

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat - Chapter 51[1,499 words]

(Elena)

Senna gets to him in the yard.

Not in the infirmary, not in our room — in the yard, twelve meters inside the gate, because that's as far as we get before Rhydian's legs make their final decision and we go down and stay down. She's been waiting. I don't know how she knew but she's Senna and she always knows, and she arrives with two assistants and a kit and the particular focused calm of someone who has been preparing for this specific thing since Cade came through the gate two hours ago.

She gets on her knees in the frozen mud beside him without ceremony.

"Talk to me," she says. Not to me. To Rhydian.

"I'm fine," he says.

"You're not." She's already working, cutting away what's left of his shirt, and I watch her face track across the damage with the expression of a healer doing rapid triage — noting things, not reacting to them, storing them in order of urgency. I watch her face and I try to read it and I mostly can't which is probably the point. "Where's the pain worst."

"Everywhere," he says.

"More specific."

"Left side. Under the ribs."

She presses there. He makes a sound that is short and controlled and that I feel somewhere behind my sternum. She nods, still not reacting, and says something to one of her assistants who goes immediately.

I'm on his other side on the ground with his hand in mine. The mud is cold through my knees and I don't care and the yard is full of people and I don't care about that either.

"Senna," I say.

"He's okay," she says. Not dismissively. Definitively. "He's going to be okay. The cut on his side reopened which is what dropped him, blood loss plus the impact from last night plus—" She glances at the marks on his chest and doesn't finish that sentence. "He needs stitching and warmth and probably two days in bed. Which I will fight him to enforce."

"I won't fight," Rhydian says.

Senna looks at him.

"Much," he says.

Something in her face moves. She goes back to work.

I look at him. He looks at me. His color is wrong — too grey, too drawn — and his hand in mine is colder than it should be. But his eyes are clear and present and doing the thing they always do when I'm in his line of sight.

Checking on me.

"I'm fine," I say, before he can ask.

"You're in the mud."

"So are you."

"Yeah but I have a reason."

I almost laugh. It comes out wrong, catches somewhere in my chest. He squeezes my hand.

They get him inside.

Brennan takes the operational weight off my shoulders the moment we cross into the Pack house, appearing at my elbow with the quiet efficiency of someone who has been holding everything in place and is ready to hand it back or keep holding it depending on what I need. I tell him what I need, which is thirty minutes and then a full briefing, and he nods and disappears.

Senna stitches the side in our room.

I sit on the bed beside Rhydian and hold the lamp where she needs it and do not look at anything except exactly what Senna tells me to look at, because looking at the broader picture of what the night left on his body is something I'm going to do exactly once, completely, in private, and process it in whatever way it requires processing, and that is not right now.

Right now I hold the lamp.

He's quiet during the stitching. His jaw is set in that specific way it goes when he's managing pain — not hiding it from me, he's stopped doing that, but containing it, the way she taught him to breathe through things. In through the nose. Out through the mouth.

His hand finds my knee. He doesn't grab it, doesn't grip. Just puts his palm there.

I put my hand over his.

Senna finishes. She does something with the bandaging that she talks through quietly, instructions about pressure and position, things I'm filing and will follow precisely. She looks at me when she's done.

"He sleeps," she says. "Through the morning if possible. Don't let him talk you into anything before this afternoon."

"She won't need to convince me," Rhydian says.

Senna looks at him with the specific expression she's developed for things he says. "You told me you were fine when you were bleeding into the ground."

"I was relatively fine."

"Sleep," she says, and leaves.

The briefing happens in the doorway of our room because that is my compromise — Brennan at the door, me on the edge of the bed, Rhydian theoretically sleeping six feet away and actually listening to every word.

Shadowpine's main push didn't come.

That's the thing I have to sit with for a moment. The attack didn't materialize. Dawn came, and the patrol reports came, and the eastern border stayed quiet. Which means either Varek decided the supply line damage made the engagement too costly, or Marcus lost enough operational credibility with his own general in the mess of the night's events that the attack got pulled, or—

"Marcus hasn't been located," Brennan says.

I look at him.

"He wasn't in the camp when your team extracted. Varek's wolves on the perimeter weren't following his orders by that point — we picked up one of the flanking wolves from last night and he says there was a disagreement between Marcus and Varek at the camp before dawn." Brennan pauses. "Varek apparently didn't appreciate Marcus going to the gorge himself. Seen as a liability rather than an asset."

"Marcus is loose," I say.

"Yes."

From the bed: "He'll come here."

I look at Rhydian.

He's not pretending to sleep. He's on his back with his eyes open, looking at the ceiling, which is at least horizontal so I'm going to allow it. His voice is steadier than it was an hour ago.

"He has nowhere else to go," Rhydian says. "Varek's done with him. The Pack won't take him back. He'll come here because this is the only place he's ever known and because—" He stops. "Because he's not finished."

Brennan and I look at each other.

"Double the perimeter," I say. "Internal gates locked after dark. And I want someone with eyes on Henrick."

"Henrick isn't—"

"I know he's not Marcus. But Marcus will try to contact him. Henrick is the last connection he has to this place." I pause. "Watch him."

Brennan goes.

The room is quiet.

Rhydian has turned his head to look at me. His hand is still on his chest where Senna's bandaging sits white and conspicuous. He looks like someone who has had a very long night and is working very hard not to show how much it cost.

He's not quite succeeding.

"The supply line worked," he says.

"Yes."

"Varek pulled back."

"For now."

He's quiet for a moment. "The crib—"

"Is still there."

"The right side—"

"Is still wrong." I shift. Sit properly on the bed beside him instead of on the edge of it. "It'll keep."

He looks at me. Does the thing he does where he looks properly, without the guard, without the management. The gold eyes that have been looking at me like that for two months and still catch me off guard sometimes.

"You came," he says. Again. Like he keeps needing to say it.

"I told you I would."

"You didn't tell me that."

"I told you I'd always come for you."

"You told me that while I was half—" He stops. Something moves through his face. "I wasn't sure you said it or I imagined it."

I put my hand flat on his chest. Over the heartbeat. Over Senna's bandaging and everything underneath it.

"I said it," I say.

He covers my hand with his.

Outside the window the morning has fully arrived, grey and cold and completely indifferent, the settlement going about its life, the eastern border holding. Marcus somewhere in the trees. The war not over but different now, changed shape, the piece we were most afraid of already come and gone.

And this.

Just this — his hand over mine. His heartbeat under both.

"Sleep," I say.

He doesn't argue.

He closes his eyes.

I stay where I am, hand on his chest, feeling him breathe, feeling the steady reliable fact of him still being here. The fire needs tending. The reports need reading. Brennan will be back with updates within the hour and I have a Pack to run and a decision to make about Marcus and a war that isn't finished.

All of that is true.

Also true: his heartbeat under my palm, slow and even, getting steadier by the minute.

I stay until I'm certain.

Then I tend the fire.

Then I lay down with him.

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat - Chapter 52[1,657 words]

(Rhydian)

The ceiling in our room has a crack that runs northeast to southwest.

I've been looking at it for two days. Not continuously — I sleep, which I didn't expect to do as much as I'm doing, the kind of deep unconscious sleep that arrives when a body finally gets horizontal and safe and decides to collect what it's owed. I wake up. I look at the ceiling. I assess what hurts, which is most things but differently each time, the specific inventory of healing shifting in small increments.

The crack goes from the window corner to somewhere above the wardrobe. I've started to notice things about it — where it widens, where it narrows to almost nothing before opening up again, one place near the middle where the plaster has lifted slightly from the stone underneath.

This is what enforced bed rest does to a person who spent four years never being still.

The door opens.

Elena comes in sideways, the way she's been doing, because she always has something in her hands. Today it's a tray. Bowl of something, cup, a folded cloth. She manages the door with her elbow, which she's gotten good at over the past two days, and she doesn't look at me when she comes in because she's watching the tray.

I watch her.

This is the other thing enforced bed rest does. It gives you time to watch things you usually catch only in pieces — the full uninterrupted version of how Elena moves through a room when she's concentrating. The small adjustments she makes, the way she sets things down deliberately, never letting anything clatter. The way her mouth moves slightly when she's thinking, just the lower lip.

She sets the tray on the bedside table.

Then she looks at me.

"You moved," she says.

"I'm on my side."

"Senna said back."

"Senna said not to put pressure on the stitches. I'm not putting pressure on them."

She gives me the look. The one that has been refined over two days of this specific argument into something extremely precise.

"I've been staring at the ceiling crack for four hours," I say.

"The ceiling crack isn't going anywhere."

"Neither am I, apparently."

She sits on the edge of the bed. She picks up the bowl and holds it out, which means she's not going to argue about the ceiling, just redirect, which is one of her approaches that I've noticed is significantly more effective than the arguing.

I take the bowl.

It's the thick soup the kitchen has been sending, the one that tastes like someone who knows what they're doing made it specifically for someone who needs to rebuild something. I've eaten it three times a day and I'm not tired of it, which is either a good sign about the soup or a telling sign about how depleted I was.

She sits while I eat. She doesn't watch me eat, she looks at the window, which means she's thinking about something and using the window as a surface to think against. She does this.

"Report," I say.

"You're not on active duty."

"Tell me anyway."

She doesn't turn from the window. But she talks, which tells me she's been wanting to tell me and was waiting for me to ask rather than just downloading it which she knows would annoy me.

Marcus hasn't been found.

The Shadowpine situation has shifted — Varek sent a messenger yesterday, not terms, just a communication that the eastern campaign is suspended pending internal review, which in practical terms means Varek is cutting Marcus loose and doesn't want the political fallout of an unfinished war with a Pack that burned his supply line and extracted their man from his own camp. The Pack's position is stronger than it was a week ago in ways that are real but not settled.

And Henrick — Henrick asked to speak to the council yesterday. He hasn't been contacted by Marcus. He wants, apparently, to say something about what he knows and what he did and what he's sorry for, in that order.

"What will you do with him," I say.

Elena turns from the window. She looks at the bowl in my hands, checking the level.

"I don't know yet," she says. "He cooperated with the inquiry. He refused to carry the last message." She pauses. "He's been here for fifty years."

"That's not a defense."

"No." She picks up the cloth from the tray, unfolds it. "But it's a context." She holds her hand out for the bowl, which is empty.

I give her the bowl.

She replaces it with the cup, which is Senna's bark tea. I drink it without making a face, which is a thing I've been working on because she watches when I make a face.

"The crib," I say.

"It's still there."

"I've been thinking about the joinery."

She sits back slightly. "Rhydian—"

"I'm not getting up. I'm thinking about it." I shift against the pillow, which pulls the left side slightly and I don't show that. "If I change the approach angle on the right side — instead of coming in straight I come in at about fifteen degrees, it accounts for the grain direction without fighting it." I pause. "I think."

Elena looks at me for a moment.

"That might work," she says.

"You know woodworking."

"My father built furniture." She says it without fanfare, a fact, the way she says things about her father. "He wasn't good at it but he liked doing it. I watched a lot."

I look at her.

"You've never mentioned that," I say.

"You've never been bedridden for two days before."

That's fair.

The morning goes like that. She comes and goes — she's running a Pack, she can't stay, there are reports and briefings and the ongoing Marcus situation and the Henrick question and a hundred

other things she's managing in the hours when she's not in this room. But she keeps coming back, which I didn't expect and can't quite figure out what to do with except be here when she does.

Around midday she brings lunch and stays.

Not for any stated reason. She just sits in the chair she's moved to the bedside — she moved it on the first day, pulled it from the corner without comment, and it's been there since — and she reads the report she's brought while I eat, and occasionally she says something about what she's reading and I say something back, and we're just— here, together, in the middle of a Tuesday, and something about that is so different from everything I had access to six weeks ago that I don't look directly at it too long.

Like the sun. You know it's there. You don't stare.

After she puts the report down and just sits. Her hand goes to her stomach without her thinking about it, the way it always does, the automatic thing. Her face goes slightly inward. Still present but half somewhere else.

"Hey," I say.

She looks at me.

"Come here."

She gives me the look — the Senna-said version — and I move over on the bed, carefully, not making it a production, just making space.

She considers this for a moment. Then she takes her boots off and sits on the bed and leans back against the headboard beside me. Our arms touching. Her legs stretched out, mine beside them.

She picks up the report again.

I look at the ceiling crack.

This is — I don't have a word for it. Domestic isn't quite right. Ordinary is closer but not exact because nothing about this is fully ordinary to me, probably won't be for a while. It's the specific feeling of something being allowed. Of being in a space that fits.

Ten minutes pass. Maybe fifteen.

I've stopped looking at the crack and started to drift toward the sleep that keeps ambushing me, that particular heavy warmth, when I feel it.

Under my hand, which is resting on the bed between us, which has apparently migrated while I wasn't managing it because that keeps happening — under my hand, which has found Elena's stomach, her hand over mine—

Something moves.

Not her. Not her breathing, not her shifting. Something else. Deliberate. Small. From the inside.

I go completely still.

Elena goes still too.

I look at her. She looks at me.

"Was that—" I start.

"Yes," she says. Quietly.

My hand stays exactly where it is. I don't move it. I don't breathe.

Nothing for ten seconds.

Then—

Again. The same thing. Small. A pressure from the inside, there and gone, like something testing the world.

My throat closes.

"The baby kicked," I say.

I mean to say it normally. As a sentence. It comes out barely above a whisper, from somewhere that isn't the part of me that manages how I sound.

Elena looks at my face. Her eyes are bright in the way they get when she's feeling something she's not saying.

I look at my hand.

At where my hand is.

At the small warm reality underneath it that just did something for the first time, something that said *I'm here, I exist, the world is real and I'm going to be in it.*

My throat closes harder.

"Hi," I say. To the room. To the small thing. To the specific future sitting under my palm.

Elena makes a sound.

I look at her. She's pressing her lips together in the way she does when something has gotten through the composure and she's not entirely mad about it.

I take her hand. Lace my fingers through hers. Both our hands on where the baby is.

We stay like that.

The ceiling crack goes northeast to southwest. The fire is warm. Outside the window the settlement is doing its afternoon.

And for a while neither of us says anything at all.

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat - Chapter 53[1,540 words]

(Elena)

The kick is small.

t's so small I almost miss it, the way you almost miss the first raindrop and then a second later you're certain it happened. A pressure, precise and unmistakable, from somewhere that has been theoretical for ten weeks and is now absolutely, undeniably real.

Rhydian's hand goes rigid under mine.

I watch his face do it — the processing, the arriving, all of it moving across him in the specific way things move across him when something bypasses the defenses and lands directly. He stops breathing for a second. Just stops, completely.

Then he says hi to the room.

Just that. Hi. Like he's introducing himself to someone.

My throat does something I don't manage in time. I press my lips together and look at the window because if I look at his face right now I'm going to start crying and I've already cried twice this week which is twice more than my annual average, and I'm not doing it a third time before noon.

I look at the window. I breathe.

The kick comes again.

Softer this time, or maybe I'm paying closer attention. The same internal pressure, there and gone, exploratory. Like someone knocking on a door to see if anyone answers.

"She's doing it again," Rhydian says.

"We don't know it's a she."

"I know."

"Senna hasn't confirmed—"

"I know." He turns his head toward me. "It still feels like a she."

I look at him.

He's looking at where our hands are with the expression he gets when something is happening that he doesn't have a prior category for. He's built a lot of new categories in the past ten weeks. I've watched him build them, one encounter at a time. But this one is different — this isn't a category you can prepare for, isn't something that comes from observation or repetition or learning to trust your hands.

This one just arrives.

"Has she done this before," he says.

"No." I pause. "Or — I don't know. Maybe. Something small, a few days ago, but I wasn't certain." I look at our hands. "This I'm certain of."

He makes a sound that isn't a word. Low and involuntary.

"Okay," he says.

"Yeah."

We stay there. The fire is warm. His shoulder is against mine, the right one, the one that isn't bandaged. I can feel his pulse through where our arms touch, which is something I've noticed is more accessible when he's been still for a while, when the particular velocity he usually runs at has dropped down to something human.

His pulse has been steadier today. Senna checked this morning and said something about color and rate that I translated as *better than yesterday.* I'll take it.

"She's going to be—" He stops.

I wait.

"I don't know," he says. "I was going to say she's going to be strong, or brave, or something like that, but I don't actually—" He shifts slightly. "I hope she gets to choose. What she is. Not have it assigned."

I look at him.

"My parents decided who I was before I was old enough to argue," he says. It comes out without weight, just observation, the way he talks about them now — he's processed them into something he can hold at arm's length and look at without being inside them. "And the Pack decided after. Traitor's son. Rogue." He pauses. "I want her to just — be whatever the thing is. Whatever she actually is."

I turn my hand over under his. Our fingers lace.

"She will be," I say.

He looks at me. "How do you know."

"Because she has you," I say. "And you're the first person in this settlement who learned to choose." I pause. "She'll have a model for it."

Something in his face. He looks away, which is what he does when something goes in deeper than he expected.

We stay like that.

Just this — the room, the fire, our hands on where the baby is, the morning doing its ordinary morning things around something that is not ordinary at all.

I close my eyes for exactly one minute.

Not sleeping. Just — being here. In this specific moment, which is good, which is the best kind of good because it's small and private and belongs entirely to us and not to any of the weight that exists on every other side of this room's door.

One minute.

The knock comes at sixty-three seconds.

I know it's Brennan before he speaks because I know his knock, have known it for eight years, and I know the particular rhythm of it when something requires me immediately versus something that can wait.

This is the first kind.

"A minute," I call.

I look at Rhydian.

He's already moved — already shifted toward upright, already doing the thing, and I put my hand on his chest.

"No," I say.

"Elena—"

"Senna said—"

"I know what Senna said." He meets my gaze. "I also know what Brennan's knock sounds like when it's urgent."

"You've known him for ten weeks."

"I pay attention." His jaw sets. "Tell me when you come back."

I hold his gaze for a moment.

"Stay in this bed," I say.

He doesn't answer, which is not the same as agreeing and we both know it.

Brennan is in the corridor.

He doesn't say good morning. He doesn't do any of the preamble. He just holds up the report, which is from the eastern tracking pair, which arrived six minutes ago via the fastest runner on the patrol rotation.

I read it.

The words are organized and professional and they take about fifteen seconds to read and another ten to process and during those ten seconds I stand in the corridor outside the room where my husband is healing and my child just kicked for the first time and I feel the morning reorganize itself completely.

Marcus.

Not alone. Not the displaced elder crossing territory on foot with nowhere to go.

An army.

Forty Shadowpine wolves confirmed moving northwest. Secondary intelligence suggests sixty additional units staged at the eastern ridge. Combined force of approximately one hundred. Led by an elder flying Mountain Pack colors and Shadowpine combined insignia. Estimated time to border: six hours.

I read it twice.

Then I fold it.

"Varek gave him wolves," I say.

"Apparently the suspension of the campaign didn't include Marcus specifically." Brennan's voice is measured. "Or Varek changed his mind. Or they had a separate arrangement we weren't aware of."

"One hundred wolves."

"Conservative estimate."

I look at the ceiling. At the crack that goes northeast to southwest that I've looked at from the other side of the wall for two days.

Six hours.

Rhydian is in bed with stitches in his side and a shoulder that's been compromised for a week. The Pack's senior fighters are present and functional but the compound's full effects haven't cleared for everyone. The eastern patrol is doubled but the eastern patrol is not designed to hold against a hundred.

Six hours.

My hand goes to my stomach. Automatic. Comes back down.

I breathe.

"Get the war room," I say. "Full council, senior warriors, border captains. Fifteen minutes." I pause. "And get Senna."

"Is Rhydian—"

"Senna knows what I need her for." I fold the report again, crease it hard. "Fifteen minutes."

Brennan goes.

I stand in the corridor.

Six hours ago I was on the floor of the war room screaming. Four hours ago I was in the mud outside the gate holding my husband upright. Two hours ago my daughter kicked for the first time against our joined hands.

Forty-five minutes ago I closed my eyes and had one minute.

Sixty-three seconds.

I go back into the room.

Rhydian sees my face immediately. He's upright — he's gotten himself to sitting, which I told him not to do and which I am not going to address right now.

"Tell me," he says.

I tell him.

His face does what it does. Takes it in. Processes. Doesn't perform anything.

Then: "How long."

"Six hours. Maybe less."

He starts to get up.

"Rhydian—"

"Elena." He looks at me. Not defiant. Not performing. Just completely, simply certain. "I'm not lying in this bed while they come for our family."

I look at him.

At the bandaging. At his face, which is still too grey but present and focused and entirely decided.

I think about the kick. About his hand over mine. About *hi,* said to the room like an introduction.

About a hundred wolves six hours away.

"You fight from the second line," I say.

"First—"

"Second line or the bed. Choose."

He holds my gaze.

"Second line," he says.

I nod.

I go to the wardrobe. Pull out my armor, which I haven't worn in three weeks. My hands know the buckles without looking.

Behind me I hear him getting up.

We dress without talking.

The morning is still the morning. The fire is still burning. And somewhere to the east, Marcus is marching with a hundred wolves and the particular conviction of a man who has nothing left to lose.

We have everything.

Which means we fight differently.

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat - Chapter 54: The letter[1,573 words]

The camp is three miles from the border.

Marcus chose the position himself — a flat clearing with good drainage and clear sightlines east and west, the kind of ground you want under you when you're running a coordinated approach. The wolves Varek gave him are different from the ones in the first camp. Older, quieter, the particular efficiency of fighters who've been doing this long enough to not need to perform readiness.

He walked the perimeter this morning the way he always walks perimeters. The frost is deep today, the kind that makes the ground ring when you step on it, and his breath makes small clouds that disappear before he turns the next corner.

He slept four hours.

That's enough. He's operated on four hours for most of his adult life — council sessions that ran to midnight, border incidents that required attention before dawn, thirty years of being the person who stayed awake so other people could sleep. Four hours is familiar. Four hours is almost comfortable.

The letter takes him twenty minutes to write.

Not because he's uncertain about the words. Because he finds himself writing and then stopping and looking at what he's written and starting again, not because the content is wrong but because the tone keeps arriving differently than he intends. Too cold. Then too explanatory. He writes three versions and burns the first two and looks at the third for a long time.

It says what it needs to say.

He calls for a runner.

The runner is young. Nineteen, maybe, with the particular combination of bravery and stupidity required to carry a message into an enemy settlement under parley conditions. Marcus gives him the sealed letter and the white strip of cloth and the specific instruction: *deliver it to the Alpha herself. Not to the gate guard, not to the senior warrior. The Alpha.*

He watches the boy go.

Then he goes back to the command tent and sits down and looks at the map.

He's been looking at this map for weeks. In different forms — the one in his own head, the ones Varek's cartographers drew, this final version that has the approach route and the three-point entry and the position of every patrol post he helped build fifteen years ago. He knows this map. He could draw it in his sleep.

He looks at where the Pack house is.

The long hall. The table. The chair.

He thinks about what the chair actually is — a piece of furniture, old wood worn smooth from generations of people sitting in it, doing the work. He's sat in it twice in his life, when the Alpha was absent and he ran sessions in their absence. Both times it felt like borrowing something. Both times he gave it back.

He thinks about what he was really after.

Not the chair specifically. Not even the authority, not exactly. Something older and harder to name. The thing where people look at you and see the actual person rather than the elder standing beside the person who matters. Where you don't have to translate yourself into a version that fits through the space they've left for you.

Viktor's father never saw him. Viktor didn't either. And Elena—

Elena has always seen him.

That's been the problem. She looked at him from the beginning with those grey eyes that her father had, that particular quality of attention, and she saw past the pleasantness and the warmth and the thirty years of being exactly what the situation required. She saw the underneath and she watched it and she waited, and now here they are.

A hundred wolves and a map and a letter that says: *send Rhydian Alma out of the Pack's boundaries by noon. Alone, unharmed, willingly. In exchange I will pull back and Shadowpine will stand down. The Pack lives. Elena keeps her territory. Everyone continues.*

Except the rogue.

He reads it over one more time.

It's clean. It's reasonable, in the narrow sense that reasonable means anything in this context. Elena doesn't love the boy enough to sacrifice her Pack for him — that's the calculation, that's what Marcus has been telling himself since he wrote the first version and burned it. She's a leader first. She's always been a leader first. Whatever the boy has done to her over these weeks, whatever has shifted between them, she was leading this Pack before he arrived and she'll lead it after he's gone and she knows that.

She has to know that.

The second version he burned had more of this in it. More justification. More explanation of why this was the logical outcome, the compassionate one, the option that costs least. He burned it because reading it back he could hear how it sounded. He could hear the years of telling himself things in the voice they need to be told to be bearable.

The third version just states the terms.

He folds it. It's already sealed. He looks at the seal — his elder's mark, the one he's carried for twenty-two years, pressed into the wax with the ring that Varek said he should have surrendered when he left and that he kept because it was his and he'd earned it and he was damned if he'd give it back.

He thinks about the boy at the post.

The blood. The particular quality of the silence between the strikes, which was not the silence of a person retreating into themselves but the opposite — someone who had found the deepest floor in themselves and was simply standing on it, waiting for the next thing. You are nothing, he said. And the thing was, Marcus thinks, that he believed it. Not as a performance, not as defiance.

As a fact he'd arrived at from somewhere real.

Elena gave him that.

She gave a feral rogue who ate alone in a cave and spent four years flinching from anything that moved — she gave him the specific gift of believing himself to be something. And he received it the way people receive things they've been starving for without knowing it.

Marcus sits with that for a while.

Then he goes back to the map.

The runner returns at midday.

He hands Marcus a single folded piece of paper, smaller than the letter Marcus sent, folded once. No seal. The wax isn't even warm.

Marcus opens it.

One word.

No.

He reads it twice.

Not because he can't read a single word. Because he's looking at her handwriting, which he knows from thirty years of documents and council notes and the small marks she makes in the margins of

reports when something requires her attention. He knows her handwriting as well as he knows his own.

No.

He sits with it.

He expected this. He told himself he expected this. He built the approach to assume the answer would be no — the three entry points, the dawn timing, the wolves positioned at the eastern ridge. All of it built for the outcome where she refused, because he knew she would refuse, because Elena has been refusing to do what he needed her to do for a year and that isn't going to stop because he sent a polite letter.

He knows all of this.

He still sits with the paper for a long time.

There's something about seeing it written. One word in her handwriting, no explanation, no negotiation. Just the word that she's been saying to him in various forms since before Viktor died, since the first time he walked into a room and she looked at him with those grey eyes and saw what was underneath.

He puts the paper down.

He thinks about her at nine years old, following her father through the Pack house corridors. He was there. He remembers it — this serious-faced child who never needed to be told to pay attention because she was always already paying attention, taking in everything, building the map of the world in her head.

He thinks about her at the council table after Viktor died. Standing at the head of it alone, not performing confidence, just being it, and the particular quality of watching someone step into their actual shape.

He thinks about her roar in the war room when Ferris proposed surrendering the boy.

He folds the paper. Puts it in his coat.

Stands up.

"We move at dawn," he says.

His second, a Shadowpine wolf named Gret, nods without asking questions. The others hear it move through the camp, the shift from waiting to preparing, the particular sound of a hundred people organizing toward something.

Marcus walks to the edge of the camp and looks west.

The border is invisible from here. Three miles of frozen forest between him and everything he built, everything he decided he was owed, everything that has been coming to this moment for thirty years.

He looks at the trees.

He thinks: she should have given him up.

He thinks: I knew she wouldn't.

He thinks: I don't know what I'm doing anymore.

The last thought arrives without announcement and sits in his chest with a weight that is different from everything else, different from the patience and the architecture and the carefully managed outcome. It's heavier. More honest.

He doesn't examine it further.

He goes back to the tent.

Dawn is six hours away.

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat - Chapter 55[1,528 words]

(Rhydian)

I'm strapping the second vambrace when Senna walks in without knocking.

"No," she says.

"You haven't seen what I'm doing yet."

"I can see exactly what you're doing." She crosses the room with the particular speed of a healer who has run out of patience and isn't planning to find more. "You're putting on armor over a wound that reopened yesterday."

"It's stitched."

"It's stitched and it will tear if you take a hit to that side, which you will, because you can't fully rotate that shoulder yet and you know it." She stops in front of me. Looks at the buckle I'm working. "Take it off."

"Senna."

"Take it off."

I look at her. She's small, half my size, and she's looking at me with the specific authority of someone who has been doing this job for longer than I've been alive and has zero interest in negotiating with a twenty-year-old who thinks willpower substitutes for tissue regeneration.

I don't take it off.

She makes a sound of frustration and turns and walks out, which I should probably read as a strategic retreat rather than a concession.

I keep buckling.

The yard is organized chaos by the time I get out there. Brennan's voice carries across the formation, assigning positions, the senior warriors moving with the particular focus of people who've done this before and know exactly what the next six hours require of them. Cade is near the fence with the trainees — too young for the front line, old enough that some of them are going to push for it anyway, and I can see Brennan has positioned an experienced wolf with them specifically to manage that exact problem.

I find Elena at the war table set up in the open air.

She's in her armor. I haven't seen her in it before — not actually in it, fully assembled, the leather and the reinforced shoulder pieces that mark her as Alpha. She looks like someone else. Or she looks like exactly who she is and I just haven't seen the full version of it.

She looks up. Sees me. Sees the vambraces.

Her face does something controlled.

"Second line," she says.

"I know."

"You're in armor for second line?"

"I'm in armor because I'm not standing in front of a hundred wolves in a shirt."

She comes around the table. Close. Her eyes do a fast assessment — the same one Senna did, the clinical sweep, checking the bandaging visible at the gap of the armor, the way I'm standing.

"Move your left arm," she says.

I move it. It costs something. I don't let it show on my face but she's not watching my face, she's watching the actual movement, and her jaw tightens.

"That's not full rotation," she says.

"It's enough rotation."

"For what."

"For holding a position. I'm not running drills, Elena, I'm standing in the second line with a weapon."

"You can barely lift that arm above your shoulder."

"I can lift it enough."

She looks at me. The morning is cold and the yard is full of wolves preparing and somewhere east a hundred Shadowpine fighters are three hours closer than they were an hour ago, and we're standing here having an argument about my shoulder.

"I'm not staying in that room," I say. Quieter now. "I told you that this morning."

"I heard you."

"Then you know I'm not changing my mind."

"I know you're not." She crosses her arms. "I also know what happens if that stitching tears mid-fight. You lose blood fast, faster than last time because your body hasn't recovered the reserves. You go down. Someone has to pull you out, which means someone who should be fighting is instead carrying you, which means a gap opens somewhere it shouldn't." She holds my gaze. "I've done this math, Rhydian. I do this math for every wolf in this yard."

"I'm not every wolf."

"No," she says. "You're the one I can't replace."

That lands somewhere specific. I feel it land.

"Which is exactly why I need you whole," she continues. "Not heroic. Whole. I need you alive and functional in three weeks, in three months, in three years. Not bleeding out at the second line because you couldn't sit still for one engagement."

"I can't sit in that room while—"

"You don't have to sit in the room."

I look at her.

"You can be useful," she says. "Just not on the line." She looks past me, toward the gate, the calculation visibly moving behind her eyes. "I need someone running the internal perimeter. Coordinating the noncombatants, the runners, making sure information moves correctly between the war table and the formation. That's not nothing, Rhydian. That's structural."

"That's not fighting."

"I know it's not fighting." Her voice sharpens. "I need it done anyway, and I need it done by someone I trust completely, and that's you whether the position involves a sword or not."

I look at the yard. At the formation taking shape. At Brennan directing wolves into position with the calm authority of someone who has run this exact scenario in his head a hundred times.

I want to be in that line.

It's not noble, exactly. It's not even entirely about her, or the baby, or any of the things that would make it a good story. Some of it is just — I spent four years being the only thing standing between myself and whatever wanted to take what little I had, and the instinct doesn't turn off because the stakes changed shape. The instinct says: get in front of the threat. Be the wall.

"I need you alive," Elena says. Quieter now. "More than I need you brave."

I look at her.

"Senna says the stitches need four more days," she says. "Four days, Rhydian. That's not a long time."

"It's a long time when there's a war happening."

"It's the time your body needs regardless of the war." She steps closer. "If you tear that open today you're looking at two weeks instead of four days. Maybe complications. Maybe something Senna can't fix as easily the second time."

I don't answer.

"I am asking you," she says, "as your Alpha and as the mother of your child and as the woman who held you in a frozen camp two days ago and didn't know if you'd stay conscious long enough to get home—" Her voice catches, just slightly, the first crack in the composure since I came outside. "I'm asking you to take the position I'm giving you. Not the line."

The yard is loud around us. Brennan's voice. The clatter of weapons being checked. Somewhere a wolf laughing nervously at something that isn't funny.

I look at her face.

At what's underneath the Alpha posture, the thing she doesn't usually let show in the yard, in front of everyone, but is letting show now because apparently this is worth the cost of showing it.

"Okay," I say.

She blinks. "Okay?"

"I'll run the internal perimeter."

Something in her shoulders drops by a fraction.

"But Elena." I hold her gaze. "If the line breaks. If they get through to the inner settlement. I'm not standing in a corridor coordinating runners while you're fighting on the wall."

She's quiet for a moment.

"If the line breaks," she says, "we're all fighting regardless of position."

"Then that's the agreement."

She nods.

We hold each other's gaze for one more second — the kind of look that does a lot of work in very little time, that says everything neither of us has time to say right now — and then she turns back to the war table and I go to find Brennan to get my position confirmed.

It's not until that night, after the scouts confirm Marcus's force has made camp three miles out and won't move again before dawn, after the war table briefing ends and the immediate adrenaline drains into the slower exhausted kind, that Elena follows me back to our room and shuts the door behind her with a specific finality.

"Sit," she says.

I sit on the edge of the bed.

She crosses to the small chest by the wardrobe and comes back with strips of cloth — the kind Senna uses for bandaging, except she's not bandaging anything, she's wrapping one strip around my wrist and tying it to the bedframe.

"What are you doing," I say.

"You will heal first," she says, working the second wrist. "That's an order."

"Elena—"

"You agreed to the internal perimeter. You're staying on it. And tonight you're sleeping flat, on your back, without arguing." She finishes the second knot. Sits back. Looks at me with an expression that is somehow both completely serious and slightly daring me to test it.

"This is excessive," I say.

"This is necessary." She climbs onto the bed beside me. Settles against the pillow. "Four days, Rhydian."

I look at the cloth around my wrists. Loose enough not to hurt. Tight enough to mean something.

I look at her.

"Fine," I say. "Four days."

She turns off the lamp.

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat - Chapter 56[1,780 words]

(Elena)

The skirmish starts at the northwest fence.

Not where we expected it — we expected the eastern approach, have had the eastern patrol doubled for three days, which means either Marcus's intelligence is outdated or he adjusted specifically to hit where we weren't looking. I'm at the war table when Petra's runner comes in, and I'm moving before the runner finishes the sentence.

Brennan's voice behind me: "Elena—"

"Hold the eastern line," I say. "This might be a split push."

I don't hear what he says after that because I'm already through the door.

The northwest fence section is a three-minute run at full pace. I make it in two and a half. The cold air comes in hard, the kind of cold that's all edge, that gets into your lungs and reminds you they're there.

Three Shadowpine wolves at the fence line. They've come through the section that backs onto the gorge tributary — terrain we patrol but don't fortify the same way because the approach is difficult and we assumed the difficulty was deterrent enough.

We assumed wrong.

Two Pack wolves are already engaged. Mira, from the southern guard rotation, holding position at the fence post. One of Brennan's senior fighters — Olan — with a cut across his forearm that he's ignoring.

I don't slow down.

The first engagement is fast. The wolf coming at Olan's unprotected left doesn't see me until I'm already inside his guard, and then it doesn't matter much that he sees me. I'm not going to describe what happens because there isn't time for description and also because the part of me that does this, that has always been able to do this when it's required, has stopped needing to narrate itself. It just happens.

He goes down.

The second one is harder. She's good — fast and low and smart about angles, and she's been watching the fight rather than jumping into it, which means she's had time to see how I move. I catch a strike on my forearm that I don't get out of the way of completely, and the impact vibrates up to my shoulder and my arm goes briefly unreliable.

I switch hands.

Viktor's training master taught me that. Ambidexterity as a fallback, not a preference, for exactly this kind of situation. I haven't needed it in two years but the muscle memory doesn't care about the gap.

She's good for another forty seconds.

Then she isn't.

The third one runs. I let him. Not because I can't catch him — I probably can, but I'm three minutes from the war table and there's a split push possibly happening and chasing a retreating wolf into the gorge tributary at dawn is not the best use of the next ten minutes.

I check Mira. She's shaken and has a gash on her cheek but she's upright and talking.

I check Olan. The arm is worse than he was showing. I tell him to go to Senna and he starts to argue and I give him the look and he goes.

Then I stand at the northwest fence for a moment.

Just — stand. Let the engagement settle out of my system. The particular wired-down feeling after a fight where your body takes a minute to believe it's finished.

The dawn is fully up now. Grey and cold and present.

I think about Rhydian in the bed with his wrists loosely tied and the look he gave me before I turned off the lamp. *Fine. Four days.*

He said it too easily.

I've been with him long enough to know when he agrees to something because he means it and when he agrees to something because the conversation needs to be over.

I start running back.

The Pack house is quiet when I come through the door. That's not unusual — the main body of the fight, if it's coming, hasn't materialized yet. The war table is still active, Brennan visible at the far end of the corridor, eastern patrol holding.

I take the stairs to our room.

The door is open.

I stop.

I know I closed that door. I closed it specifically. I have a clear memory of the latch clicking.

I step through it.

The cloth strips are on the floor. Unwound, not cut or torn — unwound carefully, which means he spent some time on them, which means he had to be deliberate about it, which means he was awake for a while before he decided to do it.

The room is empty.

I'm not surprised. I'm the opposite of surprised. What I am is — tired. And something else that doesn't have a clean name, some combination of relief-that-he's-upright and frustration-that-he's-upright-in-a-different-location-than-agreed.

I turn around.

He's in the doorway.

He must have heard me come up the stairs. He's in his training clothes, not armor — that's something, he didn't go to the line, which means he found the line between what I said and what he needed and stayed on the right side of it. Barely. Probably barely.

There's a smear of blood on his right hand that isn't his. Or if it is his, it's not from the wound, it's from something that happened in the last twenty minutes, and his jaw is set in a way that tells me some kind of engagement happened that I wasn't present for.

He looks at me.

Takes in the cut on my forearm. The state of my armor. Whatever my face is doing.

Something moves through his expression — not anger, not the defiant thing from the early weeks. Something more current than that. More raw.

He crosses the room.

Fast. Faster than I expect from someone with stitches in his side, and I take a step back automatically, and my back finds the wall, and then his hands are on either side of my head against the stone and he's close, very close, his face a few inches from mine.

I hold still.

His breathing is fast. Not from exertion — or not only from exertion.

"You went to a skirmish alone," he says.

"I went to a skirmish."

"Without—" He stops. His jaw works. "I heard it. From the corridor. I heard it and I couldn't—" He pushes off the wall, takes a step back, runs his hands through his hair. "I was in the corridor by the time Olan came through. He told me three wolves, northwest fence, you went ahead of support."

"Support arrived. Mira and Olan were already there."

"You were there first."

"I was the closest—"

"Elena." He turns back. His voice has come down from the heat of it into something lower. "You are ten weeks pregnant and you went into a skirmish ahead of your own support team."

"I'm the Alpha. That's what being the Alpha—"

"I know what being the Alpha means." He steps closer again. Not the wall this time, just close, and his hands come up to my jaw, both of them, the way he holds my face when he's saying something that he needs me to receive properly. "I know what it means. And I'm not asking you to stop being it. I'm saying—" He stops.

His forehead drops to mine.

"I was in the corridor," he says. Very quiet now. "Listening to your footsteps go away from me. And I couldn't move fast enough, couldn't get there in time, and all I could do was stand there and—"

He doesn't finish.

He doesn't need to.

I put my hands on his chest. Feel his heartbeat. Still too fast, the particular rhythm of someone whose body had a lot of adrenaline and nowhere to put it.

"Never lock me up again," he says. It comes out rough. Not a demand — something more honest than a demand. A request that knows it can't be fully granted and is being made anyway. "I can't

do that. I can't be in a room while you're—" His hands tighten at my jaw. "Not this. Not whatever that was."

I look at him.

At everything his face is doing right now that he isn't managing or containing — the fear that's still there, the residual of standing in a corridor listening to footsteps and not being able to follow them.

"The cloth strips were a fair call," I say.

"The cloth strips were an excellent call," he says. "I still took them off."

"I know."

"I'm going to keep taking them off."

"I know that too."

We stand there, his hands at my face, mine on his chest, the door open behind him and the settlement's morning sounds coming through it. The adrenaline in my own body is still settling, the particular aftermath of a fight where everything worked but might not have.

"Your side," I say.

"Fine."

"Senna is going to—"

"Senna will have things to say, yes." He pulls back slightly. Looks at my forearm where the strike landed. "Yours."

"Superficial."

"Let me see."

I let him see. He examines it with the hands that have gotten very good at careful — the hands that built the crib, that counted my pulse in the dark, that covered mine at the hot spring and haven't fully stopped reaching for me since.

"Okay," he says. "Superficial."

"I told you."

He looks at me.

"Next time," he says, "you tell me before you go."

"I didn't have time—"

"Then you make time." His jaw is set. "Thirty seconds. That's all I need. Just — tell me." He holds my gaze. "I'm not asking to come. I'm asking to know."

I look at him for a long moment.

"Okay," I say.

"Okay?"

"Thirty seconds. Before I go." I hold his gaze. "And you stay in the room when Senna says to."

He makes the face. The one where he's deciding whether this is worth the argument.

"We can negotiate," I say.

He almost smiles. "We'll negotiate."

I step back. His hands fall. We're both still standing in front of the wall he backed me into, the door open, the morning light harsh and ordinary on the floor between us.

I bend down and pick up the cloth strips.

He watches me fold them. Set them on the nightstand. Deliberate. Unhurried.

He looks at them. At me.

"Elena," he says.

"Mm."

"I love you."

I look at him.

"I know," I say.

He waits.

I put the last fold in the cloth strip. Set it down.

"I love you too," I say.

The words land between us, in the daylight, in the open.

He breathes out.

We stand there.

Outside the window, the morning keeps going.

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat - Chapter 57[1,560 words]

(Rhydian)

The argument starts after breakfast.

we've both been carrying things that are too large for the amount of sleep we've been getting and the particular pressure of two people who love each other trying to manage a war while also managing each other.

It starts, when I reach for my armor.

"You're not on the line," Elena says, from the table where she's reading a report. She doesn't look up.

"I know I'm not on the line."

"Then why—"

"Because I'm running the internal perimeter and the internal perimeter requires me to move fast and moving fast in a shirt is—"

"Senna said—"

"Senna said no impact to the left side. Wearing armor isn't impact."

She looks up. "Wearing armor and then moving fast in it when you don't have full rotation—"

"I have full rotation."

"You had three-quarter rotation this morning."

"It's better than this morning."

"That's not full rotation."

I put the armor down. Not because she's wrong — she's not entirely wrong, the rotation is still restricted, Senna said one more day — but because I need a moment to figure out which argument I'm actually making.

"I can't keep doing this," I say.

She's quiet.

"I can't keep being the person who stays inside," I say. "I understand why you need me to, I understand the logic, I've agreed to it twice and I'll probably agree to it again because you're usually right about these things." I look at her. "But I can't keep being protected. It's not how I work."

"I know how you work."

"Then you know this is—"

"I know it's hard." She sets the report down. Her hands flatten on the table. "I know it costs you something every time. I know you look at the formation and you see where you should be and you feel—" She stops. Starts again. "I know."

"Then stop—"

"I can't lose you." She says it flat. No management, no Alpha composure, just the sentence, sitting there in the morning air between us. "I can't, Rhydian. I've done the math on everything in this war. Every variable, every risk, every possible outcome. And you're the one thing I can't do the math on because when I try to calculate what happens if you don't come back I can't—" She stops. Presses her mouth together. "The numbers don't work."

I look at her.

Her hands are still flat on the table. She's not looking at me, she's looking at them, and I can see what it cost her to say that — not because she said something she's ashamed of, but because Elena doesn't put things like that out in the open and it takes something to do it.

"You can't protect me by keeping me inside," I say. Quieter now.

"I know."

"If something gets through the line—"

"I know, Rhydian."

"Then what are we actually arguing about."

She looks up.

Her eyes are doing the thing they do when she's feeling something she'd rather be thinking instead. I know this look. I've been collecting it for months — the specific quality of it, the grey gone a shade darker, the particular stillness of someone trying to manage a feeling that doesn't want to be managed.

"I had to leave you at the post," she says. Very quiet. "In the camp. I had to leave you there and come home because there was no other option, because the Pack needed me and Senna needed time and there was nothing I could do, and I sat in the war room and I stared at the eastern map and I—" She stops. Something crosses her face. "I've been running this Pack alone for a year. I've been fine. I know how to be alone and functional, I've done it, I'm good at it." She pauses. "I don't know how to be alone anymore. That's what I'm not saying properly."

The room is quiet.

I pick up my jacket from the chair. Not the armor. Just the jacket, which is warm and doesn't require arguing about.

I cross to the table.

She watches me come around to her side. I pull out the chair beside her and sit in it, and the table is between us and the morning is coming through the window and neither of us speaks for a moment.

"I'm not going anywhere," I say.

"You were literally—"

"I know where I was." I look at her. "I'm still here. And the left side is better than yesterday and will be better tomorrow than today, and I'll be on the internal perimeter where you need me, and if the line holds we'll be home by tonight arguing about something else." I pause. "We're going to be arguing about something else for the rest of our lives. That's just what this is."

She looks at me.

"Is that okay?" I ask.

Something shifts in her face. Small. Soft. The thing underneath all the rest of it.

"Yes," she says.

I take her hand off the table. Hold it. She lets me, which is still something, that she lets me, that two months of lessons and slow trust have gotten us to a place where she just lets me take her hand and doesn't manage the response.

"We're both terrible at this," I say.

"At what."

"Needing someone." I look at her hand in mine. "Neither of us knows how to do it without it feeling like losing something."

She's quiet for a moment.

"Speak for yourself," she says, but her thumb moves against my knuckles, and that movement has nothing to do with the sentence.

"I am," I say. "And also you."

She almost laughs. That half-caught sound she makes when something lands funny before she's decided whether to let it.

We sit for a moment.

Then I reach across and pull her chair around and she comes with it, turning toward me, and I get an arm around her and she— doesn't resist. She puts her forehead against my shoulder and I can feel her exhale the exact weight of the morning in one slow breath.

"The perimeter," she says. Muffled slightly.

"I know."

"You take the cloth if you need to carry anything."

"I'm not carrying—"

"It's a bandage, Rhydian, not a statement."

"It's a very specific statement."

"It's functional." She pulls back slightly. Looks at me. Her hair is down from whatever she'd put it up in, some of it falling forward, and she doesn't fix it. "Take the cloth. And check in with Brennan every hour."

"That's not the internal perimeter protocol."

"It's your protocol. Until Senna clears you."

I look at her.

"Fine," I say.

We look at each other for a moment in the particular way we look at each other after arguments that don't fully resolve but arrive somewhere better than where they started.

That evening is quiet.

Not peaceful exactly — the settlement never fully goes quiet anymore, there's always a patrol moving, someone on the gate, the specific low-level alertness of a place waiting for something. But the main push doesn't come. Marcus's force held position for the third day running, which Brennan

says suggests either coordination problems or a waiting strategy, and either way we got through the day without the eastern line breaking.

Elena comes in late.

I'm in bed, I told Senna I'd be by ninth hour, which I actually managed, I feel a certain amount of satisfaction about. The fire is low but not out. I tended it before I lay down.

She comes in and takes her boots off and sits on the edge of the bed and just stays there for a moment with her elbows on her knees and her head slightly down. The kind of sitting that means everything has been given to the day and there's nothing left to arrange.

"Come here," I say.

She lies down. Not beside me, actually on me — her cheek on my chest, her hand flat on my ribs just below the bandaging. Her weight is real and warm and completely present.

I put my arm around her.

She's asleep in under four minutes. I know because I'm counting her breathing, the way I learned to from the early weeks when sleep was harder for both of us and the dark had a different quality. Four minutes from horizontal to gone.

I look at the ceiling crack.

Northeast to southwest. Wider near the middle. The lifted plaster above the wardrobe.

I run my hand through her hair. Slowly. The way she used to do with me when I woke from nightmares, the particular gentleness of it, unhurried, no destination.

She makes a small sound. Doesn't wake up.

I keep going.

Outside the window the settlement is doing its night. Patrol sounds, occasional voices, the fire in the main yard visible as a glow against the dark.

My side pulls slightly when I breathe deep. I breathe shallow.

I look at the ceiling.

I'll fix the crib joint tomorrow.

The rotation is better. Senna will see it tomorrow.

She said I love you too, in daylight, in the morning, out loud.

I keep my hand in her hair.

She sleeps.

I stay awake a little longer, just to feel it — the weight of her, warmth, and her breathing against my chest.

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat - Chapter 58[1,637 words]

(Elena)

I heard it first from Petra.

She came to find me just before noon, which she only does when something can't wait for the next briefing. She didn't knock — just appeared in the doorway of the study with that look she gets, the one where she's already sorted through her own reaction and is delivering the information without it.

"The eastern barracks," she said. "You should come."

The barracks smelled like unwashed wool and fear.

Not metaphorical fear — actual fear, the specific scent that wolf bodies produce when the threat has been present long enough that the body stops pretending otherwise. I stood at the doorway for a moment before I went in and I just — listened.

The wolves inside weren't shouting. That would have been easier to manage. They were quiet. Maybe thirty of them, off-rotation, sitting in small clusters or alone on their bunks, and the silence had a particular weight to it that I recognized from the first year of my father's illness, when the Pack house stopped being loud.

When people stop talking it's because what they're thinking is too large to say.

I walked in.

A few heads came up. Not all of them. One wolf — young, nineteen maybe, the one they call Pip who has been on the eastern patrol for three weeks and hasn't slept properly in two — had his elbows on his knees and was looking at the floor between his feet like it owed him something.

"Alpha," someone said.

I pulled a stool from near the door and sat down. Not at the head of anything. Just — sat, among them, in the middle of the room.

Nobody said anything for a moment.

"How long has it been like this?" I asked.

Silence. Then Pip, still looking at the floor: "Since the second letter."

Marcus's terms. The one that said *surrender or everyone dies.*

I nodded slowly. "Okay."

"It's not just the letter." An older wolf, Tomas, from the back. He said it like he'd been deciding whether to for a while. "It's three days of waiting. It's not knowing when they're coming. It's knowing he—" He stopped. "Marcus knows everything. Every shift change, every weak point in the fence, every—" He pressed his mouth together. "He built this place. He knows where to hit."

"He does," I said.

That surprised them. I could see it — they expected the Alpha speech, the reassurance, the *don't worry we have a plan.* I wasn't giving them that yet.

"He knows every patrol pattern and every border gap and every wolf who tends to lose focus on a night rotation," I said. "You're right. He has thirty years of intelligence in his head and he's aimed it at us." I paused. "That's real. I'm not going to stand here and tell you it isn't."

Pip looked up for the first time.

"Then what do you tell us?" he asked. Not challenging. Genuinely asking.

I thought about it.

Not performing the thinking — actually sitting with the question, in the barracks, with thirty wolves who had been quietly terrified for three days and deserved something more than a script.

"I tell you what I know," I said. "Which is that Marcus is not the thing he was. He had Shadowpine behind him two weeks ago — a hundred and four wolves, coordinated, supplied, running on Varek's backing." I looked around the room. "And then we burned his supply line. And we went into his camp and took back our own. And Varek pulled back and left him with forty wolves and whatever argument he could make for why this was still worth their time." I let that sit. "He's not the thing he was. He's running out of support and running out of time, and he knows it, which is why we keep getting letters instead of attacks."

"Letters saying everyone dies," Tomas said.

"Letters are what you send when you're not certain the fight goes your way," I said. "Marcus knows us. He also knows himself. And a man who knows himself knows when he's standing on shaky ground."

Someone near the back shifted on their bunk.

"I'm pregnant," I said.

That wasn't in any script either. I just said it, and the room went completely still, and I let it.

"Eleven weeks," I said. "I know most of you know already. The Pack isn't exactly quiet about these things." A few quiet sounds of something that might have been acknowledgment. "But I want to say it directly, in here, because it matters to what I'm about to tell you."

I stood up.

Not on anything. Just standing, among them, the bunk frames and the smell of wool and thirty pairs of eyes that had been pointed at the floor for three days coming up toward me.

"Marcus wants this Pack," I said. "He's wanted it for thirty years. He's been patient and careful and he's done terrible things to get close to it, and he is not going to stop because we're tired." I paused. "But here is what he doesn't understand. He thinks this Pack is a position. A territory. A council table and an Alpha chair. He thinks that's what he's taking." I looked around the room. "He's wrong."

Nobody spoke.

"This Pack is Pip," I said. Pip blinked. "And Tomas. And Mira and Olan and Cade and Petra and Brennan and every wolf who has been standing on that eastern line for three days not because they were told to but because they chose to." I felt my voice change, drop into something more real. "You are not fighting for a chair. You're fighting for each other. For the wolves sleeping in the room next to you. For the people who will be in this Pack after we're gone." I put my hand on my stomach. Flat. Present. "For whatever this is. Whoever this becomes."

The room was so quiet I could hear the fire down the corridor.

"Marcus cannot take that," I said. "He can take territory. He can take ground. But he cannot walk in here and take the thing that makes this a Pack rather than just a border on a map." I looked at them. All of them. "And I will not let him."

Nobody moved for a moment.

Then Tomas — Tomas who had said *Marcus knows everything* in the voice of someone who had already half-surrendered to the knowledge — stood up.

He lifted his chin and he made the sound. Low at first. Old. The sound wolves make when they have something larger than words.

A howl.

Just him, for two seconds.

Then Pip.

Then the wolf on the far bunk who hadn't raised his head the entire time I'd been in the room.

Then the door to the corridor opened and the ones on rotation outside must have heard it because the sound came from there too, and then from somewhere further, from the yard probably, from the gate—

It built the way those things build. One voice and then many, until the walls of the barracks were doing something with the sound, carrying it and returning it changed.

I stood in the middle of it.

My hand on my stomach.

The sound going through me, and through whatever was under my hand, and out into the settlement and up into the cold winter sky.

It went on for longer than I expected.

When it stopped, the silence was different from before. Not the weighted terrified silence of an hour ago. Something else. Something that had been said that words wouldn't have managed.

Pip was looking at me.

"What do we do now?" he asked.

I looked at him.

Outside, somewhere near the gate, another voice joined a howl that had almost finished — arriving late, out of time, slightly off-key.

Rhydian.

I knew his voice. Of course I did. I'd know it from across a settlement in the dark.

Something in my chest did what it always does when I locate him by sound alone — settled. Found its floor.

"Now," I said, "we hold the line one more day."

Pip nodded.

Just that.

Just: nodded.

And the barracks, which had been a room full of fear an hour ago, was something else now. I couldn't have named it exactly. But I felt it when I walked out — in the straightened backs, in Tomas moving toward his armor instead of away from it, in the door to the corridor standing open and the cold air coming through it like an invitation.

I stepped out into the yard.

Rhydian was at the gate.

He wasn't supposed to be at the gate. He was supposed to be on the internal perimeter, which technically included the gate, which was probably the argument he'd made to himself.

He saw me.

I walked toward him.

"You heard," I said.

"The whole settlement heard," he said.

I stopped in front of him. He looked at my face with that particular attention he has, the one that takes in everything and decides what to do with it later.

"How's the side?" I asked.

"Better." A pause. "Senna said—"

"I know what Senna said."

We stood there.

"The howling," he said. "Was that—"

"Yes."

He was quiet for a moment.

Then: "Elena."

"What."

He looked at me with the open face, the unguarded one. "You didn't tell me the speech was going to be that good."

I opened my mouth.

And before I could answer, a runner came through the gate at a dead sprint, and the look on his face was the kind that arrives before the words do, and the words, when they came, were—

"The eastern scouts. Alpha, they're moving. Marcus is moving. Tonight."

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat - Chapter 59[1,563 words]

(Rhydian)

The runner kept talking.

Eastern scouts, movement confirmed, forty wolves minimum, Marcus leading from the front — I heard all of it and I was already doing the math before the runner finished the sentence. Position, timing, the three entry points we'd been watching. The patrol coverage. The gaps.

My left side pulled when I straightened.

I ignored it.

"Brennan needs to know," I said.

"Brennan's already being told," Elena said. She was reading the scout report the runner had handed over, her eyes moving fast down the page. "He'll have the eastern line repositioned in twenty minutes."

"And the northwest?"

"Covered." She lowered the paper. "You're on the internal perimeter."

"I know."

She looked at me. I looked back at her. The whole conversation we'd had that morning — the argument, the cloth strips on the nightstand, the *I love you too* said out loud in daylight — all of it was still there between us, and on top of it was this. Marcus moving. Tonight.

"Go," I said. "I've got the perimeter."

She went.

The next four hours were the strangest of my life.

Not the most dangerous — the gorge ranked higher for that. Not the most painful. But the strangest, because I spent four hours moving through the settlement I'd been in for less than three months and it felt like somewhere I'd always known.

I knew which gate guard rotated at the second hour and which one needed reminding to check the lower fence section. I knew that the storage shed behind the training yard had a door that stuck in cold weather and needed to be checked manually. I knew which wolves on the internal perimeter were solid and which ones were going to need someone nearby when the noise from the eastern line started in earnest.

I knew all of this the way I know terrain.

By moving through it. By paying attention. By doing it again and again until the map of it was in my body rather than just my head.

I stopped at the crossroads between the barracks and the main hall. The howling had stopped an hour ago but I could still feel the shape of it in the air somehow, the way sound leaves something behind in stone buildings.

Elena's voice. Her hand on her stomach. *Whoever this becomes.*

I pressed my thumb against the wall of the barracks.

The stone was cold. Old. It had been here before any of us and would probably be here after. Wolves had leaned against this wall scared and exhausted and ready and grieving and in love, generation after generation, and the stone had just held.

I thought about what that meant.

For most of my life the only thing I'd been willing to die for was survival itself — the circular logic of fighting to keep living so you could keep fighting. I'd understood that. It was clean. No weight to it.

This wasn't that.

This was — Cade running laps in the frost. Pip looking at the floor and then looking up. Mira holding the northwest fence line alone until I got to her. Petra stepping into a needle meant for Elena without knowing what was on it. Brennan adjusting his tactical position because I read terrain better and not making anything of it.

This was the crib with the joint that still needed fixing.

This was a kick under my hand against warm skin.

This wasn't duty. I'd had duty explained to me my entire childhood — duty to the Alma name, to the bloodline, to the Pack that ended up executing my parents for selling it out. Duty looked like obligation. Duty looked like the chair at the council table that you sat in because you were supposed to.

This didn't feel like any of that.

This felt like the thing underneath duty. The thing duty is supposed to point at but usually doesn't.

I pushed off from the wall.

Corvin was coming toward me from the direction of the eastern gate, moving fast, face unreadable.

"Rhydian." He fell into step beside me. "Eastern line is holding but they're close. Brennan says thirty minutes, maybe less."

"Okay." I kept moving. "Who's on the hall entrance?"

"Tomas and two others."

"Tell Tomas to put his best wolf at the inner door, not the outer. If they get through the first position the inner door is what matters."

Corvin peeled off without being asked twice.

I kept moving.

And somewhere in the next ten minutes — somewhere between the storage shed with the sticking door and the inner gate where I repositioned two wolves who'd clustered too close together — it arrived.

Not dramatically. Not with any of the ceremony something like this probably deserves. Just a quiet, certain knowledge that settled into my chest like it had been waiting for me to stop moving long enough to receive it.

I would die for this Pack.

Not because I was supposed to. Not because Elena needed me to. Not because the bloodline demanded it or the elders expected it or the Moon Goddess chose it.

Because I loved it.

Because somewhere in the last three months I'd walked into this settlement in chains and been cleaned and fed and taught and held and challenged and trusted, and I'd walked into a training yard and found out I had something to give, and I'd sat on the floor of a study at midnight and cried for the first time since I was sixteen, and I'd built half a crib by a fire, and I'd felt a kick against my palm—

And it had all added up to this. This place. These wolves. This life that I hadn't expected and would not give back for anything.

The sounds from the eastern line got louder.

I changed direction, heading toward the position Brennan had assigned me, and I nearly walked directly into Elena coming the other way.

She caught herself. I caught myself. We were both moving fast and both slightly surprised.

"Perimeter's covered," I said. "Tomas has the hall. I repositioned the inner gate."

"I know." She looked at me. Something in her face was moving fast. "Brennan just confirmed. He said—" She stopped.

"What?"

"He said you did it in the right order." She held my gaze. "His exact words."

I didn't say anything.

"Rhydian." She stepped closer. The noise from the eastern line was there, present, real, the sounds of a line holding under pressure. "What's happening with you right now."

It wasn't the question I expected.

"What do you mean?"

"You've been—" She looked at me carefully. "You've been different since the barracks. Since the howling. Something shifted."

She always saw it. Whatever it was, she always saw it.

"I figured something out," I said.

"What?"

I looked at her. At the armor and the grey eyes and the scar on her cheek and the thing I'd been building toward without knowing I was building toward it until it was already finished.

"I want to be here," I said. "Not because the elders said so or the bloodline or any of the reasons they used to justify bringing me here." I paused. "I want to be here. That's mine. I chose it." I held her gaze. "I need you to know that."

She was very still.

"I know it," she said quietly.

"I want it to be official," I said.

The sounds from the eastern line changed pitch. Closer. More concentrated.

"What do you mean?" she said.

"You're the Alpha of this Pack." I said it directly. No preamble. "I'm your mate. The father of your child. I've been running drills and holding the perimeter and making tactical calls and Brennan defers to me in the field." I didn't look away from her. "Name me co-Alpha."

She stared at me.

"Not because the charter requires it," I said. "Not because of the Alma bloodline or what Marcus wanted or what Varek thought. Because I've earned it and you know I've earned it and this Pack deserves someone standing beside you who is actually, fully, officially there."

The eastern line was loud now. Really loud.

Elena breathed.

"Rhydian—"

"I know the timing is terrible."

"Yes."

"I know there's a battle happening—"

"Also yes."

"But I need to know," I said. "Before whatever the next hour is. I need to know if you see me that way."

She looked at me for a long time.

Long enough that I heard a gate below somewhere take an impact.

Then she closed the distance between us and she grabbed the front of my jacket and she pulled me down to her level and she said — quietly, right against my mouth, so only I could hear it:

"You've been co-Alpha since the day you walked into the war room and read that map before anyone asked you to."

She kissed me once. Hard. Quick.

Then she pulled back and her jaw was set and her eyes were completely clear.

"Make it official after," she said. "When Marcus is handled."

She turned and walked toward the eastern line.

I stood there for exactly one second.

Then from somewhere behind me, in the direction of the main hall:

Tomas. His voice, carrying: "Rhydian. Inner gate — they're through the first position."

I turned.

I went.

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat - Chapter 60[1,774 words]

(Elena)

We handled Marcus at dawn.

I'm not going to say it was clean, because it wasn't. Nothing about the last three months has been clean. But by the time the sun fully cleared the eastern ridge, the fight was over, Marcus was in custody with two of Brennan's best wolves standing at his back, and the forty Shadowpine fighters he'd brought had either retreated or surrendered.

Varek didn't come for them.

That told me everything I needed to know about how finished Marcus was.

I stood in the eastern yard when it ended, armor still on, and I watched Brennan formally take Marcus into the Pack's custody, and Marcus — for the first time in all of this — didn't have anything to say.

He just looked at me.

And I looked back.

And then I turned away, because there was too much to do and because the particular grief of watching someone you grew up trusting arrive at their final accounting is not something you process in a yard with fifty wolves watching.

That would come later.

Right now there was a Pack that had held its ground for three nights and deserved to know it was over.

The ceremony happened three days later.

Senna had cleared Rhydian that morning — full clearance, which she delivered with the specific satisfaction of someone who had been right about the timeline and was not going to make anything of it but was making everything of it internally. He'd stood in the infirmary with his shirt off while she checked the stitching and the rotation, and I'd stood in the doorway trying to look like I was there for administrative reasons.

"Full rotation," she said. "Don't do anything stupid with it for another week."

"Define stupid," he said.

"You know exactly what I mean."

He caught me looking. I looked at the doorway frame.

The Pack had been asking about the ceremony since the night of the battle, since I'd told Brennan what I'd said to Rhydian against the east corridor wall with the gate coming under pressure. Brennan hadn't reacted the way I expected. He'd just said *good* and gone back to the tactical map, which was the most Brennan response possible and also the only one I needed.

Marta had cried. Quietly, privately, turning away and then turning back composed, which I pretended not to notice because that was the agreement between us.

Even Corvin, who was barely old enough to have opinions about Pack governance, had said *it's about time* in a way that suggested he'd been thinking it for weeks.

Three days of preparation. Which, in a Pack that had just been through what we'd been through, felt both too long and not long enough.

The hall was full.

Every wolf who could stand was there, which was most of them. The benches were packed. People stood at the walls and filled the doorways and the noise before it started had that particular quality of a crowd that is about to witness something it already believes in.

I stood at the front in my formal clothes — not the armor, the Alpha's robe, dark grey with the silver at the collar that my father had worn and his father before him. It fit differently than it used to. Or maybe I was different. Probably both.

Rhydian was at the far end of the hall.

He'd been dressed by Marta, which I'd found out afterward, which explained why he looked like someone who had made an actual decision about what to wear rather than someone who had put on the first thing available. Dark tunic, fitted properly, sleeves rolled to his elbows the way he always ends up wearing them regardless of what the original intention was.

He was looking at me.

I looked back.

Marta stepped to the front of the hall. She had the elder's scroll — the real one, not Marcus's forgery, the actual charter text that lived in the archive room and hadn't been taken out for a ceremony in eleven years, since my father's mating with my mother.

"We are gathered," she said, and her voice carried the way it always did, that quality of someone who has been filling rooms with their voice for forty years, "to witness the formal elevation of Rhydian Alma to co-Alpha of this Pack."

The hall was very quiet.

"This is not a bloodline appointment," Marta continued, and I noticed she'd added that, it wasn't in the standard text. I didn't stop her. "This is not a political arrangement or a charter requirement. This is a Pack choosing to recognize what is already true."

She looked at me.

I walked forward to the center of the hall, where the old stone marker was set into the floor — the same one my parents had stood on, the same one Viktor and I had stood on, the same one that had been holding up the weight of this Pack's moments for three generations.

Rhydian walked forward too.

We stopped facing each other, about a foot apart, with the marker between us and the whole Pack watching and the hall so quiet I could hear the fire in the far corner.

He was looking at my face.

Not at the crowd, not at Marta, not at the scroll or the ceremony or anything around us. Just at me, with the specific attention he's always given me, the kind that made me feel like the only relevant thing in whatever room we were standing in.

My throat was doing something I wasn't going to acknowledge.

"The co-Alpha ceremony requires a declaration of intent," Marta said. "And a demonstration of equality. Neither Alpha stands above the other. Neither leads alone."

She looked at me. "Alpha Elena."

I reached into the pocket of the robe.

I'd had the ring made three days ago. Simple, silver, the same metal as the ring my mother left me, the one on my thumb that I've worn since she left it behind. I'd had the smith make it to match. Not identical. Just from the same source.

I held it out.

Rhydian looked at it. Then at me.

"Rhydian Alma," I said. "I name you co-Alpha of this Pack. Not because the charter requires it. Not because of your bloodline or your name." I paused. "Because you earned it. Because you chose us when you didn't have to. Because you've been standing beside me since before either of us noticed that's what you were doing." My voice was steady. I was proud of how steady it was. "And because I trust you with everything this is."

I reached out and took his hand.

He let me. He always lets me now, without the half-second recalibration of the early weeks. Just — lets me. His hand warm and present and a little rough from the crib work and four years of surviving on bare rock.

I placed the ring in his palm.

He looked at it.

Then he did something I hadn't planned for and hadn't put in any script.

He went to one knee.

Right there, on the stone marker, in front of the whole Pack. One knee, head down, the specific gesture of someone acknowledging something larger than themselves. It was the wolf gesture — the old one, the one that means *I see this, I receive this, I am not too proud for this moment.*

The hall made a sound. Not a gasp. Something more complicated.

I felt my eyes go warm.

Then I went to one knee too.

Right in front of him, which was not in any charter text and was not something that Alphas do in formal ceremonies and which I did anyway, because Marta had said *neither stands above the other* and I meant it in a way that needed to be visible.

We were level. Both of us on one knee, facing each other, on the stone marker where three generations of this Pack's most important moments had happened.

He looked at me.

I looked at him.

"Equal," I said.

Just that word. Just that.

His jaw moved. He pressed his mouth together and looked at the floor for exactly one second and then back at me, and his eyes were doing things he wasn't managing, and I was glad, because mine were doing the same.

He slid the ring onto his finger.

Then he stood. And offered me his hand.

I took it and stood, and we were both standing on the stone marker in the full hall, his hand in mine, and Marta said something about the formal blessing of the Moon Goddess that I didn't entirely hear because the hall had started making noise and I was looking at his face.

He was looking at mine.

"Hi," he said. Quiet. Under the noise. Just for me.

"Hi," I said back.

Someone in the crowd howled. Then someone else.

He cupped my face in both hands.

The hall was getting loud, the full Pack sound of a hundred wolves who had been holding their breath for three days finally letting go, and in the middle of it Rhydian kissed me.

Not quick. Not the ceremony kiss, not the claiming kiss from our wedding that was all message and no conversation. This was — just him, and me, and three months of everything that had built to this moment, in front of every wolf who'd watched it happen.

I kissed him back.

The howling got louder.

He pulled back. His forehead came to mine. His hands were still on my face.

"Co-Alpha," I said.

"Say it again," he said.

"Don't push it."

He laughed. The real laugh, the one I've been collecting since the training yard, the one that turns him back into exactly who he is underneath all the surviving.

And the hall was loud and the fire was warm and somewhere in the back Cade was probably howling loud enough to embarrass himself and Marta was probably already writing something in the charter and Marcus was in custody and the war was handled and the eastern border was holding—

And my hand found my stomach, which by now was a habit, automatic—

And the ring on his hand caught the light.

But before I could say anything else, before the moment could be what it was, Brennan appeared at the edge of the crowd with his face doing the specific thing it does when information has arrived that cannot wait.

"Alpha," he said. Both of us turned. He looked between us, briefly. "Both of you. Message from Varek."