

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat - Chapter 21: The weight of Ash[1,559 words]

He finds out at noon.

Not dramatically. Not with shouting or broken furniture or any of the performances lesser men resort to when things go wrong. Marcus finds out the way he finds out most things — through a quiet word from a quiet source, a sentence delivered in a corridor while he was walking to the council hall, three words said low and fast:

She found it.

The man who said it didn't wait for a response. He knew better.

Marcus walked the rest of the way to the council hall. Sat through forty minutes of border reports and supply inventory. Said the appropriate things at the appropriate moments. Nodded at Henrick's summary of the eastern patrol rotation. Poured himself water from the pitcher on the table — water he'd brought himself, from his private stores, not from the main supply — and drank it, and said nothing.

He waited until everyone filed out.

Then he sat alone in the empty hall and looked at the far wall for a while.

The timeline is the problem.

He's known for some time that Elena suspects him — she's too intelligent not to, has been too intelligent since Viktor died, and he made his peace with that because suspicion without proof is just noise. He'd built the plan specifically around the gap between what she could sense and what she could demonstrate.

The antidote was the fail-safe. If she ever found the compound in the water, she'd have proof of the poisoning but no direction — compounds don't come with receipts, and his connection to Varek's people runs through enough intermediaries that following it back would take weeks he was never going to give her.

But the antidote in his quarters. His specific antidote, dosed for his specific body weight, wrapped in his specific cloth, in his locked chest.

That's not just proof of the poisoning.

That's proof of intent. Proof of prior knowledge. Proof that the person who put something in the water was the same person who made sure he wouldn't be affected by it.

That's the rope they hang you with.

He knew something was wrong last night. Knew it when his men didn't report back at the expected time, when the east wing stayed quiet and the room stayed undisturbed from the outside while something about the air quality told him someone had been in it. He checked the chest when he retired. Found the vial missing. Lay awake in the dark adding up numbers and coming to the only conclusion the numbers supported.

The rogue.

He genuinely hadn't expected that. He'd expected Elena to go herself — she's impulsive under the composure, always has been, it's the thing Viktor used to dismiss her for, *she acts from the gut, Marcus, she doesn't think three moves ahead.* He'd planned his contingencies around her. Two men stationed at the servant's entrance, instructions to wound but not kill — killing an Alpha's mate in her own Pack house creates problems that outlast their usefulness.

Instead the boy walked in. Found the key. Picked the lock. Got out bleeding but got out.

Marcus underestimated him.

He doesn't do that a second time.

He meets Henrick in the archive room an hour after the council session. Henrick is seventy-four years old and has been Marcus's creature for twenty years, which means he's also exhausted and frightened and doing the specific arithmetic of a man who got too deep into something a long time ago to find a way out now.

"She has the vial," Marcus says.

Henrick presses his mouth together. "The healer—"

"Has confirmed it by now, yes." He moves to the window. The settlement below is going about its afternoon, wolves crossing the yard, children near the gate, the ordinary machinery of Pack life. "It changes the timeline."

"By how much?"

"New moon," Marcus says. "Four days."

Henrick goes still. "Marcus, the Pack isn't—"

"The Pack is weakened enough. Not as weakened as I planned, but enough." He turns. Looks at the old man. "Shadowpine doesn't need them helpless. They need them manageable."

"And Elena—"

"Elena is going to bring what she has to the council." He says it flatly. "She has the vial, she has the healer's testimony, she has whatever the rogue saw in my quarters. She'll try to move against me formally." He almost smiles. "The problem is it's still not enough for the full council to act. Henrick, Marta, the three eastern elders — they'll demand a formal inquiry, which takes ten days minimum under the charter, and in ten days this is already over."

"She knows that," Henrick says quietly. "She'll find another way."

"She'll try." He crosses to the table. His hands rest on the surface — steady, both of them, no tremor. "Which means we move first. New moon. Four days. I'll send word to Varek tonight."

"The eastern grounds—"

"Are already his, as far as I'm concerned." His voice doesn't change. "Territory means nothing to a dead man."

Henrick is quiet for a long time.

"The boy," he says finally. Careful. "He's not what we thought."

"No." Marcus pulls out the chair. Sits. "He isn't."

Something crosses his face — not regret, exactly. Something more like the particular frustration of a craftsman whose material behaved differently than the properties table suggested it would. He'd looked at Rhydian Alma and seen a rogue. Trauma and instinct and four years of feral survival. A thing Elena might tame or might not, but fundamentally a variable, not a factor.

He watched him in the training yard. He watched Elena laugh.

He should have moved sooner. That laugh told him everything he needed to know about the velocity of what was happening between them, and he waited a day too long.

He doesn't make those errors often.

"He fought off two Shadowpine fighters alone," Marcus says. "Wounded. Came out with the vial." He pauses. "He's going to be a problem."

"Take him out first—"

"No." He says it without deliberation. "You kill the mate before the Alpha, you motivate her in a direction I can't predict. Elena grieving is more dangerous than Elena managing." He's quiet for a moment. "They die together. Or she dies and he follows on his own. That's cleaner."

Henrick nods, the nod of a man who stopped having opinions years ago and has only logistics left.

They sit in silence for a moment. The archive room is cold. The fire in it was never lit today — a small thing, a nothing, the kind of domestic failure that happens in packs every day. Marcus notices it the way he notices everything.

Then Henrick says, "What if she figures out the new moon timing? She's been ahead of us before—"

"She won't." He stands. "She's distracted."

He says it simply. Without malice.

He thinks of her face when she came to find him in the study. Not the anger — the anger was predictable, he'd planned for it. Something underneath the anger. The way she held herself when she asked *why* with that rawness in her voice, like she genuinely wanted to understand.

She's never asked him *why* before. She's always known, or suspected, and kept it banked and controlled.

She asked why because she's stopped being purely operational. Because that boy is getting under her armor in ways Viktor never got close to, and love — real love, the beginning of it, the particular vulnerability of it — love makes you look in the wrong directions.

Makes you look at the person you're building something with instead of the person taking it apart.

He walks to the door.

"Send the message to Varek tonight," he says. "New moon. Full force. Eastern border." He pauses with his hand on the frame. "Tell him to bring everything. I don't want a skirmish. I want it to be finished."

"And if Elena has reinforced the border by then—"

"She won't have enough wolves." He says it quietly. "Not in four days. Not with what's already in their system." He opens the door. "The compound doesn't clear overnight. Their best fighters are still flagging. She can run every countermeasure she has access to and she's still bringing half a force to a full one."

He steps into the corridor.

"Marcus." Henrick's voice behind him. "If this goes wrong—"

He stops. Doesn't turn.

"I built this Pack," he says. The words come out low and even and completely without anger, which is somehow worse than if they'd had heat in them. "I built it for twenty years from a back seat while lesser wolves sat in the chair that should have been mine. I watched Viktor's father, then Viktor, then that girl—" A pause. "I am done watching."

He resumes walking.

"If it comes to it," he says, to the corridor, to no one, to the twenty years of patience that have brought him to this specific point, "I'll burn the Pack to ash and salt the earth."

The door swings shut behind him.

The archive room sits empty in the cold, fire unlit, Henrick alone in it with the silence and the understanding — clear and irrevocable now, settled like snow — that there is no version of the next four days in which everyone survives.

The only question is who.

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat - Chapter 22[1,658 words]

(Rhydian)

Elena puts me in charge of the morning drills.

She doesn't make a production of it. She just says it over breakfast, casual, like she's telling me what the weather is — *you're running drills this morning, I've got the council, Brennan will be there if you need him* — and goes back to her tea like the sentence doesn't mean anything.

It means something.

I sit with it for a minute. The weight of it, what it implies. That she trusts me with her wolves — not the senior ones, not the fighters she's been relying on for years, but the young ones, the trainees, the fifteen and sixteen year olds who are still figuring out what their bodies can do. Which is somehow more significant, not less. Those are the ones who become everything else.

"Okay," I say.

She looks at me over her cup. Doesn't smile. But there's something in her eyes that I've learned to read by now — a small warmth that she doesn't put anywhere obvious.

"Don't break anyone," she says.

"I'll try."

There are eleven of them.

Ranging from fifteen to eighteen, various sizes, various levels of coordination. A few of them look at me when I walk in with the blank assessment of young wolves who are trying to figure out the

hierarchy. A few look at the ground. One in the back — tall, maybe seventeen, broad across the shoulders already, the kind of kid who grew fast and got used to it — doesn't look at me at all. Just keeps talking to the boy beside him in a low voice.

I know that type. I was that type.

"Pair up," I say. "Two lines, facing each other. I want to see your baseline."

They move. Mostly. The ones who look at the ground move fastest — eager, or at least willing. The tall one in the back takes his time. Makes a point of finishing his conversation before he ambles to a spot, which is fine, I'm not going to perform authority by calling it out. He'll do what I need him to do or he won't, and we'll handle it then.

I watch them run through basic blocking sequences. It takes about four minutes to see the shape of what I'm working with — two of them are genuinely good, moving with a natural economy that just needs sharpening. Most are average, willing but unformed. Two are struggling with something structural, bad habits they picked up somewhere that are going to get them hurt if nobody fixes them.

And the tall one — his name is Cade, one of the others says it when they pair up — Cade is interesting. He's technically sound. Actually better than average. But every third move he telegraphs with his shoulder, the same tell, the same window opening and closing, and he doesn't know he's doing it.

I file that away.

We work for an hour. I move through the pairs, adjusting hands and feet and angles, saying more than I expected to say. This is the thing Elena is doing to me that I don't entirely know how to feel about — she's teaching me to use words instead of just instinct, to break things down, to find the language for what I know in my body but never had to explain before because I was always alone.

Slower. You're fighting the movement instead of using it.

Drop your weight before you commit. Your feet are too narrow.

Stop looking at their hands. Look at their shoulders.

The two who are struggling start to improve. The two good ones get better. Most of the middle group is trying, really trying, and I feel something I wasn't expecting — something that sits in my chest and doesn't have a clean name but is somewhere in the neighborhood of *invested.*

I want them to get it right.

I genuinely want that.

Then Cade says it.

He's running a sequence with his partner, and I've moved close to correct his shoulder tell, and I say — *you're opening up on the third move, here, drop this before you commit* — and he does it, gets it right, and then while I'm standing there he says to his partner, not even low enough to be covert:

"What's he gonna do if I don't. Go cry to the Alpha's whore."

His partner goes still.

The two nearest pairs go still.

The yard gets that quality of silence it gets when something has been said that everyone is waiting to see land.

I stand there.

My first instinct — and it is *immediate*, animal-fast, four years of having to back every word with consequence — is to put him on the ground. Hard. Fast. Make the point in the language I actually grew up speaking.

I don't.

Not because I can't. Not because Elena's voice is in my head telling me not to — though it is, in some background register, *don't break anyone.* But because I think about what I just spent an hour doing. The adjustments, the corrections, the actually wanting them to get it right. And I think about what putting Cade on the ground in front of his peers would do to that. What message it sends about what happens in this yard when someone steps wrong.

I look at him.

He's watching me. That studied blank look of someone who threw the thing and is now watching to see where it lands and performing like they don't care either way. His jaw is set. His shoulder — and I notice this, because I've been watching his shoulder all morning — is tight.

He's not as unbothered as he's performing.

"Cade," I say.

He holds the look. "Yeah."

"Come here."

A beat. He comes. Slow, making nothing of it, but he comes, which tells me something about him — underneath the performance there's something that responds to directness. He's not actually defiant. He's testing. There's a difference, and it's one I know from the inside.

He stops a few feet away.

I move fast.

Not a strike — I'm not going to hit him, I'm not going to hurt him, but I move with everything four years of survival built into my body, and before he can process what's happening I have his arm, his weight, and the ground is coming up and then he's on his back looking at the sky with my knee on his chest and my forearm across his collarbone and I'm barely leaning any weight on it at all.

Three seconds. Maybe four.

His eyes are wide. Not scared — surprised. The specific surprise of someone who thought they had the measure of a situation and found out they didn't.

I look at him calmly.

"Can you get up?" I ask.

He tries. I let him feel that he can't — not because I'm crushing him, I'm barely on him, but because the position is right, the geometry of it is right, and there's nothing to push against.

"No," he says. Tightly.

"Okay." I hold it for another second. Let him just be there. Then I stand and step back and offer him my hand.

He looks at it.

Looks at me.

Takes it.

I pull him up. He doesn't stumble. I give him that — he takes the help without making anything of it, which actually takes more self-possession than refusing it would.

The yard is very quiet.

I look at him. He's not performing now. That's gone. He's just — here, looking back at me, slightly flushed, waiting.

"I was exiled at seventeen," I say. Not loudly. I'm not performing for the yard — this is for him, but if the rest of them hear it, fine. "My parents were executed in front of the entire Pack and I spent four years alone in a cave eating whatever I could catch." I pause. "I've been here three weeks. I'm learning your Pack's protocols and your customs and how to stand at borders and what it means to lead something, and most days I'm still getting things wrong."

He doesn't say anything.

"I'm not going to tell you what I am to your Alpha," I say. "That's between her and me." I hold his gaze. "But I'll tell you what I'm doing in this yard. I'm learning to earn something. Same as you." I pause. "Same as every single person standing here."

The yard is still quiet.

Cade's jaw works. Something is happening on his face that he's trying to keep organized and not entirely managing.

"The shoulder tell," I say. "Third move. You've been doing it all morning."

He blinks. "What?"

"Drop your right shoulder before you commit. It's a window. Someone with training is going to walk through it." I hold his gaze. "Fix it before that happens."

A beat.

"Okay," he says. Quieter than anything he's said all morning.

I look at the rest of the yard. Eleven faces, various expressions — some wide-eyed, some trying not to show they're wide-eyed, the two good ones looking at me with something that might be reassessment.

"Respect is earned," I say. "I'm earning it." I look back at Cade briefly. "Now run laps. All of you. Four. Go."

They go.

Cade goes too, without hesitation, first into the run, and I watch him find his pace and I think — *there he is. That's the actual one, under all the noise.*

I stay at the center of the yard and watch them run.

Somewhere in the Pack house Elena is sitting in a council meeting, carrying the weight of what's coming in four days, carrying all of it in that particular quiet way of hers.

I stay in the yard and I do my job.

It's a small thing.

But I'm learning that small things are how you build something that lasts.

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat - Chapter 23:Mine[1,004 words]

(Elena)

I'm not supposed to be watching.

I have three reports on my desk, a supply inventory that Brennan needs signed before noon, and a meeting with Senna in an hour. Yet here I am, standing at the window of the upper corridor, eyes fixed on the training yard below.

He doesn't know I'm here.

Rhydian moves like a force of nature among the eleven young wolves—commanding, precise, unyielding. I watched the entire Cade situation unfold: the cocky comment, the deadly stillness that came over Rhydian, the way he chose control instead of rage. Four seconds later, Cade was on the ground. Then Rhydian offered his hand and pulled the boy back up.

Pride swells in my chest, hot and fierce. My wolf preens. This is **my** mate. The man I chose. The one I'm breaking and remaking into something stronger.

He dismisses the group and stands alone for a moment in the center of the yard, hands on his hips, head bowed as he lets the session settle. When he finally looks up toward the sky, his face is open—tired, satisfied, unguarded. Something deep inside me aches with possession.

Mine.

I step back from the window before he can sense me.

The rest of the day drags. Reports. Senna's confirmation of the vial's contents. The tightening timeline before Shadowpine makes their move. By dinner, I'm coiled tight with everything I'm carrying.

Rhydian comes in windswept and still buzzing with energy. We eat, exchange words about Cade, and I can't stop staring at him—his jaw, the new scar on his forearm, the way he's learning to belong here.

He catches me.

"You're staring," he says.

"I know." I don't look away.

The corner of his mouth twitches. Heat simmers between us for the rest of the meal.

Later, when the settlement is quiet and the fire has burned low, I come to our room.

He's already on the bed, shirtless, one arm behind his head, staring at the ceiling. His gold eyes track me as I cross the room. I kick off my boots, then slowly strip out of my clothes, letting him watch every inch I reveal.

I climb onto the bed and straddle him without a word, knees bracketing his hips. His hands settle on my thighs, warm and rough.

"Elena..." His voice is already rough.

I lean down and kiss him hard, claiming his mouth. He groans into it, but I don't let him take control. I push his shoulders back down when he tries to rise.

"Stay," I order against his lips.

His eyes darken with lust.

I grind down against the hard length of him through his pants, feeling him thicken instantly. He hisses, fingers digging into my hips. I reach between us, shove his pants down just enough to free his cock—thick, heavy, already leaking at the tip.

I wrap my hand around him and stroke once, twice, squeezing the way I know drives him wild. He bucks up into my fist with a growl.

I position myself over him and sink down in one slow, relentless motion.

"Fuck—" he chokes out as I take every inch of him.

The stretch is perfect, almost too much. I pause for just a second, savoring the way he fills me completely, then I start to move.

I ride him hard.

No gentleness tonight. I brace my hands on his chest and slam down onto his cock again and again, hips rolling with aggressive, demanding rhythm. The wet sound of my pussy taking him fills the room. His head tips back, veins standing out in his neck as he fights not to thrust up.

"Elena—gods—"

I lean forward, changing the angle so he hits that spot deep inside me with every downward stroke. My breasts brush his chest. I bite his shoulder, then lick the mark.

"Look at me," I command.

His eyes snap to mine, wild and golden. I ride him faster, grinding my clit against his pelvis on every downstroke. Pleasure coils tight and vicious in my core.

His hands slide up to grip my waist, but he doesn't try to control the pace—he lets me use him, lets me take what I want.

I feel powerful. I feel *right*.

My orgasm builds fast and brutal. I ride him even harder, chasing it, thighs burning, breath ragged.

"Mine," I gasp as the pleasure crashes over me. I clench around his cock, pulsing, soaking him as I come hard.

Rhydian snarls, the sound pure wolf. His control finally snaps. His hips snap up to meet me, fucking me through my orgasm with deep, punishing thrusts. Then he flips us suddenly, pinning me beneath him for two brutal strokes before he buries himself to the hilt and comes with a guttural roar, flooding me with heat.

But I'm not done.

I push him onto his back again, climbing right back on before he can soften. I sink down onto his spent cock, working him back to full hardness inside me with slow, filthy rolls of my hips.

This time I ride him even more aggressively—wild, desperate, claiming. My nails rake down his chest. His hands grip my ass, helping me bounce on his cock.

"Again," I demand.

He growls, eyes locked on where we're joined, watching his cock disappear into my dripping pussy.

"Fuck, Elena... you're going to kill me."

"Good."

I ride him until we're both sweating and shaking. When the second climax hits me, I throw my head back and cry out.

"Mine," I moan, voice wrecked.

He surges up, arms locking around me, mouth against my throat.

"Yours," he growls, deep and possessive, the word vibrating against my skin as he comes again, pulsing hot and deep inside me.

We collapse together, tangled and breathless. His arms stay wrapped around me, holding me close as our heartbeats slowly settle.

Outside, the frozen world waits. Three days until the new moon.

But right now, there is only this.

Him. Me. And the truth we've finally stopped fighting.

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat - Chapter 24[1,413 words]

(Rhydian)

The scout's name is Petra.

She's maybe twenty-two, small and fast-looking, the kind of wolf who was built for speed over distance. She comes in from the east border just after dawn, still in her patrol gear, and she doesn't stop at the gate or the hall or anywhere in between — she comes straight to Elena, which means she was told to, which means someone knew something was coming and had the sense to set up a chain before it arrived.

I'm in the yard when she runs through it.

The look on her face is enough.

I follow her inside.

Elena is already in the main hall by the time I get there. She moves fast when something's wrong — not panicked, just efficient, like a gear shifting up. Brennan is beside her, the senior warrior she trusts most, and two others whose names I'm still learning. They're gathered around the table with a rough map spread on it, and Petra is talking, her breath still uneven from the run.

"—three separate sightings in the last twelve hours. Eastern ridgeline, the old logging track, and here—" She points. "—which is inside our border by half a mile."

"How many," Elena says.

"That we saw? Eight. But they were moving quiet. Deliberate quiet, not just caution." Petra's jaw is tight. "There are more. Scout formation doesn't move in eights."

"No," Elena says. "It doesn't." She studies the map. Her finger traces the eastern ridge, the logging track, the point inside the border. Three points of contact, roughly triangulated. "This isn't a test of the border."

"No," Brennan says. "It's positioning."

I move closer to the table. Nobody tells me to stop.

I look at the map. The three points, the terrain between them, the distance from each to the main settlement. I've been running these borders for three weeks — not formally, not with orders, just because it's what I do, have done, the part of me that spent four years surviving by knowing the land around me. I know every point on this map by feel.

"The logging track connects to the ridge here," I say. I put my finger on the map. "If they're on both ends of it, they're not scouting. They're setting up a corridor." I trace the line. "Anything coming through the eastern patrol from this direction walks into it."

The table goes quiet.

Elena looks at where my finger is. Then at me.

"He's right," Petra says quietly.

"I know," Elena says.

Brennan's expression is doing something complicated — not hostile, not toward me, but the look of a man recalibrating something in real time. He glances at Elena. She doesn't return it.

"New moon is in three days," she says. She says it flatly, to the table. Not news to her — I can tell by the zero surprise in her voice that she's been counting down since before Petra ran through the gate. "They're not waiting anymore. They're moving the setup forward."

"Why," Brennan says.

I know why. I don't say it in front of everyone because some information has weight that changes how people carry themselves and I've learned from her that you choose when to put weight on your wolves. But Elena looks at me briefly across the table and I see she knows too.

Marcus told them we found something.

One of his men got out of that room. Reported back. And Varek, who's been waiting on a timeline, recalculated.

She picks up the map. Studies it. The room stays quiet — I've noticed this about her, how she creates silence just by going into herself, how people who've worked with her long enough know to wait for it.

"We split the eastern patrol into two groups," she says finally. "First group holds the standard route — visible, normal, gives them what they're expecting to see. Second group moves through the north ridge—" she points, "—and comes in behind the logging track corridor. Flanks whatever they're building before it's built."

Heads nod around the table. Brennan starts talking about numbers, rotation, timing.

And I'm listening to all of it and the thing taking shape in my chest is simple and certain and fully formed by the time I open my mouth.

"I'll lead the second group," I say.

The table stops.

Elena looks up from the map.

I hold her gaze. "I know the north ridge route. I've run it. I know where the cover is and where it isn't and what the Shadowpine formation will look like from the high point before you come down." I pause. "And they don't know me. They know your senior warriors by name and by face. I'm new. I'm a variable they haven't accounted for."

Nobody speaks.

Elena is looking at me with an expression I can't fully read. Not the teaching face, not the Alpha face — something more personal than either of those. Something that has a feeling underneath it she's working to keep off the surface.

"Brennan leads the second group," she says.

Flat. Final. The tone that ends conversations.

I stay where I am. "Brennan is a known quantity to Shadowpine. They've been watching this Pack for months — they know who your senior fighters are, how they move, what patterns to expect." I keep my voice even. "I'm not in any of their intelligence."

"You're also not trained for coordinated strike operations," she says. "You've been running drills for three weeks."

"I've been keeping myself alive for four years against wolves who wanted to take what I had." I feel the heat rising in my chest but I keep my voice level. "That's not nothing."

"It's not the same."

"I know it's not the same—"

"Then you know why the answer is no."

The room has gone very still in the way rooms go still when a personal thing has walked into a tactical one and everyone present is deciding whether to pretend they can't see it.

I look at her.

She's looking back at me with her jaw set and her hands flat on the table and that particular quality of someone who has made a decision from a place that has nothing to do with logic and knows it and isn't going to say so in front of anyone.

"It's a good tactical call," I say quietly. "You know it is."

"Brennan leads the second group," she says again.

I look at Brennan. He looks at the table. Which is the right call on his part.

"This isn't—" I stop. Take a breath. "You're not saying no because I'm wrong."

Something crosses her face. Sharp. A warning.

"Rhydian—"

"You're saying no because it's me." I look at her. "Which I understand. I do. But that's not a tactical reason."

"It's my Pack," she says, and her voice drops, and the people around the table all find something extremely interesting to look at that isn't either of us. "My border. My call."

"Yes," I say. "It is."

I step back from the table.

She watches me. Her hands are still flat on the map. Her expression is back to controlled but I've learned her well enough to see what's underneath the control — the fear she won't name, the math she's been doing, the specific arithmetic of someone calculating what they can afford to lose and hitting the wall where the answer changes.

She's afraid of putting me out there.

I know that. I understand it in my chest, in the part of me that said *yours* in the dark and meant it completely. I understand that she's doing the thing she accused herself of in the empty moments — caring about the outcome of me in a way that affects her judgment.

I also know she's wrong about the call. And I know she knows it.

Neither of those things changes anything right now.

"Fine," I say.

I pick up my jacket from the bench.

"Rhydian—" Her voice follows me.

I walk out.

The cold hits me in the face when I push through the door and I stand in the yard for a second, breathing it in, the frozen ground under my boots and the pale morning sky above the trees.

Three days.

I roll my jaw. Look at the tree line.

Three days and she's going to need every variable she has.

I'll be ready whether she puts me out there or not.

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat - Chapter 25[1,970 words]

(Elena)

He's gone for three hours before I go after him.

I tell myself I'm not. I finish reviewing the patrol rotations with Brennan, forcing myself to focus on every name and every shift. I sign the supply inventory with a steady hand, even though my thoughts keep drifting. I sit through twenty minutes of Henrick droning on about the council timeline, hearing Marcus's logic woven through every cautious word. I handle it all—Alpha duties, pack needs, the weight of leadership pressing down on my shoulders like the frozen sky above.

But the moment I'm done, I pull on my heavy coat, tell Brennan I'm walking the perimeter, and head out into the cold night anyway. My boots crunch through the snow as I move toward the eastern tree line. I don't need to search blindly. I know exactly where he'll be.

I hear him before I see him.

The sound carries through the bare trees like a lament—low, resonant, and aching. Not the raw, grief-filled howling that used to tear through the walls during his earliest nights here, when nightmares of ropes and trapdoors haunted his sleep. This is different. Deeper. A lonely call that speaks of displacement, of a wolf still testing the edges of where he fits in this world. It vibrates through my chest, pulling at something primal inside me.

I follow it, my breath fogging in the frigid air, until I reach the border. The eastern markers stand like silent sentinels every thirty meters, dividing pack territory from the wild unknown beyond. Rhydian is exactly at the last one, standing in human form with his head tilted back toward the thin sliver of moonlight. His chest rises and falls with the sound, the vibration rolling out of him and dissolving into the dark forest.

He stops the moment he senses me, but he doesn't turn around.

"You should be inside," he says. His voice is flat, guarded.

"So should you."

I stop a few feet behind him. He's wearing a jacket that's too light for this biting cold, his shoulders rigid with tension—part stubborn pride, part the chill he's refusing to acknowledge. His stance is deliberate, toes right at the boundary line, as if he's daring the world to pull him one way or the other.

"I'm not wrong about the north ridge," he continues.

"I know you're not."

A heavy beat of silence stretches between us. He turns his head slightly, just enough for me to catch the sharp line of his jaw in the moonlight.

"Then why are you here?" he asks.

"Because knowing you're right doesn't make this easier."

He exhales, the cloud of his breath hanging in the air. I study the line of his back, the way he's planted himself at this edge—the same kind of edge he's stood at his whole life. Always on the boundary of belonging, never fully stepping in.

"Four years ago, I stood at a line like this," he says quietly, gaze fixed on the darkness beyond the marker. "Only I was going the other way. They were behind me, and I couldn't bring myself to look back."

"I know."

"I told myself it was fine. That packs were just politics and power plays, and I was better off alone. I believed it for six months. Then I stopped believing it... but I kept saying it anyway."

I take another step closer, the snow crunching softly under my boots. He doesn't move, but I feel the awareness between us sharpen.

"You're going to send Brennan to the north ridge," he says. "And I'll be stuck inside the settlement, being... managed."

"Protected," I correct gently.

"Same thing to me."

"It isn't the same."

He turns around fully now. The moonlight catches his face—open in that rare, exhausted way, stripped of armor. Tired lines around his eyes, a young man's frustration mixed with the hard-earned strength he's built here. Angry, but not at me. At the limits he's still bumping up against.

"I can do this, Elena. You know I can handle it."

"Yes," I say softly. "I know you can."

"Then why—?" His voice cracks just slightly. He clears his throat, jaw tightening. "Is this always going to be how it is? I prove myself, then prove myself again, and there's always one more thing I haven't earned yet?"

The words hit me like a blow to the chest. I look at him—this man who arrived in chains, who learned to hold power gently, who lifted a bully off the ground with his own hand and said he loved me like it startled him.

"It's not about proof," I tell him.

"Then what is it about?"

I swallow hard. "In three days, Shadowpine is coming. I have to be the Alpha for all of it. For the entire pack. And I can't... I can't do that if I'm staring at the north ridge, waiting to see if you come back. I know it's not tactical. I know the strategic move is what you argued for in the hall. But I can't look at that ridge on a map and see just a variable. I see *you*."

The forest around us feels impossibly still, as if the trees themselves are holding their breath.

"So that's it," he murmurs. "You don't trust me."

"No." I step forward, close enough to feel the heat radiating from his body. "I trust you completely. I don't trust what happens to *me* if something goes wrong. If I lose you."

He breathes out slowly. The anger in his expression softens at the edges, shifting into something raw and vulnerable. He glances back at the border marker, then at me.

"I wasn't going to cross it," he admits. "I just needed to stand here. To let that sound out. Four years on the other side of lines like this... sometimes I still feel the pull. Not because I want to go back. Just because it's what I knew."

I close the final distance. Moving around him, I wrap my arms around his waist from behind, pressing my chest flush to his back. My face buries into the warm curve of his neck, inhaling his scent—pine, snow, and that unmistakable wildness that is purely Rhydian.

"Don't go where I can't follow," I whisper against his skin. The words come out raw, trembling with fear and love and everything I've been holding back.

He goes completely still for a heartbeat. Then his large hands cover mine where they rest over his heart, fingers threading tightly together.

"Elena..." His voice is hoarse, wrecked.

He turns in my arms—first halfway, then fully—until we're face to face in the cold moonlight. Our eyes lock, and the air between us ignites. The kiss starts desperate and deep, mouths crashing together with weeks of tension and love and terror. His tongue slides against mine, hot and claiming, while his hands grip my waist, pulling me impossibly closer.

I push him backward until his shoulders hit the rough trunk of an ancient pine. He groans into my mouth as I press my body against his, feeling the hard, insistent ridge of his cock straining against his pants. Heat pools low in my belly, slick and urgent.

"Need you," I breathe against his lips. "Right now."

His hands move with frantic hunger—shoving my coat open, yanking my shirt up so he can cup my breasts. His thumbs drag roughly over my stiff nipples, sending sparks straight to my core. I arch into him with a gasp, my own hands sliding under his jacket to feel the heated skin of his chest.

He growls, low and wolfish, then spins us so my back is against the tree. The rough bark bites through my layers, a sharp contrast to the heat of his body. He drops to his knees in the snow without hesitation, his breath hot against my skin as he tears open my pants and yanks them down to my thighs.

Cold air kisses my soaked folds for only a second before his mouth is on me—hot, starving, relentless. His tongue licks a broad stripe up my slit, then circles my clit with firm, demanding pressure. Two thick fingers push inside me without warning, curling deep to stroke that perfect spot.

"Fuck— Rhydian!" I cry out, gripping his hair as my hips rock against his face.

He devours me like a man possessed, sucking my clit between his lips while his fingers pump in and out, stretching me, fucking me open. The wet, obscene sounds mix with my ragged moans. Pleasure builds fast and vicious, coiling tight in my core until I shatter against his tongue—thighs trembling, vision sparking as I come hard with his name on my lips.

He rises swiftly, spinning me again to face the tree. I brace my hands on the bark as he shoves my pants lower. The sound of his belt and zipper is frantic. Then the thick, scorching head of his cock presses against my entrance.

He thrusts in with one powerful stroke, burying himself to the hilt.

I moan loudly at the delicious stretch, the way he fills me so completely. He's big, hard, and pulsing inside me. Rhydian sets a punishing rhythm immediately—hips snapping forward, driving into me again and again. The sharp slap of skin on skin echoes through the quiet trees. One hand grips my hip hard enough to leave marks; the other reaches around to rub tight, rough circles over my swollen clit.

"Mine," he growls against my ear, teeth grazing my neck. "Say it, Elena."

"Yours," I gasp, pushing back to meet every thrust. "All yours— harder, please—"

He gives it to me. Deep, desperate strokes that hit the end of me every time, the bark scraping my palms as my breasts bounce with the force. Pleasure spirals higher, sharper. When my second orgasm crashes over me, it's devastating—my pussy clenching rhythmically around his cock, milking him as I moan brokenly into the night.

Rhydian snarls, his thrusts turning erratic. He buries himself deep and comes with a guttural roar, flooding me with hot, thick pulses of his release.

But we're not done. He stays buried inside me, breathing hard against my neck, pressing soft, reverent kisses to my shoulder. After a moment, he pulls out gently, turns me to face him, and lifts me. My back presses to the tree again as I wrap my legs around his waist. He slides back into me in one smooth glide, slower this time but no less intense.

We move together like this—face to face, eyes locked, breaths mingling. His thrusts are deep and rolling, grinding against my clit with every motion. My arms wrap around his neck, fingers tangling in his hair as I kiss him fiercely.

"I love you," I whisper between gasps. "Don't you dare leave me behind."

"Never," he promises, voice rough with emotion and lust. "I'm yours, Elena. Always."

The pace builds again, more urgent now. He fucks me against the tree with powerful strokes, our bodies slick with sweat despite the cold. I come a third time, crying out as waves of pleasure wash through me. He follows moments later, groaning my name as he spills inside me once more.

We stay locked together afterward, panting, his forehead pressed to mine. He holds me close, still buried deep, as the thin moonlight filters through the branches above.

"Don't go where I can't follow," I whisper again, voice wrecked but certain.

"I won't," he vows, arms tightening around me. "I'm right here. With you. On the same side."

The border marker stands silent behind us. Three days until the new moon and whatever Shadowpine brings. But in this moment, nothing else matters. Just us—raw, claimed, and finally whole against the tree at the edge of everything.

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat - Chapter 26: The variable[1,706 words]

Marcus hears it from Henrick, the way he hears most things he doesn't want to know.

They're walking the inner corridor after the morning council session, and Henrick says it carefully, the way he's learned to deliver information that will land badly — building toward it, qualifying it, wrapping the fact in so much context that by the time the actual sentence arrives Marcus has already assembled it himself from the shape of the approach.

"The young wolves," Henrick says. "The trainees. There's been a — shift."

"What kind of shift."

"In how they talk about him." Henrick adjusts his robe. Doesn't look at Marcus directly. "Cade specifically. He came to breakfast yesterday and sat with the senior warriors. First time he's done that. And when someone made a comment about the rogue—" He stops.

"What kind of comment."

"The usual kind. What he is. Where he came from." A pause. "Cade told them to shut up."

Marcus walks.

His boots on stone. The familiar rhythm of this corridor he's walked for thirty years, past the portraits of Alphas he served and watched and outlasted. He keeps his hands clasped behind his back. His face gives nothing.

"Brennan," he says.

"Also changing." Henrick's voice drops lower, though they're alone. "He deferred to the boy twice in yesterday's planning session. Not formally. Just — adjusted his position based on what Rhydian said. In front of four other warriors."

"He adjusted his *position.*"

"He said — and I'm told this directly — that the rogue reads terrain better than anyone he's worked with." Henrick finally looks at him. "His words."

Marcus stops walking.

He stands in the corridor and looks at the portrait of Viktor's father — strong jaw, cold eyes, the expression of a man who was handed something and held it adequately. He looks at it for a moment.

"How long," he says.

"The shift started in the training yard. Three days ago."

"The Cade situation."

"Yes."

Marcus resumes walking.

He knew the boy had something. He admitted that to himself privately after the room incident, after the two Shadowpine fighters came back with one injury between them and a missing vial and the news that the rogue had gotten out and kept moving. He'd recalibrated then — moved the timeline, sent word to Varek.

What he hadn't fully accounted for was the specific way a person can walk into an established hierarchy and change it not through force but through the slower mechanism of being *right* repeatedly until the people around them stop being able to pretend otherwise.

Viktor never did that. Viktor was Alpha by blood and held it by intimidation and the Pack followed him the way people follow weather — because it was there, because it was overwhelming, because there wasn't another option.

The boy is doing something different.

The boy is making them want to.

Marcus turns down the east passage toward his quarters. His mind is moving through the architecture of the problem the way he moves through everything — methodically, without panic, identifying the load-bearing elements. Elena is the Alpha. Elena is the target. The plan has always been Elena.

But a wolf with a pack that believes in him, a wolf who has earned it genuinely rather than inherited it — that wolf, standing beside Elena when Shadowpine comes, is not the same variable as a struggling rogue kept around for bloodline politics.

That wolf changes the math.

He opens his door. Closes it.

Stands alone in his room.

His name is Drav.

He's not Shadowpine — that matters, that's the first criterion. No Pack affiliation, no colors, no one who can trace back. He's a rogue who works for money and has been doing so for long enough that he's professional about it in the way rogues rarely are. He comes recommended through an intermediary Marcus has used twice before for things that needed distance between them.

Marcus meets him in the woodshed at the edge of the settlement property. Before dawn. The kind of hour that contains only people who are doing things they'd prefer to be invisible.

Drav is perhaps thirty. Medium build, forgettable features, the particular stillness of someone who has learned that movement draws attention and survival is largely about not drawing attention. He listens to the instruction without expression.

"During the hunt," Marcus says. "The Alpha has scheduled a game hunt tomorrow morning. The rogue will be included — she's been including him in everything." He pauses. "The forest provides natural cover for accidents."

"How clean," Drav says.

"Clean enough that it reads as an animal attack or a rogue encounter. You won't need a weapon that leaves a signature."

"And the Alpha—"

"Is not the target." He says it once, clearly. "Not yet. If she sees you, if there's any risk she sees you, you pull back. The boy only."

Drav nods. Single movement.

"Payment," Marcus says. "Half now, half when it's done."

He passes the coins. Drav pockets them without counting, which is either professional confidence or indifference to the denominations. Either way, the transaction is completed.

Marcus walks back through the frozen predawn dark and thinks about nothing in particular, which is his method — clear the board, let the pieces move, trust the architecture.

He goes to breakfast. He pours tea. He asks Henrick how the eastern elder's wife is recovering from her winter cough.

He is very, very good at waiting.

He hears what happens at noon.

He's in the archive room when Henrick comes in and closes the door and stands there with the expression of a man delivering the second piece of very bad news in a very short span of time.

"Drav," Henrick says.

Marcus sets down his pen.

"He made contact at the north ridge. Clean approach, good position. He had the angle." Henrick stops. "The boy felt him. Twenty meters out, moving through brush, no sound. He just — turned."

Marcus is quiet.

"They fought. Drav was good. He's worked for—"

"I know what Drav is," Marcus says. "What happened."

"The rogue killed him." Henrick pauses. "It took less than two minutes."

The archive room is very still.

Marcus puts his pen down on the desk with a precise click and sits back in his chair and looks at the ceiling. The familiar vault of it, the stones he's looked at for thirty years, the crack in the northeast corner that maintenance keeps patching and the building keeps reopening.

Two minutes.

A professional. An experienced rogue who had position, surprise, and no moral hesitation. Two minutes.

He thinks about what that means — not emotionally, he doesn't deal in emotional responses in these moments, but practically. Tactically. A twenty-year-old who spent four years in a cave built himself into something that can kill a professional assassin with surprise advantage in under two minutes.

And then — he realizes — walked back to camp.

"Did anyone see him return," he says.

"Yes." Henrick's voice is careful. "Several of the hunting party. He came back with a deer over his shoulder." A pause. "One of the younger wolves asked if he was all right. He had blood on his jacket."

"And he said—"

"He said he ran into a rogue trying to take his deer." Henrick looks at the floor. "They laughed. The boy who asked laughed too."

Marcus closes his eyes briefly. Opens them.

"Did he report it to Elena."

"That I don't know."

He probably did. That's the thing Marcus keeps underestimating — the boy's instinct to move toward Elena rather than away from her, to bring things rather than hold them. A rogue's instinct is self-containment, is **handle it alone**, but Rhydian has been slowly, steadily unlearning that particular survival habit and replacing it with something more dangerous.

Partnership.

He trusts her. She trusts him. They're building something that has its own momentum now, that would take more than a dead assassin or a missing vial or a postponed poisoning to stop.

Marcus stands up.

He goes to the window. The settlement below is going about its afternoon — wolves crossing the yard, a cluster of trainees near the fence, someone laughing at something near the gate. Ordinary. Untouched. The whole machine running.

His machine. He built this. The systems, the protocols, the structures that keep three hundred wolves functioning as a unit. Viktor's father had the bloodline, Viktor had the name, but Marcus had the *architecture.* The things that actually work.

They never saw it. None of them.

His hands find the windowsill. His knuckles go white.

One day. One more day until the new moon. Until Varek's wolves come through the eastern corridor in force, in numbers that a half-weakened Pack cannot fully match, and everything Marcus has been building toward for twenty years of patience and small movements and careful silences reaches its conclusion.

One day.

And in that day he has a rogue who kills professionals in under two minutes, an Alpha who is no longer operating cleanly because she is operating in love, and a Pack that is — he thinks about Cade, about Brennan deferring, about the laughter at the gate — a Pack that is starting to believe in something.

He pushes back from the window.

"Send word to Varek," he says. His voice is controlled. Completely controlled. "Tell him to add two more fighters to the eastern breach. Tell him the variable has grown." He pauses. "Tell him the rogue is a priority target. First engagement, before the main push. Before anything else."

Henrick nods. Moves to leave.

"Henrick."

He stops.

"This ends tomorrow," Marcus says. Quiet. Certain. The tone of a man who has decided something final. "Whatever it takes. Whatever it costs." He looks back at the window, at the ordinary afternoon, at the machine he built still running below him. "I'll burn the Pack to ash and salt the earth before I watch that boy inherit what's mine."

Henrick leaves.

Marcus stands at the window alone.

Below, near the gate, the laughter rises again. Young wolves, easy and unselfconscious, the sound of a Pack that doesn't know what's coming.

He watches.

And he waits for the last time.

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat - Chapter 27[1,581 words]

(Rhydian)

I don't tell Elena right away.

I come back from the hunt with a deer and blood on my jacket that isn't the deer's and I smile at whatever Corvin said near the gate and I carry the deer to the kitchens and I wash my hands twice at the basin in the yard and I stand there with cold water running over my knuckles and I think.

The man in the north ridge knew where I'd be. He had position — good position, the kind that doesn't happen by accident or luck or someone taking a walk in the wrong direction. He had the specific angle that a person has when they've been told *this is where the target will be at this time* and they've done the work to verify it before they move.

Someone told him.

Someone in this settlement, with access to the hunt schedule, with knowledge of the route we'd be taking, told an outside rogue where to stand and when.

I dry my hands. Look at the tree line.

The rogue is on the north ridge where I left him. He's not going anywhere. The deer is in the kitchen. Elena is in the Pack house doing whatever she's doing in the two hours before the evening meal, probably three things simultaneously.

I go get the body.

It takes me forty minutes to bring him down from the ridge. He's heavier than he looked in the fight — they always are. I wrap him in his own coat, which is the practical solution and also the one that involves the least additional effort, and I carry him over my shoulder through the tree line and into the settlement through the back gate, which at this hour is staffed by a single wolf who takes one look at what's on my shoulder and very wisely doesn't ask questions.

I find Elena in the study.

She looks up when I come in. Takes in my face, my empty hands, the fact that I've come back from a secondary trip I didn't tell her I was taking. She sets her pen down.

"What happened," she says.

I tell her. All of it. The position, the angle, the specific quality of the approach that told me it was professional and not opportunistic. She listens without interrupting — she's good at that, always has been, the kind of listening that is actually processing rather than waiting for a turn.

When I finish she is very still.

"You killed him," she says.

"Yes."

"Where is he now."

"Back gate storage."

She closes her eyes for a second. Opens them. "You brought him back."

"Needed to know who he was. Who sent him." I hold her gaze. "And I needed the council to see him."

She looks at me. That grey-eyed look that measures things. "Rhydian—"

"He was sent from inside," I say. "Someone gave him the hunt route. Someone with access to scheduling." I pause. "It wasn't a Shadowpine attack. It was a separate move. A quiet one." I let that sit. "Marcus is running two timelines."

The silence is very complete.

I watch her face as she assembles it — not shock, she's past shock with Marcus, but the specific cold of having a theory confirmed in the worst possible way. Her jaw tightens. She looks at the desk, at nothing, at the pattern her hands make when she folds them.

Then she looks up.

"Tomorrow morning," she says. "Full council. All elders, all senior warriors." Her voice is entirely flat. "Bring him."

"The body."

"All of him."

I don't sleep much.

Elena is beside me and I can tell by her breathing she's not sleeping either, but neither of us says anything. We just lie in the dark and think our separate thoughts that are probably the same thoughts, and at some point before dawn I feel her hand find mine under the blanket.

I hold it.

That's enough.

The council hall fills fast.

Word travels in a Pack — not always accurately, not always completely, but the shape of something important moves ahead of the details. I can feel it when I walk in, the particular quality of a room full of wolves who know they're about to find out something they've been half-knowing for a while. The senior warriors line the back wall. The elders cluster at the table. Brennan stands at Elena's right with his arms crossed.

Marcus sits at the far end of the table.

He looks rested. He always looks rested. He has his elder's expression on — measured concern, hands folded, the posture of a man who is here to help navigate whatever difficult thing has arisen. I've been watching that expression for five weeks and I know every contour of it now the way you come to know a landscape you've been living in.

He looks at me when I come in.

I look back.

Elena stands at the head of the table. She doesn't sit — she never sits when she wants everyone to feel the weight of what she's saying. She waits until the room is full and the door is closed and the particular restless shuffling has settled.

"Yesterday morning," she says, "during the scheduled hunt, an assassin made an attempt on my mate's life."

The room changes.

Not in one direction — it fractures, which is its own kind of information. Shock from some faces. A particular stillness from two of the elders who are either good at composure or already knew. Brennan's jaw tightens. Corvin, standing near the wall with the other trainees, goes pale.

And Marcus—

Marcus's face does exactly what a concerned elder's face should do. Eyes widening slightly. Lips parting. The very picture of a man receiving devastating news about someone in his own Pack.

He's extraordinary. I'll give him that.

"The assassin was a rogue," Elena continues. "Not Shadowpine — independent. Hired. He had specific knowledge of our hunt route, our timing, our positions." She pauses. "That knowledge came from someone in this settlement."

The room is very quiet now.

"I have the body," she says. "I have the coins found on him — payment. Southern mintage, specific denomination." She looks around the table. "I have a vial taken from an elder's locked quarters that Senna has confirmed contains the antidote to the compound found in our water supply." A pause. "And I have a room full of wolves who deserve to know what's been built around them."

Marcus stands up.

"Elena." His voice is steady. Warm, even. The voice of a man exercising enormous patience with a situation he finds painful. "These are serious accusations. The council should conduct a proper investigation before—"

"Sit down, Marcus."

He doesn't sit.

"The charter requires—"

"I said sit *down.*"

He sits.

The room stays very still. I watch the two elders who went particularly quiet when Elena started speaking — they're watching Marcus now, and the watching has changed quality. Less alliance, more assessment. The kind of looking people do when they're recalculating.

Elena nods at me.

I go to the door. Open it.

Bring him in.

I set him on the floor at the center of the room in his wrapped coat and I unfold it just enough and the room makes the sounds rooms make when confronted with something real and irreversible. Someone near the wall sucks in a breath. Corvin looks at the floor. The two elders who were quiet look at each other.

I reach into my jacket. Remove what I took from him after the fight — the item I didn't mention to Elena, the one I've been carrying since yesterday. A folded piece of paper. Crude shorthand, the language of rogues who work for money, but clear enough.

Hunt. North ridge. Dawn. Rogue male, twenty, gold eyes. Payment on confirmation.

I don't read it aloud. I walk to the table and I set it in front of Marcus.

He looks at it.

His face doesn't move.

But his hands — those careful, folded, patient hands — go absolutely still in a way that is different from composure. The stillness of something that has run out of options and is deciding whether it knows that yet.

I look at him.

He looks at me.

And I pick up the paper. I walk back to the center of the room. And I look at Marcus across the full width of that table, across five weeks of lessons and nightmares and *yours* in the dark and a Pack that laughed at the gate yesterday that he was going to burn—

I drop it at his feet.

"Next one's yours, uncle."

The word lands like a door slamming.

Uncle. Not Elder. Not Marcus. The word that names the relationship, the family line, the twenty years of proximity to power that he turned into a weapon and pointed at everything that trusted him.

The room goes so quiet I can hear the fire.

Marcus looks at the paper on the floor. He doesn't reach for it.

He looks up at me.

And for one moment — just one, just barely long enough for me to see it before he folds it back — his face is completely unguarded. Not rage. Not calculation.

Something older than both of those.

Something that knows it's over.

Elena's voice comes from the head of the table. Quiet and absolute.

"Take him."

Brennan moves.

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat - Chapter 28[1,115 words]

(Elena)

I don't tell him where we're going.

I just say come with me after the council session empties, the weight of Marcus's betrayal still hanging thick in the air. He follows without question, falling into step beside me as we leave the settlement behind. The walk takes twenty minutes through snow-dusted trees, the cold biting at our skin. Rhydian stays quiet, but there's a settled calm to him now—an afterglow from what he did in that hall.

The hot spring sits hidden in a natural hollow, steam curling lazily into the freezing air. My father showed it to me years ago. No one else knows. Tonight, I'm sharing it with him.

He stops at the edge of the hollow, eyes widening at the sight of the clear, steaming water nestled in smooth stone, surrounded by frost-kissed moss and bare trees.

"This is yours," he says softly.

"Mine now," I reply, glancing back at him. "Ours tonight."

We undress in the quiet. I peel off my coat, boots, then the rest of my layers, feeling the sharp contrast of icy air on my bare skin before I slip into the water. The heat envelops me instantly—delicious, penetrating deep into every tight muscle I've been carrying for weeks. I sink to my shoulders with a low sigh, eyes closing for a moment as the warmth soothes me.

Rhydian joins me. The water laps around his powerful frame as he lowers in, a soft groan escaping him at the heat. He settles across from me at first, head tilted back against the stone, steam rising around his wet hair and broad shoulders. The scars on his chest and arm catch the low light, faint reminders of everything he's survived.

I watch him. He catches me looking and holds my gaze, those golden eyes darkening with quiet heat.

"Come here," I say.

He moves through the water like a predator—slow, deliberate—until our knees brush beneath the surface. I reach up, pushing damp strands of hair from his face. He leans into my touch, no longer flinching, just melting into it.

"You were extraordinary today," I murmur, my thumb tracing his jaw.

He starts to brush it off, but I shake my head. "Don't. You walked into that hall and changed everything. Let me say it."

"Okay," he breathes.

I pull him in. Our mouths meet in a slow, deep kiss that quickly grows hungry. Steam curls around us as his hands slide under the water to grip my waist, thumbs stroking my ribs. His mouth trails to my jaw, then my neck, finding that sensitive spot below my ear that always makes me shiver. He sucks gently, then harder, drawing a soft moan from me.

"Rhydian," I whisper.

He hums against my skin.

I guide his hand lower, but then pull back slightly. "Come up here. I want to teach you something."

His eyes flare with interest. I lift myself onto the wide, flat stone shelf above the waterline—warm from the spring below, smooth and inviting. Water sheets off my naked body as I lie back, knees bent, thighs parting just enough to invite him.

Rhydian follows, water dripping from his powerful frame. He kneels between my spread legs on the stone, gaze raking over me with open hunger. His cock is already hard, thick and flushed, curving up against his stomach.

"I want your mouth on me," I tell him, voice low and steady. "All the way down. I'll show you."

He nods, eyes locked on mine. "Show me."

I thread my fingers through his wet hair and guide him lower. He starts at my throat, kissing and licking like he always does, then trails down between my breasts. His mouth is hot, reverent. He pauses at my stomach, pressing open-mouthed kisses there before I nudge him further.

"Lower," I breathe.

He settles between my thighs, broad shoulders spreading me wider. His breath ghosts over my soaked pussy, making me clench with anticipation. The first touch of his tongue is tentative—a slow, exploratory lick from my entrance up to my clit.

"Good," I praise, tightening my grip in his hair. "Just like that. Again."

He does it again, firmer this time, tasting me thoroughly. His hands slide under my ass, lifting me slightly as he grows bolder. He licks broad stripes through my folds, then circles my clit with the flat of his tongue. I moan, hips twitching.

"Use your fingers too," I instruct. "Two of them. Curl them up—yes, like that."

He pushes two thick fingers inside me, stretching me open while his mouth latches onto my clit. He sucks gently at first, then harder, matching the rhythm of his curling fingers. The combination is devastating. Wet, obscene sounds fill the hollow as he devours me.

"Fuck—right there," I gasp, back arching off the stone.

He learns impossibly fast. Every moan, every twitch of my hips, every tightening of my fingers in his hair—he reads it all. He adds a third finger, pumping deeper, faster, while his tongue flicks rapidly over my swollen clit. The heat of the spring, the cold air on my wet skin, and the relentless pleasure of his mouth push me higher.

He growls against me, the vibration shooting straight through my core. I'm grinding against his face now, chasing the edge, thighs trembling around his head.

"Don't stop— Rhydian—"

He sucks my clit hard, fingers driving into me with perfect precision, and I shatter.

I scream his name, loud and raw, the sound echoing off the stone walls and into the winter trees. My orgasm crashes through me violently—pussy clenching around his fingers, thighs locking around his head as wave after wave of pleasure rips through my body. He keeps licking and fucking me through it, drawing it out until I'm shaking and breathless.

Only when I finally sag against the stone does he lift his head. His face is flushed, lips swollen and glistening with my arousal, eyes glowing with raw satisfaction and lust.

I pull him up over me, kissing him deeply, tasting myself on his tongue. His hard cock presses hot and heavy against my thigh.

"You learn fast," I whisper against his mouth, still trembling.

"I have the best teacher," he replies, voice rough with need. That rare, real smile curves his lips—the one that makes my chest ache.

We stay like that for a long moment, steam rising around us, the world outside forgotten. His forehead rests against mine as our breathing slows.

Tomorrow the council reconvenes. Varek and Shadowpine are still coming. But tonight, in this hidden place, there is only heat, surrender, and the man who keeps learning exactly how to unravel me.

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat - Chapter 29[1,552 words]

(Rhydian)

We walk back from the spring in the dark.

Not talking. Not needing to. The kind of quiet that exists between people who've stopped performing anything for each other — where silence doesn't mean something's wrong, it just means you're here, you're together, it's enough.

The settlement lights are visible through the trees. Warm and ordinary, the same lights that were there before any of this happened, before the council and the assassin and Marcus's face when Brennan took his arm. The same lights that were there the night they dragged me in through the gate in chains.

I look at them differently now.

I don't know exactly when that started. When they stopped looking like something I was being held inside and started looking like something I was part of. It didn't happen in one moment. It happened the way Elena says everything worth having happens — accumulation. Slow and quiet and without announcement until one day you look out at the lights and think *home* before you can stop yourself.

I haven't said that word out loud.

I'm still deciding whether I'm allowed to.

Elena is a few steps ahead of me on the path. I can see her shoulders, the particular set of them in the cold, and I think about what she said at the spring — *you were extraordinary today* — and the way she said *let it be that* like she knew I'd try to make it smaller.

She knows how I work.

That's the thing I keep landing on. She knows how I work because she watched and she waited and she paid attention and she built a map of me from the inside out, the way she does everything — patient, deliberate, without rushing.

And I know her.

Not everything. There are still rooms in her I haven't seen. But I know the things she won't say directly and the things she says once and means completely and the specific way she goes still when she's scared versus when she's thinking. I know that she checks the fire before she sleeps and that she reads standing up and that she says *okay* in a voice that means *I love you* when she doesn't have the words.

I know what she whispered into my shoulder.

She doesn't know I know.

I've been carrying that for two days like something I haven't figured out what to do with yet. Like a thing too important to approach wrong.

We reach the edge of the tree line. She stops. Looks at the gate.

I come up beside her.

"You're going to be up all night," I say.

"Probably."

"The Shadowpine timeline."

"And the Marcus inquiry. And what Henrick gives us. And whether any of the border patrol shifts need adjusting given that one of the Shadowpine positions moved two days ago and we haven't confirmed it moved back." She pauses. "Yes. All night."

I look at her profile. The cold has put colour in her face. The scar on her cheek. The line of her jaw that I've come to understand as **thinking** versus **deciding** — right now it's thinking, the jaw slightly loose, not committed yet.

"What will you do with Marcus," I ask. "After."

"That depends on what he gives us. What testimony, what names, how deep the Varek connection runs." She breathes out. "The Pack deserves a proper trial. Whatever I feel about it."

"What do you feel about it."

She's quiet for a moment. "I feel like he killed Viktor and poisoned my wolves and sent someone to kill you and if it were just me and not the Pack and not what's right—" She stops. "It doesn't matter what I'd do if it were just me."

"It matters to me."

She looks at me.

"He took things from you," I say. "That counts. Even if you can't let it count officially."

Something moves through her face. She looks back at the gate.

"Come on," she says.

We go in.

She settles at the desk in the study with her reports and her maps and the weight of tomorrow arranged around her in the particular organized chaos that is Elena planning for something. I sit on the window ledge with my knees up and watch her work for a while because I'm not tired, or I am tired but the underneath of my brain won't settle, and watching her is the thing that helps.

She works like she does everything. Completely present. Two notes at once, a finger holding a place on the map while her eyes scan a report, her lips moving slightly when she's reading something that matters.

She doesn't tell me to go to sleep.

I think about what I want to say.

I've been thinking about it since the training yard, since Cade said *okay* and ran the laps and I stood there feeling something I didn't have words for. I've been carrying it through the council hall and the hot spring and the walk back through the trees.

I want to ask it right.

"Elena."

She looks up.

"What if—" I stop. Start again. "What would it take." I look at my hands. "For you to be proud of me." I say it to my hands first. Then I make myself look at her. "Not as an Alpha. Not as a political choice or a bloodline requirement." I pause. "What would it take to be someone you're actually—" The word almost doesn't come. "Proud of."

She's very still.

The room is quiet. The fire, the scratch of nothing because she's put her pen down, the particular silence that means she's taking something seriously enough to give it the space it deserves.

I keep her gaze. It costs something. It always costs something, this kind of looking, the kind that says *I'm asking you something real and I can't make it smaller.*

"I grew up being told what I was," I say. "Spoiled. Traitor's son. Rogue. Killer." I pause. "I spent four years alone with all of those things and no one to say different. No one to—" My jaw tightens. "I don't know what it looks like. Being something worth— I don't have a—"

I stop.

Elena is looking at me with an expression I haven't seen before. Not the Alpha look, not the teacher look, not even the look she has in the dark when it's just us and she lets herself be unguarded.

Something older than all of those.

Something that sits very deep.

She stands up from the desk.

She crosses the room and stops in front of me. I'm on the window ledge so we're level — her eyes straight to mine, close, close enough that I can see the firelight in her grey eyes and the lines at their corners that I've started to think of as hers specifically, the map of every decision she's ever had to make.

"Rhydian," she says.

I wait.

"You walked into a council hall full of wolves who were ready to write you off," she says quietly. "You stood at the head of the table and you laid down evidence that took intelligence and patience and courage to gather, and you named what it was in front of everyone, and you did it for this Pack. Not for me. Not to prove something." She holds my gaze. "For them."

I don't say anything.

"You trained those kids for a week and one of them went to bat for you at breakfast without being asked. Brennan — who has been here fifteen years and defers to no one — adjusted his tactical position based on yours." She reaches up and puts her hand flat against my jaw. "You killed an assassin and you came and told me immediately because you understood it was larger than you alone." Her thumb moves. "You said *I think I love you* like it surprised you and you didn't take it back."

My throat closes.

"You already have," she says. Simply. "You already are." Her eyes hold mine. "I'm already proud of you."

Something inside me — something that has been braced since I was sixteen in a courtyard watching ropes go tight, that has been hard and held and never given an inch because giving an inch was how you died in a cave alone — cracks.

Not breaks. Cracks open.

The first thing that comes out isn't a word. It's a sound. Low and involuntary and completely without dignity, and before I can do anything about it my face is in her neck and my shoulders are doing something I haven't let them do since the elders put me outside the border and I was seventeen and I ran until I couldn't hear the Pack anymore.

She doesn't say anything.

She wraps her arms around me and holds on.

I cry. Really cry — the kind that comes from somewhere deep and structural, the kind that has been waiting so long it arrives with interest. My hands grip her shirt and I don't care, I can't care, I'm so tired of holding the shape of something that doesn't need to be that shape anymore.

She holds tighter.

I've got you, she doesn't say.

She doesn't have to.

I feel it.

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat - Chapter 30[1,753 words]

(Elena)

I notice something was off.

Not dramatically. Not with any of the ceremony the moment probably deserves — I'm standing in the washroom before dawn, getting ready for the first patrol briefing, and I'm doing the mental calendar I do every month automatically, the kind of counting that lives in the background of being a female wolf where your body and the moon are in conversation whether you're paying attention or not.

I count back.

Then I count back again.

Then I stand very still with my hands on the basin and look at my own reflection in the dark glass and count a third time because twice clearly wasn't convincing.

Eleven days late.

I'm never late. My cycle runs like pack rotation — reliable, predictable, something I've been able to set a schedule by since I was fourteen. Viktor and I were careful, or rather I was careful because Viktor had no interest in heirs until he decided he wanted them, and then he died before that conversation finished. I've been careful since. I've been careful with Rhydian too, or I thought I had been, or—

The hot spring.

I look at my reflection.

The hot spring. Three weeks ago, maybe four. The night after the council session, the night I took him somewhere I'd never taken anyone and the world felt very far away and neither of us was thinking about anything practical.

I'm not panicking.

I tell myself I'm not panicking as I finish getting dressed with hands that are slightly less steady than usual, as I walk to the briefing and listen to Brennan's patrol update and ask the right questions and nod at the right moments. I'm not panicking. I'm an Alpha. I deal with information. Information is what this is.

Eleven days is information.

It's also not confirmation.

I've known about Mira for two years.

She lives three miles south of the settlement in a house that backs onto the gorge, and she is officially, in Pack records, a herbalist and trades specialist. What she is practically is older and stranger and more capable than that, and most of the Pack pretends not to know what she actually does because it's easier and because when you need her you really need her and it doesn't pay to have made the relationship complicated before then.

I send a note with a runner I trust. I don't use Pack paper.

She sends back a time.

The house smells like herbs and beeswax and something metallic underneath that I've never been able to identify. Mira is somewhere between fifty and a hundred and twenty — her face makes no commitment on the subject — and she looks at me when I come in with the specific expression of someone who already knows what you're there for and is waiting for you to say it.

I say it.

She doesn't react. She goes to a cabinet, opens it, retrieves something small wrapped in paper, and sets it on the table between us.

"You know how it works," she says.

"Yes."

"Five minutes. The mark holds or it doesn't."

"I know."

She looks at me for a moment. Grey eyes — not like mine, older, like stone that's been in a riverbed a long time. "How far along do you think."

"I don't know. A month, maybe."

She nods once. "You'll know more in a few weeks regardless." She folds her hands. "There are options. Whatever they are."

"I know," I say again.

She leaves me alone in the small back room.

Five minutes is a very long time.

I've stood at borders in the dark waiting for Shadowpine wolves to make a move. I've sat through council sessions where every second felt like it was load-bearing. I've lain awake doing math about Pack survival and resource allocation and whether the water compound would clear before the new moon.

Five minutes has never felt like this.

I hold the small paper card and I sit on the edge of Mira's low bench and I look at the window, which shows me bare trees and grey sky and the first suggestion of snow that's been threatening for three days.

I think about my mother.

She left when I was nine. No warning that I can identify in retrospect, no buildup I can point to — just gone one morning, bag gone, horse gone, a note that said things I memorized before my father took it and I've been turning over ever since. She wasn't built for it, was the shape of what the note said. Not built for the territory, the responsibility, the weight of all those wolves and all that continuity.

I always swore I understood her. That I had compassion for it.

I understood it a little less when I was the one left behind.

I look at the card.

The mark is there.

Small and certain and not remotely ambiguous, sitting in the center of the paper like something that's been true for a while and is only now being seen.

I hold it for a long moment.

Then I breathe.

One breath, long and slow, the kind Elena uses when she's taking something serious. The kind I learned from my father, from watching him absorb difficult information without letting it move through him in ways he couldn't control. Take the breath, set your weight, feel the floor under you.

The floor is under me.

I'm still here.

I'm — I turn the information over, look at the shape of it. A month, maybe more. Shadowpine three days out, neutralized now but the cleanup ongoing. Marcus in holding, Henrick negotiating testimony. A Pack running on partial strength and full will. A rogue husband who cried in my arms two nights ago for the first time since he was sixteen.

A rogue husband who said *I think I love you* like it surprised him.

Who runs drills at five in the morning and pins bullies gently and brings assassins' heads to council tables and sleeps with his hand finding my waist in the dark every single night now, automatic, like his sleeping body decided long before his waking one that this was where he kept his certainty.

I look at the mark on the card.

There's something underneath the fear — I name it, I have to name it, my father always said the things you don't name own you. Underneath the fear, underneath the calculation, underneath the part of my brain that's already running logistics about timing and Pack succession and what this means for the next six months—

Something warm.

Something I don't have clean words for. Something that sits in the same place where *I love you* lives, where *I'm already proud of you* came from, where the specific grief of Viktor's coldness finally found its opposite.

Something that feels, distantly and dangerously, like it could be called *wanted.*

I fold the card.

I put it in my inner pocket, against my chest, where no one will find it.

He's in the yard when I get back.

Running the trainees through something new — I can see from the gate that he's modified the drill pattern, added a component I don't recognize, and three of them have already improved the specific footwork problem I've been watching for two weeks. Cade is beside him, not sparring, watching the others, saying something with his hands that makes Rhydian tilt his head and then nod.

Rhydian nods.

At Cade. Who called him the Alpha's whore not three weeks ago and is now apparently offering tactical observation that my husband is taking seriously.

I stand at the gate and watch.

He hasn't seen me yet. He's completely in it — this is the thing I've been watching happen, the thing that started as an accident and became something essential, him finding out what he's capable of when there are people in front of him who need something he has to give. He moves through the yard and his voice carries and his hands show what his words mean and the trainees follow him with their eyes the way young wolves follow something that has earned it.

He looks up.

Finds me at the gate.

That face — the one I've been collecting, adding to the private inventory I didn't mean to start building. The small shift that happens when he sees me specifically, the particular settling quality of it, like something that was running at a slightly elevated frequency drops back to resting.

He lifts his chin. Small. Just that.

I lift mine back.

He turns back to the drill.

I stand there with my hand pressed against my chest where the folded card is, where the mark is small and certain and unrevealed, and I think about timing — when to say it, how to say it, what it means to tell someone who has only just started to trust that a thing is safe that the thing has expanded into territory neither of you planned for.

I think about his face when he cried.

The specific quality of someone who has been braced for so long that when something finally gives it gives completely.

He's not ready. Or he is — I don't know. I genuinely don't know which, and that uncertainty is strange because I've been able to read him for weeks now, I know his frequencies and his tells and the specific way he moves when he's uncertain versus when he's decided. But this—

This is something I don't have prior information on.

Neither does he.

I'll tell him.

Soon. When the Shadowpine situation has fully resolved, when Marcus's inquiry has reached something stable, when the ground is solid enough to put weight on.

Not tonight.

Tonight I'll lie beside him and feel his hand find my waist in the dark and I'll know something he doesn't know yet and I'll let that be what it is — private, mine, an early morning in the washroom and a house that smells like beeswax and a card folded against my chest.

Just for now.

Just until I find the right words.

I push off from the gate and walk back into the settlement and the yard noise recedes behind me and somewhere in my chest, underneath everything practical and everything difficult and everything that is still unresolved and dangerous and demanding—

The warm thing.

I stop fighting it.

I let it be there.