

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat - Chapter 71[2,140 words]

(Elena)

Brennan had laid the war table out in the main hall.

Not the outdoor one from the battle — the real one, the long wooden table where Pack council had been happening for three generations, where my father had sat and his father before him. The maps were spread down the center of it, weighted at the corners with the same stones we'd been using for months, marked with notations in three different hands.

It felt strange to sit at it in daylight.

Strange in the way good things can be strange when you've been living inside the worst version of a situation for so long that the ordinary version doesn't feel real yet.

I sat at the head. Rhydian was to my left, which was the co-Alpha position and where he belonged and which still occasionally caught me sideways — not wrongly, just with the particular weight of something that had been impossible four months ago and was now simply true.

Brennan sat to my right.

Marta was at the far end with the charter texts and the formal record. She'd been up before any of us. I suspected she hadn't slept.

The Shadowpine delegation arrived at the third hour.

Not Varek himself — I hadn't expected Varek, men like Varek didn't come to the table they lost. He sent his second, a wolf named Gret who I recognized from Brennan's intelligence reports. Broad across the shoulders, flat eyes, the economy of movement that came from years of border engagement.

He came in with two wolves behind him and he sat across the table from me and he put both hands on the wood and he said, without preamble:

"Alpha Varek is withdrawing all claim to the eastern corridor."

I looked at him.

"Continue," I said.

"The arrangement with Marcus regarding the eastern grounds is formally voided," Gret said. "Varek acknowledges that the grounds remain Mountain Pack territory under existing border agreements." He looked at the table between us. "In exchange for the return of the wolves currently held in your settlement."

I let that sit for a moment.

Fourteen Shadowpine wolves, in various states of wound and intact, currently secured in the settlement's eastern barracks. Most of them had been on Marcus's contracted force. A handful were Varek's people specifically.

"That's the offer," I said.

"That's the offer," Gret confirmed.

I looked at Rhydian.

He was watching Gret with the particular attention he has, the cataloguing quality, the one that reads what's being said and what's not being said simultaneously. He didn't look at me. He was tracking Gret.

"There's more," Rhydian said.

Gret looked at him.

"You came here with three conditions and you led with two of them," Rhydian said. "The third one is the one you're deciding how to say."

Gret looked at him for a long moment.

Then he looked back at me.

"Alpha Varek requests formal acknowledgment," Gret said. "That the arrangement with Marcus constituted an exceptional circumstance and does not represent the established position of Shadowpine regarding Mountain Pack sovereignty."

I understood what that meant.

He wanted the record to show that Shadowpine hadn't actually gone to war with us. That Marcus had been an anomaly, a contractor, a separate arrangement — something that could be administratively separated from Shadowpine's official posture.

He wanted to walk away without the formal designation of aggressor.

I folded my hands on the table.

"They attacked our border," Brennan said. To the table, not to Gret specifically. Steady. "Two separate incursions. Two hundred wolves under Shadowpine coordination."

"Under Marcus's direction," Gret said.

"With Shadowpine's wolves," Brennan said.

"Provided on contract to a third party."

"A third party who was conducting a war against this Pack," Brennan said.

Gret didn't flinch. He was good. He'd been doing this for a long time and he knew which arguments were real and which ones were positioning and he was going to hold his position until I told him what I actually wanted.

"What does Varek lose if we designate Shadowpine an aggressor," I said.

Gret was quiet for a moment. "Three border Pack alliances that have been conditional for some time," he said.

"So we have leverage," I said.

"Yes," he said. Directly. I appreciated the directness.

"And Varek sent you here rather than coming himself," I said. "Which means he's not certain the leverage is sufficient to make this go the way he wants."

Gret's expression didn't change. But the quality of his stillness changed by a degree.

"So we have more leverage than he indicated in the offer," I said.

Silence.

"I'm not going to make you confirm that," I said. "It was a statement."

I looked at the map between us. At the eastern corridor, at the border markers, at the four months of this specific conflict rendered in charcoal.

I thought about what Varek losing three border alliances meant for this region. For the balance of power east of our territory. For what happened to Packs that used to be protected under Shadowpine alliances if those alliances destabilized.

I thought about being pregnant. About the crib with the joint that was almost right. About the settlement that had held through three days of siege with wolves who were half-strength and all heart.

I thought about what I wanted the next five years to look like.

"The return of the wolves," I said. "Varek gets that."

Gret straightened slightly.

"The eastern corridor remains Mountain Pack territory and the acknowledgment of that is formal and on record," I continued. "That is not negotiable and does not appear in the final agreement as a concession. It appears as a restatement of existing borders."

"Agreed," Gret said.

"As for the formal designation." I paused.

Rhydian looked at me then. I could feel it.

"We won't designate Shadowpine an aggressor in the formal record," I said. "We will designate the incursion as conducted under exceptional circumstances by a contracted third party." I held Gret's gaze. "In exchange for a formal non-aggression commitment. Not a treaty — a commitment. Documented. Witnessed. Filed with the border council."

Gret was quiet.

"That's more than Varek expected you to offer," he said.

"I know," I said.

"Why."

I looked at him. "Because fourteen wolves in my eastern barracks have families. And because a formal aggressor designation starts a cycle that ends with more of those wolves in more barracks on both sides for the next ten years." I kept my gaze steady. "I'm not interested in the next ten years looking like the last four months."

Gret looked at the table.

Then at Rhydian.

"Co-Alpha Rhydian," he said. "Your position."

Rhydian looked at Gret with those gold eyes that had been tracking everything in this room since the delegation walked in.

"My position," Rhydian said, "is that she just gave you a better outcome than you came here to get. So if you're checking whether I'm going to walk it back — I'm not."

Gret held his gaze for a moment.

Then he looked at me.

"Varek will accept the terms," he said.

I breathed.

"Marta," I said.

She was already writing.

The formal signing took another hour.

Language arguments, charter references, the specific precision of words that would live in the record and be quoted by people who hadn't been in this room for decisions they'd make later. Brennan was meticulous. Gret was professional. Marta was faster than both of them and corrected three points of charter language that Gret's scribe had gotten wrong.

Rhydian sat to my left through all of it.

He didn't say much once we got into the formal language — that was right, that was him reading the room correctly. But he was there, and the specific quality of him being there was something I kept tracking without looking.

The ring catching the light when he moved his hand.

The way he leaned forward slightly when something interested him.

The fact that Gret's eyes kept moving between us, taking the measure of what *co-Alpha* actually meant in practice, recalibrating each time.

At some point Cade came to the door and Brennan waved him off. He appeared again twenty minutes later and Brennan waved him off more firmly. The third time I could hear him in the corridor being very quietly enthusiastic about something that Petra was trying to redirect.

I didn't let myself smile during a formal negotiation.

It was close.

When Gret signed the final document and pushed it across the table, I signed above his name and Rhydian signed below mine, and the thing was done.

Gret stood. I stood.

"Alpha Elena," he said. "For what it's worth—" He paused. The professional quality dropped for a moment. Just a moment. "Varek didn't expect you to hold."

"I know," I said.

"He thought the pregnancy—" He stopped. Started again. "He thought you'd negotiate earlier."

I looked at him.

"He was wrong about what pregnancy does to a person," I said.

Gret looked at me for a moment.

"Yes," he said. "He was."

He left with his two wolves.

The hall went quiet.

Brennan let out a breath that he'd clearly been holding for a professional amount of time.

"That went—" he started.

"Better than it should have," Rhydian said. He was looking at the signed document. "She gave him an exit."

"She gave everyone an exit," Brennan said.

I looked at them both.

"She's sitting right here," I said.

Rhydian turned to me. Something in his face — the specific warmth of it, the particular quality of someone who has just watched you do something and doesn't have words for exactly how they feel about it.

"You were extraordinary," he said.

I looked at the document.

"We'll see," I said. "Ask me in five years."

"I'm asking now."

"Rhydian—"

"Elena." He held my gaze. "You just ended a war with a handshake and gave the losing side a reason not to start the next one." He paused. "That's extraordinary. Let it be that."

I recognized my own words.

I looked at him.

"Marta," I said. "Can you file that before the afternoon briefing?"

"Already moving," Marta said, from behind a stack of charter texts.

I stood up.

The hall was ordinary in the afternoon light — the table, the stone floor, the fire in the corner that someone had fed while we weren't watching. The same hall that had held war councils and accusations and the particular grief of a Pack trying to hold itself together.

Same hall where we'd both knelt on the stone marker.

Equal.

Rhydian was beside me when I turned.

"Ferris," I said. "And the eastern succession question. And the Henrick testimony." I looked at him. "That's the afternoon."

"I know," he said.

"And Senna is going to—"

"I know," he said again.

"Two more days of—"

"Elena." He put his hand at my back. Light. Just there. "I know."

I looked up at him.

"One thing at a time," he said.

I breathed.

"One thing at a time," I agreed.

And Cade appeared in the doorway for the fourth time, and this time Brennan didn't wave him off, and Cade looked at both of us with the specific expression of someone who has been waiting to ask something for two hours and has run out of patience.

"Did we win?" he said.

Rhydian looked at me.

I looked at Cade.

"We won," I said.

Cade let out a breath so large it was almost a sound.

"Okay," he said. "Okay. Good." He straightened. Tried to look like he hadn't been hovering in the corridor for two hours. "I just — wanted to confirm."

"Confirmed," I said.

He disappeared back into the corridor.

A moment passed.

Then Rhydian said, quietly, just for me: "He asked me what love was yesterday."

"I know," I said. "You told me."

"Did I give him enough?"

I looked at the doorway where Cade had been.

"Ask him in ten years," I said.

Rhydian made a sound that was almost a laugh.

Almost.

And then from Marta's direction, with the particular weight of someone who had been waiting to say something and had decided the moment had arrived:

"Elena. Before the afternoon briefing." She looked up from the charter texts. "There's something you need to know. About the Shadowpine delegation." She paused. "Gret left something out."

I looked at her.

Rhydian went still beside me.

"What," I said.

Marta set down her pen.

"Varek has a son," she said. "Eighteen years old. He was part of the contracted force." She held my gaze. "He's one of the fourteen wolves in the eastern barracks."

The hall was very quiet.

I looked at the signed document on the table.

At the non-aggression commitment.

At my signature above Gret's.

I looked at Rhydian.

He was already looking at me.

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat - Chapter 72[2,082 words]

(Rhydian)

The rage showed up on the third day.

Not during the battle — during the battle I'd been too focused for rage, too operational, too busy being the thing that needed to be done. Not in the infirmary, not during the negotiation, not during any of the three days of briefings and border reports and the specific administrative machinery of what comes after a war.

It showed up at dinner.

Specifically, it showed up when Ferris walked into the main hall.

He'd been reinstated to a limited council role pending the formal review — Elena's call, and the right one, I understood why. You didn't fracture a Pack further by removing everyone who'd been on the wrong side. You brought them back under conditions and you watched and you gave them somewhere to put the choice to do better.

I understood all of that.

I understood it and I watched Ferris walk in and sit down at the table where he'd raised his hand to vote for surrendering me, and something in my chest went hot and quiet and specific.

I put my fork down.

Elena, to my left, noticed. She always noticed.

She didn't say anything. She kept eating. But her hand found my knee under the table and pressed once, which was a thing she did when she was saying *I see it, wait, breathe.*

I breathed.

I didn't say anything to Ferris.

But the heat didn't go away.

It was still there when we went to bed.

Elena was asleep within twenty minutes — the kind of sleep that arrived fast when a body had been running on insufficient rest for too long, gravity sleep, where she went under and didn't surface. I

knew the rhythm of it by now. The specific quality of her breathing when she crossed from present to gone.

I lay beside her and looked at the ceiling crack and thought about Ferris.

Then I thought about the two junior elders who'd raised their hands with him.

Then I thought about the wolves in the eastern barracks who'd come here to take this settlement apart.

Then, before I could stop it, I thought about the storage corridor.

The knife.

Marcus's face.

The particular angle of the wound because he'd turned at the wrong moment.

I pressed the heel of my hand against the mattress.

The thing about violence is that it doesn't clean up as neatly as you want it to. You carry it. Not always in the places you expect. Sometimes it shows up at a dinner table because a council elder walked through a door and your body registered the threat before your brain could send the corrective signal.

I'd been in fights before. I'd been in four years of fights. But those had been survival fights, cave fights, the clean transaction of: threat exists, threat is handled, threat is no longer. There was no aftermath to that because there was no relationship to it. The wolves who came for my territory were strangers and when they were gone they were gone and I moved on.

This was different.

Ferris had sat at the same table as Elena for years. He'd been part of the structure that was supposed to protect this Pack and he'd voted to hand me over and I'd been here for three months and I'd bled for this place and—

I got up.

I tried to be quiet. I took my jacket from the chair — the movement was automatic, the habit of never leaving a cave without being ready to move — and I went to the window and I stood there.

The settlement was dark.

Late, probably the second hour. The perimeter lights, the gate torches, the specific quiet of a place that had finally, actually exhaled.

I stood at the window and I put both hands on the frame and I tried to do the thing she'd taught me. The breathing. Counting. The space between the instinct and the choice.

It was harder than usual.

"Come back to bed," Elena said.

I turned.

She was awake. Or she'd never been as asleep as I'd thought — I couldn't always tell, she was quiet in ways that overlapped with sleeping. She was looking at me from the pillow with grey eyes that had adjusted to the dark faster than mine.

"I didn't mean to wake you," I said.

"You didn't." She moved. Made space. "Come back to bed."

I looked at the window. At the dark settlement. At whatever I was doing by standing here.

I went back.

She moved the pillow, the one she'd had on my side that she'd put there when I was away — she'd never told me she did that, I'd found out by accident one night when I came in late and she was already asleep with her arm over it. She moved it without comment and I lay down and she turned toward me.

"Ferris," she said.

Not a question.

"And the others," I said. "And the barracks wolves. And—" I stopped. Organized it. "And Marcus."

She was quiet.

"The storage corridor," I said.

"Yes," she said.

"I keep seeing the angle wrong," I said. "In my head. I keep seeing it the way I intended it instead of the way it happened. And then I correct it and it's—" I pressed my mouth together. "It's different."

"I know," she said.

"He turned," I said. "That's the part I keep—"

"I know," she said again. "Rhydian. I know."

I looked at the ceiling.

"He chose to come down that corridor," she said. Not excusing it. Not explaining it away. Just saying what was true. "He'd been in this settlement for thirty years and he knew every exit and he walked toward you."

"I know that," I said.

"But knowing it and—"

"And feeling it are different," I said. "Yes."

She put her hand on my chest. The place she always puts it.

I held onto it.

We stayed like that. The fire had burned down. The ceiling crack went northeast to southwest and I knew every part of it by now, every place it widened, the lifted plaster.

"Ferris," she said.

"I'm not going to do anything about Ferris," I said. "I know the answer. I know why you reinstated him and I agree with the reasoning and it was the right call."

"But."

"But I need a minute to be angry about it before I can do the right thing consistently," I said.

"That's all. I just need—" I stopped. "I need to say it to someone who isn't the full council."

"Okay," she said.

"He raised his hand to give me up," I said. "He sat in that room and he looked at you and he raised his hand."

"Yes," she said.

"While you were carrying our child," I said. "While you were running a siege on insufficient sleep and a poisoned water supply and he just—" I felt the heat in my chest flare and then settle. "He just raised his hand."

Elena was quiet for a moment.

"I know," she said. "I was there."

"Are you angry at him," I asked.

She thought about that. Actually thought, not performing consideration.

"Yes," she said. "Less than I was. I understand fear. I don't excuse it, but I understand it." She paused. "The anger is still there underneath the understanding. It probably will be for a while."

"But you reinstated him anyway."

"Yes," she said.

I looked at the ceiling.

"How do you do that," I said.

"Do what."

"Hold both things," I said. "The anger and the right decision. At the same time. Without one of them canceling the other."

She was quiet for a long time.

"Practice," she said. "And the understanding that the anger is mine. I'm allowed to have it. It doesn't have to inform every decision." She paused. "Viktor was cold to me for three years. I'm still angry about that. It doesn't stop me from being grateful for what those years built in me."

I thought about that.

"I'm more like Marcus than I want to be," I said.

The words came out before I fully decided to say them. That happened sometimes, especially late, especially when the ceiling was doing its usual thing and the fire was low.

Elena was very still.

"How," she said.

"The rage," I said. "The specific way it goes quiet instead of loud. The way I decide things before I know I've decided them." I paused. "In the storage corridor I wasn't out of control. I was very controlled. And that—" I stopped. "That scares me more than the other kind."

She turned.

She put both arms around me.

Not the gentle hold, not the careful-of-the-injuries hold. Just — all in. Her arms around me and her face against my neck and her weight real and present against my side.

I lay still.

"You are not your parents," she said. Into my neck. Quiet and certain in the way she said things she meant with her whole self. "And you are not Marcus."

"Elena—"

"You carried me in the yard," she said. "You figured out that my arm was more damaged than I'd said before I told you. You sat in a chair all night in the infirmary." She pulled back enough to look at me. "You wait, Rhydian. Even when the instinct says don't. You learned to wait."

I looked at her face.

"Marcus never learned to wait for anything," she said. "He was patient but that's not the same thing. He was patient *for things.* For goals, for positions, for outcomes he wanted." She held my gaze. "You wait *with* things. That's completely different."

I didn't say anything.

She put her forehead to mine.

"You are not your parents," she said again. Quiet. The same voice she used when she was saying something true that she needed me to keep.

I breathed.

In through the nose. Out through the mouth. The way she taught me.

"The rage," I said.

"Is yours," she said. "You're allowed to have it."

"And Ferris."

"Will sit across from you in council sessions," she said, "and you will be angry about it and you will do the right thing anyway. Because that's who you are." She paused. "Not because you're performing it. Because you've chosen it."

I looked at the ceiling.

Then at her.

"How much of this did you have to figure out on your own," I said.

She looked at me for a moment.

"Most of it," she said.

"You didn't have anyone—"

"I had Brennan," she said. "And Marta sometimes. But not—" She stopped. "Not this. Not someone in the room at two in the morning who knew the specific shape of what I was carrying."

I held her gaze.

"You have that now," I said.

"I know," she said.

She came back against my chest.

I put my arm around her.

We stayed like that and the fire did whatever fires do when they're almost out and the ceiling crack stayed where it always was and the settlement breathed outside the window.

I thought about Ferris.

The anger was still there. It probably would be for a while. But underneath it something had shifted — just slightly, just enough to fit beside the decision rather than fighting it.

Elena's breathing slowed.

She went under faster this time.

I stayed awake a little longer. Thinking about Marcus. About the corridor. About the angle that kept correcting itself in my memory.

About my parents.

About the specific difference between choosing patience and choosing *to wait with things.*

About the way Elena had said *you are not your parents* with the certainty of someone who had done the math on that and arrived at a definitive answer.

I thought about the baby.

About what it would mean to be someone's parent. What you passed down without meaning to. What you could choose to pass down instead.

I thought about that for a long time.

And then, somewhere around the third hour, I thought about the crib.

The joint on the right side. The grain direction. The angle I'd figured out that would work with the wood instead of against it.

I thought: tomorrow I'll finish it.

I thought: she'll be here when I do.

The ceiling crack went northeast to southwest. The fire went out. Elena slept against my chest.

I let myself sleep too.

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat - Chapter 73[2,251 words]

(Elena)

It happened on a Tuesday.

I know it was a Tuesday because Brennan had the weekly supply review on his morning schedule and I'd been planning to attend it and instead I made it halfway down the corridor from our room and stopped.

Not because something was wrong.

Everything was, by Senna's measure, exactly right. The baby was positioned correctly. The blood levels had recovered. The arm had healed. Senna had used the word **textbook** twice at the last appointment, which from Senna counted as enthusiasm.

Everything was right and I couldn't walk down a corridor.

It wasn't pain. It was weight. The specific, total weight of twenty-four weeks of pregnancy in a body that had been running at full operational capacity for most of those twenty-four weeks and had now apparently decided that enough was enough and the notice was being served immediately.

I stood in the corridor with one hand on the wall and I took stock of my own situation.

My back ached in a way that had been building for two weeks and I'd been managing it the way I managed things, which was by not mentioning it and adjusting my posture and doing it anyway. My feet were swollen inside my boots in a way I'd noticed that morning and chosen not to examine too closely. My lungs, which had been perfectly functional for thirty-one years, seemed to have reached a territorial agreement with the baby that involved giving up approximately a third of their space.

I breathed through my nose.

I could make it to the supply review.

I was the Alpha.

I could—

"Elena."

Rhydian came around the corner from the direction of the training yard, jacket still on from the morning drills, and he saw me standing with my hand on the wall and his face did the immediate, automatic assessment that I'd been watching him develop for four months.

"I'm fine," I said.

"I know," he said. Which meant he didn't know and was giving me the courtesy of the word before he figured it out.

He crossed the corridor and stopped in front of me.

He looked at my hand on the wall. At the way I was standing. At whatever my face was doing that I thought I was managing and apparently wasn't.

"How long have you been standing here," he asked.

"A minute."

"Elena."

"Maybe two minutes."

He looked down the corridor toward the supply review room. Then at me. Then at the hand on the wall.

"The supply review can wait," he said.

"It can't," I said. "Brennan needs the authorization on the eastern restock before—"

"I can authorize the eastern restock," he said.

I looked at him.

"Co-Alpha," he said. "I can authorize things."

"You've never done a supply review."

"I've been to three supply reviews," he said. "I've been watching how you do them for six weeks. I know what questions to ask and I know which numbers need checking and I know that Brennan already has the numbers right and just needs a signature." He held my gaze. "Let me do it."

I looked at the corridor.

At the distance between here and the supply room, which was not actually that far and which I'd walked a hundred times in worse condition than this.

"Come back to the room," Rhydian said. "Senna said—"

"Senna says a lot of things."

"Senna said you should be resting more at this stage," he said, "and I've been watching you not rest for three weeks and I've been respecting your choices because they were your choices to make." He paused. "But you're standing in the corridor with your hand on the wall."

I looked at my hand.

I took it off the wall.

And immediately put it back.

Rhydian watched this happen.

"Okay," he said, and his voice was warm and careful in a way that didn't feel like pity, which was the only reason I didn't argue with what came next.

He bent down and he picked me up.

"Rhydian—"

"Your room or the infirmary," he said. "Your choice."

"Neither," I said. "The supply review—"

"Brennan." He raised his voice toward the supply room. "Carry on without us. I'll review and authorize by noon."

Brennan appeared in the doorway. He took one look at the two of us — me in Rhydian's arms with an expression that communicated my precise feelings about the situation, Rhydian holding me with the specific calm of someone who had decided this was happening and had stopped leaving room for argument.

"Of course," Brennan said. Without a single additional syllable. He disappeared back into the room.

"Room or infirmary," Rhydian said to me.

I pressed my mouth together.

"Room," I said.

He carried me back down the corridor.

He set me down on the bed with the careful precision he used for things that mattered.

I sat on the edge of it and looked at the wall and felt the specific humiliation of being right about something you didn't want to be right about.

I was tired.

Not performance tired, not pushing-through tired. Actually, genuinely, in the bones tired. The kind that had been accumulating since the battle and the blood loss and the weeks of recovery while simultaneously running a Pack through its aftermath.

"Don't," Rhydian said.

I looked at him.

He was crouching in front of me, pulling my boots off with the same focused attention he gave everything he did. Both hands. Careful of the swelling he'd apparently already noticed.

"Don't do the thing," he said.

"What thing."

"The thing where you're angry at yourself for having a body that's doing something you didn't plan for," he said. He set one boot aside. Started on the other. "You're twenty-four weeks pregnant and you ran a war. The body is allowed to send a memo."

I looked at him.

"I have six reports that need responses by this afternoon," I said.

"I'll handle three," he said.

"You don't know which three—"

"Show me," he said. He set the second boot aside. Looked up at me. "Show me which three and I'll handle them."

I looked at him for a moment.

He was completely serious. Not managing me, not placating me. Just — offering. The specific offer of someone who had been paying attention for four months and was prepared to be useful in the exact way that was actually needed.

"The border restock authorization," I said.

"Done."

"The Ferris review summary needs a co-signature."

"Okay."

"And the Henrick testimony filing has a discrepancy in the dates that Marta flagged and someone needs to—"

"I'll sit with Marta," he said.

"She's going to have opinions about the discrepancy."

"She has opinions about everything," he said. "I've noticed. I find it useful." He stood up and went to the chest by the wardrobe and came back with the warmer blanket, the heavy one we'd been using since the temperature dropped. He held it out.

I took it. I wrapped it around my shoulders because the room was cold and my back was aching and I was tired.

"The other three reports," I said.

He sat in the chair beside the bed. "Tell me what they are and I'll tell you which ones can wait until tomorrow."

"You can't decide which ones can wait."

"I've been to every briefing for three months," he said. "I can decide which ones can wait."

I looked at him.

He looked at me.

"Tell me," he said. Quiet. Not a demand. Just — patient.

I told him.

Two of them he said could wait. The third one he asked two questions about and then said he'd take it to Brennan.

I lay back against the headboard.

"You're not going to be able to run the whole thing from this bed," I said.

"I'm not trying to run the whole thing," he said. "Brennan runs the whole thing. I'm handling the parts that have your name on them."

"They have your name on them too now."

"Exactly," he said.

He went to get his jacket from the chair where he'd put it when we came in. Then he stopped.

"Do you need anything before I go to Brennan," he said.

I thought about it.

"The report from the eastern border review is on the desk," I said. "Top of the pile. I was going to read it this morning."

He went to the desk. Found it. Brought it back. Set it on the bed beside me.

"I'll be back by noon," he said.

"Rhydian."

"What."

I looked at him. At the jacket and the ring and the face that had been on the other side of every hard thing for four months.

"Thank you," I said.

He held my gaze for a moment.

"You would do it for me," he said. "You have done it for me." He picked up his jacket. "More than once."

He went to the door.

"Rhydian," I said.

He turned.

"The Marta discrepancy," I said. "It's in the third paragraph. The date says fourteenth but the testimony transcript says sixteenth. The transcript is correct."

He looked at me.

"How long have you been carrying that in your head," he said.

"Since yesterday afternoon," I said.

"And you didn't tell Marta—"

"I was going to handle it this morning," I said.

He looked at the ceiling briefly. Then at me.

"Sixteenth," he said. "Third paragraph."

"Yes."

He went out.

Noon came and went.

He brought food with him when he came back — the thick soup from the kitchen that Senna had approved, which I had complicated feelings about but which actually helped the back ache in a way I wasn't going to examine too closely.

"Three reports done," he said, setting the tray on the bedside table. "Brennan has the fourth. Marta found the discrepancy before I could tell her and was extremely pleased about it."

"She usually is," I said.

"She asked me three questions about the charter language in the Henrick filing," he said, sitting in the chair. "I got two right."

"Which one did you get wrong."

"The succession clause for co-Alpha appointments under temporary incapacity." He picked up his own cup. "She corrected me very efficiently."

"She'll make you sit through the full charter session now," I said.

"Probably." He looked unbothered by this. "Cade's been doing the afternoon drills. He did them without being told."

I looked at him.

"He just — started them," he said. "When I didn't come out by the usual time. He organized the formation and ran the session." He paused. "He didn't get the footwork drill quite right on the second sequence but he knew he didn't get it right and he ran it again."

I thought about Cade. About the boy who had called Rhydian names in the training yard three months ago.

"He's going to be good," I said.

"He's already good," Rhydian said. "He just doesn't know it's permanent yet."

I ate the soup.

He sat in the chair and read the border report I'd left on the bed, which I hadn't asked him to read but which was exactly what needed doing.

The afternoon moved around us. Quiet. Ordinary. The particular ordinary of a place that had been through something and was reconstituting itself back into the shape of daily life.

My back stopped aching.

Not completely. But enough.

Around the third hour I said, "I need to get to the evening briefing."

"Yes," he said. He set the report aside. He came to the bed. He held his hand out.

I looked at it.

I took it.

He helped me up. Not carrying me this time — just there, steady, the specific kind of help that left me doing the work but didn't make me do it alone.

We walked to the door together.

In the corridor he stayed close but not hovering. He'd calibrated the exact distance over four months and it was exactly right and he didn't make anything of it.

"You're slower today," he said. Just an observation.

"Yes," I said.

"I'll walk slower," he said.

We walked slower.

Halfway down the corridor I said, "You said you'd serve me."

He looked at me sideways.

"You called me your queen," I said.

"I called you my queen," he confirmed.

"In the main hall. After the ceremony."

"I did."

"And then you said you'd serve," I said.

He was quiet for a moment.

"And you've been waiting to bring that up," he said.

"I've been waiting for the right moment," I said.

We reached the end of the corridor.

He stopped. Turned to face me. His hand was still in mine.

"You are my queen," he said. Simply. The same way he said everything true — directly, without packaging. "And I'll carry you down corridors and handle supply reviews and sit through Marta's

charter sessions and make sure you eat the soup." He looked at me. "That's not servitude. That's just— this is just what this is."

I looked at him.

"What is this," I said.

He thought about it.

"The rest of our lives," he said.

And the corridor was cold and the evening briefing was waiting and my back was still aching and I was twenty-four weeks pregnant and tired in ways I hadn't planned for.

And his hand was warm and his answer was the simplest thing I'd ever heard and it was exactly enough.

"Come on," I said.

We went.

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat - Chapter 74[2,021 words]

(Rhydian)

I found the wood in the same shed as the crib.

Not cedar this time — a smaller piece, darker grain, something that had been sitting in the corner under a canvas cloth. The smith's assistant said it had been there since before he started working the settlement, which put it at somewhere between eight and fifteen years, which meant nobody had claimed it and it was mine to use.

I took it back to the room.

The crib was finished. I'd done the right side joint four days ago, finally, with the angle adjustment I'd been thinking about since the infirmary. It sat against the far wall of our room now, and every morning when I woke up I could see it in the peripheral of my vision and something in my chest did a specific thing that I still didn't have a word for.

Satisfaction wasn't quite right. More like — recognition. Like seeing something become the thing it was always supposed to be.

The rocking wolf started as an idea I couldn't locate the source of.

I'd been sitting in the evening after the supply review, Elena asleep earlier than usual because the weight of the last week had finally collected its debt, and I'd had the piece of wood in my hands and the knife and I'd started working without deciding to.

An hour in, it was clearly a wolf.

Small. Curved base, the kind that would rock. Four legs that were more suggestion than precision — I was not a trained carver, I was a person who had learned to make do, and the wolf's legs showed that, but they were legs. The head was the part I spent the most time on. The angle of it, the way it sat, whether it looked like something or just a piece of wood with ambitions.

I worked on it for three nights before I told anyone what I was doing.

The first person I told was Cade.

Not intentionally — he came to find me about a drill question at the end of the second night and found me at the table in the corridor outside the room because Elena had been sleeping and I hadn't wanted to wake her with the scraping sound.

He looked at the piece of wood in my hands.

"Is that a wolf," he said.

"It's going to be a wolf," I said.

He pulled up the other chair and sat in it without being asked, which was something he'd started doing and which I'd decided I didn't mind. He looked at the wolf taking shape in my hands.

"For the baby," he said.

"Yes," I said.

He was quiet for a moment. His arms went across the chest the way they did when he was thinking about something he wasn't sure he was going to say.

"My mother made me a wooden rabbit when I was little," he said. "I don't know if she carved it or had someone carve it but it was mine. She painted the ears." He paused. "I still have it somewhere."

I kept working.

"What color were the ears," I said.

"Brown," he said. "With a white tip on the left one." He looked at the wall for a moment. "I don't know why I remember that specifically."

"Because it was yours," I said.

He looked at the wolf.

"What color is the wolf going to be," he said.

"I don't know yet," I said.

He sat with me for another twenty minutes without speaking, which was the comfortable kind of silence I'd gotten used to with Cade, and then he went to bed.

I finished the wolf on the fourth night.

The base rocked cleanly — I'd tested it on the table, two fingers pushing lightly, the gentle back and forth that was the whole point of it. The legs were what they were. The head was right. The tail was a small curve that I'd done last, after everything else, that ended up being the best part of the whole thing.

I set it in the crib.

Then I looked at it there. Small dark wood wolf in a cedar crib. The rocking base fitting the space well enough.

I thought about what Cade had said about the rabbit.

Because it was yours.

That was it, I thought. That was the whole thing. The crib had taken me weeks because I needed it to be mine — not bought, not commissioned, not handed to us as a gift from the settlement's stores. Mine. Because this child was going to grow up in a Pack that had fought for her, that had howled for her before she was born, that had held three days of siege with her in it.

She deserved something from my hands specifically.

Something that said: *your father was here. Your father made this. Whatever he was before, wherever he came from, he sat in the dark and he made you this because it was the most honest thing he knew how to do.*

I left the wolf in the crib.

Elena saw it on a Saturday.

She'd been to the morning briefing — shorter than usual, Brennan was getting good at cutting things down to what was essential, and she came back to the room mid-morning with the particular combination of exhausted and functional that she moved through most days now.

She stopped at the door.

She saw the wolf.

She didn't say anything. She crossed the room and she picked it up and she held it in both hands and she looked at it.

I was at the desk with the afternoon reports. I watched her from the desk without making anything obvious of watching.

She turned it over in her hands. The rocking base. The legs. The tail. The head with the specific angle I'd spent the most time on.

She set it back in the crib.

Very gently. The specific gentleness of putting something somewhere it belongs.

Then she stood there with her back to me and her hand on the edge of the crib and I could see the set of her shoulders and I knew what those shoulders were doing.

"Elena," I said.

"I'm fine," she said.

"I know," I said.

I pushed the chair back and I crossed the room and I stood behind her and I put both arms around her from behind, careful of everything that needed care, and she let me.

Her hands came to mine. Both of them, crossing over my arms the way she does when she's accepting something she didn't know she needed.

She was crying.

Not the loud kind, not the kind that needed managing. Just — quiet tears, the kind that arrive when you're not expecting them, when something catches the specific place you weren't protecting.

"It's not—" She stopped. "It's not that good," she said. "The carving. The legs are—"

"I know," I said. "I know what the legs are."

"It doesn't matter," she said. "That's not—" She pressed her mouth together. "That's not why I'm—"

"I know," I said.

She turned her head toward the wolf in the crib.

"My father built me something once," she said. Quiet. "A small box. For keeping things in. It wasn't very good either. The lid didn't close perfectly." She paused. "I kept it for twenty years."

I held her.

"He sat with it for weeks," she said. "I remember watching him. In the evenings after council. Just sitting with the wood and working at it. He never told me what it was going to be." She stopped. "He just kept making it."

"Like this," I said.

"Like this," she said.

We stayed like that. The wolf in the crib. The room quiet. The settlement doing its morning outside the window.

After a while she turned around in my arms. She looked up at me with her grey eyes that were wet at the edges and completely present and doing that thing they did when she'd decided to say something true.

"You're going to be a good father," she said.

I held her gaze.

The words landed in a way I wasn't prepared for. Not because they were unexpected — I'd been hoping for them, some version of them, somewhere underneath everything else. But the specific way she said it. Not *you'll be a good father* as reassurance or as something you say. As fact. As a conclusion she'd reached from evidence.

"How do you know," I said.

"The crib took you six weeks," she said. "The wolf took you four nights. You sat in the corridor outside the room so the sound wouldn't wake me." She held my gaze. "You've been thinking about her since before you knew she was a she."

"We still don't know—"

"She's a she," Elena said. The complete certainty of someone who had decided. "I know."

I looked at the wolf.

"The legs aren't good," I said.

"The legs are fine," she said.

"The front right one is shorter than the others."

"She won't notice," she said.

"She'll notice eventually."

"And she'll ask you about it," Elena said, "and you'll tell her that you made it in the corridor at two in the morning while she was still figuring out how to exist, and she'll think that's exactly right."

I looked at her face.

"You're very certain about things you can't actually know," I said.

"I'm very certain about things I've already figured out," she said. "There's a difference."

I looked at the wolf again. The dark wood, the rocking base, the tail that had come out better than anything else. The head at the angle I'd spent the most time on.

"The ears," I said. "I didn't do ears."

"You did," she said. "Look."

I looked closer. The head had two small raised sections that I'd thought were just variation in the grain.

They were ears.

I hadn't noticed.

"You did it without knowing you were doing it," she said.

I stared at the wolf.

"That counts," she said.

Something moved in my chest that I didn't have a word for. The same thing the crib did in the mornings. The recognition of something becoming what it was supposed to be.

"Four months ago," I said, "I was eating cold rabbit in a cave."

"I know," she said.

"I had nothing," I said. "I wasn't— I didn't have any of this."

"I know," she said. She put her hand on my chest. Over the heartbeat. "And now?"

I looked at the crib. At the wolf. At the room that was ours and the window that showed the settlement and the ring on my hand and the woman in front of me with her eyes still wet at the edges.

"Now," I said.

I didn't finish the sentence.

She didn't need me to.

She put her head against my chest and I wrapped my arms around her and we stood in front of the crib with the small imperfect wolf in it and I pressed my lips to the top of her head and I held on.

After a while she said, "Brennan needs you in the afternoon briefing."

"I know," I said.

"The Ferris review—"

"I know," I said.

"And Marta wants to talk about the charter succession clauses—"

"Elena," I said.

"What."

"Five minutes," I said.

She was quiet.

"Five minutes," she agreed.

We didn't move for seven.

And then Cade knocked on the door, because Cade always knocked on the door at the worst possible moment, and his voice came through the wood:

"Rhydian? Brennan says— is this a bad time?"

I looked at Elena.

She looked at me.

"Yes," I called. "Give us two minutes."

"Okay," Cade said. Then, in a lower voice, clearly not realizing I could hear him: "That means five. At least."

Elena made the almost-laugh sound.

I pulled her closer.

"Two minutes," I said.

"Two minutes," she said.

We stood there.

The wolf rocked slightly in the crib from some current of air from the window.

Just once.

Then went still.

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat - Chapter 75[1,938 words]

The trials began on a Wednesday.

Marta had spent four days preparing the documentation — witness accounts, charter citations, the careful assembly of evidence that turned what everyone in the Pack already knew into something that could be formally judged. She brought three separate stacks of parchment to the council hall the morning of the first session and set them down on the long table with the particular precision of someone who understood that these papers were going to be part of the record long after the people in this room were gone.

Elena sat at the head of the table. Rhydian to her left.

Brennan had positioned four wolves at each entrance, which was a formality — nobody in custody was going anywhere, and the settlement was settled in the specific way it settled when a hard thing was being handled correctly. But formality mattered here, and Brennan knew it.

The first case was Henrick.

He came in without escort. That had been Elena's decision — he'd cooperated with the inquiry, he'd refused to carry Marcus's final message, he'd given three days of testimony that had filled gaps in the evidence that nothing else could have filled. He sat in the chair across from the council table and he put his hands on his knees and he looked at Elena directly.

"Elder Henrick," Elena said. "You understand why you're here."

"Yes," he said. His voice was steady for a seventy-four year old man who hadn't slept properly in two weeks. "I do."

"The council has reviewed your testimony," Elena said. "And your actions over the past year."

"I understand."

"I'd like to hear from you directly," Elena said. "Not the formal version. Just—" She paused. "Tell me why."

Henrick looked at his hands.

"Twenty years," he said. "That's the honest answer. Twenty years of watching Marcus and understanding why and not stopping it." He looked up. "Every time I told myself I'd stop it before it went too far. And then it went further and I told myself the same thing." He paused. "There isn't a good answer. There's just the true one."

"Which is," Rhydian said.

Henrick looked at him.

"I was afraid of him," Henrick said. "Not the way you'd fear a threat. The way you fear disappointing someone who's made themselves necessary." He paused. "Marcus made himself necessary to everyone around him for thirty years. Including me."

The hall was quiet.

Elena looked at the documentation in front of her.

"The council's finding," she said, "is complicity in the water poisoning, through inaction and prior knowledge. Complicity in the needle attack, through the same. Direct assistance to Marcus in the early planning stages of the Shadowpine arrangement, before you withdrew." She looked at Henrick. "The council also notes your cooperation, your refusal of the final message, and the impact of your testimony on the prosecution's case."

Henrick held her gaze.

"The finding is exile," Elena said. "From this territory. Permanent. You'll be given three days to settle your affairs and you'll leave with what you can carry." She paused. "You will not be harmed. You will not be chained. This is the mercy the council is extending and it is the full extent of it."

Henrick was quiet for a long moment.

"I understand," he said.

"Do you have anything to say before the finding is recorded?"

He looked at Rhydian.

"Take care of her," he said. "She's better than any of us deserved."

Rhydian held the old man's gaze. "I know," he said.

Henrick stood up. He walked out.

Ferris was different.

He came in with the specific posture of someone who had been rehearsing composure for four days and was executing it well enough that you had to look carefully to see the cost. He sat. He folded his hands. He looked at Elena.

"Elder Ferris," Elena said. "The council's case is—"

"I know the case," he said. "I was in the room for most of it."

"Then you know the finding," Elena said.

"I suspect the finding," he said. "I'd like to hear it formally."

Elena looked at him steadily.

"The finding is conditional reinstatement," she said.

Something crossed his face. He'd expected worse. The expecting-worse was visible for one second.

"Conditional," he said.

"Three conditions," Elena said. "Charter transparency — every vote you cast in council for the next two years is publicly recorded and explained in writing. You'll attend Marta's full charter review sessions monthly." She paused. "And you'll sit on the eastern border council. The one dealing with the Shadowpine transition."

Ferris looked at the table.

"You're putting me on the council that oversees the aftermath of what I helped enable," he said.

"Yes," Elena said.

"That's not mercy," he said.

"No," she said. "It's work. Which is what you owe." She looked at him directly. "You raised your hand to give away my mate and my child, Ferris. In front of everyone. You don't get to forget that and neither does the Pack." She paused. "But you've been in this settlement for forty years and you have knowledge we need and running away from what you did isn't how we move forward here." She held his gaze. "This is how."

Ferris was quiet for a long time.

"The co-Alpha," he said finally. He looked at Rhydian. "I owe you something I don't know how to give."

Rhydian looked at him.

"Do the work," Rhydian said. "That's the thing you owe."

Ferris absorbed that.

"Yes," he said. "Alright."

The two junior elders who'd raised their hands with Ferris received similar conditions — public charter review, restricted vote for eighteen months, community service rotations with the wolves who'd held the eastern line during the siege. Both accepted without argument. One of them, a young elder named Pia who had been on the council for only two years, asked if she could request a private session with Elena afterward.

Elena said yes.

Pia came in thirty minutes later and sat in the chair and looked at her hands for a long moment before she looked up.

"I was scared," she said. "I want you to know that's not an excuse. I know it's not." She pressed her lips together. "I looked at the war and I looked at the cost and I thought if we gave him up—" She stopped. "I'm sorry."

"I know," Elena said.

"I voted to give away someone's life," Pia said. "Someone who was fighting for us."

"Yes," Elena said.

"And you reinstated me anyway," Pia said. "Why."

Elena was quiet for a moment.

"Because fear is real," she said. "It doesn't excuse decisions but it explains them. And because if I throw out every wolf who made a bad decision from fear I won't have a council left." She looked at Pia. "You're twenty-eight. You have forty more years of council work ahead of you. How you do those forty years is more important than what you did in one meeting."

Pia looked at the table.

"I'll do them right," she said.

"I know you will," Elena said. "That's why you're still here."

The two Mountain Pack wolves who had actively participated in the infiltration — not just Marcus's supporters, but the ones who had let his people through the gates, who had passed information — faced harder findings.

One was exiled permanently with the same terms as Henrick. He accepted it.

The other one, a wolf named Dorin who had been at the eastern gate and had actively disabled a section of the fence two nights before the battle — Dorin's case went to the full council vote.

It came back unanimous.

"The finding," Marta read, "is execution."

Dorin didn't argue. He'd known since the evidence was laid out. He sat in the chair and he looked at the floor and he said:

"I thought Marcus would win. I thought backing him was the safe choice."

"It wasn't," Elena said.

"No," he said.

The execution was carried out at dawn the following day by the settlement's formal enforcement process. Brennan handled it. Elena was present, which was the Alpha's obligation, and Rhydian stood beside her.

Afterward, in the corridor, he put his hand at the small of her back and she leaned into it briefly and then straightened.

"Necessary," she said.

"Yes," he said.

"I hate it," she said.

"I know," he said.

They walked back to the war room together.

The full Pack gathering happened on the seventh day.

Not a trial — all the trials were finished. Just a gathering. Every wolf who could stand in the main yard, which was every wolf who wasn't in the infirmary, which meant the yard was full in a way that the yard had been full before only for ceremonies and crises.

Elena stood at the front.

Rhydian stood beside her. To her left. The co-Alpha position.

She didn't give a long speech. That wasn't what was needed.

"The trials are finished," she said. "The findings are on record. What happened — all of it — is documented and witnessed and part of this Pack's history now." She looked around the yard. "I'm not going to stand here and tell you to forget it. You shouldn't forget it. This Pack held through something difficult and that means something." She paused. "I'm asking you to carry it forward. Not as a wound but as information. As what we now know about ourselves."

The yard was quiet.

"We held," she said.

That was all.

But from somewhere in the crowd — Cade, probably, though it was impossible to tell — someone started the sound. Low at first. The old sound, the wolf sound, the one that had filled the barracks the night she'd spoken about hope and the baby.

It spread.

The way it always spread — one voice and then two and then all of them, until the yard was full of it and the stone walls were doing what stone walls do with that kind of sound, carrying it and returning it changed.

Rhydian stood beside Elena with the sound moving through both of them and around them.

He didn't make the sound himself.

He didn't need to.

He put his hand at the small of her back and she reached back and covered it with hers and they stood like that in the middle of the Pack's voice, both of them, while the sound went up into the cold winter sky and said the thing that needed saying in the only language that fully reached it.

We are here. We held. We remain.

The sound went on for longer than necessary.

Nobody complained.

When it finally quieted, Brennan appeared at Elena's elbow with the afternoon's reports, because Brennan was Brennan and the work didn't stop.

She reached for them.

"I've got three of them," Rhydian said.

Brennan redistributed the stack without a word.

They walked back inside together, the two of them, with the Pack moving around them and the yard returning to its afternoon self and the settlement reconstituting into something that was the same as before and completely different at the same time.

Cade fell into step behind them.

"Is that it?" he said. "Is it over?"

Rhydian looked at Elena.

Elena looked ahead.

"That part," she said. "Yes."

"What's the next part?" Cade asked.

Elena and Rhydian looked at each other.

"The rest of it," Elena said.

Cade absorbed that.

"Okay," he said.

He went to catch up with Petra.

And the two of them walked inside, and the door closed behind them, and the settlement went on.