

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat - Chapter 31[1,536 words]

(Rhydian)

I notice it three days after she goes to see Mira.

Not right away. I'm not watching her with that kind of attention — the paranoid cataloguing thing I've been trying to dial back, the four-years-alone habit of scanning everything for threat. Elena isn't a threat. I've been working on letting my body understand what my brain already knows.

But I notice things. That part doesn't turn off.

The first time is breakfast. She reaches across the table for the water pitcher and the movement is slightly different — not wrong, not obviously careful, just a fractional adjustment, the kind where the body is making a small accommodation and the person hasn't fully registered they're doing it. Her forearm comes up slightly, the elbow tucking in a way that redirects the reach.

I file it away. Don't say anything.

The second time is in the yard two days later. Cade throws a training dummy's weight at the wrong angle — accident, he's apologetic about it immediately — and it swings wide. Elena is standing nearby watching the drill and she steps back, which is normal, but her hands come up and one of them goes briefly, automatically, to her midsection before she drops it.

It's a half-second. Less.

I see it.

I look back at the drill before she can catch me looking.

That night I lie awake and I think about the morning two weeks ago when I woke up early and she was already in the washroom and there was a quality to the quiet in there that I couldn't name, a stillness that was different from the usual getting-ready stillness. When she came out her face was composed. Completely composed.

Too composed for that hour.

I think about the way she went to see Mira without telling me where she was going. She said *errands*, which is a word Elena essentially never uses because Elena doesn't run errands, Elena dispatches things and handles things and delegates or does directly, but she doesn't *errand*. I noticed the word at the time. I didn't know what to do with it.

I'm starting to understand what to do with it.

I don't say anything yet.

I go to see Senna.

Not about this — I go about my arm, which is the honest reason, the scar tissue is pulling slightly when I take certain angles in sparring and Senna told me to come back if it did. But I'm there, and Senna is the kind of healer who exists in the particular confidence of someone who knows things about everyone and has decided long ago that information is for helping people and not for trading, and I trust her.

I ask her, as casually as I can make it sound, what would bring a female Alpha to Mira specifically rather than to Senna herself.

She's grinding something at the counter and she doesn't stop. Doesn't turn around.

"A few things," she says. Neutral.

"Like."

"Things she'd want kept separate from Pack records." A pause. "Mira doesn't keep records."

"What kind of things."

A longer pause. She sets the pestle down. Turns around and looks at me with the specific expression of someone who has already understood this entire conversation and is deciding how much to participate in it.

"How is your arm," she says.

"Fine. The pulling started in the second week."

She comes over and checks it. Moves my wrist, has me angle the elbow, presses two fingers along the scar line. Clinical. Focused.

"The tissue is healing correctly," she says. "The pulling is normal. It'll resolve."

"Senna."

She looks at me.

"I'm not asking you to tell me anything," I say. "I'm asking — is there anything I should be worried about. Health-wise. Anyone's health."

She looks at me for a long moment.

"No," she says. And then — quieter, almost to the herbs on her counter — "Some things are not illness."

She goes back to her grinding.

I stand there for a moment.

Then I leave.

The thing about having spent four years alone is that you develop a relationship with knowing things you can't act on yet. You see the weather turning before it turns and there's nothing to do about it except note it and prepare and let it come in its own time. You find signs of other wolves at a water source and you can't know how recent they are so you file the information and stay alert and don't throw yourself at the conclusion before the evidence warrants it.

You wait.

I've never been patient. I was a spectacularly impatient kid — wanted everything immediately, loudly, couldn't see the point of letting things develop when you could force them to happen faster. The cave cured me of that. Four years of nothing happening fast or on your terms cures you of most things.

So I wait.

I watch without performing watching. I stay close without hovering. I do the drills and the patrols and the planning sessions where Brennan has started including me as a matter of course rather than exception, and I come home to Elena at the end of each day and I look at her and I try to read what she's carrying.

She's carrying something.

I know her carrying face now. It's subtle — she's extraordinary at containment, at not letting the weight show in her posture or her voice or the quality of her decisions, which are still sharp, still completely reliable. But I know the small signs. The way her hand goes to her collarbone sometimes when she's sitting at the desk, resting there like she's checking something. The way she goes quiet in the middle of conversations with a quality that's turned inward rather than outward.

The way she looks at me sometimes with an expression I can't fully decode yet.

Not bad. Not worried. Something warmer than that but contained, held close, like something she's not ready to let have air yet.

I don't push.

Five days after the Mira visit we're sitting by the fire in the evening, both of us reading — I've started doing this, reading, which is something I literally haven't done since I was sixteen and it turns out there are things in books that are useful and also things that are just good and I'm still figuring out which is which. Elena has her feet tucked under her at the other end of the settee and there's a blanket that started on her half and has migrated significantly toward mine and neither of us has commented on it.

Normal.

This is what normal feels like. I didn't know it had a texture before.

She shifts to reach the small table for her tea and the movement is slightly off again — that same micro-adjustment, the forearm, the small tuck that redirects the reach. She picks up the cup and settles back and looks at her book.

I look at the fire.

I turn a page I didn't actually read.

"Are you all right," I say. Carefully. Aiming for casual and landing somewhere in the vicinity.

She looks up. "Mm?"

"You've been—" I pause. Choose the approach. "You seem like you're being careful."

She looks at me. Her face is completely composed. Grey eyes steady.

"Careful how," she says.

"I don't know. You flinched back from that dummy in the yard the other day. You reach differently sometimes." I hold her gaze. "I notice things. You know I notice things."

Something moves behind her eyes. Quick, almost invisible, a small recalculation. Then she looks back at her book.

"I'm fine," she says.

"Are you—" I stop. "Are you ill?"

She turns a page. "Just tired." Her voice is even, warm, completely normal.

"You're never just tired."

"I am occasionally just tired."

"Elena."

She looks up at me again. And there it is — that expression, the contained warm thing, the one I've been cataloguing and can't fully decode. She holds my gaze with it for a moment and it's right there, whatever it is, right at the surface.

Then she closes it down.

"I'm fine," she says again. Quieter this time. Something in it that sounds almost like soon and almost like I'm not ready and almost like trust me.

I look at her.

She looks back at her book.

I look at the fire.

The blanket is still migrating. Her foot, under it somewhere, has found my knee. She hasn't noticed. Or she has and isn't moving it.

I don't move it either.

I turn the page I didn't read.

Outside the window the settlement is quiet, the snow finally committing to itself and coming down steady, and the fire is warm and the room is ordinary in the specific way of things that have become yours without a formal announcement, and I sit with what I know and what I don't know and the quality of her silence which is keeping something close and warm and not yet ready to be said.

And I wait.

Because she'll tell me when she's ready.

Because that's what you do when you trust someone.

And I trust her.

With everything.

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat - Chapter 32[1,733 words]

Henrick brings it like he brings everything now — wrapped in apology, delivered sideways, the information tucked inside enough qualifying language that you have to extract it yourself.

They're in the holding room.

Not the cell — Marcus negotiated that on the first day, before Henrick even finished his testimony offer. He's an elder, he said. A founding elder. He'll cooperate fully but he won't be kept in a stone box, he has a bad knee and the damp does something to it that makes rational conversation difficult. Elena agreed, which told Marcus something about where her head was — practical, focused on extracting what she needed, not interested in punitive measures when information was the resource she was after.

That was three days ago.

The holding room is small but it has a window and a fire and a chair that isn't designed to be uncomfortable. Marcus has been thinking here. He thinks well in constrained spaces — always has, something about the narrowed field focuses him in a way that open rooms with open options sometimes doesn't.

He's been watching Elena.

Not directly — he doesn't have that access anymore, the freedom of corridors and council halls and breakfast tables. But Henrick comes twice a day, officially to check on him and report his continued cooperation to Elena, practically because Henrick is seventy-four years old and has spent twenty years being Marcus's and that doesn't stop being true because the geography changes.

He comes in the afternoon on a Tuesday and sits down and adjusts his robe and looks at the floor and says, *There's something being said. I don't know if it's true.*

Marcus looks at him.

The kitchen girl mentioned it to the stable hand. Who mentioned it to someone's mate. Who mentioned it to—

"What," Marcus says.

Henrick looks at his hands. "That Elena went to Mira."

Silence.

"When," Marcus says.

"A week ago. Maybe eight days." Henrick glances up. "She doesn't go to Senna. Goes to Mira. Alone, no escort, no record of it anywhere."

Marcus is quiet.

He looks at the window. The bare trees, the grey sky, the snow that's been sitting on the ground for a week now. He looks at these things and he thinks.

Mira is not a general practitioner. The Pack knows this — they pretend not to know it, which is a different thing, but they know. Mira handles the things that don't fit in official records. The pregnancy confirmations that can't go through Senna without entering Pack documentation. The terminations. The fertility work. The things female wolves sometimes need quietly and without the apparatus of institutional knowledge.

Elena went to Mira.

Not Senna.

Elena, who has been trained since girlhood to use the Pack's resources, who operates within the institutional structure because she built most of it, who sends runners to Senna for a pulled muscle without thinking twice — Elena went to Mira.

Marcus turns this over.

He thinks about the rogue.

Four weeks of them sharing a room. More. The training yard, the patrol perimeters, the council sessions where the boy has been sitting beside Elena as a matter of course for the past two weeks. The way they move around each other, which Marcus has watched and filed and found more concerning than he initially gave credence to.

He thinks about Elena laughing in the training yard.

He thinks about the expression on her face at the council session when the boy threw the assassin's evidence at his feet — not pride exactly, something larger than pride, something that looked like witnessing.

Like seeing someone become something.

His jaw tightens.

"Is it confirmed," he says.

"No," Henrick says. "I told you, it's kitchen talk. I can't—"

"Is there any other reason she'd go to Mira specifically."

Henrick is quiet for a moment. Then, reluctantly: "Not that I can think of."

Marcus stands up.

He goes to the window and puts his hands behind his back and looks out at the frozen settlement. At the yard where the rogue runs drills every morning. At the gate where wolves stand patrol with slightly more precision than they had a month ago. At the machine he built, running, *running well*, and being run by someone who is not him.

A child.

If there's a child — and he doesn't know, Henrick doesn't know, this is kitchen rumor moving through stable hands and he knows better than to build architecture on that foundation. But if. If Elena is carrying the Alma line's heir, if that boy has given this Pack a succession that bypasses everything Marcus has arranged—

The political calculus shifts.

It shifts completely.

Right now Elena is the Alpha and the rogue is an asset she's building into a mate, a position, a legitimate force within the Pack's structure. That's a problem Marcus has been managing — the variable that grew, as he told Varek. But it's a solvable problem. Elena can be removed and the Pack fractures and the rogue, however capable he's become, doesn't have the bloodline or the institutional history to hold it together. Not alone. Not yet.

A child changes that.

A child is a future. A concrete, breathing, Pack-recognizable future that carries both lines — the Alpha's lineage and the Alma blood — and that creates a succession so legitimate it would outlast both parents and render everything Marcus has built moot for a generation.

More. The rogue is twenty. The child would be raised in this Pack, trained here, shaped here, growing up under Elena's structure and the rogue's particular way of earning things. Twenty years from now that child would be an Alpha with a claim so clean it couldn't be contested.

Marcus would be dead by then.

But his work — the work he has given thirty years to, the architecture, the systems, the rightful place he was owed and never given — all of it buried.

He won't allow it.

He turns from the window.

"I need to get a message out," he says.

Henrick looks up. His face does the thing it does now — a specific resignation, the look of a man who has been trying to choose cooperation for three days and finding it progressively harder.
"Marcus—"

"Not for discussion, Henrick."

"Elena will know—"

"She'll know when it's too late for it to matter." He crosses to the desk. Sits. Takes the small piece of paper he's been keeping for exactly this possibility, the one tucked inside the cover of a book Henrick brought him, which Henrick knew about and said nothing about because Henrick is ultimately incapable of fully defecting from a twenty-year loyalty even when his survival depends on it.

He picks up the pen.

He thinks about what to write.

Not much. Varek doesn't need much. Varek has been waiting with the particular patience of a strategic predator who was told to hold position and hold position and has been holding for four days past the new moon timeline while the political situation inside the Mountain Pack resolved itself into something worth responding to.

This is something worth responding to.

Full force. All units. Three days. He pauses. Change of priority: secondary target first. Make the primary watch.

He folds the paper.

Henrick is sitting very still across the room.

"Secondary target," Henrick says quietly.

"The rogue."

Henrick's mouth tightens. "You're going to make her—"

"I'm going to remove her ability to function." Marcus's voice is completely even. "Elena's strength has always been her ability to think under pressure. To separate what she feels from what needs to be done." He looks at the folded paper in his hand. "She can do that with almost anything. She's done it with Viktor's death, with the poisoning, with my arrest." He pauses. "She cannot do it with this."

Henrick is silent.

"Four weeks," Marcus says. "Four weeks and that boy has become her structural center. She doesn't know how much yet — that's the thing about these attachments at the beginning, you don't know how load-bearing they are until something tests the load." He turns the paper over in his fingers. "I'm going to test the load."

"If she's pregnant—" Henrick starts.

"Then she'll watch the father die and she'll be alone with it." He says it plainly. Not cruelly — he's not performing cruelty, he doesn't need the theater of it. Just facts. Just the architecture of what breaks a person fastest and most completely. "And when Shadowpine comes through the eastern border she will not be the Alpha she is today. She'll be someone managing a grief so large it hasn't found its edges yet."

He stands. Holds the paper out.

Henrick looks at it.

Doesn't take it.

"Henrick." Quiet. The tone that has been ending arguments for twenty years.

The old man takes the paper. His hand is not entirely steady.

"Get it to the border contact," Marcus says. "You know the drop."

Henrick stands. Moves toward the door with the particular motion of someone carrying something they can't put down and can't hold either.

"Marcus," he says, at the door.

He stops. Doesn't turn.

"She'll never forgive this."

"She won't be in a position to forgive anything." He goes back to the window. "That's the point."

Henrick leaves.

The holding room is quiet. The fire burns. The window shows the same yard, the same gate, the same trees.

Marcus watches the yard.

The rogue comes out of the Pack house at the far end — heading to the morning drill, jacket on, hair disheveled from sleep, and there's something in the way he moves now that wasn't there five weeks ago. A groundedness. A sense of **here** and **belonging** that you can see from thirty feet away.

The boy looks up at the Pack house windows the way he apparently does every morning. Checking. Making sure.

Something up there must satisfy him because he looks forward again, toward the yard, and his shoulders settle, and he goes to do his work.

Kill the brat first, Marcus thinks. Make her watch.

The fastest way to break a wolf isn't claws or chains.

It's making them watch something they can't stop.

He's always known that.

He turns from the window and sits down and waits, with the patience of a man who has been waiting for thirty years and has three days left.

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat - Chapter 33[1,467 words]

(Elena)

The dream starts the same way it always does.

The Pack house, but wrong — the proportions off, the corridors longer than they should be, the kind of architecture that only makes sense while you're inside it. I'm running. Not from something specific, just the directionless urgency of dream-running, the feeling that something is wrong in a location I can't locate.

Then I'm in the yard.

And the yard is empty.

Not quiet-empty, not early-morning-empty. Just — gone. No wolves, no sounds, no movement anywhere. The training dummies standing in a row and no one near them. The gate open. The settlement stretching in every direction with all the lights out.

I put my hands on my stomach.

The dream knows, even though the dream never explains anything. My hands go there and I feel — absence. Not physical pain, not a wound, just the specific cold of something missing that should be there, the shape of a loss so total it has no floor to land on.

And then I'm at a grave.

Not Viktor's. New. Small stone, no name, ground so recently turned the grass hasn't come back yet.

I wake up with both hands on my stomach.

The room is dark. The fire is coals. I can feel Rhydian beside me before I'm fully awake — his warmth, the particular weight of him, the slow even rhythm of his sleep-breathing that I've memorized without meaning to over the past weeks.

I don't move my hands.

I lie there in the dark and I feel my own heartbeat and underneath it I try to find the other one — smaller, faster, too early to be sure of, but there, Senna said it would be there by now if I paid enough attention. I've been paying attention. Lying awake in the small hours doing exactly this, hands flat, checking.

A dream is just a dream.

I know that. I know the difference between premonition and anxiety, between what my wolf senses and what my exhausted brain manufactures. I know that this specific fear — the small stone, the turned earth, the hands finding nothing — is the oldest fear I have, older than Marcus or Shadowpine or any of the immediate threats, rooted in something much earlier.

Losing things I didn't know I had until they were gone.

My eyes are wet.

I press my lips together. Breathe through my nose. Control it.

The bed shifts.

"Elena."

His voice is rough from sleep, still most of the way under. But his hand finds my arm in the dark immediately — that instinct he has now, that automatic reaching, like his sleeping self has been keeping track of the space between us all night and noticed something changed.

"I'm fine," I say. My voice comes out wrong.

A pause. He's waking up properly now, I can feel it in the quality of his stillness — the shift from sleep-stillness to awake-stillness, which are different things.

"You're not," he says.

"Go back to sleep."

He doesn't go back to sleep.

He moves — rolls toward me, and I feel him register the position of my hands where they're still pressed flat against my stomach. He doesn't say anything. I feel him looking in the dark, and the particular quality of Rhydian paying attention has always been identifiable even without seeing his face.

"Hey," he says. Quiet. "Look at me."

I don't.

"Elena."

I turn my head. It's dark enough that I can only see the shape of him, the outline, those gold eyes catching the last of the ember light. He's propped on one elbow, close, and he's looking at me with the expression I can feel even when I can't see it fully.

The one that means he already knows most of it and is waiting for me to say the rest.

"Bad dream," I say.

"About what."

A pause. I look at the ceiling.

"About—" I stop. My throat closes around it. "About losing something."

He's very still.

He moves closer. His arm comes around me — slow, careful, the deliberate gentleness he has that still surprises me, that I don't think I'll ever stop being surprised by given where he started. He pulls me in and I let him, which is a thing I don't always do, letting people pull me, but it's him and it's dark and the dream is still sitting in my chest.

My hands are still on my stomach.

He notices. His arm settles around me and I can feel where his attention goes, the specific awareness of someone who has been cataloguing small things for days and is now assembling them in real time.

His breathing changes slightly.

"Tell me," he says. Into my hair. Not demanding — just open, just space, the way he asks things now when he understands that pushing closes doors.

I stare at the ceiling.

I've been finding the right time for a week. Waiting for the ground to be solid enough, the situation stable enough, the right moment when I'd have the right words in the right order. I've been composing this conversation in my head while running patrols and sitting through inquiries and lying awake at night.

None of it sounds right.

None of it was ever going to sound right, probably.

I close my eyes.

"I'm pregnant," I say.

The words land in the dark between us.

Rhydian goes still.

Not the flinching still or the defensive still or any of the stills I catalogued in the first two weeks. This is something different — a complete, total stillness, like every process in him has paused at the same moment to deal with a single incoming piece of information.

He doesn't speak.

I wait. My hands press a little flatter against my stomach. My heartbeat is loud in my ears and under it, if I concentrate, the other one — small and fast and absolutely real.

"I found out a week ago," I say, because the silence is stretching and I need to fill it with something true. "I've been— I didn't know how to—" I stop. Start again. "I was trying to find the right time."

Still nothing.

"Rhydian." My voice comes out smaller than I'd like.

He exhales. Long and shaky and completely uncontrolled — the sound of someone releasing something that's been held too tightly. His arm tightens around me. His face presses into my hair.

"Okay," he says.

The word comes out rough. Almost inaudible.

"Okay?" I turn my head. Try to see his face.

"I just need—" He stops. I can feel his jaw working against my temple. "Give me a second."

I give him a second.

He takes it. Several of them. His breathing is unsteady in a way I've only heard a few times — the nightmare in the first week, the crying in the study, the specific texture of Rhydian processing something his body has to catch up to.

His hand moves.

Slowly. Carefully. He reaches across and his fingers cover mine where they're still pressed against my stomach.

His hand over mine. Both of us over the small impossible fact of it.

He doesn't say anything.

I look at his hand on mine in the darkness and I feel the thing I've been carrying alone for a week expand — it doesn't get heavier, which is what I expected. It gets lighter. Distributed. Shared in a way that changes the weight of it entirely.

"How long," he says finally.

"Maybe five weeks. Senna will need to confirm properly."

"Are you—" He pauses. "Are you all right."

"Yes." I pause. "The dream—"

"Is a dream," he says. Firm. Like he's decided. "Just a dream."

"I know."

"Are you scared."

I consider lying. I don't.

"Yes," I say.

"Me too," he says immediately.

I look at him. He looks back. And there it is — that open face, the one with no armor, the one I've been watching emerge since the first night he stopped flinching. There's fear in it, real fear, but underneath the fear is something else. Something that has been building for weeks in a boy who grew up with nothing worth protecting and has been quietly, steadily, without announcing it, building a world that is.

He looks at me.

He looks at where our hands are.

"Okay," he says again. Quieter this time. Different.

Not I need a moment.

Something that sounds like *I'm here.*

I press my face into his chest.

The coals glow in the grate. The snow sits on the ground outside.

And in the dark of the room that started as mine and became ours, we hold the thing between us that neither of us planned for and both of us already cannot imagine losing.

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat - Chapter 34[1,353 words]

(Rhydian)

I don't sleep again after she tells me.

Elena does — eventually, after a long time of lying there in the dark with my arm around her and both our hands over where our hands were. Her breathing slows and evens and the tension in her shoulders releases by degrees, and I stay awake and I stare at the ceiling and I think.

Not bad thinking. Not the spiral kind, not the cave kind where thoughts ate each other in the dark and you woke up worse than you went under. Just — processing. The particular work of a mind trying to build a structure around something it has no blueprint for.

A child.

Our child.

I turn it over. I look at it from every angle. I try to find the place where it becomes real rather than something I'm holding at a careful distance because real things can be taken and at-a-distance things can't.

I don't find that place tonight. But I keep looking.

Morning comes the way mornings do — indifferent, light through the window, the settlement sounds starting up below. Elena wakes before me for once, which means she slept harder than usual, and I watch her come back into herself — that particular sequence, eyes opening, the brief unguarded moment before she's fully present, then the assembly of everything she carries sitting back on her shoulders.

She looks at me.

I look at her.

"Hi," she says.

"Hi."

She searches my face. Looking for — I don't know. Retreat, maybe. Regret. The way people wait for the thing they were afraid of to show up on the morning face of a person they told something to in the dark.

She won't find that.

"I'm okay," I say, before she can ask.

"I know." She sits up. Pushes her hair back. "You were awake all night."

"Most of it."

"Rhydian—"

"I'm okay," I say again. "I just needed to—" I sit up too. Look at my hands for a moment. "Think."

She nods. She knows about needing to think. She gives me that without pushing.

I look at her.

She's sitting in the grey morning light with her hair down and her nightclothes and the composed face she wears even before she's fully awake, and underneath the composure is something I've been learning to read for weeks — the small vulnerability she carries, the specific loneliness of a woman who has been strong for so long she's not entirely sure who she is when she isn't.

She's been carrying this for a week.

Alone.

"A week," I say.

She looks at me. "I know. I'm sorry—"

"Don't." I shake my head. "I understand why you waited. I do." I pause. "I just — you didn't have to. That's all."

She's quiet for a moment. Then, very quietly: "I know."

"You can tell me things," I say. "Before you've worked them out completely. You can tell me things while they're still—" I don't have the word. I move my hand. "Unfinished."

She looks at me with that expression. The one that goes deep. "Okay," she says.

And then she looks down.

Not at her hands. At herself. At the space below where her hands have kept finding themselves for days, the place where something small and specific and absolutely real is already doing whatever impossible thing it's doing in there.

I look too.

It's not visible. I know that. It won't be visible for a while. But now that I know, now that the information has had a night to settle into my chest, I can feel the knowing changing how I see her. Like a light source moved — same room, different shadows.

"Can I—" I stop.

She looks up.

"Can I—" I try again. My throat is doing something. I push past it. "I want to—" I gesture, helplessly, at the space between us.

She understands. She always understands the things I can't finish.

She lies back.

I move slowly. I get out from under the blanket and I sit beside her on the mattress and I look at her for a moment — her face, her eyes watching me, that quality of contained warmth she's been carrying all week that I couldn't name before and can name now.

I reach out.

My hands hover for a second. Then I put them down — flat, careful, the way she taught me to touch things without pressure, just presence. Just warmth. Just *I'm here* rather than *I'm taking*.

My hands on her stomach.

Through the fabric. Nothing to feel, nothing perceptible, just the ordinary warmth of her.

Except it's not ordinary. Nothing about this is ordinary. It's the least ordinary thing I've ever touched.

"I'm going to be a father," I say.

Not a question exactly. Not the same as last night — that was shock, that was processing. This is different. This is me saying the words out loud in the morning light to make them real, to make them mine, to claim the thing before I can talk myself out of deserving it.

"Yes," Elena says.

One word. Steady. Certain.

I look at my hands.

I think about my father.

I do this sometimes — I can't stop myself, the comparison is automatic, the particular question of *what does a father look like* routed inevitably through the only model I had. A man who valued things in terms of what they could do for him. Who touched me with the back of his hand more often than the palm. Who stood on a platform and didn't make a sound while they put the rope on because he'd decided it was fine, decided the game was over, and didn't look for me in the crowd.

Didn't look for me in the crowd.

I breathe out.

I move.

I lean down slowly. My hands stay where they are. And I press my lips to her stomach — just that, just the warmth of her through the fabric, just my mouth against the place where something is alive that is half her and half me, half everything she is and half whatever I managed to build out of four years alone.

Half the thing she healed in me.

Elena's hand comes to my hair.

I close my eyes.

The thing that happens in my chest is not like the crying in the study. That was years of accumulated grief finding a door. This is different — this is something opening that wasn't there before, a room that didn't exist until this moment, and it's so large and so completely unexpected that my body does the only thing it can with something that size.

I feel the wet on my face before I decide anything about it.

I don't move. I stay with my lips against her and my hands on either side and Elena's fingers in my hair and I let it happen without trying to control it, which is new for me, which is something she taught me without calling it a lesson.

Let it in. Don't pull away from it. Stay.

I stay.

"Hey," she says. Soft. Her hand moves through my hair.

I breathe.

"I'll die for this child," I say. It comes out uneven but it comes out certain. Against her stomach, into the fabric, the truest sentence I've ever said. "I need you to know that." I lift my head. My face is a mess and I don't care. I look at her. "Whatever comes. Whatever Shadowpine or Marcus or anything else— this is—" I stop.

I don't have the word for what this is.

She looks at me.

And her face, for once, is completely unguarded. Not the Alpha face, not the composed face, not the contained-warmth face. Just Elena. Wet-eyed and present and looking at me like I am the specific thing she needed and didn't let herself look for.

"I know," she says.

My hands on her stomach.

Her hand in my hair.

The morning light.

I lay my head back down and I close my eyes and I stay.

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat - Chapter 35[1,412 words]

(Elena)

I don't plan to tell them.

Not yet, not this way — I'd imagined something quieter, something with more control around it, a small announcement to the senior wolves first and then a gradual spreading outward the way information moves in a healthy Pack. I'd imagined having more time.

But Senna confirms it at the morning briefing in front of six people, which is her being thorough and not thinking about containment because containment isn't Senna's job, and six people in a Pack is not six people, it's six people times however many they each talk to before noon, and by the time I walk into the main hall for the afternoon council session the room already has a different quality to it.

I feel it the moment I come through the door.

That particular charged stillness of a room full of wolves who know something and are waiting to see if you know they know.

Rhydian is already there — he came in from drills early, he didn't know about Senna this morning, he's standing against the wall with his arms crossed and he catches my eye immediately when I walk in and his face does a quick question: did something happen?

I give him the small headshake that means I'll explain.

He nods. Stays where he is.

I take my place at the head of the table.

The council is assembled — elders, senior warriors, the two border captains, Senna still present from the medical briefing, Marta in her usual seat. Henrick is absent, still restricted to his quarters as part of the inquiry conditions. And at the far end, because he is still technically an elder and the formal removal proceedings take longer than three days and I won't break my own charter to speed them up—

Marcus.

He came in with a guard escort, which is the compromise — he attends the required council sessions, he's escorted, he speaks when the council requires input and not otherwise. Elena's rules, agreed to by majority. He sits with his hands folded and his expression composed and his eyes moving around the room with the unhurried patience of someone reading a situation from the outside.

He looks, if anything, interested.

I look at the room. At the faces. At Brennan who is trying to appear neutral and failing slightly, at Corvin near the back wall who is practically radiating something, at Marta who is watching me with that particular look of an older wolf waiting for a younger one to do something right.

I take a breath.

"I understand," I say, "that some of you have already heard something from the medical briefing this morning."

The room shifts. Not loudly — a collective breath, a collective adjustment.

"So rather than let it travel through the settlement in pieces." I pause. "I'm confirming it directly. I'm pregnant."

The hall erupts.

Not chaos — something warmer than chaos. Several of the senior wolves start talking at once, the kind of talking that's really exclaiming, Corvin actually makes a sound that's almost a laugh, and Marta — Marta, who has been carved from stone since before I was born — puts her hand over her mouth briefly and then straightens and looks away like she wasn't doing it.

Brennan turns toward the wall.

When he turns back his jaw is working.

"Alpha," he says, and his voice is not entirely steady. He clears his throat. "Congratulations."

"Thank you, Brennan."

"The Alma line," Marta says. She says it differently than she used to — not the political calculation of the early council meetings, not the charter requirement, but something with actual weight in it, genuine. "The line continues."

"It does," I say.

I look at Rhydian.

He's been still since I said it. Still in the specific way of someone receiving something so significant their body pauses while it loads. He's looking at me from across the room and his face is — everything. It's the open face, the unguarded one, and there's something in it that I think is pride and something else that's larger than pride and he's not bothering to conceal any of it.

He catches me looking and he breathes out. One visible breath.

I look back at the room.

The noise is settling into something more organized. Questions starting — Senna about the medical timeline, Brennan about what it means for patrol assignments in the coming weeks, the border captain asking something practical about the war council given the Shadowpine situation. Good questions, necessary questions, the Pack doing what it does when given something real to organize around.

And then, from the far end of the table, quiet enough to cut through the rest:

"Congratulations."

Marcus.

One word. The warmth in his voice calibrated to exactly the right frequency — the concerned elder, the family member, the man receiving news about his niece with nothing but appropriate feeling. His hands are still folded. His posture is still measured.

But his eyes.

I'm the only one looking at his eyes. Everyone else is looking at his face, at the performance, at the thing they want to see because seeing the alternative is harder.

His eyes are doing something that takes me a moment to locate precisely.

Not rage. Rage would be cleaner, rage would be something I could point to.

Something older than rage. Something calculated and patient and looking at me and at Rhyddian and at the room's reaction and adding it all up with the quiet efficiency of a man who has been planning thirty years and is not done.

Congratulations.

The word in his mouth is a blade wearing a bow.

I hold his gaze.

He holds mine.

The room is still celebrating around us — Corvin saying something to the wolf beside him, Senna already starting to talk timelines with Marta, the border captain writing something down. The ordinary machinery of a Pack receiving good news and beginning to organize around it.

And at the center of it, across the length of the table, Marcus and I look at each other with the full understanding that this changes something and neither of us is going to say so out loud in front of everyone.

He smiles.

It's almost perfect. It has all the external qualities of a genuine smile — the right degree of warmth, the slight crinkling at the eyes, the nod that goes with it.

But I've been looking at his face for years.

I know every frequency.

This smile says: you've given me something I needed.

This smile says: this accelerates things.

This smile says: I know exactly what to do with this now.

My hands are flat on the table.

I don't let anything show.

"The council will take a short recess," I say. Even. Normal. "We'll reconvene in twenty minutes for the eastern border update."

People stand. The room begins its recess movement, small clusters forming, the warm noise of wolves who have been given something good to feel.

Rhydian crosses the room.

He doesn't say anything when he reaches me. He doesn't need to. He just moves to where I'm standing and his hand finds the small of my back and stays there, the specific warmth of it, and I feel myself settle by a fraction.

I keep my eyes on Marcus.

Marcus is standing. Being escorted toward the side room where he waits during recesses. His guard is at his elbow. He looks back at me once before he's through the door.

The smile is gone.

What's under it is patient and certain and has been waiting for thirty years.

I turn to Rhydian.

He reads my face in the way he does now — fast, accurate, without needing the translation. His hand presses slightly at my back.

"What," he says. Low. Just for me.

"He got something from that," I say. Same volume. "I don't know what yet."

Rhydian's jaw tightens. He looks toward the door Marcus went through.

"Then we find out before he uses it," he says.

I nod.

Around us the Pack is celebrating — the sound of it filling the old stone hall, genuine and warm and something worth protecting — and beneath it, underneath the warmth, the old threat is still there and we both know it and we stand together in the knowledge of it, his hand on my back, mine on the table.

The ground is shifting.

We feel it.

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat - Chapter 36[1,452 words]

(Rhydian)

I find the wood in the storage shed behind the training yard.

Not looking for it specifically — I'm there for a broken fence post that needs replacing before the patrol rotation changes and someone trips over it in the dark, and I find the fence post, and then I find the stack of good cedar in the back corner. Dry, straight-grained, the smell of it sharp and clean in the cold shed air.

I stand there for a while.

I don't know how to build a crib. I've never built anything more permanent than a lean-to shelter in the mountains, never had reason to, never had anything worth building for. But I look at the cedar and I think about my hands and what they know and how they know it — years of making do, of figuring out what a thing needs and working backward from that — and I think: how hard can it be.

I take three planks back to the quarters.

That night, after Elena is asleep, I sit by the fire with the wood and a knife and I start figuring it out.

I could sleep anyway it's better to build it and keep my self busy.

Not because of nightmares — the nightmares have gotten quieter, more occasional, the courtyard visiting less often now that I have something real to come back to when I wake up. I'm awake because my brain won't stop. It runs the patrol schedules and the Shadowpine intelligence and the Marcus situation and then, when it runs out of threats to organize, it runs forward into the future in a way it never used to do.

I used to live strictly in the present. Four years in a cave will do that — there's no point planning beyond the next meal, the next night, the next morning, when your entire infrastructure is provisional.

Now my brain keeps going forward.

It shows me things I don't have language for yet. A child learning to walk on the stone floor. A small voice in the Pack house corridors. Elena's face doing something it hasn't done yet, some expression that belongs to a version of her I haven't met.

It shows me myself — older, heavier in the jaw, standing in a yard watching someone small navigate something difficult. The particular feeling of watching that and knowing you get to stay for it. That you're not going to be exiled or killed or left. That you built something that holds.

I work on the crib.

Elena finds out on the fourth night.

She wakes up at some point — I don't know what time, the fire has burned low — and she lies there for a moment the way she does, reassembling herself, and then she turns over and I'm not in the bed and she sits up.

"Rhydian."

"Here."

She finds me by the fire. The crib frame is taking shape — rough still, joinery imprecise, some of the angles not quite right — but recognizable. Clearly a thing.

She's quiet for a moment.

I keep working. I don't look at her because if I look at her I'll have to talk and I don't have the words for what this is yet, what this specific compulsion is, why my hands need to make something with their own material rather than buy something or commission something from someone who knows what they're doing.

She gets up. Wraps herself in the blanket from the bed. Comes and sits on the floor beside me.

Still doesn't say anything.

She watches my hands. The way she watches things she's paying real attention to — completely present, no performance.

"The joinery on the right side," she says finally.

"I know."

"I can show you the—"

"I'll figure it out."

She's quiet again. Not offended — she knows the difference between *I don't want your help* and *I need to do this part myself.* She lets it sit.

"How long have you been doing this," she says.

"Few nights."

"Every night?"

"Most of them."

She pulls the blanket tighter. Her shoulder is against my arm. We sit close without making anything of it, the way we sit now, the casual proximity that happened so gradually I can't point to when it started.

"You didn't tell me," she says.

"Neither did you. For a week."

She concedes that with a slight exhale.

I work the knife along a joint. Getting it closer. The cedar smells clean and good in the firelit room and I think about what it will smell like in six months when it's something a person sleeps in, when it has the particular smell of somewhere someone lives.

My father never built me anything.

My mother commissioned everything. That was how their world worked — things arrived because money made them arrive, and the arriving was the point, not the making. I grew up in rooms full of things that were expensive and owned and utterly impersonal.

I want this to be different.

I want there to be something in this room that my hands made. That came from knowing how to make do and figure things out and work a problem with whatever materials are available.

Four years alone taught me to survive. Maybe that's worth something now.

I'm on the final edge of the lower frame when it slips.

The knife catches the side of my left index finger — not deep, just a shallow pull across the pad, the kind of cut that bleeds enthusiastically and means nothing. I pull my hand back. Look at it.

A thin line of red.

"Here," Elena says immediately. She's got the blanket folded back before I can do anything, and she takes my hand — both of hers around mine, the same grip she uses when she's done the healing work, gentle and certain.

She looks at the cut. Then she lifts my hand to her mouth.

She presses her lips to my finger.

Not the healing gift — I know what that feels like, the particular warmth of it. This is different. Just her mouth, her lips closed over the small wound, warm and deliberate.

She stays there for a moment.

I look at the side of her face. The firelight on her jaw, the scar on her cheek, the particular way she holds things she's being careful with.

She lifts her head.

Her eyes come up to mine and something in them is doing the thing I've been learning to read — the deep thing, the thing she doesn't always put into words because she's still learning that she doesn't have to hold everything inside.

"I'll kiss every wound you ever get," she says.

She says it simply. Not a performance. Not even fully deliberate — it sounds like something that arrived at the surface from somewhere she keeps things without deciding to keep them there.

I look at her.

I've been cut before. Stabbed, slashed, bitten, scraped over rocks and tree roots and four years of terrain that wanted to break me. I have a map of damage on my body that Elena has touched and catalogued and healed twice and never once looked at like it was anything other than mine, ordinary, something that belongs to the person in front of her.

I'll kiss every wound you ever get.

My throat closes.

I turn my hand over. I take hers.

"You can't promise that," I say. My voice comes out rougher than I mean it.

"I just did."

"Elena—"

"I know what I said." She looks at me steadily. "Every one."

I look at her for a long moment.

Then I lift her hand to my mouth.

The inside of her wrist, where I first learned to feel her pulse, where the skin is thin and real and specifically her. I press my lips there and I feel her heartbeat — steady, faster than usual, present.

"Then I'll build something that makes wounds less likely," I say against her wrist. "For both of us."

She looks at the crib. At the rough frame in the firelight, my amateur joinery, the cedar that smells like something becoming.

Her thumb moves across my knuckles.

"The right side," she says.

"I know."

"I'll show you in the morning."

"I'll figure it out tonight."

She almost smiles. Leans her head against my shoulder.

I pick the knife back up. Work the joint. The fire burns low and the settlement sleeps and the room is warm and my finger has stopped bleeding, and beside me Elena is a solid warm presence that has become the most structural thing in my world.

I keep building.

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat - Chapter 37: The Needle[1,429 words]

The feast is Marcus's idea.

Not directly — he doesn't have the access for direct anymore, doesn't sit in the planning sessions or walk the corridors freely or pour his own tea from the kitchen stores. But Henrick is still in the council. Henrick, who is cooperating with the inquiry in the particular way of a man cooperating enough to stay out of a cell while keeping just enough back to feel like he retains something.

Henrick mentioned, in the right conversation, that a mid-winter feast would do the Pack good. Morale. Solidarity. Something celebratory given the pregnancy announcement and the Shadowpine threat finally being openly acknowledged rather than managed in the background.

The council agreed.

Marcus heard about the agreement that evening and allowed himself one moment of satisfaction before returning to the more pressing work of the second arrangement.

Her name, as far as Marcus knows, is not her real name.

She was introduced to him through the same chain as Drav — not Shadowpine, not anyone who can be traced, just a professional who operates in the grey territory between packs and takes on work that requires precision over force. Drav was force. This is precision.

The needle is barely two inches long. The compound on it isn't Varek's root suppressant — that's for broad strokes, for populations, for the slow weakening of a Pack that doesn't know it's being touched. This is targeted. A fast-acting compound that mimics natural illness — sharp fever, organ failure, the kind of death that looks like something a healer might see once in a decade in an otherwise healthy woman.

Specifically calibrated. Specifically dosed.

For a pregnant Alpha.

Marcus doesn't think about that part directly. He thinks about outcomes and architectures and the thirty years of patience required to get here. He doesn't think about Elena specifically, about the particular way she looked at him across the table when he said congratulations, her grey eyes doing the thing they do where they see through the performance to what's underneath.

He doesn't think about that.

She has to go. The child makes it more urgent, not less. The child is a future he cannot allow to exist.

He passes the instruction through Henrick, who passes it through a channel Marcus established four years ago for exactly this kind of necessity, and the woman with the needle arrives in the settlement two days before the feast disguised as a trader's assistant.

She's good. Marcus knows she's good because the chain she came through has never been wrong before.

He waits.

Elena has a taster.

Marcus knew this in the abstract — most Alphas do, it's standard protocol, part of the security apparatus that Elena has tightened significantly since the water poisoning. What he didn't account for, what Henrick's intelligence failed to capture with sufficient precision, is that the taster arrangement extends beyond food and drink.

It extends to physical contact at public events.

Elena's security rotation, quietly restructured over the past three weeks by the rogue who apparently has more operational intelligence than Marcus gave him credit for, now includes a second wolf who handles any unexpected physical approach to the Alpha in a crowd. Not a bodyguard — nothing that obvious. Just someone close, always close, with a specific brief to intercept first contact if the Alpha hasn't initiated it.

The woman with the needle gets close during the third hour of the feast.

She's good enough that nobody in the room sees it happen. She approaches from the left during a moment of crowd movement, her hand positioned correctly, the angle clean. She's done this before. Her body language is guest-at-a-feast, her expression is celebratory, everything about her reads as belonging.

She gets within arm's reach.

And the second wolf — a young female named Petra, the same scout who brought the Shadowpine movement report, who has been running this secondary security brief for eleven days without telling anyone except Brennan and the Alpha herself — steps into the gap.

The needle catches Petra's forearm instead.

Petra goes down within forty seconds. Not dead — the dose was calibrated for Elena's body weight, not Petra's, and Petra is smaller, which ironically means the compound hits faster but with less lethal precision. She seizes, briefly, and then stabilizes, conscious but not fully present, and Senna is there within two minutes because Senna has been stationed inside the feast hall specifically for this contingency.

The woman with the needle runs.

She makes it to the eastern gate before Brennan's people cut her off.

The room where they take her is not a comfortable room.

Marcus knows this room. He's authorized its use before, in his elder capacity, for precisely the kind of situation that requires information on an urgent timeline. It's a practical space. Stone, drain in the floor, a chair that isn't designed for sitting in comfortably for long periods.

He doesn't know they've taken her there until Henrick comes the following morning with a face that has moved beyond resigned into something genuinely frightened.

"She talked," Henrick says.

Marcus is looking out his window. The yard below. The crib-builder nowhere visible — inside, probably, or on patrol. The settlement doing its morning.

"How much," he says.

"Everything." Henrick's voice is thin. "The chain. The arrangement. The compound. The specific brief." He pauses. "She named the intermediary. The intermediary—"

"I know what the intermediary knows," Marcus says.

"Marcus." Something in Henrick's voice is different. Something that has finally, after twenty years, reached its limit. "They'll have everything by tonight. She named enough. They'll follow it back."

Marcus is quiet.

He turns from the window.

He looks at Henrick — really looks, which he doesn't always do, because Henrick has been furniture for so long that the habit of actually seeing him has faded. He's old. He looks older than he is this morning, grey and diminished, the look of a man who got off one train and hasn't found the platform for the next one.

"How is Petra," Marcus says.

Henrick blinks. "She's — stable. Senna says she'll recover."

"Good," Marcus says.

And he means it, which is perhaps the strangest thing in the room. He didn't want Petra. He's never wanted collateral. He's always been clean, specific, architectural — the right pressure at the right point, no excess. Petra is excess, a mistake, and the mistake came from an intelligence failure on his part and no other reason.

He moves to the desk.

"Send word to Varek," he says. "Tonight, not tomorrow."

"Marcus—"

"The timeline moves up again. If they follow the chain back to me by tonight, I'll be in a cell by morning. The attack needs to happen before that." He sits. Picks up his pen. "Tell him two days. Maximum."

"Two days is not—"

"It's what we have." He looks at Henrick. "It's what we've always been working toward. Two days changes nothing about the outcome."

Henrick stands in the middle of the room. He looks at Marcus at the desk, pen in hand, calm and deliberate. He looks like he's trying to find something in Marcus's face — some remnant of the man he started following twenty years ago, some version of the original argument that made this seem like the right architecture.

He doesn't find it.

"She could have died," Henrick says. Very quietly. "Elena. And the child."

"Yes," Marcus says.

"That's what you wanted."

"Yes."

Henrick breathes out. One long, final breath.

"I'm not carrying this message," he says.

Marcus looks at him.

"I've given you everything else," Henrick says, and his voice doesn't shake, which takes something, Marcus can see it taking something. "Everything for twenty years. But not this. Not this one."

The room is quiet.

Marcus looks at his old friend. At the man who has been his instrument and his shadow and his longest loyalty, and who is standing in a holding room doorway drawing a line in a place he should have drawn it years ago.

He looks at him for a long moment.

Then he nods once.

"All right," he says.

Henrick leaves.

Marcus folds the paper himself. He has the border contact's location memorized — he memorized it years ago because this was always the contingency, this was always the room at the end of the corridor, the exit he built into the architecture for exactly this moment.

He waits for the guard rotation to create the specific gap it creates every morning between shifts.

And then he gets the message out himself.

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat - Chapter 38[1,358 words]

(Elena)

The interrogation report lands on my desk at noon.

Brennan brings it himself, which tells me everything before I read a word — he doesn't send runners for things that are going to hit hard, he comes himself and he stands there while I read and he waits.

I read it.

The chain is clear. Clean, even — the woman gave them everything with a thoroughness that suggests she understood the difference between partial cooperation and the kind that ends conversations about what happens next. The intermediary. The compound. The specific brief. The origin point that all of it leads back to, single and unambiguous.

Marcus.

I set the report down.

I breathe.

"Petra," I say.

"Stable. Senna says she'll be walking by tomorrow." Brennan pauses. "She's asking if she did the job right."

"Tell her yes." I pause. "Tell her she saved two lives."

Brennan nods.

I stand up.

The holding room has the particular quality of a place that has been lived in under duress. The fire has been kept going — that was my instruction, I didn't want him cold, which Rhydian raised an eyebrow at and I said I want him present, I want him thinking, cold men stop thinking clearly and he accepted that. There's a book on the table. A cup.

Marcus is sitting in the chair when I come in. His guard steps outside.

He looks at me when I enter and his face does — nothing. No surprise, no recalibration, no reaching for the pleasantness. He looks at me with something underneath all of that, something that's been there for thirty years and has just now run out of surfaces to hide behind.

Tired. He looks genuinely tired.

"The interrogation report," I say.

"I assumed," he says.

I don't sit. I stand in the center of the room and I hold the report and I look at my uncle — my mother's brother, the man who poured tea at my father's funeral and stood at Viktor's grave with his hands folded and his face full of appropriate grief — and I wait to feel something decisive about what happens next.

I feel it.

"Petra nearly died," I say.

"I know."

"My child—"

"I know." His voice doesn't change. He holds my gaze.

"You tried to kill my child, Marcus." I say it plainly. Not a question, not an accusation requiring confirmation. Just the sentence, existing in the air between us.

He looks at me.

And there it is — finally, after all of it, the thing I looked for in that first conversation and didn't find because he buried it so deep: something that looks almost like regret. Not for the choice. For the gap between the man he thought he was building toward and the room he ended up in.

"I'm placing you under full arrest," I say. "Pending formal trial. You'll be moved to the secure cell — not this room, not a chair, not a fire." I pause. "The charter gives you the right to address the council once before trial. You'll have that. And nothing else."

He nods.

One nod. Simple.

"Is there anything you want to say," I say.

A long silence.

"You're going to be an extraordinary Alpha," he says. "Better than any of them. Better than Viktor ever would have been." His eyes find mine. "That's not an apology. I want you to understand I know what you are."

"I know you do," I say. "That's why you've been trying to kill me for a year."

I call for the guard.

He's out before noon.

I don't know how he does it — the gap in the rotation, something Henrick told him, something he worked out himself from thirty years of knowing this settlement's rhythms, this Pack's habits. I'm in the council session when Brennan's runner comes in and touches my shoulder and says three words that stop everything:

Marcus is gone.

The council room goes still.

I stand up.

"How long," I say.

"Maybe an hour. Maybe more."

I look around the table. At the faces — Marta with her jaw set, the border captains already reaching for their notes, two of the junior elders exchanging a look that has history in it. I look at all of them and I take the measure of what I'm dealing with.

"I need tracking pairs on all four exits immediately," I say. "Border patrols double. No one enters or leaves without my authorization."

"Alpha." Old Ferris — one of the eastern elders, one of the ones who was quieter than the others when we arrested Marcus, whose loyalties I've been measuring carefully and inconclusively. He speaks now with the particular weight of a man saying something he's decided to say. "Perhaps there's another way to handle this. If Marcus returns voluntarily—"

"He tried to kill my unborn child," I say.

The room goes quiet.

"He sent a needle meant for me that put Petra in Senna's care for two days. He poisoned our water supply. He arranged for an assassin to kill my mate." I look at Ferris. "There is no other way to handle this."

Ferris sits back. His face does something complicated. He doesn't speak again.

But the look he exchanges with the elder beside him — that I file. That I don't let go of.

The room fractures the way rooms fracture when something irreversible has happened and people are deciding which side of the irreversibility to be on. I can see it happening in real time — the wolves whose loyalty is mine completely and has been, the ones who are recalculating, the ones who are afraid of what comes next and are trying to figure out which direction fear points.

I keep my face still.

Rhydian finds me an hour later at the eastern border.

I'm looking at the tracks. Two guards found the exit point — a spot in the fence line that's been maintained badly for years, one of those institutional oversights that accumulates when a settlement runs long enough, and Marcus knew about it because Marcus knows everything about this place.

The tracks lead east.

Into the forest. Toward the gorge. Toward, if you follow them long enough and know the terrain, Shadowpine territory.

Rhydian comes to stand beside me. He looks at the tracks. He doesn't say anything for a moment.

"He's gone to Varek," he says.

"Yes."

"Which means Varek knows everything we know. Timeline, patrol positions, the pregnancy." He pauses. "Everything."

"Yes."

He's quiet. His breath makes small clouds in the cold air. His jaw is working.

"And the Pack," he says. "Ferris."

"And two others I'm watching." I pause. "They haven't done anything. They won't, probably — they're followers, not architects. But they're afraid, and afraid wolves make bad decisions."

"What do you need," he says.

I look at the tracks in the snow. At the line of Marcus's exit, clean and deliberate, the footprints of a man who has been planning an exit for as long as he's been planning everything else.

What I need is time. What I need is a Pack that isn't fractured. What I need is Shadowpine to not have a man inside our walls who has spent thirty years learning every weakness we have.

What I need doesn't exist anymore.

"I need you to finish the crib," I say.

He looks at me.

"I need you to finish the crib and I need the eastern patrol doubled by tonight and I need Brennan to have eyes on Ferris and I need Senna to clear Petra for light duty because I want her back on rotation." I breathe. "And I need you to stay close."

He turns. Faces me. His hand finds the back of my neck — warm, present, just there.

"I'm not going anywhere," he says.

I close my eyes for one second.

Just one.

Then I open them and look at the tracks leading east and I think about what's coming and I start building the next thing in my head.

The ground is fractured.

We stand on it anyway.

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat - Chapter 39[1,438 words]

(Rhydian)

I find the tracks an hour after Elena does.

She's already been here, already clocked the exit point, already done the cold calculation of what it means and where it leads. I can tell because when I crouch beside the fence line and read the

footprints the way four years of living in contested territory teaches you to read them, I feel her thinking layered over the evidence. She's stood right here. She's looked at this.

She's already decided what she's going to do about it.

I stand up.

Look east.

The trees are bare and the sky is the flat white of snow incoming and the tracks cut through the frozen ground with the particular clarity of something recent, something that happened this morning while I was running drills and she was in the council hall and Marcus was walking out of a holding room that apparently wasn't holding enough.

I stand there and I feel the thing I've been feeling since Brennan's runner came in — since I watched Elena's face do that specific thing it does when a situation has escalated past the plan and she's already building the next one. The thing I feel in my chest, low and certain and not quite anger.

He's out there.

He knows this territory. He knows our patrol patterns, our border positions, our response times — he helped build all of them. He's had thirty years of institutional knowledge and he took it all with him through that gap in the fence and now he's in the trees somewhere between here and Varek, either already across or close to it, and every hour he walks that distance is an hour of intelligence transferred.

Everything he knows about Elena. About the pregnancy. About our positions.

Every hour makes us more exposed.

I look at the tracks.

I look east.

And I know — the way I know things that come from the body rather than the brain, from the part of me that survived four years alone on instinct and pattern recognition — I know I can find him.

He's old. He's moving on bad terrain. He knows the territory but he doesn't know it the way I know contested land, doesn't know it the way someone who's had to learn it by necessity rather than familiarity. He has maybe a three-hour lead.

I can close three hours.

I'm already doing the route in my head — north of the main track, through the gorge approach where the terrain narrows, cut him off before he reaches Shadowpine ground. If he's still on our side of the border I can take him without involving Varek, without a border incident, without—

"No."

I turn around.

Elena is standing five feet behind me. She's been there for at least a minute, probably more. She's got her arms crossed and her face in the composed Alpha mode, but her eyes are doing something else.

I realize she's been watching me think.

"I didn't say anything," I say.

"You were about to." She holds my gaze. "You've been standing there for three minutes looking east like you're measuring a distance."

I look at the tracks. Back at her. "He's got three hours. Maybe less. I know this terrain—"

"He knows you're the most likely person to follow. He's planned for it." Her voice is even. "He wants you east. He wants you away from this settlement, away from me, either captured by Shadowpine or—" she stops. Takes a breath. "He wants you separated from me. That's been the priority target all along."

"I know that."

"Then you know going after him alone is exactly what he needs you to do."

I look at the fence gap. At the tracks.

The thing in my chest is still there — still low and certain and wanting the simple solution of *find the threat and remove the threat*, which is the only crisis management I grew up with, the only protocol a rogue alone in a cave has available. See the thing that wants to hurt what's mine. Go toward it. Handle it.

Elena is not a cave. This is not a mountain territory.

I know that.

"He'll give Varek everything," I say.

"I know."

"Timeline, patrol positions, the pregnancy—"

"I know." She doesn't flinch. "Rhydian, I know all of it. I've been doing this math for three hours." She takes a step closer. "Sending you after him alone doesn't solve it. Varek already has orders. The attack is coming regardless of whether Marcus reaches him or not. What changes if you catch him is that you're out there alone when it does."

I look at her face.

She's right.

I hate it with a specific physical intensity but she's right and I know she's right because the part of me that thinks rather than reacts has been saying the same thing since I started doing the route in my head and noticed the problem. I can close three hours. But I can't close the twelve between here and whatever Varek is planning, not alone, not if Shadowpine has scouts on the approach.

And Elena—

If something happens while I'm gone. If they move before I get back. If she's here and I'm in the trees somewhere east and—

I breathe out.

"He tried to kill our child," I say. My voice comes out flat.

"I know."

"He's going to Varek to finish what he started."

"I know that too."

"And you're telling me to stay."

"I'm telling you to stay." She holds my gaze. "I know what I'm asking. I know what it costs you." A pause. "Stay."

I look at the gap in the fence.

The tracks.

The east.

I think about Cade running laps. About Brennan deferring in the planning session. About Corvin's face when Elena announced the pregnancy. About what I told Elena in the dark: *I'll die for this child.*

Dying for something and living for it are different calculations.

I've spent four years on the dying calculation. Automatic, instinctive, the only math a cave allows. But there's another math, the one I've been learning since I walked into this Pack house in chains, the one Elena has been teaching me without calling it a lesson:

What does staying make possible?

I turn around.

I face her.

She's watching me with that patient quality — the quality that has been present since the first lesson, since the counting to ten and the breathe and the *let it in*, the quality of someone who has been waiting for this specific moment and believes in the person standing in front of her.

"Okay," I say.

She goes still.

Not surprise. Something softer than surprise — something that recognizes what this is, the specific cost of it, the fact that I'm choosing rather than just complying.

"Okay?" she says.

"I'll stay." I hold her gaze. "But I want Brennan's best tracker on the east route immediately. I want eyes on the Shadowpine border before nightfall. And I want to be in every planning session from here — not briefed after, not updated. In the room."

She looks at me for a moment.

"Done," she says.

"And when this is over—" I pause. "When Shadowpine is handled and the Pack is secure and we've got breathing room—"

"Marcus," she says. Simply.

"I want to be there."

She holds my gaze. Nods once. "You will be."

I look at the fence gap one more time.

The tracks going east. The trees. The particular cold of knowing the threat is out there moving while I'm standing still.

Then I turn my back on it.

I face the settlement. The gate. The yard where Cade is probably finishing the morning drill. The Pack house where the half-built crib sits by the fire and Senna is somewhere inside clearing Petra for light duty.

Elena comes to stand beside me.

She doesn't touch me. Just stands close, shoulder almost at my arm, both of us facing the same direction.

"That's the first time," she says quietly. "Without arguing."

"I argued."

"You argued and then you stopped." A pause. "That's different."

I think about the counting to ten. About the breathing. About all the ways she's been teaching me the space between instinct and choice.

"I'm learning," I say.

She's quiet for a moment.

"Yes," she says. "You are."

We walk back toward the gate together, the frozen ground under our boots, the sky pressing low and white above the trees, and behind us the tracks go east into the bare forest and I don't look back.

I keep walking.

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat - Chapter 40[1,441 words]

(Elena)

I'm in the yard before dawn.

Not because Senna cleared me for full training — she hasn't, and I haven't asked because I know the answer and I don't want the argument on record. I'm here because I can't sleep and because the alternative is lying in the dark doing threat calculations that go in circles and the circles are making me feel like the walls are closing in.

Movement helps. It always has.

I start with footwork. Just that — the basic patterns, the weight shifts Elena of three years ago drilled into muscle memory, before the Pack and before Viktor and before any of this. The yard is frozen and the footing requires adjustment and my body is making small compensations I'm aware of and trying not to think about directly.

Six weeks. Maybe seven.

Nothing shows. Nothing feels different in any way I can specifically point to — I'm tired more often, which could be the pregnancy or could be the fact that I'm managing a fractured Pack with a traitor in the wind and a Shadowpine attack incoming and my mate is twenty years old and I'm the only person who has any idea how to hold all of it.

I move faster.

The footwork becomes something else. I find a training dummy and I start working strikes — not hard, I'm not stupid, but present, deliberate, the kind of practice that keeps form from rusting. My shoulder rotation. My weight dropping before commitment, the habit Rhydian pointed out I drop under pressure.

I do not drop it now.

By the time the sky is turning from black to the flat grey of early morning I'm sweating despite the cold, which is something, and my head has quieted to a workable level, which is the point.

I hear footsteps on the stone path from the Pack house.

I know them. Of course I do — I know his footsteps from three buildings away now, know the particular rhythm of them, the slight irregularity when he's moving with purpose versus moving casually.

These are casual footsteps that have just become not casual.

He's seen me.

I don't stop. I finish the sequence I'm in, weight shift, strike, reset, and then I put my hands down and turn around.

Rhydian is standing at the edge of the yard.

He's dressed — he woke up looking for me, checked the bed, put clothes on, came to find me. He's holding two cups and his hair is still from sleep and his expression is doing something I need a moment to decode.

It's not anger.

It's — the look he gets when he's containing something that wants to be larger. When the instinct has arrived before the words.

"Hi," I say.

He looks at the training dummy. At me. At the dummy again.

"Hi," he says. Very carefully.

I cross to the bench and pick up my water skin. Take a drink. Give him a moment.

He crosses the yard and sets one of the cups on the bench. Steps back. Crosses his arms. He's doing the thing where he decides whether to say what he's actually thinking or find the diplomatic version, and I've watched this process enough times to know which one he lands on most often now.

"How long," he says.

"Hour, maybe."

"Since before dawn."

"Yes."

He looks at the dummy. Back at me. "Senna said—"

"Senna said limited exertion." I hold his gaze. "Footwork and form work is limited exertion."

"You were throwing strikes."

"Controlled strikes."

"Elena—"

"Rhydian." I say his name the same way he says mine. Just the weight of it. "I know my body."

"I know you know your body." He unfolds his arms. Folds them again. "That's not—" He stops. Starts over. "The yard is frozen. The footing is bad. If you went down—"

"I didn't go down."

"But if you—"

"I didn't." I look at him steadily. "I know what I'm doing."

He looks at me for a long moment with that gold-eyed intensity that he's stopped trying to modulate. He's not flinching anymore, hasn't been for weeks, but this is different — this is him trying to find the boundary between his fear and my autonomy and not quite locating it cleanly.

Good. It's not a clean boundary. I know that. I'm the one living on both sides of it.

"I can't stop training," I say. Because this is the real conversation, the one under the one about frozen ground and controlled strikes. "Shadowpine is coming. The Pack is fractured. Marcus is across the border with everything he knows about us." I hold his gaze. "I am the Alpha. I cannot be the thing that needs protecting."

"You're pregnant."

"I know."

"You're carrying—" He stops. His jaw tightens. "You're carrying my pup. Elena."

There it is. The actual sentence. Not the footwork or the dummy or the frozen ground — the thing underneath, the specific terror of it, the twenty-year-old boy who has been building a crib in the

firelight every night for two weeks saying *you're carrying my pup* in a voice that is doing everything it can not to crack.

I put my hand on his arm.

He goes still.

"I know," I say. Quieter. "I know what I'm carrying."

"Then—"

"I'm not stopping." My hand stays on his arm. "But I'll modify. I'll stay off the ice patches. I'll keep Brennan at the yard when I train. I'll—" I pause. "I'll be careful."

He looks at my hand on his arm. At my face. Back at the dummy.

He breathes out.

It's a long breath. The kind that carries something down with it on the way out.

"Come here," he says.

I look at him. "What—"

He moves before I finish the question. He bends and gets an arm under my knees and the other at my back and he lifts me in one clean movement and I make an undignified sound that is definitely not a squeak and grab his jacket.

"Rhydian—"

"I'm not carrying you because you can't walk," he says. He's already moving toward the Pack house. Completely calm. "I'm carrying you because I want to."

"That's—" I'm trying to find the objection and I'm struggling because he's warm and his grip is secure and my body, which has been up since before dawn in freezing temperatures, is making a very compelling argument for the opposite of argument. "That's not a reason."

"It's my reason."

"I'm the Alpha—"

"Of this entire Pack, yes." He gets to the door and somehow manages it without putting me down, which requires genuine coordination, and I notice this in spite of myself. "You can be the Alpha and also be carried to bed. Both things can be true."

"You learned that from me," I say.

"I learn everything from you." He's in the corridor now. "Rest. You're carrying my pup."

"You've said that."

"I'll keep saying it."

I give up.

Not because I've lost the argument — I haven't, the argument has several strong remaining points. I give up because he smells like sleep and the cups he brought had tea in them and he came to find me before dawn because he noticed I was gone, and the specific quality of being carried by someone who is doing it because they want to and not because they think you can't do it yourself is—

It's different. It's entirely different from weakness.

I put my head against his shoulder.

He carries me through the corridor and into our room and he sets me down on the bed with a care that is completely out of proportion to the situation and genuinely not something I have words for, and he pulls the blanket up, and he sits on the edge of the mattress.

He looks at me.

"Sleep," he says.

"I have reports—"

"After."

"Brennan needs—"

"Brennan is handling it." He holds my gaze. "Sleep. One hour. Then I'll wake you and you can run the whole Pack if you want."

I look at him.

At the dark circles under his eyes from the nights with the crib. At the worry he's been carrying without putting it anywhere loud.

"One hour," I say.

He nods.

I close my eyes.

I feel him stay. Not leaving, not moving — just there, at the edge of the mattress, keeping watch the way he's been keeping watch since the night everything shifted and he stopped being someone I was managing and became someone I was building something with.

I'm asleep in under five minutes.

He's still there when I wake up.