

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat - Chapter 61[1,510 words]

Marcus was already awake when the sky started to change.

He'd been awake for most of the night, which wasn't unusual, but this was a different kind of wakefulness. Not the working kind, where his mind ran logistics and position and timing. Just — awake. Present. Sitting at the edge of his cot in the temporary shelter his second had arranged after the Pack house custody fell through, listening to the camp.

A hundred and ninety-eight wolves.

He'd counted them himself the previous evening, walking the perimeter the way he always walked perimeters. Varek had sent the additional force overnight — not because Varek had changed his mind about Marcus specifically, but because Varek had done his own math and decided the eastern corridor was worth one more attempt with proper numbers behind it.

Two hundred, approximately.

Marcus had more wolves than he'd ever commanded in his life.

He stood up and pulled on his coat.

Gret was at the command position when Marcus arrived, which meant Gret had also been awake for most of the night, which meant the Shadowpine second was either genuinely invested in this or smart enough to be present when his general arrived.

Probably the latter.

"Weather's clear," Gret said. "Good visibility at the border."

"I know." Marcus looked at the map. He'd looked at this map so many times he could close his eyes and navigate it by memory. Eastern approach, northwest secondary, the inner gate that Rhydian had repositioned — he knew about that, he'd had a scout confirm it two days ago. "The inner gate positioning."

"Covered," Gret said. "We're coming in three columns. The repositioning doesn't change the angle enough to matter at full force."

Marcus ran his finger along the eastern approach. Then the secondary. Then the point where the two lines converged at the main hall.

The long table.

The chair.

He pulled his hand back.

"How are the wolves?" he asked.

Gret looked at him sideways. It wasn't the question he expected. "Ready," he said, after a pause. "They've been waiting three days."

"I know they've been waiting." Marcus folded the map. "That's not what I asked."

Gret was quiet for a moment. "They're ready," he said again. "They want it done."

That was fair. Waiting was its own kind of pressure. You could prepare wolves for a fight and you couldn't always prepare them for the time before the fight, where the imagination did things that the actual engagement rarely matched.

Marcus walked to the edge of the camp.

The border was dark still, the sky beginning to lighten at the far eastern horizon in the way it did before dawn — not light yet, just the suggestion of it, the grey that came before color. He could see the Mountain Pack's gate lights from here. Not well. Just enough.

He thought about Elena.

He'd been trying not to think about Elena specifically, which meant he'd been thinking about her constantly, the particular logic of avoidance. He thought about the war room, the maps she'd covered in charcoal notations, the particular way she stood at the head of a table when she was telling people something she needed them to believe. He thought about the council hall after Viktor died, when she'd sat in the Alpha's chair for the first time and every elder in the room had waited for her to look uncertain.

She hadn't.

He thought about the ceremony.

He'd heard about it through Gret's intelligence network — the co-Alpha declaration, both of them kneeling, the ring. He'd listened to the report with his hands folded on the map table and his face doing the thing it did when he was receiving information he'd already predicted.

He'd predicted it.

He hadn't predicted how it would feel to be right about it.

The boy had been in this Pack for three months. Three months, and Elena had given him something she'd never given Viktor in three years, something she'd never — Marcus stopped that thought and left it stopped.

He turned from the border.

The camp was waking up.

The sound of it was particular and distinct from the regular morning sounds of a camp — there was a quality to the movement, a direction to it, the way two hundred bodies organizing toward a specific event sounded different from two hundred bodies organizing toward a day. He'd heard it before, years ago, border skirmishes he'd authorized as an elder, sending other wolves into positions he'd mapped and knowing they'd hold or they wouldn't.

He'd never been in front before.

He walked through the camp.

Wolves looked at him as he passed. Not all of them — some were focused inward, doing whatever private preparation the next hour required. But enough. The Mountain Pack wolves he'd brought, the ones who'd come because they still believed the old argument about territory and bloodline and legitimate succession. The Shadowpine wolves who were here for the eastern corridor and nothing more personal than that.

He stopped near the eastern formation.

A young wolf — seventeen, maybe eighteen, Mountain Pack originally, someone who had been loyal to Marcus's faction since before the arrest — was checking his weapons with the careful attention of someone who'd been trained to do it correctly and was doing it correctly to manage his nerves.

"Steady," Marcus said.

The wolf looked up. "Yes, Elder."

Marcus started to correct him — *General* — and stopped.

He looked at the boy's face.

Young. Genuinely young. The kind of young that hadn't finished becoming anything yet.

He thought about Rhydian at seventeen, in a courtyard, screaming for his parents while the elders held him back. He thought about Cade at seventeen, calling Rhydian a whore in a training yard and then running laps when he was put on the ground and handed back up. He thought about Pip in the barracks, staring at the floor.

He walked away from the formation.

Gret fell into step beside him.

"We move in thirty minutes," Gret said. "Columns in position. Scouts confirm the eastern patrol is standard rotation." He paused. "They don't know we have two hundred."

"No," Marcus said. "They don't."

"The message Varek sent them yesterday — the one requesting negotiation — that's bought us the window. They'll be expecting a response before any movement."

Marcus had drafted that message himself.

He'd drafted it and read it back and felt nothing in particular about its function, which was to create the appearance of good faith where none existed, to buy the hours needed to position properly.

He'd drafted it and sent it and he'd thought about Elena reading it, doing her math, deciding whether to believe it.

He hoped she hadn't believed it.

He didn't examine that thought.

"Full formation in twenty-five minutes," he said.

Gret went to give the order.

Marcus stood at the camp's center.

The fire from the previous night had burned to coals. The sky was lighter now at the east — not dawn yet, but close. The particular grey that came before it, when you could see shapes but not colors, when everything was outline rather than detail.

He put his hand in his coat pocket.

His fingers found the folded paper.

Elena's reply to his last letter. He'd kept it. He didn't know exactly why. It was one word and he knew what it said and keeping it made no practical sense.

He left it in his pocket.

Two hundred wolves behind him.

The eastern corridor ahead.

The Pack house beyond that, and the long table, and the chair that had never been his.

He thought: *she's going to be ready for this.*

He thought: *she's been ready for this for months.*

He thought: *I trained her.*

He walked to the front of the formation.

Two hundred wolves arranged in three columns behind him, armor on, weapons checked, the particular focused silence of a force that has been waiting long enough and is done waiting.

He looked at the border.

At the gate lights visible through the trees.

At whatever was on the other side of them — Elena and her co-Alpha and her pregnant belly and her wolves who had howled for three days through a siege and were still standing.

The sky was lightening.

Almost dawn.

He turned to face the formation.

Two hundred wolves looked back at him.

He'd been building to this for thirty years. The patience and the architecture and the small quiet moves and the thirty years of being furniture. All of it had been pointing here. To this clearing. To this moment.

To this choice.

He opened his mouth.

"No mercy," he said.

His own voice surprised him.

Not because it was loud — it wasn't particularly loud, it didn't need to be, two hundred wolves in a silent clearing heard him fine. Not because it was hard to say.

Because he meant it.

And because somewhere underneath the meaning, something else was present that he couldn't name and didn't try to.

The formation moved.

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat - Chapter 62[1,497 words]

(Rhydian)

The eastern gate came down at first light.

Not with a single hit — it took three, coordinated, the kind of organized force that tells you the wolves on the other side have been waiting for this specific moment and saved something for it. The sound traveled through the settlement like a physical thing, and by the time it reached where I was standing at the inner crossroads, every wolf on the perimeter was already moving.

Brennan's voice over the noise: "Eastern breach. Three columns. They're splitting."

Three columns meant the eastern approach wasn't the only push. Marcus had learned from the first skirmish — he wasn't going to let us concentrate at one point. He was going to make us choose.

"Northwest fence," I called to Tomas. "Take six."

Tomas went without asking questions, which by now was just how we worked.

I moved toward the eastern yard.

The next forty minutes were not something I can describe in order.

That's the thing about a real fight — the kind that covers ground, that moves through multiple positions, that involves more bodies than you can track at once. It doesn't have a narrative. It has moments. Things you see clearly and things that are blur and things you find out about afterward.

What I know is this.

The eastern column came through the breach and hit the first defensive line hard. Brennan held it — I could hear him holding it, his voice constant and specific, directing wolves the way he directed formations in the yard except with actual stakes attached to every call.

The second column split northwest, which is where Tomas went.

The third column came straight through the middle.

Toward the Pack house.

Toward Elena.

I was already running.

I don't know how many wolves I went through between the inner crossroads and the Pack house yard.

I know the number stopped mattering somewhere around the fifth one because the math of individual engagements stops working when the pressure is continuous and what you're actually doing is creating enough space to keep moving rather than finishing anything cleanly.

My left side held. That surprised me. Senna's clearance, the full rotation she'd signed off on that morning — it held under everything I asked of it, which was more than she would have approved of if she'd seen the list.

I didn't think about that. I didn't think about much except the Pack house yard and what was between me and it.

Cade appeared on my left at some point.

I don't know where he came from. He was just suddenly there, moving alongside me, and I glanced at him and he looked back and neither of us said anything because there wasn't anything to say.

We moved faster.

The Pack house yard was loud.

Wolves everywhere, the particular chaos of a defensive position that's being tested from multiple angles, Brennan's secondary force holding the outer perimeter and Elena's position somewhere in the middle of it all.

I found her by sound.

I knew her voice. I'd have known it from twice this distance. She was calling positions, directing wolves, and even through everything her voice had that quality it has when she's in full Alpha mode — not loud for the sake of loud, just carrying, clear, going exactly where it needs to go.

She was on the far side of the yard.

I started moving toward her and a Shadowpine wolf cut across my path and I dealt with that and kept moving and another one tried to come at my right and Cade was there before I had to be, which meant something about Cade that I filed and would think about later when there was time for thinking.

I could see Elena now.

She was fighting two wolves, which was two wolves and she was handling it, her footwork the thing I'd watched in the yard every morning, every lesson, every sparring session. Clean. Efficient. Not the kind of fighter who wasted anything.

One of the two went down.

She turned to the second.

And then a third came from her left — wrong angle, outside her sightline, the kind of approach that happens in the chaos of a large fight when you can't track every direction at once.

She moved.

Not toward the wolf. Away from it.

I'd seen her move in a hundred drills and a handful of real fights. I knew what she looked like when she was moving to engage and I knew what she looked like when she was moving to evade.

This was neither.

Her arm came up and across — not a defensive position, not a fighting stance. Instinctive. Protective.

Her hand went to her stomach.

Just for a second. Half a second. The automatic gesture I'd watched her make a hundred times, the one that happened without her thinking about it.

But in a fight, half a second in the wrong position is a different thing than half a second anywhere else.

The third wolf's strike caught her at the shoulder.

She went down to one knee.

The sound that came out of me wasn't a word.

I don't know what it was. I know it wasn't quiet and I know the wolf closest to me backed up a step before I reached him, which meant it was loud enough and whatever was in it was clear enough that it registered even in the middle of everything.

I covered the ground between us in the time it took her to get her feet back under her, which she was already doing when I arrived — she was already pushing back up, already reassessing, already fighting, which was exactly who she was and also not the point.

"I'm fine," she said, before I reached her.

"I know," I said.

I didn't know.

I finished the third wolf. Fast. Not clean — I didn't have the patience for clean, not in that moment — and then I turned back and she was fully upright and her shoulder was doing something that she wasn't letting herself show on her face.

"The shoulder," I said.

"Bruised," she said. "Not broken."

"You went down—"

"One knee," she said. "I went to one knee and came back up. I'm fine, Rhydian."

I looked at her face. At her hands, which she'd dropped to her sides in the way she does when she's deciding not to touch something.

Her right hand.

The one that had gone to her stomach.

"Is she—"

"Fine," Elena said. Firm. The word landing like a door closing. "She's fine. I'm fine. We need to—" She looked past me at the yard. "There are still wolves in the yard."

She was right. There were still wolves in the yard.

I knew that.

But I stood there for one more second and I looked at her and she looked back at me with those grey eyes that were completely present and completely steady and underneath the steadiness something that wasn't steadiness at all, something that was only there for a second before she locked it back down.

"Rhydian." Her voice was quiet. Just for me. "I need you to trust that I know my own body."

I held her gaze.

"Okay," I said.

"Okay?"

"Okay." I turned toward the yard. "But after."

"After," she said. "Yes."

We moved into the yard together.

Cade was ten feet away managing two wolves at once and doing it messily but doing it. Brennan's voice from the eastern position sounded closer than it had a few minutes ago, which meant the eastern line was advancing, which meant the push was working.

I watched Elena out of my peripheral vision.

She was fighting clean. Her shoulder was compensating — I could see it, the tiny adjustment she made when she raised that arm, the way she favored the right side by a degree that most people wouldn't catch.

I caught it.

I stayed close.

Not because she needed me to. Because she was protecting something more important than either of us and she couldn't protect it and fight simultaneously and we both knew it and neither of us was going to say that out loud in the middle of the yard.

That was fine.

That was enough.

The fight continued.

And I kept close, and she kept moving, and the Pack held the yard, and somewhere in the noise and the cold and the dawn light I heard Brennan shout something that sounded like a position call and then —

Then his voice again.

Different.

"Marcus," Brennan called. "He's at the main gate. He's asking for Elena directly."

The yard went a different kind of quiet.

I stopped.

Elena stopped.

She looked at me across two feet of frozen ground and the whole weight of the last three months sat between us in a single breath.

"Don't," I said.

She was already walking toward the gate.

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat - Chapter 63[1,664 words]

(Elena)

I heard Rhydian say *don't* behind me.

I kept walking.

Not because I didn't hear him. Not because the word didn't land. But because Marcus at the main gate asking for me specifically was not a thing I could send someone else to handle, and we both knew it, and the reason he said *don't* had nothing to do with whether it was the right call.

It was the right call.

That didn't make it easier to walk toward.

The main gate was forty meters from the Pack house yard.

Forty meters of settlement I'd been running for a year, stone paths I knew by feel, the gate that had the creak in the east hinge that nobody had fixed. Wolves on both sides of the path, some fighting, some already finished, and I moved through all of it with the particular focus that kicks in when there's a destination and the destination is the only thing that matters.

Four Shadowpine wolves were between me and the gate.

I didn't plan for four. I planned for however many were between me and the gate, which turned out to be four, and I dealt with each one in the order they presented themselves, which is the only way you deal with four wolves when you're alone and moving and the shoulder that took the strike in the yard is already doing the thing where it tells you it's manageable while quietly reserving its opinion.

The first one came from my right, which was the wrong side to come from, because my right is my strong side and I haven't had a weak right in a decade. He went down fast.

The second one was smarter. Waited for me to be mid-recovery from the first, came low, which was the correct read on where I'd be vulnerable. I got my arm up and it cost me something in the shoulder and I paid it and finished the engagement anyway.

The third and fourth were together, which meant somebody had given them basic tactical instruction or they were smart enough to figure it out themselves. I moved between them before

they could close the angle, which is the only move that works against two, and it required more speed than the shoulder appreciated and less space than I had and it worked.

Four wolves.

Forty meters.

I reached the gate.

Marcus was standing at the outer side.

Not in full engagement — he was at the gate line, where you stop when you're asking for something, where wolves stand when they're requesting rather than attacking. Two of his guards flanked him. Beyond them I could see what was left of his force pulling back, consolidating, and that told me something about how the fight in the yards was going.

His face, when he saw me, did something I hadn't expected.

Relief.

Brief. Gone almost immediately. But it had been there.

I stopped at the gate.

We looked at each other through the bars.

"You're hurt," he said.

"You noticed."

"Your shoulder." He looked at it. "The compensation in the last forty meters."

"You've been watching me walk for thirty years," I said. "You know what compensating looks like."

"Yes." He looked at my face. Then past me, at the settlement, at whatever he could see of the fight from where he was standing. "It's over," he said.

"Is it."

"My column on the northwest — Tomas turned them at the fence line. The eastern push is stalled at the inner yard." He said it without heat. Just assessment. "Two hundred wolves and I'm losing."

"Yes," I said.

He was quiet for a moment.

"I need to talk to you," he said.

"You're talking to me."

"Properly." He looked at the gate. "Without bars."

I looked at his guards. Two wolves, Shadowpine, standing with the flat patience of people waiting for an outcome they're not invested in.

"Send them back," I said.

He turned to them. "Go."

They went.

I put my hand on the gate latch.

"Elena." Rhydian's voice, behind me.

I turned.

He'd followed. Of course he had — I'd known he would, I'd felt him the entire forty meters, the specific quality of his presence which I've been able to feel from further than this for months. He was three meters back, standing in the path, and his face was doing the thing it does when he's decided something and is waiting to see if I'm going to argue with the decision.

"Stay here," I said.

"I'm not—"

"You are. Stay here." I held his gaze. "If this is a trap, you're the response. I need you outside it."

He looked at Marcus through the gate. Then at me.

"Thirty seconds," he said. "I give you thirty seconds before I'm through that gate."

"Give me five minutes."

"Two minutes."

"Rhydian—"

"Two minutes, Elena. Then I'm through."

I looked at him for one more second. Then I turned and opened the gate and stepped through it.

Marcus looked older on this side of the bars.

That was the thing I noticed first. I'd been seeing him through distance and strategy and the particular filter of knowing what he'd done, and somehow all of that had kept him at a scale he didn't actually occupy. He was seventy years old and he had a cut above his eye that was drying and he was standing in the cold dawn light looking at me like someone who had come to the end of a very long road and found something different from what he'd expected.

"Say what you have to say," I told him.

"I—" He stopped. He looked at the ground. Then back at me. "I don't have a speech," he said. "I thought I would. I've been talking to myself for three months and when I get here I don't have—" He stopped again.

I waited.

"The baby," he said.

I kept my face still.

"I didn't—" His jaw moved. "The needle. I didn't think about it that specifically. I told myself I was thinking about outcomes and architecture and what was logical and I didn't—" He pressed his mouth together. "I didn't let myself think about the baby specifically."

The gate was at my back. Rhydian two minutes away. The fight going on somewhere behind me.

"Why are you telling me this," I said.

"Because you deserve to know I know what I did." He held my gaze, and for the first time since all of this started there was no pleasantness there, no warmth, no performance of any kind. Just him. Whoever that actually was. "And because I—" He stopped.

That was when the blade came.

Not from Marcus. From the left.

One of his guards hadn't gone as far as instructed, or had waited specifically for this, or had their own order from someone I hadn't accounted for. I caught the movement in my peripheral vision half a second before it arrived and I turned and got my arm up.

The blade didn't get the angle it wanted.

What it got was my forearm.

The cut was long. Not deep — the angle was wrong for deep, I'd moved enough — but long, running from just below my elbow to near my wrist, and the cold air hit it immediately.

I heard Marcus shout something.

I didn't hear what because I was already dealing with the wolf who had thrown the blade, which required all of my attention for the next several seconds and got it.

The wolf went down.

I stood over him with my forearm bleeding steadily onto the frost and I looked at Marcus.

He was very pale.

"Elena—"

"I'm fine," I said.

"Your arm—"

"Is fine." I looked at him steadily. My arm was not, by objective standards, fine. But it wasn't going to stop me and the distinction mattered. "Was that yours?"

His face told me before he spoke. The specific horror of someone watching a consequence they didn't engineer arrive anyway.

"No," he said. "That was not mine."

I believed him.

I didn't have time to do anything with that information because the gate behind me was opening and Rhydian came through it with the expression of someone who had counted to one hundred and twenty and found the number insufficient.

He reached me in four steps.

His hand closed around my wrist above the cut, not over it, applying the right pressure without being told how. He looked at the blood. Then at me. Then at Marcus.

"You're done," he said to Marcus.

His voice came out very quiet.

Which, as I'd learned, was the dangerous kind.

"Rhydian—" I started.

"He's done," he said again. "Whatever this was." He looked at me. "Brennan can take him from here."

Marcus didn't argue.

That was the thing.

He just — didn't argue.

He looked at me one more time with that face I'd been trying to read for three months, the one that was finally, actually showing me something real.

"I'm sorry," he said.

Two words.

I looked at him.

And before I could answer — before I could decide what I even had to say to that, what it was worth, what I owed it — Brennan appeared at the gate with four wolves behind him, and the sound of the battle behind us was getting quieter, and my arm was still bleeding, and Rhydian's hand was steady around my wrist.

"Alpha," Brennan said. "The western column is surrendering."

I looked at the western yard.

Then at Marcus.

Then at Rhydian's face, which was watching mine.

"Take him," I said to Brennan.

And I turned and walked back through the gate with Rhydian's hand on my wrist and Marcus's *I'm sorry* sitting in my chest like something I hadn't decided what to do with yet.

The fight wasn't finished.

But something else was.

I just didn't know what to call it yet.

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat - Chapter 64[1,502 words]

(Rhydian)

Elena went through the gate.

I counted.

Thirty seconds. Sixty. Ninety. The two minutes I'd promised her stretched past the point of comfortable and I stood at the gate with my hand on the latch and I did not go through it because she'd asked me not to and I was still, after everything, trying to be the person who trusted her judgment when she had more information than I did.

One hundred and twenty seconds.

The gate opened.

I went through.

She was on the other side with blood on her forearm and Marcus three meters away looking like he'd aged ten years in two minutes, and I crossed the distance between us and I put my hand around her wrist above the cut and I looked at the blood.

Then at Marcus.

Then at Elena, who said "Rhydian" in the specific tone that meant *don't do what you're about to do.*

"He's done," I said.

She said something else.

I didn't hear it properly because Marcus was looking at me with that tired face and I was doing the particular thing where my body gets ahead of my brain and my brain is catching up and deciding whether to agree.

It agreed.

For now.

I stayed where I was and I kept my hand on Elena's wrist and I watched Brennan take Marcus toward the inner settlement and I felt the particular shape of an unfinished thing sitting in my chest where something finished should be.

Elena looked at her arm.

"Senna," she said.

"After the western column," I said.

"The western column is surrendering." She looked at me. "Which means now."

"In a minute."

"Rhydian—"

"Give me a minute," I said.

She looked at my face.

She gave me the minute.

The western column had come down to eleven wolves by the time the surrender was formal.

Not because we'd killed the rest — Brennan's eastern push had been cleaner than that, more containment than destruction, the way Elena runs things when she has enough control to choose. Most of Marcus's force had pulled back or been secured. The settlement was ours again in the way it had been before this started, which was a specific kind of relief that came with a specific kind of cost attached.

I walked the perimeter while Brennan handled the formal process.

The settlement looked like itself and didn't look like itself at the same time. The eastern gate was down — that would need to be addressed. There were marks on the stone paths and the fence sections and the inner yard walls that hadn't been there yesterday. Wolves I knew, moving carefully, checking on each other.

Corvin had a cut across his jaw that he was pressing a cloth against.

"You okay?" I asked.

"Fine," he said. "Looks worse than it is."

"Go to Senna."

"I'm waiting until the priority cases—"

"Go to Senna," I said. "That's not a suggestion."

He went.

I kept walking.

And somewhere between the inner yard and the northwest fence line, between checking positions and accounting for wolves and doing the hundred small things that happen in the aftermath of something large — I stopped.

Because Marcus was there.

Not free. Brennan had two wolves with him, one on each side, and Marcus was moving in the direction of the holding structure, which was the correct direction, which was where he should be going.

But he stopped when he saw me.

Brennan's wolves stopped too.

I looked at Brennan. He looked at me.

"A minute," I said.

Brennan held my gaze for a moment. Then he stepped back, and his wolves stepped back, and Marcus and I were standing in the northwest path with about three meters of frozen ground between us and nobody else close enough to matter.

Marcus looked at me.

He looked at the ring on my hand. The co-Alpha ring that Elena had put in my palm in the hall two days ago. He looked at it and something moved across his face that I couldn't fully read.

"The settlement is still standing," I said.

"Yes." His voice was flat. Not the warm elder voice, not the pleasantness. Just his voice.

"Two hundred wolves," I said. "And we're still standing."

"I noticed."

"Because of her," I said. "Because of this Pack. Because of wolves who had every reason to run and didn't."

Marcus was quiet.

"You spent thirty years here," I said. "You knew every one of them. Their names, their families, their rotation schedules, their weaknesses." I held his gaze. "You used it against them."

"Yes," he said. Just that. Like he was done finding ways around it.

"I've been here three months," I said. "I didn't know anyone. I came here in chains and I bit the first hand that reached for me." I paused. "And I would burn myself to the ground before I let anything happen to this place."

He looked at me.

"I know," he said.

"Then why—" I stopped. Started again. "You had it. You had everything you said you wanted. You were here, you were part of it, you were inside thirty years of everything this Pack built. And you chose—" I couldn't finish that sentence the way I wanted to without the anger coming with it.

I breathed.

"You chose to destroy it," I said. "Instead of belong to it."

Marcus looked at the ground.

When he looked back up, his face was doing something I hadn't seen from him before. Not the tired thing, not the resigned thing. Something older and rawer than either.

"You're right," he said. Simply. Without qualifying it.

I stared at him.

He looked at the ring again. "She chose well," he said. "Badly timed, wrong reasons at the start, wrong methods for everything that came after." His jaw moved. "But she chose well."

I didn't say anything.

"Rhyidian Alma." He said my name like he was reading it off a charter. "I've been watching you for three months. From the council hall and the perimeter and the holding room." He paused. "You're the thing I was supposed to be. I think that's what I couldn't—" He stopped.

The two of us stood in the northwest path while the settlement cleaned itself up around us.

"I ruined your life," he said. "Your parents. The exile. All of it connects back to decisions I made or supported or looked away from." His voice was completely level. "I know that."

"You tried to kill my mate," I said. "Twice. You tried to kill my child."

"Yes."

"You sent a hundred wolves at us this morning."

"Yes."

"So your apology—" I felt it rising, the thing I'd been keeping in the functional box all morning, the box that had *deal with this later* written on it. "Whatever you told Elena at the gate. Whatever *I'm sorry* is supposed to do after all of that—"

"Nothing," Marcus said quietly. "I know it does nothing."

I stood there.

And he straightened.

Something changed in him. The resigned quality dropped away and underneath it was something different – the thing that had been running this whole show, the thirty-year architecture, the patience and the calculation and the specific quality of a man who had decided long ago that he was owed something and let that decision make every other decision for him.

It surfaced.

Just for a moment.

"You think this is finished," he said. Quiet. Almost conversational. "You think because your Pack is standing and I'm in custody and you've got the ring and the mate and the child that it's finished."

I looked at him.

"You came from nothing," he said. "A cave. An exile. A traitor's son with nothing but instinct and three months of someone else's patience." His eyes found mine and stayed there. "This Pack will never fully accept you. Not the way they accepted bloodlines. Not the way they accepted history." He tilted his head. The old gesture. The elder's assessment. "You know that. Deep down, you know that."

I looked at him.

He held my gaze.

"You ruined my life, boy," he said. The quiet voice. The certainty underneath it. "And I know it. And I'll carry it." He paused. "But you think you've won something here. You think you've arrived somewhere." He looked at the ring. At me. "You haven't. You've started something. And starting things is the easy part."

He let that sit.

Then, softer, like the last thing he had that was true enough to say out loud:

"Now I'll end it."

The words landed.

Not as a threat, exactly. More like a promise that had been waiting for the right moment to be spoken.

I stared at him.

Brennan's wolves stepped back in.

And I stood there with the ring on my hand and Elena's blood still on my palm and Marcus's words sitting in my chest in the exact shape of something I didn't know how to argue with yet.

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat - Chapter 65[1,446 words]

(Elena)

Senna had just finished wrapping my arm when Brennan came through the infirmary door.

His face did the thing.

I was off the table before he spoke.

"What," I said.

"Rhydian." He was already turning back toward the corridor. "Northwest path. Marcus."

I was past him before he finished the sentence.

The northwest path was thirty meters from the infirmary.

I covered it in twenty seconds, which was faster than the arm appreciated and slower than I needed, and I came around the corner of the barracks and I saw them.

Rhydian and Marcus.

Standing in the path with Brennan's two wolves a careful distance back, and whatever had been said between them was over because the quality of it had changed, the particular stillness of two people who have arrived somewhere past words.

Marcus said something.

I couldn't hear it from here. Just the shape of it, the quiet delivery, and whatever it was it landed on Rhydian's face in a way that I'd only seen a handful of times. The thing underneath all the learning and the trust and the three months of choosing — the older thing, the one that came from seventeen and a courtyard and four years alone. The thing that doesn't argue, just decides.

I was moving before I fully understood what I was moving toward.

"Rhydian," I said.

He didn't look at me.

That was how I knew.

"Rhydian." Louder now, pulling on the co-Alpha voice, the one that carries. "Fall back."

Brennan's wolves shifted. Brennan himself appeared at my elbow, tracking the situation.

Marcus looked at me when I said it. Something moved across his face — something that recognized the order and understood what I was trying to stop.

Rhydian still didn't look at me.

He was looking at Marcus with the specific quality of someone who has made a decision before he knows he's made it, the way the body sometimes gets there first, and I knew this look, I'd seen it on his face at the gorge approach when he looked east and I'd seen it in the training yard when Cade said the wrong thing, and both times it had gone somewhere different depending on which version of him showed up.

I didn't know which version was here right now.

"Fall back," I said again. Clear. Direct. "That's an order."

"Elena." His voice was flat. Quiet. Not defiant — something more complicated than defiant. "Give me a minute."

"I gave you a minute."

"Give me another one."

"Rhydian—"

"He said something." He still wasn't looking at me. "To Elena at the gate. Whatever it was. Whatever *I'm sorry* was supposed to do." He stopped. "I want to hear it from him."

"You already heard—"

"I want to hear it from him."

The path was very quiet for a moment.

Marcus was watching us. The both of us. The exchange. And something in his face had shifted from whatever had been there thirty seconds ago — the calculation, the architecture — into something that looked, briefly, like witnessing.

"Rhydian." I moved closer. Not to Rhydian — to a position where he couldn't not see me without actively looking away. "Look at me."

He looked at me.

His jaw was set. His eyes were doing the thing where they were very present and very decided and somewhere underneath that was the younger thing, the scared thing, the thing that doesn't let itself be scared because being scared was how you died in a cave.

"Whatever he said," I told him. "I need you to not let it be the thing that makes you do something you can't take back."

He stared at me.

"He told you that you haven't won," I said. "That's what that face is. He told you something about the Pack not accepting you and he said it in the specific way Marcus says things that go straight to the part of you that's been waiting for someone to confirm your worst fear."

Something shifted in his expression.

"And he's wrong," I said. "But I need you to hear that from me later, somewhere that isn't here, when we can actually have that conversation properly." I held his gaze. "Right now I need you to fall back."

A long silence.

"Elena," Marcus said.

I looked at him.

"Let him ask what he needs to ask," Marcus said. Quiet. Not strategically — just said, the way old men say things when they've stopped having anything left to protect. "I'll answer honestly. I'm done with everything else."

I looked at Marcus.

Then at Rhydian.

Rhydian's jaw loosened by a fraction.

"Two minutes," I said. "Both of you."

I stepped back.

Not far. I stayed at the edge of the path, where I could hear and where Brennan could hear and where I was close enough to matter if the two minutes became something different.

Rhydian looked at Marcus.

"Did you mean what you said," he asked. "About ending it."

Marcus was quiet for a moment. "I meant that your work isn't finished. That holding something is harder than winning it." He paused. "I meant that this Pack still has wolves who followed me because they believed the argument. And they're here, in this settlement, and they're going to need

somewhere to land." He looked at Rhydian steadily. "You're the co-Alpha. That's part of your work now."

"That wasn't a threat," Rhydian said.

"No," Marcus said. "It wasn't."

Rhydian was still.

I watched him processing it. The thing Marcus had actually said, separated from the thing his fear had made it mean.

"And the Pack not accepting me," Rhydian said.

"Some of them won't," Marcus said. "That's true. I won't pretend it isn't, because you'd know I was lying and it would confirm everything you're already afraid of." He paused. "But I watched you in that barracks two days ago. The sound that came out of that settlement when Elena spoke." He looked at Rhydian's ring. "They howled for both of you. That's not nothing."

Rhydian looked at the ground.

Then back up.

"Okay," he said.

Just that.

Brennan's wolves stepped back in. Marcus went with them. Quietly. Without anything else.

And Rhydian stood in the northwest path and I watched his shoulders drop by a degree and then I was walking toward him because I couldn't not, because the conversation was over and he was here and so was I.

He looked up when I reached him.

"He wasn't threatening you," I said. Quiet.

"I know." He rubbed the back of his neck. "I know that now."

"But you heard it as—"

"I heard it as confirmation," he said. "Which is different from a threat and harder to argue with." He looked at me. "You knew what it was before I did."

"I've known what Marcus's sentences mean for thirty years," I said. "You'll get there."

Something in his face shifted.

"Two minutes," he said.

"What?"

"You said two minutes and you meant it." The corner of his mouth moved. Not a full smile. Just the shape of one. "You gave me two minutes and stood right there the whole time."

"I told you to fall back," I said.

"You did."

"You ignored me."

"I did," he agreed.

I looked at him.

"We're going to have a conversation about that," I said.

"I know."

"Later."

"Yes."

I put my hand on his arm. He covered it with his.

"Come on," I said. "Senna has things to say about your side and you haven't eaten since before dawn."

He came.

We walked back through the settlement together, and the northwest path was quiet behind us, and Marcus was somewhere ahead in Brennan's custody, and the settlement was still standing and so were we.

But I kept thinking about what Marcus had said.

Some of them won't.

And the wolves I'd been watching since the arrest. Ferris. The two junior elders who'd raised their hands at the war council. The ones who had been quieter than the others after the declaration.

They were here.

Still here.

And the fight that had happened with blades this morning was going to happen again without them, in council sessions and corridor conversations and the slow grinding work of a Pack that had been fractured and was trying to decide whether to heal.

That was the work.

That was what Marcus meant.

I looked at Rhydian walking beside me, ring on his hand, side still bandaged under his jacket.

I didn't say any of that yet.

But somewhere in the back of my mind, the part that never stopped running calculations, a new set of numbers had begun.

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat - Chapter 66[1,279 words]

It happened in the holding room.

A small stone room with a fire that had burned low and a chair that wasn't designed for comfort and a lock on the door that was good quality but not complicated.

Marcus had twenty-two years of this settlement's institutional knowledge in his head.

Including the lock.

Brennan found the two guards outside the holding room at the third hour after dawn. Not dead. Unconscious, which was the tell — if Marcus had wanted them dead, they'd be dead. He'd wanted a head start.

By the time Brennan's alert went through the settlement, Marcus had eight minutes.

Rhydian had been coming out of the infirmary when Petra ran past him toward the eastern position. He'd caught her arm. She'd given him four words.

Marcus. Holding room. Gone.

He'd let go of her arm and he'd gone.

He found Marcus in the storage corridor behind the main hall.

Not running. Marcus wasn't built for running, and even if he had been, he was seventy years old and this was his territory in the deepest sense, the kind of knowing that didn't require hurry. He

moved through the corridor with the economy of someone who had walked this specific route in his mind for days and was executing the walk now, not improvising.

Rhydian came in from the eastern end.

Marcus turned.

They were twenty feet apart.

"You didn't have to run," Rhydian said.

"I didn't run." Marcus looked at the distance between them. "I walked."

"Semantics."

"Accuracy." Marcus's voice was completely level. "If I'd run, you wouldn't have caught me."

"You're not gone yet."

"No," Marcus said. "I'm not."

Neither of them moved for a moment.

The corridor smelled like cold stone and old cedar from the storage shelves. A single lamp bracket on the wall, burning low. Outside, somewhere, Brennan's wolves were spreading out through the settlement.

"You said you were done," Rhydian said.

"I said I was done with deception," Marcus said. "I said I'd answer honestly." He looked at Rhydian steadily. "I didn't say I was done."

"Those mean the same thing."

"They don't." Marcus took one step forward. Not aggressive — measured. "I have spent thirty years in this settlement being what the situation required. Patient. Cooperative. Necessary." He took another step. "I am done being patient. I am done being cooperative." His jaw moved. "What I am not done with is this."

Rhydian held his ground.

"You have the ring," Marcus said. "You have the title. You have Elena and the child and the Pack howling your name." He took another step. "And I have nothing. So tell me why I should stand in a room and wait for a trial that will take everything formal and correct and strip whatever dignity remains and put it on a table for the council to vote on."

"Because that's what Elena wants," Rhydian said.

"Elena wants justice," Marcus said. "I know what Elena wants. I've been watching her want things for thirty years." He was ten feet away now. "What I'm asking is why *you* would enforce it."

Rhydian watched him.

He'd learned to watch Marcus. In the council hall, in the holding room through the bars, in the northwest path when everything had been said that was going to be said. He'd learned the difference between Marcus building toward something and Marcus revealing something.

This was both.

"Because she asked me to," Rhydian said.

Marcus stopped.

Something moved in his face. Whatever he'd been building toward was rerouted by that specific answer, the simplicity of it, and for a second Rhydian saw it — the thing underneath all the architecture and the patience and the thirty years of being necessary.

Loneliness.

Not tragic loneliness. Not self-pitying loneliness. The clean, structural kind that comes from spending decades being essential and never being *chosen.*

"She asked you," Marcus said. Quiet.

"She asked me," Rhydian said. "So I'm here."

Marcus looked at the ring on his hand.

Then he moved.

Not toward the door, not retreating — forward, and he was faster than he had any right to be at seventy years old, faster than Rhydian had calculated for, and the corridor was narrow enough that the geometry worked against Rhydian's advantages and before he could compensate Marcus had the lamp bracket arm, pulled it free from the wall, and used it.

The impact caught Rhydian at the shoulder — the wrong shoulder, the left one, the one Senna had cleared forty-eight hours ago and that still registered force differently than the right.

He went back into the shelving.

Cedar boxes scattered.

He was up in two seconds. It took two seconds because the shoulder needed one to recalibrate and his brain needed one to finish being surprised.

Marcus had a knife.

Small, dark-handled, the kind you keep for utility rather than display. It had been in his coat and he'd had it the whole time, through the northwest path conversation, through Brennan's custody.

Of course he had.

"I don't want to do this," Marcus said. He was five feet away, the knife extended, not threatening — presenting. The difference was in the wrist. "Move out of the corridor."

"No," Rhydian said.

"Rhydian—"

"I said no."

Marcus moved.

What came next was fast and contained and brutal in the specific way of fighting in small spaces where there's no room for the techniques that work in yards. Rhydian blocked the first entry but took the second on his forearm, the flat of the blade rather than the edge because Marcus, even now, wasn't trying to cut him. The third attempt he almost had — got inside the angle, nearly had Marcus's wrist — but the shoulder wasn't cooperating the way it should and Marcus used that, felt it in the moment Rhydian hesitated.

The wall came up fast.

His back hit it. Marcus's forearm came across his chest. The knife found his throat.

Not cutting. Pressing.

Just present.

Both of them were breathing hard.

Rhydian looked at Marcus's face from four inches away. The cut above his eye from the battle, the lines the morning had put in him, the specific exhaustion of someone who had been running on empty since long before any of this started.

"Move," Marcus said. His voice was quiet. Not victorious — tired.

Rhydian didn't move.

He felt the blade at his throat. The pressure of it. He knew exactly what it would take for Marcus to use it and he knew Marcus knew it too and he stood in that knowledge and he breathed.

He thought about Elena.

Not the fear — he'd felt the fear and registered it and moved past it in the first three seconds. He thought about her specifically. Her voice counting to ten. The way her hands pressed his shoulders down, waiting for the muscle to release. The particular thing she'd said in the bedroom about three weeks ago, about how the space between instinct and choice was where everything real happened.

You can feel it and stay.

He stayed.

He didn't push back. Didn't try to disarm or break the hold or do any of the things his body was offering as options. He just stood in the corridor with a knife at his throat and he waited.

Marcus's forearm was shaking slightly.

Rhydian noticed it.

Not from effort — the position wasn't physically demanding. From something else.

He waited.

Marcus's breathing changed.

One breath, two, three, and on the third one something in the forearm pressure changed, not reducing but shifting, the quality of it different.

Rhydian held very still.

Patience, he thought. *She taught you patience.*

He waited.

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat - Chapter 67[1,684 words]

(Rhydian)

The knife stayed at my throat.

I counted Marcus's breaths.

Three. Four. Five.

The forearm pressure wasn't increasing. That mattered. A man who had decided to use the blade would have used it by now — the hesitation wasn't weakness, exactly, it was something more complicated, the particular pause of someone who has arrived at a destination and isn't sure it's where they meant to go.

I knew that pause.

I'd felt it myself, four years ago, standing outside a cave with another wolf's blood on my hands and the specific coldness of having done something I couldn't take back.

I stayed still.

"You could have left," I said. Quiet. Not provoking. Just filling the silence. "Through the storage corridor, out the northeast exit, into the forest before anyone—"

"I know," Marcus said.

"But you didn't."

"No."

"So you came this way," I said. "The way you knew I'd be coming from."

He didn't answer.

But the forearm didn't move either. It stayed where it was, and his breathing stayed at that particular rhythm, and the lamp on the floor threw both our shadows against the shelving.

"You didn't come this way to escape," I said.

A long silence.

"No," Marcus said finally.

"Then what."

He looked at me.

Whatever answer he had didn't make it to words. It stayed behind his eyes in the way things do when they're too complicated or too true or too late to say.

I'd been waiting for a sign.

What I got was a sound.

Small. Sharp. Coming from the eastern end of the corridor.

A rock.

Hitting the stone floor about ten feet from where Marcus was standing, bouncing twice, rolling to a stop near the shelving.

Marcus turned.

Instinct. Pure and automatic, the way the body responds to sudden sound without asking the brain first.

One second. Maybe less.

I moved.

My hand closed around his knife wrist — the left one, not the right, the one that had been doing most of the work against the shoulder injury and was slightly slower because of it. I pulled it down and back and his grip changed to compensate and in the change the knife shifted.

The small hunting knife was in my other hand.

I didn't take it from him — I'd had it since the storage shelves when he'd knocked me into the cedar boxes, when one of them had scattered and I'd caught what fell out of it in the same motion I used to get back on my feet. He hadn't seen it. Nobody had seen it. I'd been holding it against my leg for the last two minutes waiting.

Patience.

I drove it forward.

Not the throat — that's not where I aimed, whatever came out of my mouth later. I aimed for the shoulder, the right one, the clean incapacitation that Brennan had told me about in the third week of training sessions, the strike that stops a wolf without the aftermath.

But Marcus turned faster than I calculated.

He'd heard the rock but he'd also heard me move, and thirty years of Pack politics had kept his reflexes sharper than they had any right to be, and he twisted toward me at the exact wrong moment.

The blade found the left side of his neck.

Not the throat. The side. The soft place above the collarbone where the angle catches.

He went down.

Not all at once. He went down the way things go down when they've been standing for a very long time and finally find the floor — not fast, not crumpling, just a gradual settling, like the weight had gotten too much to manage upright.

I went with him.

Both of us on the floor of the storage corridor with the cedar boxes scattered around us and the lamp still burning and his blood on my hand.

He was looking at the ceiling.

Breathing. Still breathing — I checked, my hand at his chest, feeling it rise and fall. Shallow but present. The wound was bad but not immediately. Not yet.

"Marcus," I said.

His eyes moved to me.

"Stay still," I said. "Brennan's—" I looked toward the eastern end of the corridor where the rock had come from. "Senna."

"Here." Elena's voice, from the eastern entrance.

I looked up.

She was standing there with a second rock in her hand that she hadn't needed to throw, and Senna was two steps behind her with the medical kit, and Brennan was coming through the western end of the corridor at a run.

Elena looked at Marcus on the floor.

At my hand.

At the knife.

Her face did something complicated and quick and then went to the specific place it goes when she's managing something in the moment that she'll process later.

"Senna," she said.

Senna was already moving past her.

I shifted back to give her room, and Senna dropped to her knees and she started working with the particular focus she has when a situation is urgent and she's already run the math, and I stood there in the storage corridor with blood on my hand and the lamp throwing shadows and Elena two steps away.

I looked at her.

She looked at me.

"The rock," I said.

"You needed a second," she said.

"How long were you—"

"Long enough." She looked at my hand. At the blood on it. Back at my face. "Are you hurt."

"No."

"Your shoulder—"

"Is fine." I looked at my hand. "Elena."

"You're fine," she said. Quietly. Certain. "You're fine."

I looked at Marcus on the floor. Senna's hands moving. Brennan arriving, assessing, giving instructions to the wolf behind him.

"I didn't mean—" I started.

"I know."

"He turned. The angle—"

"Rhydian." She stepped forward. Her hand came to my arm, below the blood. "I know."

I held her gaze.

She held mine.

And something settled. Not the situation — the situation was Senna working on Marcus in a storage corridor and Brennan managing the aftermath and the whole settlement still running on battle adrenaline. The situation was unresolved and loud and complicated.

But Elena's hand on my arm.

That settled.

I breathed.

"He said something," I told her. "In the corridor. Before you—" I stopped. Organized it. "He said he didn't come this way to escape."

She was quiet.

"He came this way knowing I'd be coming from that direction," I said. "He came this way on purpose."

She looked at Marcus. At the floor. At whatever she was thinking that I could see moving behind her grey eyes but couldn't fully read.

"He's going to live," Senna said, without looking up. "The angle was—" She paused. "He's going to live."

Nobody said anything for a second.

"Keep him stable," Elena said.

"I know how to keep someone stable," Senna said.

Elena almost said something. Didn't.

She looked at me again.

"Come outside," she said.

"I should—"

"Brennan's here. Senna's here." She looked at my hand. "Come outside."

I went.

The settlement was in early afternoon light by the time we got to the outer yard. The fighting had been over for hours but the settlement still had that quality it gets after something big — everyone moving with slightly too much purpose, too aware of each other, the particular aftermath energy that doesn't settle until you sleep on it.

Elena stopped near the east fence.

The same fence Cade had been training at for weeks. I'd repositioned wolves at this section the night before the battle. I knew every board in it.

She turned to face me.

"He came to you on purpose," she said. Not a question.

"Yes."

"Because he wanted it to end in the settlement." She pressed her lips together. "Not in the forest. Not at the border. Here."

I looked at her.

"He built this place," she said. "Thirty years." She looked at the Pack house. The hall. The long table visible through the window. "He couldn't leave it the way he came in."

I thought about that.

"You don't have to make sense of it tonight," she said. "What happened in there."

"I know."

"But you're going to want to," she said. "Because that's who you are." She looked at me steadily. "And that's okay. Just—" She paused. "Just not alone."

I looked at her.

"Not alone," I said.

"That's the whole deal," she said. "That's what this is."

She held out her hand.

Not for support — she wasn't steadying me, I wasn't unsteady. Just — out. Offered.

I took it.

We stood at the east fence in the afternoon light with the settlement working around us and Marcus alive in the storage corridor and the battle finished and the aftermath beginning, and I held her hand and I didn't say anything for a while.

She didn't say anything either.

That was enough.

That was, I'd learned, almost always enough.

After a while she said, "Senna is going to have opinions about the shoulder."

"Yes."

"You ignored her clearance parameters today."

"Technically I operated within the—"

"Rhydian."

"Within approximately eighty percent of the—"

"Rhydian."

"Yes," I said. "She's going to have opinions about the shoulder."

Elena's hand tightened on mine by a fraction.

I felt it.

"Stay close tonight," she said. Quiet. Not a request — just a fact being stated.

"Where else would I be," I said.

She looked at me.

And the settlement breathed around us, and the light was pale and cold and real, and whatever came next — the trial, the council, the slow fracture-work of putting a Pack back together after everything it had been through — whatever came next was waiting.

But right now.

Just this.

Just her hand.

Just the fence.

Just the afternoon light that didn't care what we'd been through and kept coming anyway.

And then, from inside the Pack house, Brennan's voice carrying through the window:

"Elena. He's awake. Marcus is asking to speak."

She looked at me.

I looked at her.

Neither of us moved for a second.

"Together," she said.

And we went in.

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat - Chapter 68[1,687 words]

(Elena)

Marcus was propped against the infirmary wall when we got there.

Senna had moved him from the storage corridor — cleaner space, better light, the things you need when someone is losing blood and you're trying to change that outcome. He was upright but barely, the specific kind of upright that requires a wall to maintain, and the bandaging at his neck was white and tight and already doing what it needed to do.

He looked small.

That was the first thing. After everything — the thirty years, the architecture, the two hundred wolves — he looked like an old man propped against an infirmary wall in a settlement he'd spent his whole life trying to own.

His eyes found me when I came through the door.

"Elena," he said.

His voice was rough. Senna had warned us it might be permanent, depending on what the wound had done to the tissue. It came out like something that had traveled a long distance.

I pulled the chair from against the far wall and sat in it. Not across from him dramatically, not standing over him. Just — sat. At his level.

Rhydian stayed in the doorway.

"You asked to speak," I said.

Marcus looked at Rhydian. Then back at me. "You came together."

"Yes."

He seemed to think about that for a moment. Then he looked at the bandaging at his own neck, just a glance, and looked away.

"The eastern grounds," he said. "The arrangement with Varek."

"I know about the arrangement."

"Varek won't honor it," he said. "Not now. Not without me as the functional point of contact." He paused to breathe. The breath cost him something. "The agreement was personal. It doesn't transfer."

"What are you saying," I asked.

"I'm saying Varek wanted the territory," Marcus said. "He used me because I was available and useful. Without the leverage I provided—" He stopped. Breathed again. "He has no strategic reason to continue pressing your border."

I looked at him.

"You're telling me the war is over," I said.

"I'm telling you it was over the moment they pulled back yesterday," he said. "The two hundred wolves were a last arrangement. Varek gave them to me because it cost him little and the potential gain was the corridor. Now the corridor isn't available and I'm—" He looked at his hands. "No longer in a position to deliver anything."

The infirmary was quiet.

Rhydian, in the doorway, hadn't moved.

"You could have sent this through Brennan," I said.

"Yes," Marcus said.

"But you asked for me."

He was quiet for a moment.

"I wanted to see it," he said. "You. Both of you." He looked at Rhydian. Then at me. "I wanted to see what it looked like from here."

I held his gaze. "What does it look like."

"Like it was always going to be this," he said. "The two of you. From the first council session when you agreed to the marriage and I thought—" He stopped. "I thought you'd break it in three weeks. Break him or be broken by him." He almost smiled. It was a pale thing, barely there. "I was wrong about that."

"Yes," I said. "You were."

He looked at the window. At whatever the afternoon light was doing outside.

"Viktor," he said.

I waited.

"I told myself it was necessary," he said. "For years I'd been telling myself that. Necessary, logical, the only solution available given what I knew about him and what he was and what he would have done to this Pack given time." He paused. "I think the truth is I was just tired of waiting."

The room was very quiet.

"I know," I said.

He looked at me.

"I've known for a year," I said. "I had no proof. But I knew."

"Yes," he said. "I know you knew."

We sat with that.

It wasn't forgiveness. I wasn't going to offer forgiveness in an infirmary because he was wounded and asking for it, and he wasn't asking for it, which was the thing I kept coming back to. He wasn't asking for anything. He was just — saying things. True things. Out loud, in the room, with me and Rhydian as witnesses.

Maybe that was what he'd needed all along. A room where the truth could exist without strategy wrapped around it.

"I'm tired," he said.

"I know," I said.

"Elena." He looked at me directly. Fully. The way he must have looked at everything before he decided to cover it in pleasantness and patience. "You're going to be extraordinary. You already are." A pause. "He is too. In ways I didn't calculate for."

I didn't say anything.

"That's not comfort," he said. "I'm not trying to comfort you. I'm just—" He stopped. He looked out the window again. "It's the truest thing I have left to say."

Rhydian made a small sound from the doorway.

I glanced at him. He was looking at Marcus with a complicated expression that I didn't try to read fully. Some things belonged to him alone.

I looked back at Marcus.

He was still looking at the window.

And then, quietly, without drama, without anything that announced itself — his breathing changed.

Senna was at the wall beside him in three seconds. Her hands went to the bandaging, to his pulse, to the sequence of things she checks when a situation has shifted. I stood. Rhydian came through the doorway.

"Senna," I said.

She didn't answer.

Not because she was ignoring me. Because she was working. Her hands were moving with that particular focused speed that I'd learned meant something was happening that she was trying to stop.

I watched her work.

I watched her work for a long time.

And then she stopped.

She sat back on her heels.

Her hands came to rest on her knees.

She looked at me.

I looked at Marcus.

He looked like he'd looked at the window. Peaceful wasn't the right word — that was too simple, too soft for someone who had been what he'd been. But settled. Like the weight was gone.

"Elena," Senna said, very quietly.

"I know," I said.

I don't remember the next part clearly.

Not because I wasn't present. I was present for all of it — the infirmary, Senna's hands, Rhydian's voice saying something I didn't fully catch, the specific sound of wolves outside being told what had happened moving through the settlement like a wave.

Shadowpine left.

I know that because Brennan told me, and because the noise from the eastern border that had been present in the background for three days went quiet. Just — went quiet. Between one hour and the next, the pressure from the east disappeared, the way Marcus had said it would.

The border held.

I know that too.

What I don't clearly remember is the moment my knees stopped working.

I was in the outer yard. The settlement was doing the thing it does after something enormous — quiet, collective, the specific sound of a community processing something at the same time. I was walking. I know I was walking because I'd been doing it continuously for what felt like days, and Senna had said something about the arm earlier and I hadn't listened properly and the arm was—

The arm was warm.

Too warm.

I looked down at it.

The bandaging Senna had put on in the infirmary after the gate fight was dark. The cut had been long, Senna had said it was manageable, but manageable and managed were different words and I'd been using the arm as though it were fully functional and—

The yard tilted.

Not actually. I knew it wasn't actually tilting. It was the other thing — the thing where your body has been running on something other than reserves and the something runs out, and the world goes briefly sideways while your body makes a case for horizontal.

I went down to one knee.

Just one. I caught myself. One hand on the frozen ground, the arm screaming when I put weight on it, and I stayed on one knee with my vision doing things I didn't appreciate.

"Elena."

Rhydian's voice. Close. He'd been close this whole time — I'd felt him the whole afternoon the way I always feel him, that specific awareness.

His hands found me before I could say anything.

Both of them, at my arms, careful of the left one, and then he was down on one knee too, right in front of me, and his face was right there and it was doing the thing.

"I'm fine," I said.

"You went down."

"One knee," I said. "I went to one knee and—"

"Elena."

"I'm—"

"Stop saying you're fine," he said. Quiet. Very quiet. "Please just — stop saying you're fine."

I looked at him.

His face was completely unguarded. All of it — the fear and the relief and the three days of everything sitting right there with nothing managed about it.

"Okay," I said.

He got his arm under mine. The right side. Careful.

He didn't carry me. He let me stand, let me do the work, just kept his arm where it was so the work wasn't entirely mine. Which was, I'd learned, the specific version of *I've got you* that worked for me. Not taking over. Just being there.

We made it two steps.

And then my vision went white at the edges in a way that was not negotiable and my legs made their final decision and I went down properly this time, all the way, and the last thing I was aware of before the white got louder was Rhydian's arms around me, catching me before the ground did, holding on.

"Senna," he said. His voice was tight. The tightest I'd ever heard it.

"I've got her," Senna said. Somewhere close.

"Is she—"

"I've got her," Senna said again. Steady. "Rhydian. I've got her."

And then there was just the white, and the cold ground somewhere far below me, and Rhydian's arms, and nothing else for a while.

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat - Chapter 69[2,239 words]

(Rhydian)

I didn't feel the distance between the outer yard and the infirmary.

Not because it was short — it wasn't, it was the length of the settlement, past the training yard and the barracks and the inner gate that still had marks on it from this morning. I felt none of it. I was aware of my legs moving and Senna somewhere at my left and Brennan's voice behind me saying something about clearing the path, but none of it registered as distance.

Elena's weight in my arms registered.

That was all.

She was lighter than she should be. Not actually lighter — she was the same weight she'd always been, solid, real — but the particular limpness of unconscious changed the math of it in a way I wasn't prepared for. She'd always had presence even when she was still. The still-and-present was

something I'd learned, catalogued, come to rely on in the same way I relied on the fire being there in the morning.

This wasn't that.

"Rhydian." Senna's voice. Right beside me. "Pace."

"I'm pacing."

"You're running."

I slowed down.

It cost me something to slow down. Every instinct I had said *fast, faster, get her there faster* and I knew Senna was right that jostling wasn't helping and I slowed down anyway and I hated every reduced step.

"The baby," I said.

"I know," Senna said.

"Is she—"

"I won't know until we're inside." She didn't sugarcoat it. That was the thing about Senna — she'd never once told me something was fine when she didn't know if it was fine. "So let's get inside."

We got inside.

They made me wait outside the door.

Senna and one of her assistants, and the door closing, and me in the corridor with the particular quality of nothing to do.

I stood at the wall opposite the door.

My hands were shaking. I noticed this the way you notice things that are happening to someone else — at a remove, clinically, the information arriving separately from any response to it. My hands were shaking and there was blood on the right one that I hadn't cleaned off yet and I pressed it flat against the wall and held it there.

Cade appeared at the end of the corridor.

He looked at me. At the closed door. At my hands.

He didn't say anything. He walked to the wall and stood on the other side of the door and put his back against it and crossed his arms and just — was there.

I didn't say anything either.

We stood like that for a while.

"She's going to be fine," Cade said eventually.

"I know," I said.

"Senna's—"

"I know."

He was quiet.

Then: "I've never seen you scared before."

I looked at him.

He wasn't saying it as an observation about weakness. He was saying it the way you say something when you're trying to understand the shape of a person you thought you knew, and you've just been given new information.

"Get used to it," I said.

He looked at the door. "Is that what love is?"

I thought about that.

"Part of it," I said.

"The terrible part?"

"Most of it," I said. "Yeah."

He absorbed that.

Brennan came around the corner, checked the situation, checked my face, and went back the way he came without saying anything. That was the right call. Brennan always made the right call about when to speak and when not to.

The door stayed closed.

I don't know how long I stood in that corridor.

Long enough for the light through the window at the end to change from afternoon to early evening. Long enough for Cade to bring me water twice, the second time insisting with the particular expression he'd developed over the past month that meant he'd learned that expression from Elena specifically.

I drank the water.

At some point Petra appeared and said something about the Shadowpine withdrawal being confirmed at all three border points. I heard the words and said something appropriate back and filed it in the part of my brain that was handling everything that wasn't the closed door.

The settlement was quiet.

Not the battle quiet, not the before-something quiet. A different kind. The specific quiet of a place that has been through something and is sitting with it, processing collectively, the way a Pack does when the shared weight has to go somewhere.

I stood at the wall.

And I thought about the day she'd put the ring in my palm.

The way she'd looked at me on the stone marker. Both of us on one knee, level, and she'd said *equal* like it was the only word that mattered and she'd meant it in the way she meant everything — completely, without reservation.

I thought about the corridor outside the barracks when she'd told me I'd been co-Alpha since I walked into the war room and read the map before anyone asked.

I thought about the hot spring.

The bark tea. The first time she let me hold her hand without the teaching structure around it. The way she'd kissed me back at the ceremony with the whole Pack watching and then pulled back and her forehead dropped to mine and she'd said *hi* and I'd said *hi* and none of it had been anything but us.

I thought about the kick.

The small, specific, absolutely real pressure against our joined hands in the bed with the ceiling crack going northeast to southwest.

The door opened.

Senna came out.

I pushed off the wall before she'd fully cleared the doorframe.

Her face was — not unreadable. Senna's face had never been fully unreadable, not to me, not after months of watching her assess things. It was tired. It was the face of someone who has done work and the work is finished and now there's the after.

"The arm," she said.

"What about the arm."

"The blood loss was more than I'd have liked." She looked at me steadily. "She was running on less than she should have been for most of the afternoon. The pregnancy means her blood volume is already doing more work than usual, and adding—" She stopped. Reorganized. "She's stable."

I breathed.

"The baby," I said.

"Also stable." Senna held my gaze. "I want to be clear with you that stable means the situation is not actively dangerous. It doesn't mean I'm without concern. She needs to stay in that bed for at least two days and she needs to eat properly and she needs—" Senna looked at the door and back at me. "She needs someone to enforce that, which historically has been a challenge."

"I can enforce that," I said.

"I know you can." Something moved in her face. The closest thing to warmth that Senna allowed herself in clinical settings. "She's awake. She's asking for you, which I anticipated, which is why I came out quickly."

I looked at the door.

"Two days," Senna said. "In the bed. Both of you, ideally — you're not exactly at full capacity yourself."

"I know."

"I mean it, Rhydian."

"I know, Senna."

She stepped aside.

I went through the door.

Elena was propped against the infirmary pillows.

Not sitting up properly — she didn't have the energy for properly, I could see that from the doorway. Half-up, head against the wall, the particular way she holds herself when she's running on less than she'd like but won't admit it.

Her left arm was freshly bandaged. White linen, precise, Senna's work.

She looked at me when I came in.

I crossed the room.

I pulled the chair up to the side of the bed and I sat in it and I took her right hand in both of mine and I held it and I pressed my forehead down to the back of it and I stayed there.

She didn't say anything.

I felt her other hand come to the back of my head. Slow. Her fingers in my hair the way they'd been in the early weeks when I woke from nightmares — the specific gentleness of it, unhurried, no destination.

Something in my chest came undone.

Not all at once. Slowly. The way things come apart when they've been held too tightly for too long and the hands finally relax.

I didn't try to stop it.

I'd been in the corridor for hours. I'd been holding the shape of functional for hours because there was no other option, because the corridor required it and Cade was there and Petra came with reports and I was the co-Alpha and co-Alphas didn't sit down on infirmary corridor floors and come apart.

But there was nobody here except her.

And she was alive.

And her hand was in my hair.

And I was done.

The sound that came out of me wasn't quiet. It wasn't dignified. It was the specific sound of someone who has been managing something enormous for hours and has arrived at the exact moment when the managing ends and the feeling begins.

I cried into her hands.

Her fingers kept moving through my hair.

She didn't tell me it was okay. She didn't say I'm fine again — she'd heard me in the yard when I asked her to stop saying that, and she remembered, because she always remembered things like that.

She just kept her hand in my hair and let me.

After a while she said, very quietly: "I heard you in the yard."

I lifted my head.

My face was a mess. I knew that. I didn't do anything about it.

"What did you hear," I said.

"When I went down." She looked at me. Her grey eyes were present, fully present, none of the edges that unconsciousness leaves in faces. She was here. She was completely here. "You said something."

I thought about the yard. About the moment her legs gave out. About the specific quality of the world going wrong in a very small amount of time.

I hadn't said anything. Or I hadn't meant to. But I might have.

"What did I say," I asked.

"Don't you die," she said.

I looked at her.

She looked back at me.

"That was it?" I asked.

"That was it," she said.

I breathed.

"I meant it," I said.

"I know you did." She turned her hand over in mine and held on. "I'm not planning to."

"Good." I held her hand. "Because I have a very specific list of things that still require your input."

"Such as."

"The crib joinery," I said. "The council trial for the Shadowpine arrangement. Ferris and the two junior elders who raised their hands." I paused. "Cade asked me a question today that I didn't have a complete answer to and I think you might."

"What question?"

"What love is," I said.

She was quiet for a moment.

"What did you tell him?"

"That it was mostly terrible," I said.

Something moved through her face. The almost-smile, the real one, the one that belonged to no one else.

"You're not wrong," she said.

"He's seventeen," I said. "He deserved a more complete answer."

"Give him time," she said. "He'll find out."

I looked at her.

At the bandaged arm. At the pillow behind her head. At the specific reality of her alive and present and holding my hand in the infirmary at the end of the longest day.

"Two days," I said.

"Senna already—"

"Two days in this bed," I said. "Both of us. I'm not going anywhere."

She looked at me. "The settlement—"

"Brennan."

"The border reports—"

"Brennan."

"Rhydian—"

"Elena." I held her gaze. "Two days."

She was quiet.

Then: "The crib still needs—"

"Two days," I said. "Then the crib."

She looked at the window. The evening light had gone the particular deep blue of winter dusk.

"Okay," she said.

I pulled the chair closer.

She made room for me on the bed without being asked, shifting over, and I sat on the edge of it beside her and she put her head against my shoulder and I put my arm around her carefully, away from the bandaging.

Her hand found my chest. Over the heartbeat. The place she always puts it.

I covered it with mine.

We sat.

Outside the infirmary the settlement was quiet in the way settlements are quiet after something enormous — not empty, not peaceful, just resting. Catching its breath.

And I sat in the infirmary with Elena against my shoulder and her heartbeat under my awareness and the specific warmth of being exactly where I needed to be.

I thought about the crib.

I thought about the joinery on the right side that still needed fixing.

I thought: *tomorrow.*

I thought: *we have tomorrow.*

That was, I was learning, the whole thing. The whole gift of it.

Tomorrow.

And then from somewhere in the corridor outside, Cade's voice — trying to be quiet and not quite managing it:

"Is she — are they — is it okay in there?"

And Brennan's voice, lower: "Yes. Give them a minute."

"How many minutes—"

"However many they need," Brennan said. "Come away."

I heard them go.

Elena's hand tightened against my chest.

"He's a good kid," she said quietly.

"Yes," I said. "He is."

We didn't say anything else for a while.

We didn't need to.

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat - Chapter 70[1,906 words]

(Elena)

I woke up to firelight.

Not the infirmary lamp — that had been turned low at some point during the night. The fire in the small grate that Senna kept burning in the corner, and the particular quality of early morning dark that came before the grey.

Rhydian was asleep.

In the chair. He'd started in it the night before and somewhere between my second round of Senna's bark tea and whatever hour it was now, he'd folded himself into the specific uncomfortable architecture of someone who had refused to leave and refused to take the other bed and was now paying the physical price of both decisions.

His head was tilted to one side.

Arms crossed, which I suspected was keeping him upright rather than warm. One foot extended toward the bed, close enough that his boot was touching the frame.

Even asleep he was staying close.

I watched him for a while.

My arm ached. The bandaged one — a specific deep ache that Senna had said was normal, the kind that came from the tissue doing the work of knitting itself back together. It wasn't sharp. Just present. Something I was aware of the way you're aware of weather when you're inside.

The baby was quiet.

I put my free hand on my stomach, the automatic gesture, and I waited and there was the small flutter of something — not a kick, not as definite as the kick, but something. Like being checked on from the inside.

I breathed.

Yesterday had been the longest day of my life and I'd had some long days. I lay in the infirmary bed in the early dark and I took inventory of everything it had contained. The battle. Marcus in the corridor. The storage room. The yield and then the silence from the eastern border. The outer yard, and the ground coming up, and Rhydian's voice saying *don't you die* like it was the only thing that mattered to say.

It had been the only thing that mattered to say.

I looked at him in the chair.

At the ring on his hand, catching the firelight. At the side that still had bandaging under his shirt from the stitches that Senna had told him not to compromise and that he had compromised repeatedly and thoroughly. At his face, which in sleep had the quality it always had — younger, softer, the twenty-year-old sitting just under the surface of everything the last three months had built.

I reached over.

My right hand, the good arm, across the small distance between the bed and the chair.

My fingers found his face.

Just that — the back of my fingers against his jaw, light enough not to wake him, just contact.

He was warm. He was always warm. It had been one of the first things I'd noticed, that particular warmth, the night I'd held him through a nightmare and felt his skin under my hands and thought about how long it had been since I'd felt something that warm and meant it.

His eyes opened.

Not startled. Rhydian didn't startle from sleep anymore — he came up from it gradually now, like a person who had started to trust where he was. His eyes found the ceiling, then the fire, then my face.

Then my hand on his jaw.

He didn't move.

"Hi," I said.

"Hi," he said. His voice was rough from sleep and the night and everything the day before had cost him.

"You're in the chair," I said.

"I know."

"You were there all night."

"I know that too."

"Senna said—"

"Senna said a lot of things," he said. "I agreed to all of them in principle."

I looked at him.

"In principle," I said.

"In principle," he said.

I left my hand where it was. He turned his face slightly into it — not much, just a fraction, the way he does things when he's letting himself have something without making a production of it.

The fire popped. Outside, somewhere, a bird. Early. The kind that starts before the light has decided to commit.

"We won," I said.

He was quiet for a moment.

"Yes," he said.

"Say it properly," I said.

He looked at me. Something moved through his expression. The morning version of him — unguarded, unarmored, the one that only existed in rooms like this, at hours like this, when there was nobody watching and nothing to perform.

"We won," he said.

Not triumphant. Just — said. The simple truth of it, stated by someone who had come from a cave and four years of surviving alone and had ended up here, in this room, with a ring on his hand and a Pack that had howled for him.

I felt the word land in my chest in a way that was completely different from anything tactical.

We.

That was the whole of it, really.

"Come here," I said.

"Elena—"

"I'm not asking you to climb through the window," I said. "Come here."

He looked at the chair. At the bed. At my face.

He got up.

He moved the chair out of the way and he sat on the edge of the bed beside me, careful of the arm, careful of the general inventory of things that needed care — he'd gotten good at that, the specific consideration of knowing someone well enough to know where all the places were.

I reached up and I touched his face.

Properly this time. Both hands — the right one steady, the left one gentle, the way Senna had shown me I could use it without pulling the stitching. His jaw in my palms. His face tilted down toward mine.

He looked at me with those gold eyes that had stopped being guarded somewhere around week four and hadn't gone back.

"We won," I said again.

Quiet. Just for us.

Something in his face changed. The last thing that had been held, the last bit of the shape he'd been maintaining since before dawn yesterday — it let go. Not falling apart. Just releasing, the way held breath releases, the way a fist opens when there's nothing left to defend.

His forehead came down to mine.

"We won," he said.

His voice broke on the word. Just slightly. Just at the edge.

I pulled him closer.

He kissed me.

Not soft. Not careful. Nothing like the early lessons or the ceremony or any of the structured deliberate things that had happened in the first weeks. This was something else — the accumulated weight of three months and one very long day and the specific relief of being alive and here and together, all of it coming through at once.

I kissed him back.

The bandaged arm went to his shoulder anyway, Senna's instructions notwithstanding, because some things matter more than protocol and right now this was one of them.

His hand found my face. The way it always did. The way he held things he was being careful with — not gripping, just present, just warm against my cheek.

We stayed like that.

The fire burned and the early bird outside did its thing and the settlement around us breathed in the way settlements breathe when the worst has passed and the ordinary is returning.

When we separated his eyes were closed.

He stayed close. Forehead still near mine.

"Elena," he said.

"What."

"The crib is almost finished."

I stared at him.

"You just—" I started.

"I know what I just did," he said. "I'm also telling you the crib is almost finished."

"You kissed me and then you told me about the crib."

"The joint on the right side," he said. "I figured out the angle. I can finish it this week."

I pulled back enough to see his face properly.

He was doing the thing. The thing where he had something he was feeling that was too large to hold directly so he came at it sideways, through practical information, through something he could actually say.

He was telling me we had a this week.

He was telling me there was going to be a this week, and a next week, and a week after that, and all of them would have him in them and the crib would be finished and the right side joint would be correct and the room that was ours would have a crib in it.

He was telling me we won in the only language that fully reached him.

"Okay," I said.

"The grain direction," he said. "That was the problem. I was fighting it instead of working with it."

"Tell me later," I said.

"Later," he agreed.

I took his hand. The one with the ring. I held it.

He held mine back.

Outside, the grey was starting. The first real light, the kind that committed, coming through the infirmary window and doing what light does — finding every surface, making ordinary things visible again.

"Brennan's going to come in an hour," I said.

"Yes."

"There'll be reports."

"The council trial for the Shadowpine arrangement," I said. "Ferris. The eastern grounds. Henrick's testimony." I looked at the ceiling. "The Shadowpine wolves who surrendered in the yard — we have to decide what—"

"Elena," he said.

"What."

"One hour," he said. "We have one hour before Brennan."

I looked at him.

"One hour," I said.

"And in that hour," he said, "you don't have to be the Alpha."

I held his gaze.

That was the thing, I realized. That was the whole specific gift of him, the thing I hadn't known I needed until it was just — there. Not telling me to stop being the Alpha. Not asking me to be less of anything. Just offering the space where I didn't have to be it.

Where I could just be this.

"Okay," I said.

He shifted and lay down beside me, careful of everything that needed care, and I turned toward him and he put his arm around me and I put my head against his chest.

His heartbeat, under my cheek. Steady. Real.

My hand found his stomach and rested there. His found mine.

Both of us breathing.

The fire burning low.

The grey outside growing toward actual morning.

"We won," I said. One more time. Just to say it again. Just to let it be real in the room.

He pressed his lips to my hair.

"We won," he said back.

And outside, the settlement started to wake up. First one voice, then another, then the sound of the gate being checked and the kitchen fires starting and Cade's voice from somewhere doing what Cade always did in the morning, which was be slightly too loud for the hour.

And we lay in the infirmary while the ordinary world resumed around us and we didn't move and we didn't speak and it was the most peaceful I'd felt in months.

Until Brennan knocked on the door forty-five minutes later.

"Alpha," he said through the wood. "When you're ready."

Rhydian made a sound that was not complimentary to the concept of forty-five minutes.

"Give us five minutes," I called.

"Of course," Brennan said. Then, lower, more to himself than to us: "Told Cade to give them an hour."

His footsteps moved away down the corridor.

I looked at Rhydian.

He looked at me.

"Five minutes," he said.

We didn't move for six.