

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat

chapter 6-10

(Elena)

He's on the edge of my bed again, back straight, fists on his knees, eyes fixed on the wall behind me like it owes him something.

He won't look at me.

That's fine. He'll learn.

Morning light comes through the window, pale and grey. His hair is still damp from the bath I ordered, the fresh shirt I gave him hanging loose off his thin frame. I pull a chair in front of him and sit down, our knees almost touching.

"Look at me."

He doesn't.

I wait. A full minute, maybe more.

Finally those golden eyes slide toward mine — wary, suspicious, like a stray bracing for a kick.

"Give me your hand."

"Why?"

"Because I asked."

"I don't have to do what you say."

"You're in my territory. My room. My bed. You'll do what I say until you earn the right to refuse."

He scowls. But he lifts his left hand.

I take it. His fingers are cold and calloused, bandages clean — I changed them this morning before he was awake. I turn his palm up and trace a line down the center with my thumb.

He twitches.

"Ticklish?" I ask.

"No."

"Liar."

His jaw tightens, but he doesn't pull away.

I just hold his hand. Both of mine wrapped around his, not moving, letting him feel the weight and warmth of it. His pulse hammers against my fingers.

"Your heart's racing," I say.

"You can't hear it from there."

"I can feel it through your pulse."

He swallows.

I let go. "Other one."

He gives me his right hand without arguing. Palm up, thumb trace — he twitches again but controls it better this time.

"You're trying," I say.

"I'm not trying anything."

"You're not biting me. That counts."

The corner of his mouth moves. Almost a smile. Then it flattens back out.

"Why are we doing this?" he asks.

"Because you flinch when people touch you. That's fine for a rogue. It's not fine for a mate."

"I'm not your mate yet."

"You will be. And when you are, you can't stand beside me looking like you're about to attack anyone who brushes your sleeve." I keep my eyes on his. "Touch isn't just about sex. It's about letting someone close enough to hurt you and trusting them not to."

"I don't trust anyone."

"I know."

He pulls his hand back and crosses his arms over his chest. I let him have that minute.

Then I stand. "Get up."

He does. Slow and reluctant.

I move behind him.

His entire body locks up immediately.

"Relax."

"You're behind me. I can't see you."

"That's the point."

I place my hands on his shoulders. He flinches so hard he nearly stumbles forward, shoulders flying up to his ears. I keep my hands exactly where they are. Light. Still. Waiting.

"Breathe. In through your nose."

His chest rises.

"Out through your mouth."

He exhales — shaky, uneven, but he does it.

"Again."

Another breath. Better. His shoulders drop a fraction.

I squeeze gently, just enough pressure to be felt, and he flinches again — smaller this time.

"Don't fight it," I say. "You're not in danger."

"You don't know that."

"I'm your Alpha. I'm going to be your mate. I'm not your enemy."

He doesn't answer. But he breathes.

I move my hands down his arms, just fingertips trailing from his shoulders to his elbows and back up. He shivers.

"Scared?" I ask.

"No."

"Liar again."

His ears go pink.

I find the knots in his shoulder blades with my thumbs and work slow circles into them. Months of cave floors living in his muscles, years of running and fighting and never once being touched without pain.

"Who hurt you?" I ask quietly.

"Everyone."

"That's not an answer."

"It's the only one you're getting."

I don't push. I move my hands to the back of his neck instead, fingers brushing damp hair.

He freezes completely.

"Breathe," I remind him.

A long slow breath. His neck stays rigid, but he doesn't pull away.

"I'm going to count to ten," I say. "By ten, I want your shoulders down. No tension."

"That's not how bodies work."

"Try anyway."

One. Two. Three — his shoulders drop a little. Four. Five. Six — more, not all the way but better. Seven. Eight. Nine. Ten.

Still raised. But not as bad. And he hasn't flinched in over a minute.

"Again."

We do it five more times. Each round his flinch gets smaller, his shoulders drop a little lower, his breath comes a little steadier. By the fifth time, he's not flinching at all — still stiff as a board, but holding.

"Sit down," I say, guiding him back to the bed edge.

He sits.

"Shirt off."

His eyes go wide. "No—"

"Rhydian."

"You just want to—"

"I want skin contact. Fabric gets in the way." I hold his gaze. "Take it off or I'll do it for you."

He glares at me for a long moment. Then his hands go to the hem and he pulls it over his head, slow and reluctant, like each inch costs him something.

The scars again. Pale ones, pink ones, the bruise on his shoulder gone yellow at the edges. I don't stare. I put my palms flat on his bare shoulders and he gasps — small, sharp, almost a whimper.

"Cold hands," he manages.

"They'll warm up."

I press gently. Feel his skin burning underneath — he's running hot from nerves, heart going like something trapped.

"Breathe with me," I say. "Match my rhythm."

I breathe in. He breathes in.

Out. He breathes out.

In. Out. In. Out.

His shoulders begin to move with it, rising and falling, and something in his face goes loose and quiet. He looks almost peaceful, eyes half-closed, mouth slightly open.

I slide my hands to the base of his neck, thumbs on either side of his spine.

He makes a sound — not a word, just a soft exhale that he clearly didn't intend.

"Good boy," I murmur.

The words come out before I think about them. Quiet, warm, almost without meaning to.

His ears go red. Not pink this time — red. Bright red, spreading from the tips all the way down to his neck.

He opens his eyes and looks at me, something new sitting behind them. Not fear, not defiance — something younger than either of those.

"Don't call me that," he says, voice rough.

"Why not? You are being good."

"It makes me feel—" He stops.

"Makes you feel what?"

"Weak. Like a kid."

"Weak men don't survive four years alone. Weak men don't fight six enforcers with their hands chained." I hold his gaze. "You're not weak. You're just not used to this."

He looks away, ears still burning.

I put my hands back on his shoulders. He flinches once — catches himself — takes a breath. The muscle softens underneath my palms.

"Good boy," I say again. Quieter. Just to see.

His ears go deeper red. But he doesn't tell me to stop.

When I slide my thumbs up either side of his neck, he tilts his head back. Just slightly. Just enough.

Offering me his throat.

Not submission. Something else — something that took four years of surviving alone to forget how to do.

Trust.

I don't say a word about it. I just keep touching, keep breathing, keep teaching.

The lesson isn't over. But we've made a start.

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat

(Rhydian)

I'm back there.

The courtyard. The wooden platform. The rope.

My mother is crying. My father stares at the sky like he checked out before they even put the rope on. The elders stand in their half-circle with stone faces, and the whole Pack watches from behind the enforcers like it's something to see.

I'm sixteen. I'm screaming. It takes three grown wolves to hold me back from running to them.

"Please. Please don't. They're sorry — I'm sorry — please—"*

Nobody listens.

The trapdoor opens.

They fall.

The ropes go tight.

I wake up gasping so hard I nearly choke on the air. Cold sweat soaking through the sheets, heart slamming my ribs, hands clawing at the mattress looking for something to grab, something to fight—

But I'm not in the courtyard. Stone walls. A fire burned down to coals. A soft bed that still doesn't feel like mine.

And someone is holding me.

Arms around my chest, a body warm against my back, breath slow and steady on my neck.

Elena.

I don't remember her climbing in. Must have been so deep in it I didn't feel her.

"Shh." Her voice is rough from sleep. "You're safe. You're here. Not there."

The nightmare is still crawling under my skin. I can still hear—

I can still hear it.

"I've got you," she murmurs, and her hand presses flat against my chest, right over where my heart is going absolutely haywire.

"Let go," I choke out.

"No."

"I said let go—"

I thrash. Hard. My elbow catches something and I hear her grunt, but she doesn't release me, so I shove. Both arms, everything I have. I roll off the bed and get my back against the wall before I even know I'm moving.

(Elena)

One second I'm holding him, feeling his heart race under my palm, and the next I'm flat on my back and he's across the bed pressed into the corner like something cornered.

Chest heaving. Eyes wild — gold shot through with something broken and red.

"Don't touch me." His lips pull back. His hands are shaking.

I sit up slow. Keep my palms visible, facing out.

"Rhydian."

"Stay away from me."

"You were having a nightmare. I heard you."

"I don't—" He stops. Swallows. "I don't cry."

"You were calling for your mother."

His face crumples. Just for a second — there and gone, smoothed back behind the mask so fast I'd almost think I imagined it.

"Get out," he says.

"This is my room."

"Then I'll leave." He tries to stand. His legs don't hold him and he drops back onto the mattress, and I have to look away for a second to give him that.

"You're having a panic attack," I say. "Remember what I showed you? Breathe. In through your nose."

"I don't need your lessons right now—"

"This isn't a lesson. This is just staying alive."

He glares at me. But he breathes. Shallow and ragged, but he does it.

"Again. Deep."

He pulls in a long breath. His shoulders shake with it.

"Out through your mouth."

The exhale comes out wet.

"Good. Again."

We do this for a full minute. His hands stop shaking first, then his breathing evens, and the wildness in his eyes fades into something underneath.

Grief. Open, raw, nowhere to hide it.

(Rhydian)

I hate that she's seeing me like this.

I hate that she stayed.

I hate that I can still feel her arms around me like I actually mattered to someone.

Nobody's held me since I was sixteen. Four years of waking up alone in the dark, bleeding alone, fighting alone, crawling back to that cave alone every single time.

And this woman — this stranger who slapped me and bandaged me in the same hour — held me while I screamed.

"Why are you still here?" I ask. My voice doesn't come out right.

"Because you're my responsibility."

"That's not an answer."

She's quiet for a moment. The fire pops.

"Honest answer?" she says.

"I don't know."

"I know what it's like to wake up from a nightmare alone. Viktor never held me. When I cried in the night he told me I was disturbing his sleep."

I stare at her.

"Three years," she says quietly. "Not once."

"That's..." I don't have the word for it.

"Yes. It was."

"So you held me because you wished someone had held you?"

"I held you because nobody should go through that alone. Not even a rogue who bites people on the first day."

Something in my chest does a thing I don't have a name for.

"I saw them die," I hear myself say.

The words just fall out. I didn't decide to say them.

Elena doesn't speak. She just watches me, and somehow that's the right thing.

"The trapdoor. My mother screamed. My father didn't make a sound — he just went, like he'd already decided it was fine. And I was screaming so loud I couldn't hear anything else by the end."

"You were a child."

"I was sixteen. Old enough to fight."

"You couldn't have saved them."

"I know that." My hands drop into my lap. "I know what they did. Selling Pack secrets to Shadowpine — I know it was wrong. I know they deserved what they got." My throat closes around the next part. "But they were still mine. Even if they were monsters. They were still my parents."

(Elena)

His voice breaks on that last word.

Mine.

I know that word. Loving someone who doesn't deserve it. Viktor was cold and absent and when he died I still cried — not because I loved him, but because the loneliness that came after was so much louder than the loneliness before.

Rhydian has been alone in a way I never was. Not even close.

He's sitting in the corner of my bed shirtless and bandaged and trembling, eyes wet, fighting the tears with every muscle in his jaw.

"Let it out," I say.

"No."

"Rhydian—"

"I haven't cried since the day they died." His voice is ragged. "I'm not starting now."

I move toward him. Slow, one careful inch at a time, watching his face. He sees me coming and doesn't tell me to stop.

When I'm close enough I just open my arms.

"Can I hold you?"

"No."

I wait.

"Why do you even want to?" he asks.

"Because you need it."

"That's not a real reason."

"It's the only one that matters."

****Rhydian****

She's looking at me like I'm not what everyone's called me for four years.

Not a brat. Not a rogue. Not a traitor's son.

Just someone who's hurting.

I don't know what to do with that. I've been hard and mean and sharp for so long — it kept me alive, it kept people at a distance, and that was fine because distance was safe.

But I'm so tired.

Tired of the cave. Tired of the cold. Tired of waking up from that courtyard with nobody there.

I nod. Barely. Just a small movement of my head.

She doesn't grab at me. She just shifts closer and opens her arms and waits, and I lean into her like something finally giving way.

(Elena)

He falls against me like a tree coming down.

Face pressed into my shoulder, arms still at his sides, not hugging back — just collapsed, like he used up everything he had just getting here.

I wrap around him. One hand on his back, one cradling the back of his head. His hair is soft. His skin is fever-warm.

The first sob is almost silent — just his shoulders hitching once. Then again. Then it breaks open and he's really crying, ugly and gasping and shaking all the way through, face buried in my neck, tears hot against my skin.

His hands come up finally and grab fistfuls of my nightgown and hold on.

I pull him closer.

"There you go," I whisper. "I'm not going anywhere."

We stay like that a long time. Him crying, me holding, the fire crackling low. The moon moves past the window.

Eventually the sobs slow. His grip loosens. His breathing finds a rhythm.

He doesn't pull away.

"Elena," he mumbles into my neck.

"Hmm."

"Thank you."

I press my lips to the top of his head. Light, quick, almost without thinking.

"Sleep," I say. "I'm right here."

He doesn't argue. His body goes heavy against mine, and within minutes his breathing deepens and evens out completely.

I keep holding him anyway.

(Rhydian)

For the first time in four years, I fall asleep without fighting it.

And when I dream, there are no ropes. No trapdoors. No courtyard.

Just grey eyes. Warm hands. And the specific quiet of not being alone.

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat

The meeting place is a hollow between two dead trees, half a day's run from Elena's territory. Bare ground, heavy sky, clouds swallowing the moonlight whole. Nobody comes here. Nobody except people with things to hide.

Marcus arrived first. He stands with his arms crossed, elder's robe swapped out for plain black wool — no pack markings, no witnesses, nothing that says who he is. He's been waiting twenty minutes and his patience ran out ten minutes ago.

Then he catches the smell.

Shadowpine. Three of them, moving through the dark. The Alpha up front, two guards trailing behind like shadows.

Varek is a massive wolf of a man — shoulders wide as an axe handle, face crosshatched with old scars, one eye milky white and blind from a fight a decade back. The other eye is black and flat as a snake's and it finds Marcus immediately.

He doesn't smile. He never does.

"Elder." His voice is gravel and rust. "You called."

"We have a problem," Marcus says.

"We always have a problem. That's why you come crawling."

Marcus swallows the anger. He needs Varek. For now.

"Elena agreed to the marriage," he says flatly. "The rogue. She's bringing Rhydian in, and she's going to try to make something of him."

Varek's good eye narrows. "And that's a problem because?"

"Because if she succeeds, she'll be stronger than she's ever been. A female Alpha with a young, vicious mate at her side — the Pack rallies around that. I lose everything." Marcus steps closer, drops his voice. "She has to die. And the rogue has to take the blame."

Varek tilts his head, the blind eye staring at nothing while the other one stares through Marcus like he's made of glass.

"Why frame the boy? Why not just kill her and be done with it?"

"Because the Pack loves her. She dies without explanation, they tear the territory apart looking for who did it and eventually they find me." Marcus's jaw is tight. "But if it looks like her own new mate snapped and murdered her? They execute him without a second thought. The Alma line ends. The Pack falls apart. And I'm there to hold it together."

Varek is quiet. Wind moves through the dead branches above them.

"Cold man," Varek says finally. "Your own niece."

"My niece agreed to marry a rogue. She made her choice."

"You sure she doesn't suspect you?"

"She suspects me now. But suspicion isn't proof. By the time she has proof, she'll be dead."

Varek turns to his guards. "Leave us."

They dissolve into the dark without a word.

Just the two of them now. The traitor and the enemy Alpha, standing in a hollow between dead trees like they belong there.

"What do you need?" Varek asks.

"Three or four of your best. Wolves who can move without being seen. They hit Elena on a border patrol — make it look like a rogue attack gone wrong. But they leave something behind. A piece of Rhydian's clothing. A weapon with his scent on it. Something that points straight at him."

"And if the boy fights back?"

"He will. But he's half starved and feral and untrained. He's not the problem."

Varek scratches his scarred chin, slow and deliberate. "Sending my wolves into enemy territory to kill an Alpha isn't cheap, Marcus."

"Name your price."

"The eastern hunting grounds. The river stretch."

Marcus feels it like a punch. Those grounds are rich — deep deer population, clean water, high ground that matters strategically. Giving them away would cripple his pack for a generation.

But without Varek he never gets to lead at all.

"Done," he says, through teeth that barely part.

Varek grins, and it's worse than the chuckle — yellow teeth filed to points. "Good. Now tell me about the boy. What breaks him?"

Marcus thinks for a moment. "He's alone. Four years with no family, no pack, no one. Elena thinks she can reach him with softness. She's wrong — he's too broken for that. He bites the hand that feeds him. It's all he knows."

"So he won't protect her when it counts?"

"He might try. He'll fail."

"And Elena?" Varek's good eye glints. "What's her weakness?"

The answer comes without hesitation. "She's starving for warmth. Viktor was a cold man and she's been hollow ever since. That's the real reason she agreed to this marriage — she thinks she can turn the boy into something that loves her." Marcus's mouth twists. "She'll be distracted. Focused on teaching him, touching him, trying to build something. She won't see it coming."

Varek spits on the ground. "Dying for love. Stupid."

"Stupid. But useful."

Varek begins a slow circle around Marcus, boots crunching dead leaves, the blind eye catching nothing and the good one catching everything.

"Five wolves," he says finally. "My best. Silent and clean. They hit the border patrol in three days." He stops circling. Faces Marcus. "You get Elena on that patrol. You get the boy with her. And you make sure something of his is left at the scene."

"Already planned."

Varek moves close — close enough that Marcus can smell old blood on his breath. "This goes wrong, Marcus, and I'll feed you to my pack. Slowly."

"It won't go wrong."

"No. It better not." Varek turns and walks toward the dark where his guards disappeared, then stops without looking back. "One more thing."

"What?"

"The boy — if he somehow survives, bring him to me. I want to see the last Alma before he dies."

"He won't survive. Elena will be dead and the Pack will tear him apart themselves."

"Probably." Varek shrugs, already walking. "But if he does, I have uses for a young wolf with nothing left to lose."

Then he's gone. Swallowed whole by the night.

Marcus stands alone in the hollow. Heart going faster than he'd like. Palms damp.

He looks up at the sky — no moon, no light, no one watching.

Perfect.

The plan has been living in him for years. Since Viktor was still alive and Elena was still just an inconvenience. He fed Viktor the herbs himself — Varek sourced them, untraceable, the kind that make a healthy heart simply stop. He sat at that funeral and watched Elena cry and felt nothing but impatience.

Now it's almost done.

Three days. Elena on the eastern border. Rhydian beside her. Something of the boy's left in the blood.

He smiles — thin and cold and ugly.

Let her try to tame her brat. I'll burn them both.

The words sit in his mouth like ash and victory mixed together.

He walks back toward Pack territory, footsteps light, mind already turning over every detail. Behind him the hollow sits empty between its dead trees, bare ground and heavy sky and no witnesses to any of it.

But the plan is planted.

And in three days, blood will water it.

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat

(Elena)

The Pack hall is packed wall to wall. Every wolf who can stand has crowded in — benches full, doorways blocked, children sitting on parents' shoulders just to see. Even the cooks and stable hands abandoned their work.

They're here for the show.

An Alpha widow marrying a rogue. A boy who bit off an elder's fingers, standing at the altar like he's walking to his own execution.

Maybe he is.

I stand at the front beside the old stone altar where my parents were mated, where Viktor and I were mated. The moon symbol carved into the rock is draped with white cloth and dried flowers — someone's idea of making this look like a celebration.

It doesn't.

My dress is simple. Dark grey wool, fitted at the waist, falling to my boots. No veil, no jewelry except my mother's silver ring on my thumb. Hair pulled back tight, not a strand out of place.

I look like a warrior going to war.

Because I am.

The doors open across the hall and Rhydian walks in.

He's been cleaned up — hair brushed and falling in dark waves, black tunic with the sleeves rolled to his elbows, bandaged wrists hidden. He looks almost presentable.

But his eyes give him away completely.

Golden and wild, cutting left and right like a trapped animal clocking every exit. Jaw tight. Fists at his sides. He's terrified and furious about being terrified, and that combination is written all over his face.

The crowd parts for him. I catch whispered words as he passes — *young, dangerous, pretty, pity.*

He hears them too. His ears go red.

He stops in front of me. Close enough that I catch the soap they scrubbed him with, something sharp and clean — and underneath it his actual scent. Smoke and pine and something wild that soap couldn't touch.

We stare at each other. Nobody speaks.

Old Marta, the officiating elder — one of the few who didn't side with Marcus — clears her throat. "We are gathered under the moon's light to bind two wolves as one. Elena, Alpha of this Pack, and Rhydian, last of the Alma bloodline."

Rhydian's jaw ticks.

"The Moon Goddess blesses this union. May it bring strength, loyalty, and—"

"Get on with it," Rhydian mutters.

Someone gasps. Marta falters.

I don't react. I keep my eyes on his.

"Do you, Elena, take this wolf as your mate? To stand beside you, defend your Pack, share your den and your blood?"

"I do." Steady. Clear.

"Do you, Rhydian, take this wolf as your mate? To stand beside her, defend her Pack, share her den and her blood?"

Silence.

Marta tries again. "Rhydian?"

He looks at me. His throat moves as he swallows. The whole hall leans in.

"I'm not saying it." Loud enough for everyone to hear. "You can chain me and drag me here and put me in this stupid shirt, but I won't lie in front of your moon."

Gasps ripple through the room. Someone hisses.

I feel the temperature drop.

I step in close. Our chests nearly touching, voice low enough that only he catches it.

"You don't have to mean it. Just say the words. We both know what this is."

"A transaction," he says, and laughs — short and bitter. "You're buying a corpse for your bed, remember?"

"Say the words, Rhydian."

"No."

I keep my voice flat and quiet. "You want to embarrass me in front of my Pack? Fine. But I promise you, what comes after this ceremony will be ten times worse for you."

"Is that a threat?"

"It's a promise."

Five full heartbeats. The hall holds its breath.

Then he looks away first.

"Fine," he mutters. "I take her. Whatever."

Marta rushes forward before he can change his mind. "By the power granted by the Moon Goddess and this Pack, I declare you mates." She exhales. "You may kiss."

He doesn't move.

Arms crossed, mouth a flat line, eyes somewhere above my head. Ten seconds. Twenty. Someone in the back laughs nervously and the sound makes everything worse.

I feel every eye in the room. The pity settling in.

Poor Elena. Can't even get her rogue to look at her.

Something in me goes very cold and very still.

If he won't kiss me, I'll kiss him. And nobody in this hall will ever forget who runs things here.

I grab the back of his neck with both hands.

He's so caught off guard he doesn't react in time — eyes going wide, lips parting — and I pull his face down to mine and kiss him.

Hard.

This isn't romance. This is a claiming. A message to every wolf watching: *he is mine, whether he likes it or not.*

My mouth crushes against his, teeth scraping his lower lip, and I taste him — salt and smoke and something underneath that makes my wolf go very quiet and very alert.

He freezes completely. Hands hanging at his sides, breath caught in his throat, stiff as a board.

Then I bite his lip.

Not hard. Just enough to break skin.

Blood — hot and copper-sweet — spreads between our mouths, and something in him snaps loose. A low growl builds in his chest, not angry, something else entirely, and his hands come up —

Not to push me away.

To grab me.

His fingers find my waist and grip hard — almost too hard — pulling me flush against him, and then his mouth starts to move.

He kisses back like someone who has absolutely no idea what they're doing.

No technique, no finesse, nothing learned. He mashes his mouth against mine like he's trying to figure out a lock with no key. His teeth catch mine, he misses slightly and gets the corner of my lips, then my chin, then corrects back. It's clumsy and uncoordinated and a little bit of a disaster.

It's the most honest thing I've felt in years.

I slide one hand from his neck to his jaw and guide him — tilt his head slightly left, show him the angle. He follows immediately, adjusting without being told twice, and our mouths find each other properly this time.

Still rough. Still inexperienced. But better.

His tongue brushes my lower lip — tentative, like a question. I part my lips and let him in, and he makes a sound deep in his chest, a real groan, and pulls me closer until there is genuinely no space left between us.

I bite him again, softer. He shudders head to toe.

When I finally pull back, he looks wrecked.

Lips swollen and blood-red, eyes dark and unfocused, breath coming in uneven pulls. A thin thread of copper connects us for just a moment before it breaks.

I turn to the Pack before my own face can give anything away.

"My mate," I say. "The Alpha's husband."

The room erupts — cheers, clapping, stunned silence, all of it at once.

Marta starts to say something. "The ceremony is comp—"

"We're done." I take Rhydian's hand — he's still dazed enough that he doesn't argue — and pull him down the aisle.

The crowd parts. Whispers chase us out like smoke.

"Did you see her just—"

"He kissed her back—"

"He'll kill her in her sleep—"

I don't stop walking. Through the courtyard, past the training yard, straight to our quarters. I close the door behind us.

Rhydian stands in the middle of the room breathing hard, tunic wrinkled where I grabbed him, lips still wet, eyes wild.

"What," he says slowly, "was that."

"A wedding kiss."

"That was a war cry."

"Same thing."

He touches his lip. Looks at his fingers — blood — and wipes it on his pants. Then he looks at me, chest still rising and falling too fast, something working itself out behind his eyes.

"Teach me," he says.

"What?"

"To kiss. Properly." He waves a hand vaguely at his own mouth. "Not whatever that was. I want to know how to do it right."

I should say no. I should point him to his corner of the bed and end the night there.

Instead I step closer.

"Come here," I say.

He comes.

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat

(Rhydian)

The door is closed. The fire is burning low. The room smells like her — pine smoke and leather and that warm thing underneath that makes my wolf go restless in my chest.

Elena stands on the other side of the bed watching me. Grey eyes unreadable, dark hair still pulled back tight from the ceremony. The simple grey dress fits her in ways I keep telling myself not to notice.

I'm failing at that.

She catches me looking. Of course she does.

"See something you like?" No smile.

I look away. My face is hot. "No."

She doesn't call me a liar. She just walks around the bed — slow, deliberate, boots silent on the stone — and stops in front of me. Too close. I can smell her skin now, something clean underneath the leather and smoke, and my mouth actually waters, which is humiliating.

My legs find the edge of the bed and I sit down hard.

"You look scared," she says.

"I'm not scared."

"Your hands are shaking."

I look down. She's right. My fingers are trembling against my thighs like they belong to someone else.

"I don't know what to do," I hear myself say. The words come out rough and embarrassed and I can't pull them back. "I've never — I mean, I've been alone for four years. Before that I was a kid who never had to figure anything out for himself."

"You've never been with anyone."

"No."

She nods. Doesn't look surprised, doesn't look disappointed. Just patient, the way she gets when she's teaching me something.

"That's what this is for," she says.

"The elders made you do this."

"I could have refused. I didn't." She reaches down and pulls off one boot, then the other. They land on the floor with soft thuds. "You're not supposed to know anything yet. That's why I'm here."

I watch her fingers move to the belt at her waist and my throat goes completely dry.

"What are you doing?"

"Getting ready for bed."

"It's early."

"It's dark. We're married. This is what married people do."

She unbuckles the belt and lets it drop.

"We're not going to—" I swallow. "I mean, not tonight, right?"

"Eventually." She pulls the grey dress over her head in one clean motion and it pools around her feet.

I forget how to breathe.

She's standing in just a thin white undershirt. The fabric is practically nothing in the firelight — I can see the shape of her legs, the curve of her hips, everything the shadows aren't quite hiding. My mouth opens. Nothing comes out.

Elena doesn't look embarrassed. She stands there with her hands on her hips looking at me like I'm something she's still working out.

"Your turn," she says.

"For what?"

"Take your clothes off."

"No."

"Yes."

"I can't."

"You can. You're just scared."

I start to argue and then stop. Take a breath. "Maybe a little."

She steps closer. The hem of her shift brushes my knees and I can feel the heat of her through it.

"Just the shirt," she says, softer. "That's all. We go slow."

My hands are still shaking but I grab the hem of the black tunic and pull it over my head. The air hits my bare chest and I cross my arms without thinking, covering the scars the way I always do.

Elena takes my wrists and lowers my arms back down.

"Don't hide. I've already seen them."

"The light was low then."

"It's low now."

"Not low enough."

That small real smile appears for just a second. "It's never going to be low enough for you to feel okay about it. So we start anyway."

She steps back. Her fingers find the hem of her undershirt.

She lifts it. Slowly. An inch at a time.

Her stomach first — flat, muscular, a thin line of dark hair below her navel. Then her ribs, rising and falling with her breath. Then the underside of her breasts, round and full, and then she pulls the shift over her head and drops it and she's just—

She's naked.

All of her. The scars on her shoulders, the curve of her waist pulling in and flaring back out, the dark hair between her legs, her breasts heavy and soft with nipples tight from the cold air.

Or not from the cold.

I can't look away. I genuinely cannot make myself look away, and I don't try.

She doesn't cover herself. Arms at her sides, letting me look, completely unbothered by any of it.

"Watch," she says. "Then copy."

"Copy what?"

"Whatever I do."

I nod. My throat is closed.

She unbuckles my belt herself. Pulls it free. Then her fingers find the waist of my pants.

"Lift your hips."

I lift. She pulls everything down and off in one movement and suddenly I'm sitting completely naked on the edge of the bed while she stands in front of me in nothing but firelight. I should feel cold. I feel like I'm burning alive.

She looks at me the way she looked at my scars — not staring, just taking in what's there. Memorizing.

"You're beautiful," she says.

"What?"

"You heard me."

"No one's ever—" I stop.

"Then no one was paying attention."

She sits beside me and her thigh presses against mine, warm and real, and I feel my whole body lean toward her involuntarily.

"Watch," she says again.

She raises her hand and touches her own throat — fingertips light — then drags them down slow, between her breasts, over her stomach, stopping just above where her legs meet.

My breath comes out all at once.

"Your turn."

I lift my hand and touch my neck. My fingers are clumsy and too fast and completely wrong.

"Slower," she says. "Softer. Pretend it's me."

That changes everything.

I close my eyes. Imagine my hand on her throat. Her chest. Her stomach. My fingers slow down by themselves, the touch going lighter.

"Better," she whispers.

When I open my eyes she's watching me and her lips are parted.

"Keep going. Touch your chest, your stomach — whatever feels good. I'll do the same."

We sit side by side, both touching ourselves, both watching each other, and it's strange and clumsy and somehow the most real thing I've ever been part of.

She circles her nipple with one finger. I copy her. Mine hardens under my own touch and I make a small sound I wasn't expecting.

She makes one too — a soft exhale — and moves her hand lower. Her fingers part something wet and glistening and I genuinely cannot breathe.

"Your turn," she says.

I reach down and wrap my hand around myself — I'm so hard it almost hurts — and gasp.

"Not there," she says. "Here." She shows me again. "Feel your own heartbeat."

I find the spot at the base, press gently. My pulse is hammering there.

"Good. Now put your hand on me."

I look at her.

"Touch me," she says quietly. "Where I just touched myself."

My hand shakes the whole way. My fingers brush her thigh first, then slide inward.

She's hot. Wet. Soft in a way I have absolutely no framework for.

I freeze completely.

My whole body is shaking — the wanting and the fear and the not-knowing all happening at the same time with nowhere to go.

"I can't," I whisper.

"Yes you can."

"I don't know how."

"Then I'll show you."

She takes my hand and guides it to her breast instead, then tips my head down toward her.

"Open your mouth."

I open.

"Lean down."

My lips find her skin. Her nipple. Hard and soft at the same time in a way that doesn't make sense until it does.

"Gently," she says. "Like you're drinking something warm."

I close my mouth around her and suck. Too hard — she gasps sharp and I pull back immediately.

"Sorry—"

"No. That was good. Just softer."

I try again. Softer this time, and my tongue moves on its own, circling the tip without me deciding to do it.

Elena's hand slides into my hair. Her fingers curl.

"Yes," she breathes. "Like that."

I keep going. My jaw is tense, my rhythm is uneven, I catch her with my teeth by accident more than once — but every time I get it wrong she just adjusts my head with her hand, shows me where to go, and never once pulls away.

Then she makes a sound.

Low, from deep in her chest. Rough and completely real. Not a lesson sound. Not something she's performing. Just — pleasure. Because of me. Because of something I did.

I'm harder than I've ever been in my life and my body presses against her thigh and I know she can feel it and she says absolutely nothing about it, just keeps her hand in my hair and lets me keep learning.

After a long time she pulls my head back.

Her eyes are dark. Lips parted. She looks like I've done something right.

"Good boy," she murmurs.

My ears burn all the way down my neck. I don't look away.

"More?" I ask.

That small real smile.

"More," she says. "But not tonight."

She lies back and pulls the blanket over both of us. I lie beside her, body still humming, still wanting, the wanting sitting in my chest with nowhere to go.

But she's warm. And close.

And for the first time in four years, I'm not alone when I close my eyes.