

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat - Chapter 41[1,494 words]

(Rhydian)

The messenger came at midday.

I saw him before anyone else does. I'm on the wall walk above the eastern gate — Brennan put me up there as part of the new rotation, eyes on the approach road since Marcus mess, and I've been doing it without complaint because it's useful and because standing somewhere high with clear sightlines is something my body understands after four years of cave living.

He came from the east.

Alone, which is either brave or Stupid, and nothing about Shadowpine is ever brave when calculated is available. He's wearing no colors — that's the first thing I register. No Pack marking, no identifiable armor. Clean travel clothes, a white strip of cloth tied to his left arm.

Parley. Formal parley.

I didn't move from the wall. I watch him cover the last quarter mile with the particular economy of someone who has been told exactly how far to walk and what to say when he gets there and is running through it in his head.

I send the runner before he reaches the gate.

Elena. Eastern approach. One messenger, parley marks. Now.

She's at the gate by the time he arrives.

I came down from the wall and stand two paces behind her left shoulder, which is where I've started standing in these situations — not beside her, that's Brennan's position and he's earned it, but close. Close enough. She knows I'm there without looking.

The messenger stops at the gate.

He's maybe thirty. Forgettable face, the kind that's useful in a profession that requires moving through places without being remembered. His eyes do a fast sweep — Elena, Brennan, me, the guards at the gate, the wall above — and settle on Elena.

"Alpha," he says. "I carry a formal declaration from the Shadowpine Pack."

"Who sends it," Elena says.

"Alpha Varek." A pause. The precise pause of someone delivering a prepared line. "And his newly appointed general."

The gate is quiet.

Elena's face gives nothing. "Name," she says.

"Marcus," the messenger says. "Formerly elder of the Mountain Pack."

I hear it move through the wolves near the gate — a ripple, a held breath, a specific quality of a thing you half-expected becoming real. Beside me Corvin makes a sound, just barely, caught and controlled. Brennan's jaw tightens visibly.

Elena holds her hand out.

The messenger produces a sealed letter. Steps forward to the gate, reaches through. She takes it. Doesn't open it. Looks at the messenger.

"You'll be given water and a place to rest," she says. "You leave at dawn."

"My instructions were to wait for a response."

"You'll have one by dawn," she says. "Water. Rest. You're a guest while you're here and a guest only. If you attempt to move through the settlement or speak to Pack members outside of escort, that changes." She holds his gaze. "Understood?"

He nods. The nod of a professional.

She turns and walks back toward the Pack house. I fall into step beside her. I can see the letter in her hand — plain exterior, dark wax seal with Shadowpine's mark and something else pressed beside it, something additional that I don't have the heraldry to read but Elena clearly does because her hand tightens slightly around the paper.

"What's the second seal," I say.

"Elder's mark." Her voice is flat. "Marcus still has his ring."

We walk.

She calls the full council in twenty minutes.

Not just senior wolves — everyone with any role in Pack governance, which is the move I would have made. You don't read a declaration of war in a small room and let it spread through the

settlement in pieces. You control the shape of the information. You give it to everyone at once so the version they carry is the true one.

The hall fills. The fire goes up — someone has the sense to build it high before people arrive, so the room is warm and clear rather than cold and uncertain, which matters, which affects how people receive things.

I stand at the back with Cade and the trainees near the wall. I moved here deliberately — they need to see what it looks like when serious things happen and someone stays steady. That's half the work.

Elena stands at the head of the table with the letter.

She breaks the seal. Opens it.

Reads it once, eyes moving, face giving nothing. I watch her eyes track down the page. Watch her stop at something. Read it again.

Then she looks up.

"I'll read this directly," she says. "I'm not going to summarize or soften it. You deserve to hear exactly what it says."

The room is completely still.

She reads.

The declaration is formal. Old language, the kind that pack law requires for official war declarations — the structure of it is almost ceremonial, which is its own kind of obscene, the politeness of a thing designed to end lives. Varek's name. The Mountain Pack's name. The specific grievances listed — territorial claims on the eastern hunting grounds, which Marcus promised him, stated now as Shadowpine's rightful territory. The formal notice of hostile intent.

And then the part that changes everything.

"In addition to the above declaration, the Shadowpine Pack announces the appointment of Marcus, formerly elder of the Mountain Pack, as General of Operations for the eastern campaign. In this capacity, Marcus brings full intelligence of the Mountain Pack's military structure, patrol rotations, border positions, and leadership vulnerabilities, which will be applied in the service of a swift and decisive resolution."

Elena pauses.

The room makes a sound that isn't a word. It's the collective sound of a specific kind of hit landing.

"The Mountain Pack is advised to consider full surrender as the outcome most favorable to Pack members, including the preservation of life for the current Alpha and her unborn heir, under terms to be negotiated upon the Pack's formal capitulation. General Marcus has indicated a preference for a peaceful resolution and has specifically requested that the Alpha be given the opportunity to respond before the first engagement."

She folds the letter.

Looks at the room.

"Marcus is their general now," she says.

She says it simply. No theater. Just the fact.

The room absorbs it.

I watch faces from the back wall. Marta with her eyes closed briefly, something moving through her that she controls but barely. Brennan looking at the table. The eastern elders — Ferris among them — whose faces are doing the particular work of people who backed the wrong calculation and are now watching its consequences arrive.

Cade beside me breathes out slowly.

"He told them everything," I say. Low. Just for Cade.

"Yeah," Cade says. Same volume.

"The patrol positions. The border gaps. The pregnancy." I watch Elena at the head of the table, already reading something in Brennan's expression and responding to it, the machine of her starting to move. "Everything he built here for thirty years — he's pointing it at her."

Cade is quiet for a moment.

Then: "What do we do."

I look at him. He's looking back at me with seventeen-year-old eyes that are scared and present and waiting — not for an answer that makes it safe, that kind of answer doesn't exist, but for an answer that tells him what to do with his body and his wolf and the fear that is completely appropriate right now.

"We do what she says," I say. "Exactly what she says, exactly when she says it." I pause. "And between now and when she needs us, we train."

He nods. One nod. The nod of someone who has decided.

At the head of the table Elena is talking — already past the reaction, already in the next thing, her voice steady and her hands flat on the table and the room organizing itself around her the way it does, the way it has, the way it will because that's who she is and what she does.

I watch her.

I think about the letter in her hand and the general on the other side of the border and the eastern hunting grounds and every piece of intelligence about this Pack that Marcus carries in his head like a weapon pointed home.

I think about the crib half-built by the fire.

I think about what she said in the dark: I love you.

She doesn't know I heard it. I've been waiting for her to say it awake. I'll wait longer if I have to.

First we get through this.

I push off the wall.

"Drills at five tomorrow," I tell Cade. "Tell the others."

He goes.

I walk to the front of the room.

Elena looks up when I get there. A second's eye contact — question, answer, we're past needing words for most of it now.

I stand at her shoulder.

"We will get through this together" I whispered.

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat - Chapter 42[1,540 words]

(Elena)

The suggestion comes from Ferris.

Of course it does. I've been watching Ferris since the declaration arrived, watching the particular way he holds himself in meetings now — slightly separate, slightly angled, the posture of a man who has been doing math and doesn't like the answer and is looking for a different equation.

He waits until the third hour of the war council. Strategic timing — everyone is tired, the maps have been out for two hours, the arguments about the eastern border positions have gone in circles twice and the room is running on the particular exhaustion of people who know the problem and can't find the solution and are starting to feel the walls.

Then he speaks.

"There is another possibility," he says. "That we haven't formally discussed."

I look at him.

"The declaration offers terms," he continues. "Specific terms. The letter says Marcus has indicated a preference for peaceful resolution." He pauses, and in the pause I can hear him deciding how to say the next part, the exact phrasing he's been rehearsing since yesterday. "The intelligence advantage Shadowpine holds comes primarily from Marcus. And Marcus—" Another pause. "Marcus's stated grievance has always been about leadership. About who holds power here." He looks at the table. "There may be a way to address that grievance without full conflict."

The room is quiet.

"The declaration also makes specific reference to the rogue," Ferris says. He still doesn't say Rhydian's name. He has never said Rhydian's name in my presence, I realize. "The Alma appointment was the mechanism Marcus used to build his case for action. If that appointment were to be—"

"Don't," Rhydian says.

He's been at the wall. I felt him go still thirty seconds ago, before Ferris started talking, the moment the setup became apparent. He doesn't move from the wall. His voice comes out very flat and very quiet.

Ferris looks at him briefly. Back at the table. "This is a council discussion. Everyone present has the right—"

"Say it," Rhydian says. "If you're going to say it, say it."

A beat.

"Surrendering you to Marcus's terms," Ferris says, "in exchange for a renegotiation of the eastern campaign—"

"Would give Marcus exactly what he wants," Brennan says.

"It would save lives—"

"It would give him the Pack," Brennan says. "That's what you're not saying. You hand over Rhydian, Marcus has the legitimacy argument resolved, Varek gets the eastern grounds, and we spend the next decade watching an old man who tried to poison us run things from behind Shadowpine's authority." He looks at Ferris. "That's the deal you're describing."

"People will die in a war—"

"People will die in a surrender too," Brennan says. "Just more slowly, and for longer."

The room has that quality it gets when something true has been said that everyone was avoiding. The particular silence of a thing sitting uncovered.

I've been still since Ferris started speaking.

I've been still in the specific way I go still when something requires the whole of me — not the managed stillness, the performance of calm. The actual kind. The kind where I go somewhere inside myself that is very cold and very clear and I look at a situation from there before I move.

I look at the situation from there.

Ferris is afraid. That's the root of it. He's genuinely, practically afraid — he has a mate and children and wolves he's responsible for and he's looking at a declaration of war from a Pack with better numbers and an insider's knowledge of every weakness we have and he's doing the calculation that frightened people do: what's the minimum cost of keeping the people I love alive.

That's not evil. I understand it.

But what he's proposing would cost more than he's accounting for.

"Who else," I say.

Everyone looks at me.

"Who else in this room thinks what Ferris is describing is worth discussing." I keep my voice even. "I want to know. Show of hands or say so directly, I don't care which."

A long silence.

Two hands, eventually. Junior elders, both of them, on the eastern end of the table. They put their hands up and then put them down quickly, as if they'd like to have the option of the gesture not having happened.

I note all three names.

I look at Ferris.

He's looking at me with the expression of a man who has said the thing and is now waiting to see what it costs him. There's something almost like relief in it — relief that it's out, that the calculation is visible, that we can deal with the actual shape of it rather than the shape he was trying to hide.

I respect that, actually. Marginally.

"Marcus was in this Pack for thirty years," I say. "He sat at this table. He attended our births and our funerals and our council sessions and he built systems that kept us running." I pause. "And he poisoned our water. He sent a needle meant for me into Petra's arm. He sent an assassin to kill my mate and walked into Shadowpine with thirty years of our vulnerabilities in his head." I look at Ferris. "You want to give him what he's been trying to take by force."

"I want people to live," Ferris says. Quietly. He means it.

"So do I," I say. "Which is why I will not hand my mate to a man who has already tried to kill him twice." I put both hands flat on the table. "The Alma bloodline is what Marcus has been using to justify everything he's done. The bloodline that he claims the Moon Goddess chose, the bloodline he tried to weaponize with this marriage and then tried to destroy when it stopped serving him." My voice is completely even. "Rhydian is my mate. He is the father of my child. He has spent six weeks earning a place in this Pack that has nothing to do with his bloodline and everything to do with who he is." I look at the table. At every face. "And I will not surrender him. Not to Marcus. Not to Varek. Not to anyone in this room who thinks it's a workable solution."

Ferris opens his mouth.

"If someone in this room moves against my mate," I say—

The sentence starts normally and then something happens.

I don't plan it. It comes from a place below planning, below the Alpha management and the political calculation and the thirty years of watching my father hold this room together — it comes from somewhere much more basic than any of that, from the wolf who has been running underneath Elena the Alpha this whole time and has been patient and is not patient anymore.

I roar.

Not words — just sound, raw and enormous, the kind that hits the stone walls and comes back different, that carries through the hall and into the corridor and probably to the far side of the settlement yard.

The room doesn't move.

Ferris has gone pale.

Even Brennan has gone very still, which I note peripherally, which tells me the sound was real and not just something I felt from the inside.

"Touch my mate," I say, and my voice when it comes back to words is lower than usual, rougher, stripped of everything except what it actually is, "and I'll kill you myself."

The room is absolutely silent.

I breathe.

Once. Twice.

The cold clear place inside me is still there. I can still see the situation from there. I am still the Alpha, still the one who has to hold this together, still the one who has to convert this room full of frightened wolves into a fighting force in less time than we have.

I am all of those things.

And I am also a woman who has been carrying a child for seven weeks while managing a traitor and a war declaration and a Pack that keeps asking her to prove she can hold it, and something in me has just drawn a line in the floor of this hall that is not moving regardless of what the council votes.

I look at Ferris.

He looks at me.

"I understand your fear," I say. Quieter now. "I share it. I'm afraid too." A pause. "But we don't surrender. We don't give Marcus what he wants. And we do not touch my mate." I straighten. "Those are not positions open for discussion. Everything else—patrol strategy, reinforcement options, the eastern border approach—everything else we discuss. Tonight. As long as it takes."

I sit down.

The room exhales.

At the wall, Rhydian hasn't moved. I can feel him from here — the quality of his stillness, the specific one that isn't the flinching kind or the defending kind but the kind I've come to understand is what he does when he's received something that's gone somewhere he can't immediately speak to.

He'll say something later. In the dark, in the room, with nobody around.

I know how he works.

I look at the maps.

"Eastern border," I say. "From the beginning. Brennan, walk us through it again."

The council breathes.

And we work.

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat - Chapter 43: The General[1,556 words]

The fire at the camp's center burns too high for tactical sense.

Marcus knows this. He's walked enough borders, attended enough pre-engagement briefings, to understand that a large fire at night is a position marker, an invitation, a gift to whatever scouts are watching from the tree line. He let them build it anyway. Because a hundred wolves standing in

the dark with no fire get cold and restless and start thinking about what they're doing and why, and cold restless wolves make bad decisions in the first hour of a fight.

The fire stays.

He stands at its edge and watches the wolves who are now technically his.

A hundred is more than he asked for. Varek is making a point — either that he's committed to this fully, or that he doesn't trust Marcus to deliver with fewer. Probably both. The Shadowpine wolves are different from Mountain Pack wolves in ways Marcus has been cataloguing since he arrived: harder in the jaw, less individually expressive, the particular cohesion of a Pack that has been fighting border conflicts for a decade and has developed the specific muscle memory of a unit that doesn't question orders.

Good, in one sense.

Less good in another. They're Varek's, not his. He can give them direction and they'll execute it with precision, but if something goes sideways — if the Mountain Pack's response is different from what the intelligence suggests — these wolves will look to their own instincts before they look to Marcus.

He factors this in.

He walks the perimeter of the camp. Old habit — he's done it every night for thirty years in the settlement, a full circuit before sleep, checking what's there and what isn't. The border camps are louder than he's used to. The Shadowpine wolves talk differently, eat differently, keep different hours. There's a particular smell to a camp that isn't home and he's been feeling it since he arrived — not homesickness, he doesn't think that's the word, but an absence, a space where something used to be that isn't there anymore.

He thinks about the hall. The long table. The seat he should have had.

Doesn't let himself stay there long.

Varek is waiting at the eastern command position — a term that means a slightly larger tent and a crate to put maps on, which is fine, Marcus doesn't need comfort. He needs clear sightlines and a table and the intelligence he carried here in his own head, which is the most valuable thing in this camp and everyone present knows it.

"Numbers confirmed?" Marcus says.

Varek doesn't look up from the map. "One hundred and four. Two trackers came in this afternoon."

"I asked for eighty."

"You got more." Varek finally looks up. His blind eye catches the lamplight and his good one finds Marcus with its usual flat precision. "Consider it a gift."

Marcus looks at the map.

The Mountain Pack's eastern border, rendered in Varek's cartographer's hand from a combination of Shadowpine intelligence and the information Marcus arrived with. He looks at the patrol positions — positions he knows, positions he helped design fifteen years ago when the eastern border was first formally secured. He looks at the gap near the old logging track, which he told them about the night he arrived, which will be the primary entry point.

He looks at the mark on the map that indicates the Pack house.

The hall. The long table.

He looks away.

"The Alpha has doubled the eastern patrol," Varek says. "Your arrival was noticed."

"Of course it was." He picks up the charcoal and adjusts a notation on the map. "She's not reactive. She's been ahead of this since the water supply. I told you that."

"You said she was distracted. The rogue, the pregnancy—"

"She is distracted. Distraction doesn't make her slow." He sets the charcoal down. "It makes her human. She's making decisions with more weight on them than she used to. That's not the same as errors."

Varek studies him.

"You respect her," he says. Flat. Not an accusation. Just an observation.

Marcus doesn't answer.

He picks up his coat from the crate and pulls it on. Outside the tent the camp is settling into its pre-engagement rhythm — the particular noise of a hundred wolves preparing for tomorrow, which is different from the noise of them doing anything else. Quieter. More internal. The specific silence that falls over people when morning means something real.

He walks back to the main fire.

They look at him when he approaches. He feels it — the shift in attention, the specific quality of a crowd orienting toward a speaker, which is something he's been navigating for thirty years. Council halls, elder sessions, the smaller intimacy of private conversations. He knows how to hold a room.

He takes the position near the fire. Not above it, not on anything elevated — that would be theater, and theater rings false with wolves who've been in actual fights. He just stands at the fire's edge and waits until the quiet finds its own level.

It doesn't take long.

These wolves are trained. They pay attention.

He looks at them.

A hundred and four faces in the firelight. Young ones, most of them — the particular youth of wolves who've spent their fighting years on border skirmishes, who are physically ready for this and have no idea what it actually is. Some older ones behind them, the ones with the flat eyes of experience.

He thinks about what to say.

He's been thinking about it for two days, walking the perimeter, adjusting the map, watching the fire burn too high. A general's speech is a specific thing — it has to give people a reason that isn't the real reason, because the real reason is always too small or too personal or too embarrassing to say out loud. You killed my nephew for his throne. I want what I built. I spent thirty years being furniture and I am done.

You can't say that.

So you find the version that lives beside the truth without quite being it.

"The Mountain Pack," he starts, and his voice carries the way it's always carried, the specific projection of a man who learned to be heard in stone rooms, "has held the eastern corridor for three generations." He pauses. Let them settle. "They've held it with the resources of two territories and the advantage of defensive position and a bloodline claim that the Goddess herself endorsed. They've held it and they've held it well."

The fire pops. Nobody moves.

"But holding is not the same as earning," he says. "The eastern grounds—" He points east, though they're facing west toward the Mountain Pack's territory. The gesture lands anyway. "Those grounds are Shadowpine by right of land use, by right of proximity, by right of the families who fed their children from that forest for longer than the Mountain Pack has been standing." He pauses. "You know this. Your grandparents knew this. What's changed is that tonight you're going to take it."

Murmurs. Low, controlled.

"The current Alpha," he continues, "is a capable wolf. I want to be direct with you about that because I don't respect soldiers who lie to the people they're asking to fight." He looks around the circle. "She'll be defended well. The rogue she's mated is better than intelligence suggested. Her senior warriors are experienced." A pause. "None of that changes the outcome. It changes the cost. So fight with precision, not bravado. The wolves who survive tonight will be the ones who listen more than they charge."

He lets that sit for a moment.

Then, because a speech like this has a shape and the shape requires an end, and because there is a version of the truth he can say after all — not the whole truth, but the part of it that is real:

"The Wolf Queen has held that territory for a year," he says. "She's held it on competence and will and the particular stubbornness of a woman who decided she wasn't going to lose." He looks at the fire. Then at the wolves. "Tonight, that ends."

A beat. Just one.

"Tonight, the Wolf Queen dies."

The camp erupts.

Not chaos — a roar, organized, a hundred and four voices aimed in the same direction, and the sound of it moves through the dark forest and disappears into the trees and for a moment the night is nothing but noise and fire and the terrible forward lean of a thing about to happen.

Marcus stands at the fire's edge.

He doesn't join the sound.

He stands there with the map in his head and the intelligence he carried across the border and thirty years of patience arriving, finally, at its end.

He thinks about the long table.

He thinks about the empty chair at the head of it.

He thinks about Elena at the war council, the way she looked at him across the room the night he said *congratulations* — seeing through him, past him, all the way to the architecture behind his face.

He wonders, briefly and without resolution, if she's seen this coming.

She probably has.

He turns from the fire and walks back to the tent.

Tomorrow at dawn.

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat - Chapter 44[1,490 words]

(Rhydian)

I've been looking at the map for three hours.

Not continuously — I eat, I check on the trainees, I do a perimeter walk with Brennan that takes forty minutes and covers things we've already covered twice but covering things twice is how you find what you missed the first time. But I keep coming back to it. The map on the war room table, the charcoal notations, the positions Brennan updates every time a scout comes in.

The supply line keeps pulling my attention.

It's here — east of the logging track, running parallel to the gorge at maybe a quarter mile. Long route, slow terrain, the kind of path you use when you're moving volume rather than speed. Varek's camp needs food, weapons, the particular logistics of a hundred and four wolves who've been camping in border territory for three days. That line is what keeps them functioning.

Cut it and you don't stop the attack.

But you change what it costs them to execute it.

Hungry wolves fight sloppily. Cold wolves miscommunicate. A unit that's been waiting three days for resupply that doesn't arrive starts making individual decisions, and individual decisions in a coordinated assault are where things break down. You're not defeating them — you're introducing noise into their system, and noise at the wrong moment is sometimes enough.

Five wolves. Maybe six. Moving fast, moving quiet, hitting the supply wagons at the gorge crossing where the terrain narrows and the return route is clear.

Get in, damage what you can, get out before Shadowpine's flanking scouts know anything has happened.

It's not a suicide mission.

I've been telling myself that for three hours and the truth is I don't fully know. I know the terrain — I've run that gorge approach twice, once during a patrol and once on my own, just because it's what I do, because knowing land is the only insurance that has ever reliably kept me alive. I know where the narrow point is, I know how long the crossing takes, I know the three places where you can disappear into the tree coverage fast enough that a Shadowpine scout on the standard rotation wouldn't catch the movement.

What I don't know is Varek's counter-positioning. Whether he's put guards on the supply line specifically, how many, whether Marcus told him about the gorge approach.

Marcus probably told him about the gorge approach.

I'm still looking at the map when Elena comes in.

She reads the room immediately — she always reads rooms immediately, it's one of the things I've stopped finding unnerving and started finding useful. She clocks the map, clocks where my attention is, clocks the two wolves behind me who've been watching me think for the last hour.

"Show me," she says.

I point.

She leans over the table. Her hair falls forward and she pushes it back with one hand, automatic, and looks at the supply line route. Her finger traces it slowly.

"Here," I say, putting my finger on the gorge crossing. "The terrain narrows to maybe thirty feet. One wagon at a time. If they're moving volume they're making four, five crossings minimum."

"Before dawn."

"Has to be. After dawn Shadowpine will have the whole eastern approach covered for the main push."

She's quiet. Looking at the map.

"Brennan's tracking pairs confirmed the supply movement yesterday evening," I say. "Same route, same timing. It's consistent."

"You've been watching this for three hours."

"Yes."

"And you want to go yourself."

I look at her. Not trying to soften it or reframe it. "Yes."

The room is very still.

Petra, who is now doing light duty and has apparently decided that light duty means standing in the war room being useful, shifts her weight near the door. The two wolves behind me are doing the specific non-movement of people trying not to be noticed.

Elena straightens.

She turns from the table and puts her back to it, arms not quite crossed — one hand gripping the opposite wrist, which is a thing she does when she's working through something she's already half decided. I know this gesture. I've been collecting her gestures for two months without meaning to.

"How many," she says.

"Five. Maybe six. People who know the gorge approach and can move fast." I pause. "Cade."

She looks at me.

"He's ready," I say. "You know he is."

She looks at the ceiling briefly. Looks back at me.

"Brennan—"

"Brennan is your best border commander and you need him here when the main engagement hits." I hold her gaze. "I know the gorge. I ran it twice. I know where the cover is and where it isn't and what the crossing looks like at night." I pause. "Elena."

She makes a sound that isn't quite a word.

"I know what you're going to say," I say.

"Do you."

"You're going to say it's high risk. That the intelligence on Shadowpine's counter-positioning is incomplete. That Marcus probably briefed Varek on the gorge approach which means they may have guards on the crossing that aren't in our current tracking data." I pause. "You're going to say I'm not expendable."

She looks at me for a long moment.

"Are you done," she says.

"Almost." I hold her gaze. "I'm going to say that you know this changes the math on the main engagement. You've been doing the math for three days and you know every variable that moves in our favor matters. And this one—" I touch the map without looking away from her. "This one we can actually reach."

The fire in the corner has burned down. Someone hasn't tended it. The room smells like cold stone and old charcoal and the specific tension of a place where hard decisions are made and remade until there's nothing left to decide.

Elena looks at the map.

Then she looks at me.

Her jaw is doing the thing. Not the deciding thing — past that. The thing after deciding, where she's living inside the decision and checking whether she can hold it.

She can hold it. I can see that she can hold it. It costs her, I can see that too, which is its own kind of thing to carry.

She pushes off from the table.

Crosses to me.

She's close. Not touching, just close, in the private radius that belongs to us and not to the room, and she tilts her chin up slightly to hold my gaze because I have three inches on her and she has never once in my experience compensated for this by doing anything other than just looking up and expecting you to look back.

I look back.

"You come back," she says.

Not a request. Not exactly a condition. Something with more weight than either.

"I know—"

"That's the only term," she says. "The only one that matters." Her voice is completely even. "You can take Cade and whoever else you need, you can hit the supply line, you can do whatever the gorge approach requires. But you come back."

I search her face.

She means it the way she means everything — completely, without reservation, in the specific way of someone who doesn't say things unless they've already paid the price of meaning them.

"Okay," I say.

"I need to hear—"

"I'll come back." I hold her gaze. "I'm coming back."

She breathes.

One controlled breath that I feel more than see.

Her hand comes up. Presses flat against my chest — right over where she always puts it, over the heartbeat she's been checking since the first lesson in the bedroom, the first night she was teaching me that touch doesn't have to mean damage. I put my hand over hers.

"I know you know the gorge," she says, quieter. "I know you're the right call for this." A pause. "I also know that knowing those things doesn't make standing here agreeing to it—" She stops.

"I know," I say.

"Don't be a hero," she says. "Do the job and come home."

Home.

She says it like it's the most ordinary word in any sentence. Like it's just a coordinate, a direction, a thing you return to after being away.

She doesn't know what that word does to me.

Maybe she does. I think maybe she does.

"I'll be back before dawn," I say.

She steps back. The hand drops. Alpha mode reassembling itself, the posture straightening, the specific gravity she carries when a room is watching and she needs to be what the room needs her to be.

"Petra," she says. "Find Cade."

"Yes, Alpha."

"And someone tend that fire," she says. "It's freezing."

She goes back to the table. Back to the maps. Her finger finds the eastern border position and she starts talking to the two wolves behind me about patrol timing.

I stand there for one more second.

Just one.

Then I go find Cade.

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat - Chapter 45[1,591 words]

(Elena)

He leaves at two in the morning.

I don't go to the gate. That was a decision I made an hour ago, deliberately, because standing at the gate watching him walk into the dark is not something I can do and still be useful for the next four hours, and the next four hours require me to be useful.

So I stand at the war room window instead.

The yard is lit by two torches and the thin nothing of a clouded moon. I watch him cross it — him and Cade and four others, moving with the specific economy of people who are trying not to be seen even inside their own walls. Rhydan is in front. He walks the way he walks when he's going somewhere that requires everything he is, which I've come to understand is different from how he walks everywhere else. Slightly lower. More deliberate. Like he's putting his weight into the ground on purpose.

He doesn't look up at the window.

I told him not to. I said *don't look back, it makes it harder* and he said *for you or for me* and I said *both* and he didn't argue.

He doesn't look up.

Cade is behind him and I can see even from here that the boy is nervous in a way Rhydian isn't — the shoulders slightly too high, the pace slightly too quick, the particular energy of someone running on something that hasn't metabolized yet. He'll settle. He settled in the yard, settled in the council hall, settles every time the thing he's afraid of actually arrives. He's better than he knows.

Rhydian knows. That's why he asked for him.

They reach the east gate and then they're gone, and the yard is just a yard again, two torches burning for no one.

I stay at the window for longer than I should.

The war room needs me.

Brennan is running the eastern patrol coordination, which means he's in and out every twenty minutes with updates that require responses, and there's the matter of Ferris who is technically still on the council and technically still present in the settlement and who I've been watching with the specific attention of someone managing an asset that might become a liability depending on what the next twelve hours look like.

I manage all of it.

I'm good at managing things. I've been good at it since I was twelve and my father started bringing me to council sessions, setting me in the corner with **watch how it's done** and trusting that I would. I watched. I learned. I built the capacity for exactly this — the ability to be present and functional and clear-headed when the thing I'm most afraid of is happening somewhere I can't see it.

It's a useful capacity. I've never been more aware of how much it costs.

Senna finds me around three.

She doesn't say anything about the gorge mission or where Rhydian is or the particular quality of the way I've been standing for the last hour. She just appears with two cups and sets one on the table near my elbow and stands there drinking hers.

After a while she says, "How far along?"

"Eight weeks. Maybe nine."

She nods. "Any morning sickness."

"Some."

"Worse when you're—" She pauses, choosing the word. "Managing things?"

I look at her sideways. She doesn't look back. She's looking at the map with the expression of a healer reviewing someone else's domain.

"Yes," I say.

"Eat something before dawn." She sets her cup down. "Not for you. The nausea gets worse on an empty stomach and you need to be functional in—" She glances at the window, at the dark. "A few hours."

"I know."

She goes.

I pick up the cup she left. It's the bark tea, the one she's been giving me since the confirmation, the one that's apparently fine during pregnancy in the right dose. It's bitter and it tastes like something that's good for you rather than something you'd choose, and I drink it standing at the map table and I think about eight weeks.

Eight weeks since the hot spring.

Eight weeks since the world had a particular quality of being very far away and neither of us thought about anything practical.

I press my thumb against the outside of the cup until the ceramic is warm.

The reports come in at regular intervals.

Brennan's tracking pairs on the border. The eastern patrol check-in at three-thirty. A runner from the north fence at four. Nothing about the gorge. No signal fire, no runner, no anything, which is either because everything is going correctly and silence is the plan or because—

I stop that thought.

He's fine. He knows the terrain. He has Cade and five good wolves and a plan he spent three hours building from a map he's been staring at for days. He's been keeping himself alive on instinct and competence since he was seventeen and the particular version of both that he has now is sharper, not duller, than it was when they dragged him here in chains.

He's fine.

I check the window again anyway.

The war room eventually empties. Brennan takes his last update and goes to reposition the eastern patrol before dawn. The junior wolves rotate out. For about twenty minutes, which feels longer, I'm the only one in there.

I look at the map for a while. Then I stop looking at the map because I've memorized it and looking at it isn't helping anymore.

I go to our room.

It's cold — the fire has died down and no one has tended it because I've been in the war room and Rhydian tends the fire now, that's just how it's arranged itself, it's one of the dozens of small domestic divisions that happened without discussion. He does the fire. I do the window latch that sticks. He makes the bed when he wakes up second, which is always, because he sleeps in a way he didn't when he arrived, deeply and late, his body finally believing it's allowed.

The fire has died because he's not here.

I get it going again. It takes a few minutes and I do it on my knees in front of the grate and it's the most ordinary thing I've done in six hours and that ordinariness does something — my hands start moving a little slower, a little less efficiently, the carefully managed composure developing a small crack that I don't immediately seal.

I sit back on my heels.

The fire catches. Orange and unsteady at first, then better.

I'm sitting on the floor in front of the grate at four in the morning while my husband runs a gorge crossing in Shadowpine territory.

I put my hands on my stomach.

It's become a habit, unconscious now, the way Rhydian's hands find my waist in the dark. My palms just — go there. Settle. Like there's something to check on, something to reassure, even though there's nothing to feel yet except ordinary warmth and the faint evidence of a life that is entirely theoretical from the outside and entirely real from the inside.

"Your father," I say, to the room, to the fire, to the theoretical small real thing — "is a fool."

My voice comes out different than I expected. Rougher. Not from crying — I'm not crying, I've been specifically not crying since two in the morning because there isn't time and also because once I start I'm genuinely uncertain about my ability to stop.

"A brave fool," I say. "Which is worse." I press my palms a little flatter. "He saw the supply line and he just — he saw the whole picture and he found the one place we could actually reach and he asked to go himself because that's who he is." The fire pops. "Because he spent four years alone figuring out that the only reliable thing is yourself, and now he's here and he keeps— he keeps using that. Keeps putting himself at the point of the thing because he trusts himself there and he knows he can do it and he's right, which makes it impossible to argue with." A pause. "Impossible to argue with and extremely difficult to—"

I stop.

My thumb moves. Slow circle.

"He's coming back," I say. Quieter.

Not to the fire.

Not even really to the small theoretical thing under my hands.

Just to the room. To the dark. To the version of the next hour that I need to believe in hard enough to function.

He said he'd come back.

And Rhydian doesn't say things he doesn't mean. Took me three weeks to teach him to say things at all, and now when he says them, he means them completely, the way he does everything — fully, without reservation, with the specific commitment of someone who spent four years with no one to make promises to and is now making up for lost time.

I stay on the floor in front of the fire until my knees start to protest.

Then I get up.

I put his pillow on my side of the bed. Not because I need it there. Just because it smells like him, which is a thing I will never in my life admit to anyone, and I sit on the edge of the mattress and I wait for dawn, and I don't look at the window, and I listen.

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat - Chapter 46[1,537 words]

(Rhydian)

The gorge smells like iron and pine and the specific cold of water that hasn't seen sunlight in weeks.

We've been at the crossing point for twenty minutes, which is fifteen minutes longer than comfortable and five minutes shorter than I need to feel certain about the pattern. The supply wagons come through every forty minutes based on Brennan's tracking data. We're at the tail end of the window. Either the next one comes in the next ten minutes or the rotation has changed and we have a problem.

Cade is two feet to my left, belly-flat in the frozen undergrowth, not moving. He's good at not moving. Better than I expected — he's been controlling his breathing since we got into position, the deliberate quiet of someone who found the right frequency and is holding it.

The four behind us are solid. They're not trainees. Brennan pulled them from the senior rotation, wolves with actual border engagement experience, and I've been watching them move since we left the gate and they don't have any of the tells that get people killed: no unnecessary sound, no light-seeking, no clustering.

I press my thumb against the ground. The earth here is slightly softer near the water, and I can feel the vibration a few seconds before I hear anything.

Something coming.

I lift two fingers. Cade sees it.

The wagon comes through the narrow point at the crossing with a single driver and two flanking wolves on foot — less than I planned for, which is either good or a warning. Less visible protection sometimes means more invisible protection, scouts running wider, the kind of cover that doesn't announce itself.

I give it four seconds.

Then I move.

What happens after that is not a sequence of events so much as a series of problems that each require immediate resolution. The two flanking wolves before I'm fully upright. The driver trying to decide whether to run or fight — he fights, which is the wrong choice for him. The wagon itself, which has to burn, which means getting fire to it without the fire going somewhere it shouldn't in terrain this dry.

Cade handles the fire.

I handle the rest.

The first wolf goes down in the first six seconds — I'm not going to think about that, there's no time for thinking, that comes later or it doesn't come at all. The second catches me across the shoulder before I get the angle right, and the pain is present and noted and set aside because pain that doesn't stop your body from functioning is information, not an obstacle.

My shoulder keeps working. Good.

The wagon catches at the third attempt. The fire climbs fast, faster than I'd like — the wood is dry, everything is dry, the cold has pulled all the moisture out of everything — and for about thirty seconds the gorge crossing is lit like midday.

Too bright. Move.

We move.

The return route is north along the gorge wall and then west through the tree cover toward the border. I've run it in my head enough times that my feet know where to go before my eyes confirm the path, which is the point of running things in your head, which is what Elena has been teaching me though she'd call it tactics and I call it not dying.

Seven minutes in is when it goes wrong.

I hear them before I see them. Four wolves, moving fast from the northwest — not the standard patrol rotation, not anything in Brennan's tracking data, which means Marcus told Varek about the gorge. Not just the crossing. The escape route.

Of course he did.

I give Cade three hand signals without stopping: *split, north route, don't wait.* He gets it. That's the other thing about Cade — he's become someone who gets things quickly and then does them rather than asking for confirmation. I don't know exactly when that happened. Sometime in the last three weeks.

He splits. Four wolves with him.

I take the two Shadowpine wolves who peel off from the group toward me, which is their job — they're trying to separate me from the rest, isolate the identified target, which tells me they've been briefed specifically. They know who I am.

Marcus.

The fight is fast and brutal and I win it because I'm better than both of them and I've been fighting to survive since I was seventeen and that kind of fighting has a particular quality to it that trained pack wolves don't always have a response for. There's no honor in it. There's just outcome.

I'm moving again within ninety seconds.

The northwest isn't clear.

I can feel it — the specific quality of a position that has more in it than you've accounted for, the hair-standing thing that four years alone taught me to trust without questioning. I adjust south. The south route is longer but it's the one that wasn't in any intelligence Marcus would have had, because it's not a patrol route, it's a gorge feature I found on my own two weeks ago when I was running the approach for the fourth time because I couldn't sleep.

I make it forty meters.

Then someone drops from the tree cover above me.

Not a Shadowpine wolf.

He's sixty years old and he's still the most dangerous person in the vicinity and I know it the moment we're face to face, which is the problem with knowing someone's history, with understanding what twenty years of patience builds in a person, with having spent six weeks in the same settlement watching the specific quality of his attention.

Marcus lands clean. He's not supposed to be this capable at sixty-three. He was always elder, always the council, always the quiet man in the high-backed chair. But he moves like someone who has been waiting to stop performing patience for a very long time.

He's got two wolves with him. Flanking.

I do the math.

Nine wolves from the supply line. The two from the northwest. Now Marcus and two more. The shoulder that isn't entirely right. The distance to the settlement border.

I do the math and I don't like the answer.

"Rhydian," Marcus says.

He says my name like it costs him nothing. Like we're in a corridor somewhere, like he's about to suggest I check on Elena, like thirty years of this didn't just arrive at a gorge crossing at four in the morning.

"Marcus," I say.

He doesn't smile. That's different from what I expected. I've built a picture of him in my head over six weeks — the warmth, the pleasantness, the performance. This version is something underneath that. The version that existed before he decided what to put on top of it.

Tired, was the word Elena used. She said he looked tired.

He looks tired.

"The supply wagons are gone," I say.

"Yes." He glances back toward the gorge, where the fire is still visible above the tree line. "I assumed they would be. You were always going to find the crossing."

"Then why send the protection at all."

"To see how you handled it." He looks at me steadily. "And to be here when you came through."

The two wolves at his flanks don't move. They're waiting for something from him, some signal that hasn't come yet. He's holding them. That's interesting. That's a choice.

"You could have sent anyone for this," I say. "You didn't need to be here yourself."

"No," he agrees. "I didn't."

I watch his face. The gorge is quiet now except for the distant fire and the water below and the sound of my own blood moving through my ears faster than usual.

"She won't surrender," I say. "Whatever you're thinking. You don't have anything she'll surrender for."

Something moves across his face. Quick and gone.

"Not even you?" he says.

I look at him.

He looks back.

And I understand — the thing he came here for himself, the thing that required him personally rather than delegates. He's not here to kill me at the gorge crossing.

He's here to take me back.

The two flanking wolves move.

I fight.

I fight the way I've fought everything for four years — completely, without reservation, without any of the holding back that training introduces, the hesitation that comes from learning rules — and it's not enough. Not because I'm outmatched by any single one of them. Because there are three and my shoulder is wrong and I've been moving for two hours and the third time the ground comes up to meet me I can't get up fast enough.

My cheek against frozen earth.

Marcus crouches.

He looks at me with those tired eyes and something in them that isn't satisfaction. Something older.

"She'll come," I say. My voice comes out rougher than I intend.

"Yes," he says. "That's the idea."

The dark comes.

Not all at once.

Just the gorge and the fire and his face, and then just the fire, and then just dark.

I think about the crib.

Half-built. By the fire.

I think: I told her I'd come back.

Then nothing.

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat - Chapter 47[1,524 words]

(Elena)

Cade comes through the gate at five-twelve.

I know the time because I've been watching the window since four, the particular obsessive checking of someone who told themselves they weren't watching the window and has been watching it every four minutes regardless. The fire I rebuilt has burned down again. I haven't tended it a second time because tending it felt like admitting I'd been in this room long enough to need to.

I hear the gate before I hear anything else. The specific sound of it — the weight of it, the creak that the eastern gate has that the others don't, that maintenance has been meaning to address for two years. I'm in the corridor before Cade gets to the Pack house door.

He's moving fast.

His jacket is torn at the shoulder. There's blood on his neck that I can see from fifteen feet away and it takes me approximately one second to assess that it isn't arterial, that he's upright and moving under his own power, that the blood is from somewhere manageable.

He sees me.

And his face does something.

I've learned Cade's face over six weeks of watching him in the training yard. I know what it looks like when he's scared and what it looks like when he's performing confidence and what it looks like when he's gotten something right and doesn't know how to hold the satisfaction of it. I know what it looks like when he's about to say something difficult.

It looks like this.

"Alpha." He stops in front of me. He's breathing hard from the run. His hands are shaking slightly and I don't think he knows.

"How many did you lose," I say.

"None. We all—" He stops. Swallows. "We're all back. The mission—" Another stop. He's trying to do this in the right order and the right order keeps colliding with what he actually needs to say. "The supply line is down. The wagons are gone. We—"

"Where is he," I say.

Cade goes still.

His mouth opens. Closes. He looks at me with seventeen-year-old eyes that have had a very long night and I watch him try to find the words that will make this land softly and understand, somewhere in the process, that there aren't any.

"He split from us," Cade says. "Southeast, to draw off the wolves that came from the northwest. There were—" He stops. "Marcus had people on the escape route. The route Rhydian chose wasn't in any of our patrol data, which means—"

"Marcus was there himself."

He doesn't answer. Which is an answer.

I keep my face completely still.

"He sent you through," I say. "He took the wolves that were after the group and split you off himself so you'd make it back."

Cade's jaw tightens. He's looking at a spot slightly to my left. The specific kind of not-looking that is doing everything it can.

"We heard the fight from the north route," he says. "I wanted to—" He stops. His voice has developed a roughness that he's fighting. "I was going to turn back. He told me not to wait. He told me before we split, he—"

"I know," I say.

"He said—" Cade stops again. He puts his fist briefly to his mouth, which is a gesture I've seen him make when he's trying to control something that's bigger than he is. "He said *don't wait.* So I didn't. And I— I shouldn't have listened, I should have—"

"He was right," I say. "You did the right thing."

Cade looks at me.

There are tears on his face. He doesn't seem fully aware of them, which makes something in my chest do something I don't have time for right now. He's seventeen and he came back from his first real mission and he came back without the person who sent him and he's standing in a corridor at five in the morning trying to give me the report correctly.

"You did exactly what he needed you to do," I say. "Go to Senna. Get the neck looked at."

"Alpha—"

"Now, Cade. That's an order."

He goes.

I walk to the war room.

I walk because walking is something to do with my body while my brain handles what Cade just told me, which requires more resources than I currently have and is happening anyway, the information just arriving and arriving and arriving in waves that I'm managing by putting one foot in front of the other and keeping my face arranged.

Rhydian's capture reaches her.

I think about that phrase abstractly, like it's something happening to someone else. A dispatch from another front. *The Alpha received news of—*

Brennan is in the war room.

He looks at my face when I come through the door and he doesn't say anything. He puts both hands flat on the table and he waits. Which is the right thing. Which is why he's Brennan.

"Marcus has him," I say.

Brennan's jaw tightens. He keeps looking at me.

"He went himself," I say. "To the gorge. He had the escape route." I move to the table. I look at the map. "He didn't go there to kill him. He went to take him."

Brennan is quiet for a moment. Then: "Leverage."

"Yes."

"He'll send terms."

"By dawn. Before the main push." I'm looking at the gorge crossing on the map. The small mark. The route Rhydian chose because it wasn't in any patrol data, because he found it himself, running the approach again and again because he couldn't sleep and the only thing that helped was knowing the ground.

He knew the ground. He still got taken.

Because Marcus knew *him.* Knew he'd find the unmarked route. Knew he'd split to protect the group. Knew he'd take the most damage himself rather than let it fall on someone else.

Thirty years of intelligence on this Pack and then six weeks of watching the rogue become part of it, and Marcus used all of it.

I look at the map.

My thumb finds the edge of the table and presses. The wood is cold. The fire in here is properly tended because this room has been staffed all night.

Everything is properly tended except—

"Get the eastern patrol to full position," I say. "Whatever Marcus sends, we're not reducing our defensive posture before we see it."

"Yes, Alpha."

"And I want Senna in the war room by dawn. Whatever Marcus proposes is going to come with a timeline and I need her assessment of what they're capable of medically, whether they—" I stop. Start again. "Whether he'll be—"

I can't finish that sentence.

Brennan doesn't ask me to.

"I'll get Senna," he says. He moves toward the door.

"Brennan."

He stops.

I'm still looking at the map. At the gorge crossing. At the small unremarkable mark on a piece of charcoal-drawn paper that is where I last know my husband to have been alive.

"If the terms are his life for my surrender," I say. Carefully. Like I'm reciting something. "I need you to stop me from agreeing."

A long silence.

"Elena—"

"I mean it." I look at him. "I know what the right answer is. I know what the Alpha's answer is." My throat tightens. "I need you to be in the room when the terms come and I need you to be the person who reminds me what I know." I pause. "Because I'm— I'm not certain I can be both things at the same time."

He looks at me for a long moment.

"I'll be in the room," he says.

He leaves.

The war room is empty.

I turn from the table and I walk to the window — the same window I've been checking all night — and I look at the eastern tree line where dawn is just barely threatening the sky, the specific grey of almost-morning that isn't light yet but isn't dark anymore.

He's out there somewhere.

I know he's alive. I know it the way I know my own heartbeat, which is not a rational knowing and I don't care. He's alive and he's somewhere east and Marcus has him and he promised he'd come back.

I'll come back.

He said it the way he says everything now. Completely. Without reservation.

Something in my chest has been built around that sentence and it's being pulled at and I can feel the structure of it, the load-bearing quality of it, what holds and what doesn't—

My knees hit the floor.

I don't decide to do it. My legs just— stop. And I'm on the stone floor of the war room and my hands are on my stomach and my face is doing something I can't manage anymore, the composure just gone, just— not available.

The sound that comes out of me isn't words.

It isn't tears, exactly. It's something underneath tears, something structural and massive, the sound of the specific thing you were most afraid of arriving.

It fills the room.

And outside the window, the dawn keeps coming whether I'm ready for it or not.

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat - Chapter 48: Education of pain[1,456 words]

Marcus doesn't enjoy this.

He wants that noted, at least internally, at least in the private record he keeps of himself that has no audience but his own conscience. He's never enjoyed this part. The physical end of things has always struck him as the least elegant instrument available — the choice you make when patience has run out or when you need information that won't come any other way.

He needs neither.

He knows everything already. He has the intelligence on the Mountain Pack's positions, the patrol rotations, the defensive strategy Elena will deploy when the main push comes at dawn. He has thirty years of that knowledge in his own head and he doesn't need a single word from the boy on the post.

What he needs is for Elena to know what's happening here.

That's different.

The Shadowpine camp's interrogation structure is a clearing ringed by pines about fifty meters from the main fire. Practical, not dramatic — space for the work, screened enough from the main camp that it doesn't distract the wolves who need to be functional at dawn. Varek offered his own people for it. Marcus declined.

He does this himself.

The boy is conscious.

That's the first thing he establishes when they bring him in. He was out for maybe two hours — head impact at the gorge, which was unfortunate but necessary, you can't contain a wolf who's fighting like that without taking him down first. The shoulder is probably damaged from earlier in the night; he's been holding it differently since he came around. The cuts from the gorge fight are numerous and superficial except one on his left side that's deeper than ideal but not life-threatening.

He'll live through this.

That matters. A dead hostage is a different kind of pressure than a living one, and living is what Marcus needs him to be.

He's bound at the post with his arms above him, which is standard, which puts the body in a position that makes everything more acute without doing lasting structural damage. His head is up. His eyes, when they find Marcus, are gold and completely present.

No fear in them.

Marcus expected some fear. This is a twenty-year-old. He's been beaten and captured and he woke up in an enemy camp and there should be at least some fear.

There isn't.

There's something else. Something that Marcus has to look at for a moment before he places it. An absence. Not of emotion — the opposite of absence. He's furious, clearly, and underneath the fury there's something else, something settled, like a person who has located the deepest floor in themselves and is standing on it.

Marcus thinks about where that comes from.

Elena.

She's been teaching him things. Not just the fighting, not just the protocol and the border knowledge and the tactical vocabulary. Something more interior than that. He's watched it happening for six weeks from behind meeting room doors and across council tables and in the training yard where the boy's whole quality of movement changed in ways that have nothing to do with footwork.

She's been teaching him how to take things and not break.

That's going to make this longer.

He starts with the basics.

Not cruelty — methodology. He's been clear with Varek's wolves about this: the goal is observable damage, the kind that travels through a report, that arrives in Elena's imagination before any messenger does. The goal is not unconsciousness and not serious impairment.

He works.

The boy doesn't make noise at first. That's will, not absence of feeling — Marcus can see it in the jaw, in the way the tendons in his neck cord up and then deliberately release, the specific technique of someone controlling their own body's response. Breathing through the nose. Exhaling through the mouth.

Elena teaches that. Marcus has heard her, through doors, counting to ten.

He works longer.

Around the third interval, something changes. Not breaking — the boy doesn't break, Marcus is increasingly certain he won't break in any useful timeframe — but something becomes less controlled. The breathing comes out through the teeth instead of the lips. The jaw unclenches slightly. The sounds he's been suppressing start to escape in small increments, not words, just the involuntary grammar of a body being pushed past its planned threshold.

Marcus steps back.

Looks at him.

The boy's head is down now. His hair is damp. His chest is moving fast, recovering, and in the firelight his face has the particular quality of someone concentrating very hard on something internal, some resource they've found that Marcus can't reach.

"You've been trained to take pain," Marcus says.

Nothing.

"Not by anyone here. You arrived knowing how. Four years." He walks a slow circle. Not for theater — just thinking, which he does better moving. "Four years of living rough, fighting for everything, nothing given. You learned to manage it."

The boy's head comes up slightly.

"She's changed it, though," Marcus says. "What I mean is — the nature of what you're protecting has changed. When you were alone, pain was just information. Your body telling you what was happening. No weight to it beyond survival." He stops. "Now there's weight."

He sees it land. The subtle tightening.

"She's pregnant," Marcus says. Conversational. "You're going to be a father. And you're here, and she's there, and what I'm doing is reaching through that distance and—"

"Stop." Rhydian's voice comes out rough and low and from somewhere that isn't the same place his earlier silence came from. Not will. Something rawer.

Marcus stops.

The boy's head is fully up now. His face is a specific kind of wrecked that Marcus recognizes from thirty years of watching wolves carry things — the face of someone whose composure is functional but only just, being held together by something that has nothing to do with technique.

"You think this is about her," Rhydian says. His voice is uneven at the edges. "You think hurting me hurts her and that's the point."

"It is the point," Marcus says. Simply.

"She's not coming." He holds Marcus's gaze. "Not for this. Not how you think." His breathing is still short. "You've spent thirty years in that Pack and you never understood her."

Marcus looks at him.

"She'll come," Rhydian says, "because that's what she does. She'll come and she'll have a plan and the plan will be better than yours because she's been thinking three steps ahead since before you started this." Something shifts in his face. "And I'll still be here when she gets here, because she taught me—"

He stops.

His head drops slightly and comes back up.

"She taught me," he says again, quieter, from the deep floor, from wherever that settled thing lives in him, "that pain doesn't own you. That you can feel it and stay." He meets Marcus's gaze. "She taught me that. You can't take it back out."

A long silence.

Marcus looks at the boy.

At what Elena has built in six weeks out of a feral rogue who bit her on the first day. At what that looks like when it's tested by something that Marcus has been practicing for thirty years.

He finds he doesn't have a response.

He picks up the instrument again.

He works.

And the boy's jaw comes up higher every time, not lower, which is not what Marcus expected and not what he accounted for, and there's something in it that sits badly in his chest in a way he doesn't examine.

The last interval ends.

Silence.

And then Rhydian raises his head and Marcus is two feet away and the boy's mouth works and—

He spits blood directly into Marcus's face.

The blood is warm. It lands on Marcus's cheek and his mouth and the bridge of his nose.

He doesn't move.

He stands there and he feels it.

"She taught me pain is nothing," Rhydian says. The voice is almost completely gone now, barely a sound. But it's steady. "You are nothing."

Marcus takes the cloth from his pocket.

He wipes his face.

He turns and walks away from the post without looking back, because if he looks back he will see something in the boy's eyes that he already knows is there and cannot use and doesn't know what to do with.

Something that looks like winning.

From a post in an enemy camp.

At dawn, Elena will come or she won't.

Either way, Marcus thinks, walking back toward the fire, toward the hundred and four wolves who are going to need direction in approximately two hours—

Either way, I've already lost something I didn't know I was betting.

He keeps walking.

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat - Chapter 49[1,487 words]

(Elena)

The terms arrive at six-fifteen.

A runner. Young wolf, Shadowpine colors, the blank face of someone delivering a message they've been told not to read. He hands it to Brennan at the gate and Brennan brings it to me in the war room where I've been for the last forty minutes since I got off the floor, since I washed my face and stood at the window until my knees stopped shaking and then went back to the map because the map is something to do.

I read it.

Surrender the territory east of the gorge. Remove the Alma appointment. Submit to a council restructure under Shadowpine oversight. In exchange: the rogue is returned alive.

There's a handwritten line at the bottom. Not Varek's hand. I know this handwriting from thirty years of council documents, from the elder's charter, from the notes he used to leave under the door when something required delicate handling.

You have until dawn, Elena. Don't be sentimental.

I fold the paper.

Set it on the table.

Brennan is watching me.

"What did I tell you," I say.

"That I need to remind you what you know."

"Remind me."

He's quiet for a moment. "If you surrender the territory, Shadowpine controls the eastern corridor. Everything east of the gorge feeds directly into our water supply, our patrol routes, our—"

"I know."

"The council restructure gives Marcus legitimate authority through Shadowpine backing. It's the thing he's been—"

"I know, Brennan." My voice comes out flatter than I mean it. "I know all of it."

He stops.

I pick up the letter. I fold it again, smaller, and I hold it in both hands and I feel the weight of it which is not the weight of paper.

"I'm not surrendering," I say. "I was never going to surrender." I set it down. "I'm going to go get him."

Brennan is very still.

"The terms are a distraction," I say. "Marcus doesn't want the territory. He wants me focused on negotiation while Varek's wolves position for the main push at dawn. The terms are designed to keep me in this room calculating until it's too late to do anything but receive an attack." I look at the map. "So I'm not staying in this room."

"Elena—"

"I need eight wolves. Our best, not the largest — best. People who know the gorge approach and can move quiet." I look at him. "And I need you here, running the defensive posture, because when we come back through the eastern border Varek's advance team is going to realize what happened and the eastern patrol needs to be ready."

Brennan puts both hands on the table.

"You're eight weeks pregnant," he says.

"I know."

"If something happens—"

"Then you hold the Pack." I hold his gaze. "That's always been the arrangement, Brennan. Nothing has changed about that."

He looks at me for a long time with the expression of a man who disagrees and knows it doesn't matter.

"Eight wolves," he says.

"And Petra."

"Petra is on light—"

"She's been cleared for movement and she knows the camp layout from the tracking reports." I pick up my coat. "She comes."

We move at six-forty.

Nine of us. Ten including me. Moving northeast through the tree cover, away from the standard eastern route where Varek's scouts will be watching for exactly this kind of movement, using the longer approach that adds twenty minutes to the timeline and keeps us invisible until we're inside whatever perimeter the camp has established.

I've been running the layout in my head since the tracking reports came in two days ago. Marcus's camp has a central fire, command tent to the northeast, the interrogation area — Brennan called it that and I let him call it that and I didn't allow myself to think too hard about what that means — screened to the south by a ring of pines.

I know where he is.

The cold is different in the gorge than on the settlement side. Something about the rock faces, the water below, the way temperature pools down here in the dark. It gets into your hands even through the gloves. I keep moving, keep my hands in motion, don't let them stiffen.

The camp's fire is visible before we hear it.

Petra comes up beside me. She points — two scouts, eastern perimeter, standard rotation. She's been tracking their timing for three minutes.

We wait.

The gap opens.

I go first.

What happens in the camp is fast and specific and I will account for it to the council later in whatever level of detail is required. What I need now is the pine ring, the south side, the clearing they used because it's screened and private and has a post.

Four Shadowpine wolves between me and the clearing. My eight wolves handle them before I reach the first tree.

I go through the ring.

The clearing is firelit. Two wolves at the perimeter, one near the post, and—

I stop registering the tactical components.

He's at the post.

Arms above him, wrists bound to the chain, head down. His shirt is gone. In the firelight I can see — I don't run through the inventory of it because I can't, not right now, not while I need to function — but I see it. What the night has done. What Marcus did.

My wolves handle the perimeter wolves. I'm not part of that. I'm already moving to the post, already at the chain, and the chain has a lock and the lock—

"Petra," I say.

She's already there. She's been here before, in this role, she knows what's needed. The lock opens in twelve seconds.

His arms come down.

His knees don't hold.

I catch him. Both arms, his weight coming into me, and he's heavier than he looks when he's fully upright and I don't care, I absorb it, I get my arms under his and I hold on.

His head comes up.

His face, which I've spent two months memorizing — which I know better than I know most things in this world — is a specific kind of wrecked that I am going to carry with me for a very long time. But his eyes are open. Present. Those gold eyes finding me in the firelight with the particular quality of someone whose first instinct, even now, even in this, is to check whether I'm okay.

I could scream.

I don't.

"You came," he says.

His voice comes out barely above a breath. Rough in ways that have nothing to do with the cold.

"You told me you'd come back," I say. My voice is doing something I can't fully manage. "You didn't. So I came to get you."

Something moves through his face.

His hand comes up — the right one, the one that isn't as damaged, moving slowly with the particular care of a body that's had a very long night — and his fingers find my jaw.

My throat closes completely.

"Hi," he breathes.

I press my forehead against his.

"Hi," I say.

We stay like that for exactly one second. One second that belongs only to us, to this specific thing, to two months of lessons and hands and the crib by the fire and *I think I love you* and *yours* in the dark and a small card folded against my chest.

One second.

Then I hear Petra: "Alpha. We need to move."

"I know."

I get his arm over my shoulder. He takes his weight back as much as he can, which is more than I'd like him to push but this is not the moment for that conversation. We move.

Through the pine ring. Back through the camp the way we came, my wolves closing around us, and the Shadowpine perimeter hasn't fully registered what's happened yet because we moved fast and quiet and the dawn is just starting to threaten the eastern sky.

He keeps moving.

Every step costs him. I can feel it in the way he breathes, the slight catch, the way his hand on my shoulder grips slightly harder when something pulls at the wrong moment. He doesn't stop. He doesn't ask to stop.

Of course he doesn't.

At the gorge's edge he says — quiet, to me, just for me: "The crib."

I look at him.

"I didn't finish the right side," he says. "The joinery." His voice is wrecked but he's looking at me with something almost like—

"I told you I'd help with that," I say.

"I know." He breathes. "Tomorrow."

"Tomorrow," I say.

We cross the gorge.

The settlement lights are visible through the trees.

He keeps moving and I keep holding and the dawn comes up cold and grey and completely indifferent to everything we've been through in the dark, and I let it.

We're going home.

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat - Chapter 50[1,480 words]

(Rhydian)

The ground is moving.

Not actually moving — I know that, the rational part of my brain that's still running knows the ground is the ground and the trees are the trees and we're heading west toward the settlement and everything is fine. We got out. Elena came and we got out.

But the ground keeps moving anyway.

It started maybe ten minutes after we crossed the gorge. A slow tilt, like standing on a boat, the kind of wrong that your body notices before your brain gets the report. I adjusted my weight. Kept moving. Told myself it was the cold and the night and the particular aftermath of a body that's been asked to do too much.

That was probably five minutes ago.

Or fifteen. Hard to say.

"Rhydian."

Elena's voice. Close. She's been at my left side since the camp, her shoulder under my arm, and I've been trying to put the minimum amount of weight on her possible because she's eight weeks pregnant and I'm not putting weight on—

"Rhydian, stay with me."

"I'm with you," I say. My voice sounds like someone else's.

"Your grip changed."

"My grip is fine."

"Your hand is shaking."

I look at my hand. It's on her shoulder and it is, actually, shaking. That's interesting. I didn't tell it to do that.

"I'm okay," I say.

"You said that already."

"It's still true."

But the trees are doing something. The edges of them, where the dark meets the pre-dawn grey, keep shifting when I hold them steady. I know what this is. I've had it before, the one time in the mountains when I took a bad hit and walked three miles back to the cave afterward and woke up two days later not entirely sure what year it was.

Blood loss and impact and a body that's been running on something other than actual reserves since the gorge.

I know what this is and what I need to do is keep walking.

"Three miles," I say.

"What?"

"From the gorge. We're maybe two miles from the gate now." I keep my feet moving. "I know the distance."

"Yes," Elena says, carefully, the voice she uses when she's deciding how much to say. "We're close."

"Then I'm fine."

"Rhydian—"

"I just need to keep—"

My left knee does something unhelpful.

I catch myself. Mostly. I go sideways and Elena goes with me, her arm coming across my chest, and Petra is there immediately on my other side with the quick professional response of someone who has been watching this happen for the last hundred meters and was ready for it.

The ground is very close.

I'm not on the ground. I should note that. I'm still upright, technically, with two people holding me upright, which isn't the same as being on the ground.

"Okay," Elena says. Her voice is doing the thing where it's completely controlled except for a specific frequency underneath. I've learned that frequency. It means she's scared and is not letting herself be scared because other things need her more.

"I can walk," I say.

"I know you can."

"I just need—"

"I know." She adjusts her grip. Her arm is tight around me, her hand at my side, and even through everything I can feel that she's careful about where she puts the pressure. Thinking about the baby even now. Thinking about both of us at the same time.

That's— I want to say something about that but the words keep sliding away before I get to them.

The trees are definitely moving.

"Talk to me," Elena says.

"About what."

"Anything. The crib. The drills. What you want for breakfast." A pause. "Keep talking."

I understand why she wants that. The brain that stays in the conversation is the brain that doesn't check out. I know this. She knows I know this because she's the one who told me, some lesson or other about pain management, about staying present.

"The right side of the crib," I say.

"What about it."

"The angle's wrong. I've done it three times and it keeps being— the joinery pulls when I tighten it." I feel my weight shift and Petra adjusts and we keep moving. "I think the issue is the wood. The grain runs the wrong direction for that joint and I'm trying to—" I stop. The grey at the edge of the trees is brighter now. Dawn coming. "I'm trying to force it to do something it doesn't want to do."

"So use a different piece," Elena says.

"I know. I just." I stop again. My head is very heavy. "I want to use that piece specifically."

"Why."

"Because it was the first one I picked. From the shed." The settlement lights — there, through the trees, just visible. "I carried it back the first night. Before you knew I was doing it."

She's quiet for a moment.

"Okay," she says softly. "We'll fix the joint."

"Tomorrow."

"Tomorrow," she agrees. "Keep walking."

I keep walking.

The grey keeps tilting.

I'm aware of things in pieces now, which is not ideal. Petra's grip on my right side. The sound of the other wolves around us moving through frozen undergrowth. Elena's warmth at my left, which is the most consistent thing in my field of experience right now, the thing my body keeps orienting toward.

The gate.

I can see the gate.

That's good. That's the gate and the gate is the settlement and the settlement is Senna and the room and the fire that needs tending.

"Gate," I say.

"Yes," Elena says. "Almost there."

"Tell Cade—" I stop. What did I want to tell Cade. There was something. "Tell him the shoulder tell is still there under pressure. He fixes it when he's calm and loses it when it matters. He needs to practice it— tired. When he's tired."

"I'll tell him."

"He's going to be good."

"I know."

My legs stop cooperating about fifteen meters from the gate.

Not gradually — they just make a decision without consulting me, and the decision is that they're done, and the ground comes up fast and this time there aren't enough hands to stop it, we go down together, Elena and Petra and me, and the frozen earth is hard under my knees and there are voices and footsteps and Brennan somewhere saying something about Senna and I can't track all of it.

Elena's hands on my face.

Both of them, cupping my jaw the way she does when she wants me to pay attention to her specifically, when she's about to say something that requires my full focus.

I try to give her my full focus.

The edges of the gate are soft.

"Hey," she says. Sharp. "Look at me."

I look at her. Her face is close, the grey dawn light on her jaw, the scar on her cheek that I stopped seeing as a scar weeks ago. Her grey eyes that I have been looking at for two months and could probably navigate by.

"Stay awake," she says.

"I'm awake."

"You're not." Her thumb on my cheekbone. Pressing. "Stay with me."

"I'm trying—"

"I know you are." Something moves through her face that she doesn't hide, doesn't manage, just lets sit there. Raw and open and entirely her. "Listen to me."

"I'm listening."

She leans forward.

She kisses me.

Not soft. Not the careful lessons of the first weeks or the warmth of the room at night. This is something else — urgent and real and slightly desperate in the specific way of someone communicating something that words haven't been handling adequately.

When she pulls back her face is a centimeter from mine.

"I'll always come for you," she says. Her voice breaks on the last word, just slightly, just at the edge of it. "Do you understand? Wherever you are. Whatever happens. I will come." Her hands are still on my face. "But you have to stay awake. You have to give me something to come back to."

I look at her.

The gate is behind her and the dawn is coming and her face is the clearest thing in my entire field of vision.

"Okay," I say.

"Promise me."

"I promise."

Her forehead drops to mine. Just for a second. Her breath is uneven.

"Senna," she calls. Her voice shifts, goes up, carries. "Now. Right now."

Hands under my arms. Multiple sets. Brennan's voice, organized, directing the movement toward the gate.

I keep my eyes on Elena.

She's moving with us, her hand not leaving mine, and the settlement lights are warm and close and the gate is open and somewhere inside there's a fire that needs tending and a half-built crib with a joint that pulls and a bed that smells like both of us now.

I focus on her hand.

I stay awake.