

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat c 4

(Elena)

The boy stands in the middle of my hall, wrists bleeding, chest heaving. He's thin — too thin. His clothes are rags, his hair a matted mess. But those golden eyes are still full of fire.

I don't turn around when I give the order. Just walk toward my quarters and speak over my shoulder.

"Clean him. Feed him. Bring him to me when he's presentable."

Behind me I hear him laugh — ugly and sharp. "I'm not a dog you can wash and train."

I keep walking.

An hour later they bring him in. He's been scrubbed, hair damp and curling at the edges, someone's found him a gray linen shirt that hangs too big off his frame. Wrists bandaged. He still looks half feral.

"Sit," I say, pointing at the table by the window.

He doesn't sit.

I've dealt with difficult wolves before. None of them spent four years biting anyone who came close. I sigh and walk to the table where a bowl of thick stew is waiting — meat, potatoes, carrots, made properly. I pick up the spoon, fill it, and walk to him.

He's taller than me. I have to look up to meet his eyes and I don't like that.

"Open your mouth."

"Make me."

I move fast — one hand to the back of his neck, spoon toward his lips. He turns his head and the stew splashes across his cheek.

Then he bites me.

Teeth into the side of my index finger, hard enough to draw blood. Not hard enough to take it off — but enough.

I don't pull away. I let him hold it for three full seconds, then I twist my hand just slightly, just enough pressure on his jaw, and he opens. My finger slides out wet and red.

I look at the wound. Four deep punctures, blood dripping onto the floor.

"Are you done?" I ask.

He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. My blood smears across his lips. "I could've taken your finger off."

"But you didn't."

His hands are shaking. Not from anger — I know the difference. That's fear. Buried under all the teeth and snarling, that's a terrified boy trying very hard not to show it.

I understand that more than I want to admit.

The spoon hits the floor.

I slap him.

The crack echoes off the stone walls. His head snaps sideways, a red mark blooming on his cheek. He doesn't flinch. Doesn't raise a hand. Just turns his face back slowly, golden eyes wide.

I grab his jaw — fingers digging into bone, my bitten finger smearing blood on his skin.

"You will learn respect," I whisper. "Starting tonight."

His throat moves. He swallows.

I let go.

Neither of us steps back. His breath is fast and shallow and I can feel the warmth of it on my chin.

I reach for the collar of his shirt.

"What are you doing?" His voice cracks slightly.

"Taking your shirt off."

"No—"

I grab the fabric and pull. It tears at the seam and comes up over his head before he can decide what to do about it.

His chest is a map of damage. Scars crossing his ribs — some pale and old, some still pink. A bruise on his shoulder going yellow at the edges. His collarbone sits too prominent, the way it does when someone hasn't been eating enough. But underneath all of it there's lean muscle, the ropery kind you earn from fighting for your life rather than training for sport.

He crosses his arms over himself. Shame flickers across his face.

"Don't stare," he mutters.

"I'm assessing."

I turn to the chest by the bed and pull out bandages, salve, a clean cloth. "Sit on the bed."

"No."

"Do you want those wrists infected?"

"I don't care."

"You will when you can't use your hands."

A pause. Then slowly, like it costs him something, he walks to the bed and sits on the edge.

I sit beside him. Close. Our thighs almost touching.

I take his left wrist first — unwrap the bloody bandage, and underneath the skin is raw and torn and crusted. I wet the cloth and clean it carefully, no rushing.

He hisses. "That hurts."

"Good. Pain teaches."

"Teaches me to hate you."

"You already hate me. So nothing lost."

I work the salve in gently, wrap fresh linen around his wrist, tie it off. Then I hold out my hand for the right one. He gives it without argument this time. Same damage, same process, same deliberate care.

When both wrists are wrapped and I'm done I should stand up. Send him to the corner. Lock the door and be finished with it.

Instead my hands come to rest on his bare chest.

Right over his heart.

It's pounding — fast and hard, like something trapped. I feel him shiver under my palms, and it's not the cold. The fire is burning, the room is warm, there's sweat at his temple.

He shivers because I'm touching him.

"You're scared," I say quietly.

"I'm not scared of you."

"Your heart says otherwise."

He looks down at my fingers. Then back up at my face, golden eyes dark and confused in a way I don't think he knows how to hide.

"No one's touched me in four years," he says. His voice drops to almost nothing. "Not like this. Not... gently."

Something twists in my chest that I really don't want to feel.

This boy — rude, defiant, feral — has been completely alone. No one cleaned his wounds. No one sat close enough to feel his heartbeat. I know what that does to a person. Viktor touched me like I was a chore he needed to finish. I know the cold that leaves behind.

But I don't say that.

Instead my fingers find a scar on his ribs — long, curving from his side down toward his stomach.

"How'd you get this one?"

"Knife fight. Rogue tried to take my cave two years ago."

"Did you win?"

"I'm still here."

I trace up across his ribs, light as I can make it. He closes his eyes. His jaw goes tight.

"Stop," he breathes.

"Why?"

"Because I don't know what this is."

"A lesson."

"What kind?"

"Respect starts with trust. Trust starts with touch." I squeeze his shoulder gently, feel the muscle jump under my palm. "You need to learn that not every hand reaching for you is trying to hurt you."

He opens his eyes. Something raw sits in them — something young that the four years of feral living hasn't managed to kill yet.

"You slapped me," he says.

"I did. And I bandaged you. Both things are true at the same time."

He goes quiet.

I take my hands off his chest. He inhales sharply at the loss of it — quick, involuntary, like he didn't mean to do it.

I stand.

"Bandages need changing tomorrow morning. I'll do it."

"You don't have to."

"You're going to be my mate. Everything about you is my business now."

I walk to the door. Pause with my hand on the frame.

"There's a bed in the corner."

"Where do you sleep?"

"Same room. Not the same bed. Not yet."

He looks at the corner bed, then at me, then at the floor. When he speaks his voice is smaller than anything I've heard from him since he arrived.

"Why are you being nice to me?"

I don't answer.

Because honestly — I don't fully know. Maybe I see something broken in him that looks familiar. Maybe his shiver under my hands woke something up in me I thought Viktor had killed completely.

Or maybe I'm just exhausted from being cold.

I close the door behind me and lean against the wall in the hallway. I look at my bitten finger — dried blood, the wound already knitting shut the way wolf wounds do.

I bring it to my lips. Taste him.

Iron. Salt. And underneath it something else entirely.

Something wild.