Same source. Same water.

I set the cup down without finishing it.

"You're not drinking," Elena says, without looking up.

"I'm not thirsty."

"You sparred for two hours."

"I'm still not thirsty."

She looks up then. Something in my voice maybe, or just the fact that I'm usually not the one who argues with my body about what it needs. She studies my face with those grey eyes that don't miss much.

"What's going on," she says. Not a question.

I look at the cup.

"How long has the Pack been using this water supply," I ask.

A beat. Her expression doesn't change but something behind it does — a sharpening, a stillness. "Since the settlement was built. It runs off the main spring under the back house." She pauses. "Why."

"Brennan dropped a block this morning that he's caught clean every day for at least a week. Mira sat between drills. That young one — red-haired, runs near the fence—"

"Corvin."

"He went white in the middle of a run. Finished it walking." I meet her eyes. "I've been here three weeks. I know what these wolves look like when they're moving right. They're not moving right today."

Elena is quiet. Completely quiet, the kind she gets when she's taking something seriously enough that she stops performing composure and just — goes still.

"It could be a virus," she says. Careful.

"Could be."

"Winter's starting. Something moving through the Pack—"

"Could be," I say again. "But it hit fast. Yesterday Brennan was fine. Mira was fine. Whatever this is, it didn't build up slowly."

She looks at my untouched cup.

Then at hers.

She sets it down.

The silence between us does something — stretches in a specific direction, toward a specific name, and neither of us says it out loud yet. But I can see it landing on her. The same place it landed on me in the training yard when the seventh wrong thing happened and something in my chest went cold and certain.

"You think someone put something in it," she says quietly.

"I think I've seen people poisoned before. In the territories outside the border. Rogues use it on each other's water sources when they want to take a cave without a fight." I pause. "It doesn't always look like poison. Sometimes it just looks like a bad week."

Elena's hand is flat on the table. Very flat. Very still. The kind of still that means she's holding something in that doesn't have a clean shape yet.

"How long would something like that take to—"

"Depends what it is. If it's a suppressant — something that just takes the edge off, makes wolves slower, more human-tired — you might not see real impairment for three, four days." I look at her. "We're seeing it now. Which means if it started in the water, it started two or three days ago."

She stands up.

Not dramatic, not fast — just standing, the way she does everything, with that economy of movement that means she's already three steps ahead and her body is catching up. She goes to the window. Looks out at the yard, the training grounds, the settlement spread below the hill.

Her back is to me.

"Rhydian," she says.

"Yeah."

"Is there any part of this that you think I'm overreacting to."

I look at her shoulders. The line of them. The way they're held too level, too careful.

"No," I say.

She nods once. Like confirmation of something she already knew.

"Marcus," she says. Just the name. Flat and quiet and landing like a stone.

I don't say yes. I don't say no. I turn the empty cup in my hands and I think about the way he walked into our room that morning and didn't look at me, not once, and I think about Elena saying *he suspects me but suspicion isn't proof* and I think about Viktor's tea.

"It fits his timeline," I say carefully. "Whatever's coming, whatever he's arranged — he'd want the Pack weakened before it happened. Not obviously sick. Just—"

"Just slow." Her voice is barely above a breath. "Slow enough that when something hits us we can't meet it properly."

"Shadowpine," I say.

She turns around.

Her face is controlled. Completely controlled, the mask she wears in council meetings, and underneath it — I've gotten good enough at reading her to see it now — something that is genuinely frightened. Not for herself. For them. For all those wolves in the training yard moving wrong and not knowing why.

It's the first time I've seen her scared for someone else and it does something to my chest that I don't have time for right now.

"We can't go to the council," she says. "If Marcus has anyone there—"

"He has Henrick at minimum."

"—they'll know we're looking. He'll move faster." She crosses back to the table. Doesn't sit — stands with her hands on the back of the chair, thinking out loud now, which she doesn't usually do, which tells me how fast her mind is moving. "I need to confirm it first. The water. I need someone who can test it without it getting back to him."

"Your healer," I say. "The one who did my wrists. She didn't look at Marcus when he came in that first morning. People who are loyal to someone look at them when they enter a room."

Elena stares at me for a second.

"That's—" She stops. "That's a very specific thing to notice."

"I spent four years alone. You learn to read rooms." I shrug. "She's not his. I'd bet on it."

"Her name is Senna." Elena straightens. Pushes the chair in. "I'll go to her alone. You don't come — if Marcus is watching he'll make it look like the rogue husband dragging the Alpha into paranoia." Her jaw tightens. "You go back to the yard. Keep your eyes on the water situation. Count how many wolves seem impaired. Build me a number."

"And if I see someone getting worse. Actually worse, not just headaches—"

"Come find me immediately. Don't tell anyone else. Don't—" She pauses, looks at me directly, "— don't let Marcus see you notice anything."

I hold her gaze. "I know how not to be seen."

"I know you do." Something moves through her expression that isn't quite softness and isn't quite gratitude but lives somewhere adjacent to both. "You were right to tell me."

"You would've noticed."

"Maybe." She picks up her coat from the hook by the door. "But you noticed first."

She says it without looking at me — matter-of-fact, already moving, already thinking forward to Senna and the water and whatever comes next. But I feel it land somewhere specific. Somewhere it was needed without me knowing it was needed.

That I was useful. That what I am — the paranoid, cataloguing, survival-wired, cave-living thing that I am — wasn't in the way for once.

That it was exactly right.

I pull on my jacket. Move toward the door.

"Rhydian."

I stop. Turn back.

She's looking at me properly now. Not the Alpha-reading-the-room look. Just her.

"Be careful," she says.

It's two words. She says them plainly, without weight, already turning away by the time they're out.

I stand there for one second longer than I need to.

Then I go back to the yard.

The morning moves around me and I move through it, doing what she asked — watching without watching, counting the hesitations and the pale faces and the too-careful movements that don't belong to these wolves. I find fourteen by midday. Fourteen in a fighting force of sixty.

It's not catastrophic yet.

Yet is doing a lot of work in that sentence.

I'm standing near the water trough at the yard's edge, watching Corvin attempt drills with a focus that's clearly costing him more than it should, when I feel someone watching me.

I don't look right away. Old habit. You look right away, you tell them you're paying attention. You let it sit for ten seconds first.

Ten seconds.

Then I look.

Marcus is standing at the far fence. Just standing, hands clasped, face pleasant and distant the way it always is. He's not looking at the drills. He's not looking at the water trough.

He's looking at me.

When our eyes meet he doesn't look away. He holds it for one long moment with that almost-kind expression, like a man who wants you to know he sees you. Who wants you to know it doesn't worry him.

Then he turns and walks away.

My hands are fists in my pockets.

Three weeks ago I would've gone after him, I think. Cornered him somewhere and made him tell me what he's done and not cared what came after.

Three weeks ago I had nothing to lose.

I breathe out slow through my nose. Watch him disappear around the corner of the main house. Then I turn back to the yard, to Corvin, to the fourteen wolves moving wrong, and I think about Elena's face when she said be careful and didn't make anything of it.

I stay in the yard.

I count.