

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat

c 16-20

(Elena)

I find him in the elder's study.

He's doing what he always does when he wants to look untroubled — reading. Seated in the high-backed chair by the fire with a book open in his lap and a cup cooling on the table beside him, the picture of a man who has nowhere to be and nothing to hide. He doesn't look up when I close the door. Doesn't look up when I cross the room. Just turns a page, unhurried, like I'm a draft from the hallway that will settle if he waits long enough.

I pull the chair from the desk and set it down across from him and sit.

He finally looks up.

"Elena." A small smile. The warm kind. "You look tired."

"We need to talk."

"Of course." He closes the book. Folds his hands over the cover. "I've been hoping you'd come to me, actually. There are some concerns I've been sitting with — about the eastern patrol rotations, and the Shadowpine intelligence —"

"Marcus."

He stops.

I hold his gaze and let the silence do what silence does when you've stopped pretending.

Something moves behind his eyes. Barely there. Then the pleasantness settles back in like sediment after a disturbance, and he tilts his head slightly in the way he has — that particular angle that means **I'm listening** and means nothing at all.

"The water supply," I say.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I had Senna test it this morning."

A beat. One single beat where his left hand tightens almost imperceptibly against the cover of the book. If I hadn't been looking for it, I wouldn't have seen it. But I was looking for it.

"And?" he says. Smooth. Easy. Genuinely curious.

"And she found traces of a root compound she didn't recognize at first. It took her three hours to place it." I pause. "It's used in the southern territories. Suppresses the immune response in shifters. At low doses it reads like fatigue. Like a bad week."

Marcus looks at me.

"That's very concerning," he says.

I laugh. I can't help it — it comes out short and sharp and completely without humor. "Right."

"Elena." He leans forward slightly. The concerned elder, practiced to the bone. "If someone has tampered with our water supply, that's a serious matter for the full council —"

"I'm not bringing this to the council."

A pause. He recalibrates. I can actually see it — the small adjustment, the recalculation, like watching someone shift their weight before they change direction.

"Then what are you doing?" he asks. Quieter. Still measured.

"I'm sitting in front of you asking if you'd like to tell me anything."

The fire pops. Outside the window the settlement is doing its mid-morning business — someone crossing the yard, voices somewhere down the corridor. Normal sounds. The ordinary world happening just outside a room where something else is happening entirely.

Marcus looks at me for a long moment.

"I think," he says slowly, "that your husband has put some very particular ideas in your head. And I understand that — he's a rogue, he's been living outside trust structures for years, he reads threat into everything —"

"Don't."

"— I'm not dismissing your concern, I'm contextualizing —"

"I said don't." My voice comes out quieter than I meant it. Low. The kind of low that apparently works because he stops. "Don't make this about Rhydian. This is about you."

He looks at me. And for just a second — just one unguarded second — the pleasantness slips.

Not into rage. Not into fear.

Into something tired.

Something that has been doing this a very long time and is, somewhere very deep down, exhausted by it.

It's the most honest thing I've ever seen on his face and it scares me more than the anger would have.

Then it's gone.

"I didn't tamper with the water supply," he says. Firm. Certain. Meeting my eyes without blinking. He's good — he's always been good, that's the problem, a man who has spent twenty years navigating this Pack's politics is not going to crack in a chair by a fire because I'm looking at him hard. "I understand why you're frightened. The timing with Shadowpine, the pressure you're under — it makes sense that you're looking for someone to blame for what might simply be a winter illness moving through—"

"Fourteen wolves. In three days. All presenting the same way."

"Illness moves through groups, Elena —"

"Senna confirmed it in the water, Marcus."

"Senna is your healer. She's loyal to you. If you brought her a theory —"

"I brought her a sample. Didn't tell her what I was looking for. She came to the conclusion herself." I pause. Let that land. "She also told me the compound doesn't occur naturally. Someone had to acquire it. Transport it. Introduce it deliberately."

He's quiet.

I watch his face. The fire shifts and the light shifts with it and there are lines on him I don't always see in council meetings — around his mouth, between his brows. He's seventy years old and he looks it right now in a way he usually doesn't, and I wonder not for the first time what happens inside a person to get them to this place. What you have to decide about yourself to be able to walk to a water room in the dark and do what he did and then come to breakfast and pour tea and ask how people slept.

What you have to stop feeling.

"Marcus," I say. And I hear it in my own voice — not anger, which surprises me. Something rawer than that. "Viktor is six months dead. We haven't finished grieving him. These are your wolves too. They grew up in these halls, they trained in that yard, they —" I stop. Press my mouth together. "Why."

He looks at me.

And I see it — just a flicker, just barely — something almost like pain.

"You were always going to be the problem," he says quietly. Not cruel. Just — stating it. Like a fact he's been sitting with. "Viktor was manageable. Viktor was selfish enough to be predictable. But

you—" He almost smiles, and it's the saddest thing I've ever seen on him. "You actually care about them. And you're clever enough to build something real." He pauses. "I couldn't let you."

I'm very still.

"So it's true," I say.

He doesn't confirm it. He doesn't need to — we both know he just told me, as much as a man like Marcus ever tells anyone anything. He's already rearranging his expression, already pulling the warmth back into place like a coat he put down for just a moment.

"I think you should speak to the council," he says. "Bring your concerns, bring Senna's findings, let the proper process —"

"You poisoned our pack."

"That's a serious accusation."

"I know what you did."

"You know what you suspect." He picks up his book. Sets it on his knee. "Suspicion isn't proof, Elena. You told your husband that yourself — yes, I know you did, these walls are not as thick as you think." He opens to his page. "Bring me proof."

The casual dismissal of it.

The sheer — the absolute —

I'm on my feet before I decide to stand. My chair scrapes back and I cross the distance between us in three steps and my hand closes around the front of his robe and I slam him into the wall.

The book falls.

He's lighter than I expected — old, I keep forgetting he's actually old under all that composure — and he hits the stone with more force than I intended, his head knocking back against it, and he makes a genuine sound, breathless and surprised, and for one second the mask is completely gone and there's just a frightened old man.

Then he looks at me.

And he smiles.

Slow. Sad. Almost — fond.

"There she is," he murmurs. My fist is still in his robe, holding him against the wall, and he doesn't try to move, doesn't fight it, just looks at me like I've confirmed something he already knew.

"Viktor's Alpha. Viktor's fire." Something crosses his face. "You could have been extraordinary, Elena. Under different circumstances. Under a different arrangement."

"Tell me what you've arranged with Shadowpine."

"Nothing."

"Tell me when they're coming."

"I don't know what you mean."

I pull him forward an inch and press him back harder and he exhales but the smile doesn't leave.

"Proof," he says, very quietly. "You need proof. And by the time you have it —" He tilts his head. That same angle. That same pleasantness, completely reconstructed in the space of thirty seconds. "These things have their own momentum, you understand. Stones already rolling. Not even I can stop them now."

"Try." My voice is barely above a whisper. "Tell me how to stop it and I'll take it to the council myself. I'll let you—"

"Elena." He says my name gently. Like a teacher. Like someone fond of me in the way people are fond of things they're about to break. "You have worked so hard. You really have. And I don't — I want you to know I don't enjoy this. I've never enjoyed this part."

I stare at him.

"But you're looking in the wrong directions," he continues. "You're looking at the water and the warriors and the border, and that's all correct, you've been very clever—" His eyes hold mine, warm and steady and completely without remorse. "But you'll never see the blade that kills you."

The fire pops.

My fist tightens in the fabric of his robe.

He holds my gaze and doesn't look away and doesn't look afraid and that's the thing that makes my blood go cold — not the words, not the threat, not even the confirmation sitting between us like a body on a table. It's the fact that he means it. That this is a man standing inside the consequence of his choices and feeling nothing about it except the satisfaction of saying the truest thing he knows.

He's not threatening me.

He's just telling me what's already true.

Slowly I release him.

Step back.

He smooths his robe with both hands. Reaches down and picks up his book from the floor. Checks the spine for damage with the focused concern of a man whose books matter to him, which they apparently still do.

"I'd recommend," he says, tucking the book under his arm, "getting some rest. You'll want to be at your best in the coming days." He looks at me. "For your wolves."

He walks to the door.

Opens it.

The ordinary sounds of the corridor fill the room — boots on stone, someone laughing somewhere, the smell of bread from the kitchen. Normal. Untouched. The whole living world carrying on.

"Marcus," I say.

He pauses. Doesn't turn.

"I'll find the proof."

A moment.

"I know you'll try," he says.

Then he walks out.

I stand in the middle of the room with the fire at my back and my hands not entirely steady and the weight of *you'll never see the blade that kills you* sitting in my chest like a stone in deep water.

Then I breathe out.

Pull my sleeves down.

And I go to find my husband.

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat

(Rhydian)

Elena tells me about the confrontation in pieces.

Not all at once — she's not someone who unloads things all at once. She comes and finds me in the yard where I'm still counting wolves and she says *walk with me* in the tone that means it's not a request, and we walk the long way around the settlement perimeter where no one is close enough to hear, and she talks.

I listen.

I don't interrupt. I've learned that about her — she needs to get through the shape of a thing before she can deal with the parts of it. So I walk beside her in the cold and let her talk, and I watch her hands, because her hands tell me things her voice doesn't. They stay too still at her sides for most of it. Then she gets to the part about him against the wall, the part where he said *you'll never see the blade that kills you,* and her right hand closes into a fist briefly and then opens again.

She stops walking.

I stop too.

We're at the far edge of the yard, near the fence line, the settlement spread below us under a sky that hasn't decided whether it's going to snow again. Nobody's near us. Just cold air and the sound of her breathing and the thing she just told me sitting between us like a lit fuse.

"He's got an antidote," I say.

She looks at me.

"Has to. He wouldn't poison the water without protecting himself — he needs to function when Shadowpine comes. He needs to be the one standing while everyone else is flagging." I look back at the settlement. The main house. Marcus's wing. "He keeps it somewhere close. Somewhere he can dose himself every morning without anyone seeing."

She's quiet for a moment. "His quarters."

"That'd be my guess."

Another pause. "We can't search his quarters. Not openly. If he finds out —"

"He already knows you're looking." I turn to her. "He told you as much. He's not scared of what you'll find, he's counting on not finding it before Shadowpine arrives." I hold her gaze. "Which means I need to find it today."

"Rhydian—"

"Elena." I say her name the way she says mine sometimes — just the word, just the weight of it. "You can't go. He expects you. He's watching you." I pause. "He's not watching me. He thinks I'm a rogue playing at being a mate. He's been underestimating me since the day I got here."

She looks at me for a long time with those grey eyes that are doing the thing where they're processing faster than her face is showing.

"His room is in the east wing," she says finally. "Third door past the elder's study. He locks it." She stops. Starts again. "He keeps a spare key under the iron bracket outside the door. Left side. Viktor told me years ago when Marcus was— it doesn't matter." She presses her mouth together. "If his chest is locked, there's a tool kit in the kitchen stores. Bottom shelf, wrapped in leather."

I nod.

"Don't get caught," she says. Very quietly. Like she knows that's not adequate and she's saying it anyway.

"I'll be fine."

"That's not—" She stops. Her jaw tightens. "Just be fast."

I go.

The east wing is quiet.

Midday — Marcus will be at the council hall for the daily briefing, which Elena told me runs long without fail and never less than two hours. I've got time. Maybe. The kind of time that feels solid until it suddenly isn't, and I've learned the hard way that trusting that feeling is the fastest way to get dead.

I move like I used to move in the mountain territories. Deliberate. Light-footed. Aware of every surface before my weight commits to it. The corridor is empty, a few wall sconces burning low, the stone floors cold and echoey in that way that old buildings are. Third door past the study. Left side of the iron bracket.

There.

The key is small and dark with age, sitting in a gap in the bracket so small you'd miss it if you didn't know exactly where to look. I take it. Turn it in my fingers once.

The lock opens without protest.

Marcus's room is nothing like I expected and exactly like I expected — spare, organized, nothing on the surfaces that doesn't belong there. The bed is made with military precision. Books stacked by height on the shelf. No personal effects to speak of, nothing that says *this is a man who loves anything.* Just the architecture of function.

I do a fast visual sweep.

Desk. Clear except for papers, which I don't touch. Bookshelf, nothing behind the volumes — I check, one hand tilting them forward, quick. Bedside table, empty drawer. Wardrobe, clothes only, coat pockets empty.

Then the chest at the foot of the bed.

It's locked.

Of course it is.

I go back to the kitchen stores, find the leather roll on the bottom shelf without breaking stride, and I'm back in his room inside four minutes which is longer than I wanted but it can't be helped. I kneel in front of the chest. The lock is old — good quality but old, the kind that was built to last rather than built for complexity.

I've picked worse. You learn things in four years of surviving in contested territory. Lock-picking isn't a skill you look for the opportunity to acquire. It's just something that becomes necessary one afternoon when you need the supply shed of an abandoned outpost and there's nobody to ask nicely.

Forty seconds. Maybe fifty.

The lock clicks.

I lift the lid.

Inside, wrapped in cloth, is a small collection of vials. Not many — five, six, neatly arranged. I pick one up and hold it to the light from the window. Clear liquid. No color, no obvious smell when I work the stopper loose for a second and put it back immediately.

This is it. This has to be it.

He counted them. I can see how they're arranged — the cloth underneath molded slightly to the shape of each one, the kind of impression that comes from habit, from setting things down the same way every day. He'll know if one is missing. He'll know if I take the whole set.

But Senna can work with one. Senna, who spent three hours identifying the compound in the water, can identify this in a fraction of the time and tell us exactly what it is and what it counteracts and how much of it these wolves need.

One vial. That's all I need.

I reach in.

The door opens.

Not the main door — the side door, the one I didn't know existed because it wasn't in Elena's description of the room, a narrow servant's entrance cut into the far wall that's been papered over or painted over or something, invisible until it isn't, and it opens and two men step through it and I know immediately they're not Pack wolves.

They're Shadowpine.

Not in colors — dressed plain, nondescript, the kind of unremarkable that means they've been living in this settlement for at least a few days without anyone clocking them. Marcus's plants. His insurance, sitting in the walls of this place like rot.

The first one is big. Really big, the kind of big that means whoever sent him is not worried about subtlety. The second is smaller, quicker-looking, and he's got a knife already out, which tells me they were told to expect someone.

Marcus knew I'd come.

Of course he did.

I'm still holding the vial.

I pocket it in the same motion I use to stand, one fluid movement, and I get to my feet with my hands loose and my weight forward and my back to the window because I'm not letting them have the door and the window both.

"Rhydian Alma," the big one says. Like he knows me. Maybe Marcus described me. *Skinny rogue, golden eyes, will bite you if cornered.* More or less accurate.

"You've got about four seconds," I say, "to reconsider."

They don't reconsider.

The big one moves first — always the big one, always, they think mass is the argument and sometimes it is but not when you've been fighting off rogues in mountain territory for four years, not when your entire survival has been predicated on being faster than whoever wants what you have. I drop under his first swing and drive my shoulder into his ribs and shove, hard, using his own momentum against him the way Elena showed me, and he hits the desk and the papers scatter and he goes down hard on one knee.

The smaller one is already close. The knife comes in low — smart, they know about wolf healing, they know to go for something debilitating rather than clean — and I get my forearm up and the blade catches the outside of it instead of my stomach.

The pain is immediate and white and clarifying.

I grab his wrist. Twist. The knife doesn't come free but his angle changes and I use that to pull him into my elbow, which connects with his cheekbone, and he staggers. Not down — he's too trained for down — but enough.

The big one is back up.

This is the part where four years alone works against me. In the mountains, one-on-one was the equation. Two trained fighters with coordination and a knife between them is a different equation entirely, and I know within the first thirty seconds that I'm working harder than I can sustain.

But I don't need to sustain it. I just need to get out.

The door — the main door, the corridor, the Pack house where Marcus's men can't follow without exposing themselves — is behind me and to the left. Six feet. Maybe eight.

The big one swings again. I let it catch my shoulder instead of my face, which hurts enormously and rocks me sideways, and I use the momentum to turn and cover the distance to the door in two steps and my hand finds the handle and I'm through it and pulling it shut behind me with my whole weight before either of them can reach me.

Corridor. Empty. Still.

I don't run — running draws attention and I can't afford attention — so I walk. Fast, controlled, the way Elena walks when she doesn't want anyone to know something is wrong.

My arm is wet.

I already knew that. I've known it since the knife connected, the specific wet warmth of it, but I haven't looked because looking makes it real in a way that changes how your body responds and I needed my body to stay functional for another sixty seconds.

I look now.

The sleeve of my jacket is dark. Not a little dark. The kind of dark that means the cut is deep enough to matter, that means something below the surface is open and disagreeing with the situation, that means I need to find Elena or Senna or anyone who knows what to do with this in the next few minutes before the decision gets made for me.

I stand in the corridor of the east wing and I look at my arm and I think, with a clarity that only pain produces, that Marcus had a contingency for everything.

Except Elena.

And I reach into my pocket with my good hand.

The vial is still there.

Small and cool and whole.

I close my fingers around it and keep walking.

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat

(Elena)

I'm halfway down the east corridor when I smell it.

Blood. His blood specifically, which I know now — which I've known since the night I cleaned his wrists and the scent of him got into my hands and didn't leave. Smoke and pine and something wild and underneath all of it, right now, iron.

A lot of iron.

My feet move faster before my brain catches up. I round the corner and he's there, walking toward me — *walking*, still upright, which is the first thing I clock — but his left arm is held slightly away from his body in the specific careful way of someone managing pain they don't want to show, and his jacket sleeve is wrong, the color wrong, soaked through in a spreading dark patch that—

"Rhydian."

He looks up.

His face is composed. Too composed, the kind of composed that costs something, and his eyes are very gold and very focused in the way they get when he's running on adrenaline that's starting to ebb.

"I've got it," he says. First thing out of his mouth. He reaches into his pocket with his right hand and holds up the vial and his voice is completely, absurdly steady. "One vial. Senna can work with one."

I stare at him.

"You're bleeding," I say.

"I know."

"How badly."

"It's—" He glances at his arm like he's checking something he already knows the answer to. "It's not nothing."

That's when I reach him. I don't ask — I take his arm, both hands, and he lets me, doesn't pull back or make it difficult, just watches my face while I push the sleeve up as gently as I can manage.

The cut is deep. Long, running the outside of his forearm from just below the elbow, clean-edged, knife work — someone who knew what they were doing made this. My stomach tightens in a way that is not medically appropriate but I don't have time for it so I just note it and set it aside.

"There were two of them," he says. "Inside Marcus's room. Shadowpine, not Pack. They came through a side door I didn't know about."

"He has a servant's entrance." I should have told him that. I didn't think — I didn't — "Rhydian, I should have—"

"It's fine."

"It's not fine, look at your—"

"Elena." He says my name and something in the way he says it stops me. Quiet. Certain. His right hand finds my wrist where I'm holding his arm and he doesn't move my hands away, just rests his over mine. "I'm still here. I got out. I got the vial." A pause. "I'm fine."

He's not fine. But I understand what he means.

The corridor is empty but it won't be for long. I don't want Marcus to know what's been found — not yet, not until Senna has confirmed it and we know what we're working with.

"Come with me," I say.

I take him to the room that used to be the Alpha's private study — not the bedroom, not anywhere Marcus has reason to look first. It's small, fireplace, a desk, a locked door that only I have the key to. I lock it behind us.

He sits where I point. The chair by the fire, upright, not leaning — stubbornly not leaning, even now, even with his arm doing what it's doing. I get the healer's kit from the cabinet, the one I keep here separate from the main stores, and I pull a chair up facing him and put the kit between us and start.

He watches my hands the whole time.

I clean it first. He hisses once, controls it, goes silent. The cut is deep but clean — it missed everything that matters, which is either luck or whoever held the knife had instruction to wound rather than kill. I'm not sure which of those is more unsettling.

"He knew I'd come," Rhydian says. Not upset about it. Just — filing it. Processing it in the way he processes things, quietly and in real time, the way someone does when they've had to be their own counsel for four years.

"Yes," I say.

"He's got contingencies everywhere." He's looking at the fire now. "He's been building this for a long time."

"His whole life, probably." I press a clean cloth against the wound and hold it. "Hold that."

He puts his right hand over it, over mine briefly before I move away, and the contact is brief and warm and neither of us mentions it.

I look at the wound. The bleeding is slowing but not enough, and there's a heat in the surrounding skin that I don't like, a tension in the tissue that means his body is already fighting something. The knife might have been treated. Might not. I don't know and I can't know and the uncertainty sits in my chest like a hot coal.

There is another option.

I've used my Alpha gift three times in my life. My father told me to use it sparingly — *it costs you,* he said, *every time, it takes something out of the well, and wells aren't bottomless.* I used it once for a warrior with a chest wound who wouldn't have made it through the night. Once for a child who fell from the lookout tower. Once for Viktor, actually, two years into our marriage when he caught a fever that ran too high for too long, and he thanked me with the particular flatness of a man who didn't fully understand what it meant for me to give that.

I look at Rhydian's arm. At the heat in the tissue. At the way he's holding himself carefully in the chair like he's not going to tell me how much it hurts.

I lift his arm.

He looks at me. "What are you—"

I lower my head and press my lips to the cut.

He goes absolutely rigid.

I can taste him immediately — iron and salt and underneath it something that is purely him, that wild living quality that somehow survived four years of cold and alone and came out the other side of it still intact. I run my tongue along the length of the wound, slow, and his hand comes up and grips the arm of the chair hard enough that the wood creaks.

"Elena—" His voice is wrecked.

I lift my head. Look at him.

His eyes are very dark. His jaw is working.

"You taste like courage," I say. I don't plan it. It just comes out, because it's true, because that's exactly what it tastes like — not blood, not pain, but the particular quality of a person who walked into a dangerous room alone for someone else's Pack, someone else's wolves, and came out the other side still holding the thing he went in for.

He stares at me.

Something moves through his face that he doesn't try to cover. He's getting worse at covering things and I don't think he's noticed yet and I'm not going to tell him.

"That's—" He stops.

"Hold still."

I close my lips over the wound again and this time I let it come — the warmth that starts in my sternum, the thing that feels like pulling a thread from the center of yourself, the slow costly unspooling of something that takes weeks to rebuild. It moves through my mouth and into the cut in a way I've never been able to describe accurately, like heat but more specific than heat, like intention made physical.

He makes a sound.

Not pain. The opposite of pain — low and startled, the sound of a body receiving something it didn't know it needed, and his free hand finds my hair without him deciding to do it, fingers resting against the back of my head, not pressing, just — there.

The tissue knits.

I feel it happening under my lips, the inflammation dropping, the edges of the wound finding each other. It's never a clean process, never painless, but it's fast. Faster than natural healing. Fast enough.

I lift my head.

His arm is pink and new where the cut was, the skin closed, the heat gone. A faint line remains — scar tissue forming, it'll fade over weeks. But the wound is closed. The threat of whatever was on that knife is gone.

I sit back.

My head swims slightly. The cost of it, settling in. I press two fingers to my temple without thinking.

"Hey." His voice is different. He leans forward — not far, just enough. "What just happened. Are you—"

"I'm fine. It takes something out of me. It passes."

"That was your—" He's looking at his arm. At the closed skin. "You did that."

"Yes."

"You could've just bandaged it."

"The knife might have been treated. I wasn't taking the risk."

He looks at me. Looks for a long time with those gold eyes that miss less and less these days. He's learning to see, this boy. He arrived here wild and shut-down and biting, and somewhere in the past weeks he's been slowly, carefully opening like something that forgot how to.

It's the most dangerous thing I've watched happen.

Dangerous because I can't look away from it.

He reaches up with his right hand.

His fingers find my face — my jaw, cupping it with a carefulness that doesn't belong to someone who's spent four years fighting off rogues in mountain territory, with a gentleness that belongs to someone who paid attention to every lesson even when he was pretending not to.

His thumb brushes my cheekbone.

I hold very still.

"Stay with me tonight," he says.

Quietly. Just that. No performance in it, no angle, no brat hiding behind words — just Rhydian, twenty years old and freshly healed and looking at me like I'm the most solid thing in his world, which might be true, which is exactly the part that makes my chest do what it does.

"Stay with me tonight."

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat

(Rhydian)

She doesn't answer right away.

I watch her process the words — *stay with me tonight* — the flicker behind her eyes, the almost-decision playing across a face that usually gives nothing away. She glances at my hand cupping her jaw, then back at me. Something raw and unguarded moves through her expression, and I'm still learning how to read it.

Then she says, "Okay."

Just that. Simple. Honest.

"The vial is with Senna," she says.

"I know."

"She'll have something for us by morning."

"I know."

A beat. She looks at me. "Shadowpine is coming in—"

"Elena." I say her name quietly. "I know all of that." I hold her gaze. "It'll still be true tomorrow."

I follow her back to the room.

The moment the door closes, the air changes. Thicker. Heavier. The lessons, the structure, the careful control — all of it falls away.

Something in her face changes. Not softens exactly — she doesn't soften, that's not the right word, it's more like the part of her that's always managing things puts itself down for a moment. Like she stops being the Alpha and becomes just — her. Whoever that is underneath everything she carries.

She hangs her coat slowly, deliberately, buying herself time. I sit on the edge of the bed and watch her, the firelight painting warm gold across her skin. When she finally turns from the window, the snow falling steadily behind her, there's no Alpha in her eyes. Just Elena. Just a woman standing in front of a man who wants her so badly it hurts.

She walks to me.

No instructions. No teaching. She stops between my knees and looks down at me like I'm something precious and dangerous at the same time. Her fingers slide into my hair, pushing it back from my forehead with a tenderness that makes my chest ache. I close my eyes and lean into her touch.

"Hey," she whispers.

I open my eyes. She's watching me like she's memorizing this moment.

I reach up, take her hand, and pull her down. She comes willingly, straddling my lap, her thighs bracketing mine. Our mouths hover close, breaths mingling. Neither of us closes the distance right away. We just stay there, suspended in that aching space, letting the want build until it's unbearable.

I kiss her first.

Slow. Deep. Nothing like the claiming bite of the ceremony. This is just us — hungry, searching, real. Her lips part under mine and she sighs into my mouth, a soft, needy sound that shoots straight to my cock. My hands slide under her shirt, palms greedy against the warm, scarred skin of her back. She arches into me, pressing her breasts against my chest.

We undress each other without rushing.

Her fingers work the laces of my shirt, mine pull her pants down her strong thighs. Every piece of clothing that hits the floor feels like another wall crumbling. When she's bare in front of me, firelight licking over every curve and scar, I have to stop and just look. She's devastating.

I pull her back onto the bed with me.

This time there's no lesson plan. No "do this, breathe, follow my lead." Just two people who have been circling each other for too long finally giving in.

I take my time tasting her.

I kiss down her throat, sucking lightly at the spot that makes her breath hitch. My mouth finds her breasts, tongue circling one tight nipple while my hand palms the other. She moans softly, fingers tightening in my hair, guiding me lower without words. I go where she wants — kissing down her stomach, nipping at her hip bones, until I settle between her thighs.

She's already wet, glistening.

I drag my tongue up her slit in one long, slow stroke and her hips jerk. I do it again, savoring her taste, then seal my mouth over her clit and suck gently. Elena's head falls back with a broken sound. Her thighs tremble around my shoulders as I lick and suck and worship her, sliding two fingers inside her tight heat, curling them just right.

"Rhydian—" she gasps, voice wrecked.

I don't stop. I work her slowly, deliberately, until her back arches and her fingers fist the sheets. When she comes, it's quiet and devastating — a long, shuddering release that leaves her panting and boneless.

I crawl back up her body and kiss her deeply, letting her taste herself on my tongue. She wraps her legs around my waist and rolls us so she's on top. Her hand wraps around my aching cock, stroking once, twice, before she positions me at her entrance.

Our eyes lock.

She sinks down onto me inch by inch, taking me deep into her slick, pulsing heat. The feeling is so intense I have to grip her hips to keep from thrusting up too fast. She's tight. Perfect. Wet velvet gripping every inch of me.

"Fuck, Elena..." I groan.

She starts to move — slow, rolling grinds that drag me along every sensitive spot inside her. Her hands brace on my chest as she rides me, hair falling around her face like a dark curtain. I sit up, pulling her closer so I can kiss her while she moves, our bodies pressed together, skin sliding against skin.

We stay like that for a long time — slow, deep, intentional. Every thrust, every roll of her hips feels like a promise. I cup her ass, helping her move, sucking marks into her neck and shoulder. She rides me harder when I hit that perfect spot inside her, her moans growing louder, breathier.

I flip us again, pinning her beneath me. I hook one of her legs over my arm and drive into her deeper, grinding against her clit with every thrust. Her nails rake down my back, hard enough to sting, and the pain only makes me fuck her harder.

"Again," I growl against her ear. "Come on my cock again."

She does — clenching around me so tightly I almost lose it. I keep thrusting through her orgasm, drawing it out until she's shaking.

Only then do I let myself go.

I bury myself to the hilt and come hard, spilling deep inside her with a guttural groan. The pleasure whites out everything else for a long, perfect moment.

Afterward, the fire has burned low. Snow still falls outside. She's on her back, I'm half-draped over her, my head on her chest listening to her heartbeat slow. Her fingers are in my hair again, stroking lazily.

I lift my head and look at her — flushed, lips swollen, eyes soft in the firelight. The words rise up before I can stop them.

"I think I love you."

The room goes still.

Elena freezes beneath me. Her hand stops moving. Her eyes widen slightly, something complicated and raw flashing across her face — fear, surprise, something deeper she doesn't know how to name yet.

Three seconds. Four.

Then she grabs my face with both hands and kisses me fiercely — desperate, claiming, almost angry in its intensity. Like she's pouring every unsaid thing into me. Like she's answering with her whole body because words aren't enough.

I kiss her back just as hard, pouring everything I feel into it.

Outside, the snow keeps falling.

And for the first time in years, I'm not cold anymore.

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat

(Elena)

I've never said it.

Not once. Not to Viktor — that was never on the table, we both understood what we were, two wolves in a political arrangement using the word *mate* as a job description. Not to my father, though I think he knew, think he could read it in the way I followed him through the Pack house as a child, always one step behind, always watching how he moved through a room. Not to my mother before she left. Especially not then.

The word has always sat in my chest like something with no exit. Something that grew in the wrong shaped space and couldn't find a door.

I've watched other people say it. I've watched warriors say it to their mates in the training yard, quick and thoughtless, the way you'd say *pass the bread* — love you, go — and disappear into the trees for a patrol. Like it weighs nothing. Like it costs nothing to let it out.

I never understood how they did that.

Rhydian is asleep.

I know the exact moment it happens — his breathing changes, deepens, the particular quality of unconsciousness that I've learned to recognize over the past weeks of sharing this bed. The tension in his shoulders dissolves. His face goes different when he sleeps, younger, the twenty-year-old he actually is instead of whatever he's performing at any given moment.

He's on his side, facing me, one arm under the pillow. The healed skin on his forearm catches the last of the firelight — pink and new, the line of it already fading. My work. My gift, which I've given to three people in my life and always measured carefully, always counted the cost.

I didn't count it tonight.

I just gave it.

I'm on my back, looking at the ceiling, listening to him breathe and trying to understand what's happening to me.

He said it like it surprised him. Like the words showed up in his mouth before he'd approved them and came out anyway, and then he just — sat with it. Didn't take it back, didn't qualify it, didn't explain it into something smaller or safer. Just looked at me with those gold eyes and let it exist in the air between us.

I think I love you.

The *think* is the part that got me. The *think* is the most honest thing about it — not performing certainty he doesn't have, not packaging it to land better. Just telling me what's true at the exact level of truth he's got access to right now.

I kissed him because I didn't have language for what that did to me.

I still don't.

Outside the window the snow has changed — lighter now, smaller flakes, the kind that will freeze overnight and make the yard treacherous by morning. The fire has burned down to embers, just enough light to see by, just enough heat to make the blankets unnecessary. I don't pull them up. I lie here in the warmth of the room and the warmth of him a foot away and I do what I've always done with difficult things.

I turn it over. Look at all the angles.

The problem with loving someone is the math of it — what it means when you lose them. I learned that arithmetic early. My mother left when I was nine. My father died when I was twenty-six, two years into my marriage to Viktor, and I stood at his grave and felt the specific loneliness of

someone who has lost the only person who knew them before they learned to perform themselves. Viktor died and I felt — nothing, which taught me something too, taught me that the absence of love is its own kind of loss, the loss of something you never had.

I know what's coming.

Shadowpine in two days. Marcus with his patience and his contingencies and his *you'll never see the blade.* A Pack half-weakened by something in their water, a rogue husband who's only been learning to fight for three weeks, and proof that isn't quite proof yet sitting in a vial in Senna's hands.

I know the odds.

I've always known the odds. That's part of the job, the actual job, the one nobody tells you about when they hand you the territory — you carry the odds. You do the math everyone else doesn't want to do. You lie awake looking at the ceiling and you count your wolves and your resources and your contingencies, and you figure out what you can lose and still survive and what you can't.

What I can't lose is sitting right here.

Which is exactly the problem.

You can't lead with an open wound. You can't stand at a border making clear decisions if half your mind is on someone behind you. Viktor was cold and it was terrible and lonely and I spent three years feeling like furniture, but it was operationally clean. I always knew where everything was.

I don't know where anything is anymore.

He shifts in his sleep.

Rolls slightly, his arm moving, and his hand finds my waist in the way it has started to do — unconsciously, just reaching, just checking, like his sleeping body has already made a decision his waking one is still circling. His fingers settle against my side and go still.

My chest does that thing. The cracking-open thing I can't prevent.

I look at him.

At the scar on his eyebrow, the one from a wolf who wanted his food. At his mouth, slightly open in sleep, the same mouth that said *I think I love you* like it was just a fact he'd discovered and was reporting. At his hand on my waist, heavy and warm and completely unselfconscious.

He came here in chains. He bit me on the first day. He spent the first week flinching from every touch and sneering at everything within sneering distance and waking up from nightmares screaming for parents who were executed in a courtyard when he was sixteen.

And somewhere in the past three weeks he stopped flinching.

He started staying.

I don't know exactly when it happened for me. I've been trying to locate the moment and I can't. It wasn't the training yard, wasn't the lessons, wasn't any single thing — it was accumulation, the same way the snow outside accumulated, quietly and without announcement until everything was covered and you looked out the window and thought *oh. When did that happen.*

I turn on my side.

Face him.

He's still asleep, breathing deep and even, the firelight on his face. I watch him for a while in the way I only let myself watch when he can't catch me doing it — openly, without the management, without the Alpha face or the teacher face or any of the faces I wear depending on who needs what from me.

Just looking at him because I want to.

Because he's mine in a way I didn't expect and don't fully understand and am not sure I know how to hold properly yet. But he is. He came here a rogue and I set out to make him useful and somewhere in the middle of all of it he became — this. Whatever this is.

Someone I go to find at the end of a terrible day.

Someone whose voice in the dark is the specific sound of not being alone.

Someone I healed tonight without counting the cost.

I lean forward. Very slowly. And I press my lips to his shoulder — the curve of it, just that, just the warmth of his skin under my mouth.

He doesn't stir.

I stay there for a moment. My lips against his shoulder, his hand on my waist, the embers dying in the grate and the snow falling outside and the whole settlement sleeping in the quiet that comes before everything breaks open.

And then, into his skin, barely a sound at all — just breath shaped into words:

"I love you."

There.

Out.

The word finally with somewhere to go.

He doesn't hear it. He's asleep and the room swallows it and nobody knows, nobody will ever know I said it first, said it into his shoulder in the dark like a secret I've been keeping from myself.

I close my eyes.

His breathing is slow and steady and even underneath my lips, his heartbeat solid and present, and I stay there in the warmth of him and let myself have this one thing.

Just tonight.

Just this.

Senna will have her results. The border will need checking. Marcus will be somewhere in this house, patient and dangerous and already in motion.

Tomorrow I'll be the Alpha again.

But right now, in the dark, with snow on the ground and a rogue's hand on my waist—

I'm just a woman who finally found somewhere to put it.

