

# The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat c 3

(Rhydian)

This is what my life is now. A hole in a rock.

A bed of old leaves and wolf fur, wind screaming through the crack at the back every single night. Four years I've been here. Four years of hunting alone, sleeping with one eye open, waking up to the sound of my own growl.

The cave sits on the edge of unclaimed land — no pack owns it, no pack wants it. Thin soil, twisted trees, water that tastes like iron. Perfect.

I'm twenty years old and my hands know how to kill. My face has a scar across the eyebrow from a wolf who got too close to my food. My body is hard from years of fighting and running and surviving on stubbornness alone.

I don't remember what warm feels like.

Tonight I'm at the mouth of the cave with a rabbit I caught this morning, chewing through cold tough meat and staring at the dark. The moon is barely there — just a sliver, the kind of night that makes wolves restless.

Somewhere out there packs are sleeping in warm dens. Eating hot food. Licking their pups' heads.

I haven't felt another wolf's touch since I was sixteen.

My parents were traitors. Sold out our Pack for money. I didn't know — I was a kid, spoiled rotten, gold rings on my fingers, thought the world owed me everything. Then the elders came. My father fought them. My mother screamed. I bit off a man's fingers because I was scared and angry and too stupid to think straight.

They should've killed me. Instead they threw me out. \*Rogue. Never return.\*

So I didn't. I ran. I became something hard and mean and sharp, and now I sit alone chewing cold rabbit and waiting for absolutely nothing.

I hear them before I see them.

Too many footsteps. Too quiet for deer. My body goes cold before my mind catches up — I drop the rabbit, I'm on my feet, eyes cutting through the treeline.

There. A shape between two pines. Then another. Then three more.

Five, maybe six. Leather armor, pack colors. Not Shadowpine. Not any border pack I know.

Strangers.

"Rhydian Alma." A woman's voice, hard as rock. "By order of Alpha Elena of the Mountain Pack — you're coming with us."

I snarl. My claws slide out. "I don't know any Alpha Elena."

"You know her now. She's called you to be her mate."

I laugh — ugly, short. "Her mate. I'm a rogue. I don't mate, I don't serve, I don't do anything except eat and sleep and kill whoever comes near my cave."

The woman steps into the moonlight. Tall, muscular, face like a closed fist. "We have orders to bring you alive. She didn't say anything about pretty."

I don't wait for her to finish. I slam into the first enforcer before he gets his arms up — claws across his chest, he goes down screaming. The second grabs my arm and I twist and bite his hand, just enough to make him let go.

No rules. No honor. Just teeth and claws and four years of caged rage.

But there are six of them and I've been eating rabbit for weeks. I'm running on empty and they know it.

The woman gets me from behind — arm locked around my throat, cutting off my air. I claw at her, try to shift, can't get enough breath to manage it. My vision starts to blur.

"Hold him."

Two grab my legs. One pins my arms. I thrash, I kick, I go completely feral, and it doesn't matter.

Metal closes around my wrists.

Chains.

Cold and heavy and real.

I swore I'd never wear them again. Last time was the exile. I was seventeen and screaming and they dragged me out past everyone who ever knew my name.

"Bastards," I hiss.

The woman releases my throat and I gasp, lungs burning. She looks down at me without any particular feeling on her face.

"Dead or alive," she says. "Your choice."

I look at the chains. Then at her. "Where are you taking me?"

"To meet your bride."

The laugh that comes out of me sounds broken even to my own ears.

"I'm going to kill her," I say. "Soon as I get free."

"You can try."

They drag me through the forest for hours. My feet scrape over roots and rocks and I don't help, not even a little — every few steps I throw my weight sideways, try to trip someone, make them work for every single inch. They just pull harder. The chains open the skin on my wrists and blood runs down my fingers and I keep my mouth shut. I won't beg. I won't give them that.

Inside though, my heart won't slow down.

A mate. They want to make me a mate. What pack would take a traitor's son unless they were truly desperate?

Eventually lights appear through the trees. A village. A hall. Wolves everywhere, all of them staring.

\*"That's him?"\*

\*"The Alma brat?"\*

\*"He looks half dead."\*

I lift my chin and keep walking.

Inside the hall a fire burns in a massive hearth, warm air hitting my face like something I'd almost forgotten existed. At the far end, on a raised platform, a woman stands.

Tall. Dark hair pulled back. Grey eyes that catch the firelight and give nothing away. A scar runs down her left cheek and disappears into her collar.

She's beautiful in a way that has nothing soft about it. Beautiful like a blade — the kind you only notice right before it goes in.

The woman shoves me forward. I stumble, chains clinking, but I catch myself before my knee hits the stone. I won't kneel. Not for her. Not for anyone.

Elena walks down the steps toward me. Slow, deliberate, boots echoing off the stone floor. She stops a few feet away and looks me over — head to toe, unhurried, the way you'd look at a horse you weren't sure was worth the trouble.

I hate her already.

"So," she says. Low voice. Completely calm. "This is Rhydian Alma."

I bare my teeth. "This is the corpse you dragged here."

She doesn't flinch. "You're smaller than I expected."

"You're older than I expected."

Someone in the room sucks in a breath. Elena just tilts her head slightly, still studying me.

"Four years as a rogue," she says. "Living in a cave."

"And I'd like to go back, so if we could make this fast—"

"I've heard you killed three enforcers who tried to bring you in."

"They chained me. I don't like chains."

She glances at my wrists. At the blood. At the way I'm holding myself straight even though my shoulders feel like they're being torn off.

"Take them off," she says.

The woman behind me hesitates. "Alpha, he's—"

"Off."

The chains drop. My arms fall and the relief is almost painful. I rub my wrists, fingers numb and raw.

Elena steps closer. Close enough that I catch her scent — pine smoke, leather, and underneath it something warm I can't name. My skin feels like it's suddenly too tight.

I haven't been this close to another person in four years. It's making it very hard to think straight.

"You're wondering why you're here," she says.

"I stopped wondering about pack business a long time ago."

"Your bloodline is why. The elders say the Moon Goddess chose the Almas. I need a mate. You're the only one left."

"That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard."

"It's politics."

"Same thing."

She takes one more step. Her chest is inches from mine. I can feel the heat coming off her and I hate that I notice it, hate that my wolf notices it even more.

"You will marry me," she says quietly. "You will stand beside me. You will learn what it means to be an Alpha."

"And if I don't?"

"I'll break you."

I should shut up. I know I should shut up. But I'm a brat — it's genuinely the only thing I have left — so I let my eyes drag down her body, slow and obvious, the way I know will land.

She doesn't move. Doesn't look away. Just watches me do it.

"You want this corpse in your bed, old woman?"

Something flashes in her grey eyes. Dark and fast and hungry — there and gone so quick I almost think I imagined it.

"We'll see who's cold in the end, boy."

She turns and walks away.

I stand there in the middle of the hall, chains at my feet, wrists still bleeding, firelight pressing warm against my back.

My heart is slamming against my ribs.

I'm terrified.

But I'll take that to my grave before I ever let her know it.