

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat c 5

(Rhydian)

The door clicked shut behind her hours ago. Four, maybe five — I've lost count.

I've been pacing ever since. The stone floor is cold under my bare feet, they took my boots when they cleaned me up. Probably scared I'd use the laces on someone. Smart.

The room is big. Fire dying in the hearth, window looking out at a thin moon, cold bowl of stew on the table I still haven't touched. The bed sits in the corner — real mattress, real pillow — and my body is screaming at me to lie down, but I can't. This isn't my home. Every time I close my eyes I see the faces of the wolves I've killed.

So I pace.

My chest is still bare. The bandages on my wrists are white and clean and I can smell the salve she used — herbs, something faintly sweet. I hate that smell. I hate that she touched me.

But my skin remembers her fingers tracing my scars. The way she rested her palm flat over my heart.

I shake my head. Stupid.

She's my enemy. She chained me, dragged me here, and she's going to marry me whether I want it or not. That's all this is.

And yet when she whispered *you will learn respect* with her face inches from mine, something inside me went quiet. Something that's been screaming for four years just... stopped.

I don't know what that means. I don't want to know.

The fire pops. A log collapses, sparks climbing the chimney.

The door opens.

(Elena)

She's wearing only a thin robe.

I didn't mean to come back tonight. I told myself I'd take the guest room, give him space, let him breathe. But I couldn't sleep. I kept hearing his voice in my head — *no one's touched me in four years* — and eventually I stopped fighting it, put on this robe, and walked back.

Now I'm here and he's staring at me like I appeared out of the wall.

He's still shirtless. Firelight moves over his scars.

"You're back," he says. Voice rough.

"It's my room."

"You said you'd sleep somewhere else."

"I changed my mind."

His eyes drop to the robe — the slit at my thigh — then snap back up fast.

"You're barely dressed."

"I'm in my own home."

I walk past him slowly. Let my hip brush his arm as I go.

He flinches like I burned him.

(Rhydian)

That was deliberate. I know it was.

Her hip was warm. Soft in a way I didn't expect, like she's hiding something underneath all that hard edge. I watch her cross to the bed and sit on the edge, the robe swaying with every step, and I know I should look away.

I don't.

She pats the empty space beside her.

"Sit. Second lesson — how to be touched without flinching."

My brain is screaming at me to refuse. To sneer and tell her exactly where she can put her lessons.

My legs are already walking toward her.

I stop at the edge of the mattress. Close enough to reach out. Far enough to bolt.

"I don't need this."

"Yes you do."

"I'm not a child."

"No. You're a wolf who's forgotten what gentle feels like."

I hate her for being right about that.

I sit.

The mattress is soft — genuinely soft, the kind of soft I forgot existed. My weight shifts the bed and I slide slightly toward her. I hold myself rigid. Don't lean. Don't move.

She turns to face me, grey eyes calm, unhurried.

"Give me your hand."

"Why?"

"Because I asked."

I raise my right hand, the bandaged one. She takes it, warm fingers wrapping around my palm, and holds it against hers like she's comparing. Her hand is smaller but not by as much as I expected.

She turns my hand over and traces the lines of my palm with her thumb.

My breath catches before I can stop it.

(Elena)

His hand is shaking.

Just barely, just a tremor, but I feel it. I've held a lot of hands — my father's when I was small, Viktor's when duty demanded it, wolves bleeding out on the ground. None of them shook like this.

It's not me he's afraid of. It's the softness itself.

I keep tracing. Slow, small circles. Nothing threatening.

"What are you doing?" he whispers.

"Showing you that touch doesn't have to hurt."

"It always hurts."

"Not always."

I lift his hand and place it on my bare thigh, just above the knee.

He jerks back like I've scalded him.

"Hold still."

"I can't—"

"You can. Breathe."

He pulls air in through his nose. His fingers go rigid against my skin.

I lay my hand over his and hold it there. Let him feel the warmth, the realness of it.

"It's just skin," I say. "Same as yours."

He looks down at where his hand rests. Those golden eyes are wide open, something exposed sitting right behind them.

"Why are you doing this?" he asks.

"Because you need to know you can be near someone without bracing for pain. And I need to know you're capable of learning that."

"I'm not something broken you can fix."

"I'm not trying to fix you. I'm trying to give you something you didn't have."

"What's the difference?"

"Fixing is about changing you into what I want. This is about giving you tools. What you do with them is yours."

He goes quiet. His hand has stopped shaking.

(Rhydian)

Her skin is warm and smooth and underneath it I can feel muscle, hard and real. She looks like silk but she's built like steel.

I never knew skin could feel like this.

My mother stopped touching me when I was ten — said I was too old for it. My father only ever touched me to clip me round the head. And for four years the only hands that reached for me wanted to punch me, stab me, or chain me.

Her hand is just resting on top of mine. Not gripping. Not pressing. Just there.

"Why aren't you afraid of me?" I ask.

"Should I be?"

"I've killed people."

"So have I."

"That's different. You kill for your pack."

"And you kill to survive. Don't make yours sound worse than mine."

I look at her face properly for the first time — the scar on her cheek, the hard jaw, the soft line of her mouth that doesn't match the rest of her.

"You're strange," I say.

"So I've heard."

"Most Alphas would've beaten me by now."

"I'm not most Alphas."

She lifts my hand off her thigh and the cold rushes in immediately, sharp and unwelcome. But then she places it on her waist.

"Hold me. Gently."

My palm presses against thin linen. I can feel her ribs underneath, the dip of her waist, the flare of her hip. The robe is so thin it barely counts as a barrier.

"Tighter," she says. "Not hard. Just firm."

I tighten my fingers. Just holding. Not squeezing.

She puts her free hand flat on my bare chest, right over my heart. She can definitely feel it pounding.

"Your heart's racing," she says.

"I know."

"Good. Means you're alive."

"I was alive before you."

"Surviving isn't the same as living."

I don't have anything to say to that, so I say nothing. My forehead is damp. My whole body is running hot and cold at the same time, caught somewhere between panic and something I don't have a name for.

"What's happening to me?" I whisper.

"Your body's remembering what it's like to be near someone."

"I don't like it."

"Yes you do."

She's right and I hate it and I don't pull away.

(Elena)

His hand is sweaty against my waist. He's trembling again but it's different this time — not the fear tremor from before. This is something hungrier.

I keep my hand over his heart and feel every beat. Fast, hard, slightly irregular.

I lean closer. Not kissing him. Just close enough that my breath touches his lips.

"Touch doesn't have to hurt," I whisper. "Sometimes it can feel good."

"What does good feel like?" His voice is barely there.

"You'll find out. If you let yourself."

I pull back. His hand drops from my waist. He looks lost — genuinely, completely lost, like a pup encountering something it has no category for.

I lie down on my side of the bed and pull the blanket up.

He stays sitting. Rigid. Staring at nothing.

"Lie down, Rhydian."

Slowly, he does. Flat on his back, stiff as a board, eyes fixed on the ceiling.

I don't reach for him. He's not ready for that. But I stay close, and in the quiet I listen to his breathing slow, feel his body unclench inch by inch as exhaustion finally wins.

Then the bed shifts.

He rolls toward me. Not touching. Just closer.

That's enough.