

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat c 2

(Elena)

I've been in this hall a hundred times. As a girl watching my father lead. As a mate sitting beside Viktor. As a widow standing alone.

Today the benches are packed. Every elder who can still walk is here, Pack members crowding the doorways, craning their necks to see. Marcus made sure of that. He wants witnesses.

I stand at the head of the room, back straight, face giving nothing away.

Marcus sits to my right pretending to read from an old scroll. The other elders shift in their seats like the stone's burning through their robes.

"Let's begin," I say.

He looks up with that gentle smile — the one that makes my skin crawl.

"We are here to discuss the future of this Pack. The Moon Goddess demands balance. A leader cannot lead alone."

Murmurs of agreement ripple through the crowd.

I say nothing.

"We consulted the omens. The bones. And the Goddess has spoken." He pauses, spreading his hands like he's offering something precious. "The next Alpha mate must come from the Alma bloodline. Their son — Rhydian — is the only surviving Alma. Twenty years old, a rogue, yes. But the Goddess does not make mistakes."

I know exactly what Rhydian Alma is. A spoiled brat whose parents sold out their own Pack for money. A boy who bit off an elder's fingers when they came to arrest his father. Exiled at seventeen, living feral in the mountains ever since. Rumor says he's killed wolves who tried to drag him back.

And Marcus wants me to marry him.

"Rhydian is a rogue," I say. Flat. "Rogues don't lead. They don't mate. They get put down."

"The Goddess can redeem anyone. Even a lost boy."

Old Man Henrick speaks up beside him — Marcus's shadow, always has been. "The neighboring packs smell weakness. A new mate from the Alma line would strengthen us."

I look around the room. Some elders won't meet my eyes. A few — the good ones, the ones who remember Viktor's cruelty — look ashamed.

Marcus stands and walks toward me, arms open like he's going to embrace me.

"Elena, my niece. You are still young. You deserve warmth at night. Children. A true mate."

Warmth.

That word lands somewhere soft and unguarded inside me.

I remember Viktor's hands. Cold, always cold. Three years of marriage, three years of his body over mine — quick, hard, silent. He never kissed me. Not once. When I tried to hold him after, he'd roll away.

"That's done. Go to sleep."

I'd lie there staring at the ceiling, my body still humming, needing something he never bothered to give. I used to touch myself in the dark, biting my lip so he wouldn't hear.

I wanted heat. Real heat. Someone who looked at me like I was a person, not just a vessel for heirs.

Viktor died and I told myself I didn't care. That I was better off.

But at night, in that empty bed, my skin remembers. It still aches.

Marcus is still talking. Something about duty and sacrifice.

I cut him off.

"And if I refuse?"

Silence. Then — "The council will have no choice but to consider other options for leadership."

There it is. Out in the open.

He wants me to refuse. He's been steering me toward this for months — marry a monster or lose my Pack. He thinks I'll break. He thinks I'll scream and rage and hand him exactly what he wants.

He doesn't know me.

I look at that old scroll in his hands. I've seen it before. It's a fake — the omens never said a word about the Almas. Marcus wrote it himself. I can't prove that yet. But I will.

So I do something else instead.

"Fine," I say.

Marcus blinks. "What?"

"I said fine. I'll marry him."

The room goes dead. Not a breath, not a shuffle, just complete silence.

His smile cracks. For just a second, beneath all that warmth and patience, he looks like someone slapped him across the face.

"You'll... agree?"

"I'll marry the Alma brat." Louder now, so the whole room hears it. "I'll find him wherever he's hiding. I'll put him in my house. In my bed."

Murmurs explode through the crowd.

Henrick stammers beside Marcus. "Elena — he's a rogue, a killer, you can't possibly—"

I turn to him slowly. "Didn't you just say the Goddess wills it? Are you questioning her, Henrick?"

His mouth snaps shut.

I walk to the center of the room and face every single wolf who came here to watch me fall.

"I'll marry Rhydian Alma." My voice carries to the rafters. "And I'll break him."

Gasps.

"I'll take that spoiled, exiled brat and I will drag him back here if I have to. And I will teach him what it means to be a mate. To be a wolf."

I turn to Marcus. He's gone pale — pale as ash, pale as someone who just watched their entire plan collapse in front of them. He thought I'd fight and refuse and hand him a reason to take everything from me.

I just outmaneuvered him in front of his own witnesses.

"Uncle." I let myself smile. Not nicely. "You should be happy. This was your idea."

His mouth opens. Closes. Nothing comes out.

"Send word to the borders. Find the Alma boy. Tell him his Alpha is waiting."

The crowd erupts — some cheering, most just stunned. Henrick is whispering frantically into Marcus's ear, but Marcus isn't listening. He's staring at me like he doesn't recognize what he's looking at.

Good.

Let him wonder.

I step off the platform and walk straight past him without a glance. My heart is slamming inside my chest, but my hands are steady.

At the door, he finds his voice.

"Elena. Wait."

I stop. Don't turn around.

"That boy is not just a brat," he says quietly. "He's dangerous."

I look back over my shoulder.

"I know exactly what I've done, Uncle. I called your bluff. Now you have to live with it."

I walk out into the cold air and breathe.

I'm going to marry a rogue. A wild, exiled boy who doesn't know the first thing about being a mate.

And somewhere deep underneath everything Viktor froze in me — I feel it. Small, stupid, completely unwelcome.

Heat.

He's a boy, I tell myself. A killer. A nothing.

The flame doesn't go out.