

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat - Chapter 76[1,945 words]

(Elena)

It started as a backache.

Which was, I later realized, exactly how it had been described to me by every wolf who'd had a child in this Pack. Marta had said it. Senna had said it. My own mother had apparently written it in the letter she left behind, the one my father kept and showed me when I was eighteen and which I'd read exactly once and put away.

It starts as a backache.

But I'd been having backaches for three weeks and this was week thirty-two and the baby wasn't supposed to come until week thirty-eight, so when the backache started at the morning briefing I sat through it and adjusted my posture and thought about the supply review that Rhydian had taken off my hands and the Ferris documentation that Marta needed by noon.

I sat through the backache for two hours.

By the third hour it had opinions.

By the fourth hour it had opinions that arrived at specific intervals, which was when I stopped sitting through it and started calculating intervals, which was when I understood what was happening.

"Brennan," I said.

He looked at me from across the war table.

He looked at my face.

"I'll get Senna," he said.

He was out the door before I could tell him to walk, not run, because running would tell the whole settlement something was happening before I'd had a chance to tell Rhydian.

I sat at the war table.

I breathed.

In through the nose. Out through the mouth. The way he'd taught me by showing me how it worked for him — all those early lessons where I'd been the teacher and somewhere in there we'd traded places without noticing.

Another contraction arrived.

I pressed my palm flat on the table.

The door opened and Rhydian came through it.

Not Senna first. Rhydian first.

He must have been somewhere close, or Brennan had gone for him before Senna, or he'd heard something in Brennan's walking that told him what the pace meant. He came through the door and he saw me at the table and he crossed the room in three steps.

"What," he said.

"Early," I said. "The baby is coming early."

His face did several things in rapid succession. I watched all of them — the first one that was *what*, the second one that was *how early*, the third one that was the calculation about thirty-two weeks, and then the fourth one, which was the specific face he made when something was happening that he had no protocol for.

I'd seen that face before. The first time was in the main hall when I kissed him at the ceremony. He'd looked exactly like that then — like someone who had prepared for a version of the moment and was now encountering the actual one.

"Rhydian," I said.

"I'm fine," he said.

"You're not," I said.

"I'm—" He stopped. His hand found mine on the table, covered it. "Okay. I'm not fine. How are you?"

"I'm having contractions," I said. "At intervals. Senna needs to check the timing and position and—"

"I'm here." His hand tightened. "I'm right here."

Senna came through the door with two assistants and the specific focused walk of someone who had already assessed the situation from Brennan's four words and was operating.

She looked at me. "How far apart."

"Eight minutes the last two times," I said.

She set her kit on the table. "Eight weeks early."

"I know," I said.

"The baby is not fully—" She stopped. Reorganized. "The baby is smaller than optimal. That's manageable. The question is how quickly this progresses and what position we're working with." She looked at Rhydian. "I need her in the infirmary."

"I can walk," I said.

"You can," Senna said, "and you're going to tell me you're fine and you're going to walk too fast and by the time we get there you'll be in the middle of a contraction in the corridor."

Rhydian looked at me.

"Infirmary," he said. "Now."

He picked me up before I'd finished forming the objection.

"I can walk," I said.

"I know you can," he said. He was already moving. "Let me do this."

"Rhydian—"

"Elena." His voice had the quality it sometimes had at two in the morning when we'd stopped performing things for each other. Direct. Present. "Please."

I let him carry me.

The infirmary was warm.

Senna's assistants had a fire going by the time we arrived, which meant Brennan had warned someone ahead of us, which was Brennan doing what Brennan did. The bed was positioned. The kit was open. The room had the particular organized quality of a space that had been made ready for something.

Rhydian set me down.

He didn't go to the chair. He stood at the side of the bed with his hand still in mine and he watched Senna do her assessment with the focused attention he gave everything that mattered.

Senna worked through her checks. She asked questions and I answered them and she made sounds that I'd learned to interpret over the months of appointments — this one meant neutral, this one meant noting something, this one meant she was thinking.

The contraction arrived mid-assessment.

I breathed through it.

Rhydian's hand tightened. Not hard — just present. Just *I'm here, I feel it.*

"Still eight minutes," Senna said. "Good." She looked at me. "The position is right. The baby has been head-down since week twenty-eight, which is in our favor." She paused. "The concern with early arrival is lung development. Eight weeks early means we're in a range where the outcomes vary significantly." She looked at both of us. "I want to be direct about that."

"Yes," I said. "Be direct."

"Most wolves born at this stage do well," she said. "The majority. But it's not certain and I won't pretend it is." She looked at Rhydian. "I'm going to need you to stay in this room and be useful. Can you do that?"

Rhydian looked at her steadily.

"Yes," he said.

"No leaving to handle reports or briefings or—"

"Senna," he said. "Yes."

She studied his face for a moment. Then she turned back to her kit.

"Good," she said. "Then let's do this."

Labor, I discovered, was not a thing you could prepare for by having done other hard things.

I'd thought it might be. I'd held borders and run councils and fought wolves in frozen yards and been poisoned and carried a siege on insufficient blood levels. I'd thought my body knew something about endurance.

What it knew and what this required were not the same thing.

The contractions moved from eight minutes to six. Then to five. Senna tracked them with the focused precision of someone who had done this many times and knew exactly what the timing meant.

Rhydian didn't leave.

He didn't try to fix it, which was the thing I hadn't known I needed — he didn't offer solutions or distraction or anything that would have made him feel useful at the cost of making me feel managed. He just stayed. His hand in mine. Adjusting his grip for each contraction, giving me something real to hold.

At some point Cade appeared in the corridor.

I could hear him through the door. His voice, low, asking Brennan something. Brennan's response, shorter, redirecting.

"He's going to stand there all night," Rhydian said.

"I know," I said.

"Should I—"

Another contraction arrived. I breathed through it. Rhydian breathed with me, which I hadn't asked him to do and which helped more than I could explain.

"Let him stay," I said when it passed. "He doesn't have to know what's happening. Just — let him be there."

Rhydian looked at the door.

"Okay," he said.

An hour passed. Then another. The contractions reached four minutes and Senna's voice changed register — not alarmed, just more focused, more active.

"It's moving quickly," she said. "That's good. Quick isn't always better but in early labor faster is usually less difficult."

"Define difficult," I said.

"I'm defining it as we go," she said. "You're doing well."

"I know I'm doing well," I said. "I want information, not encouragement."

Senna looked at Rhydian briefly.

"She's always like this," Rhydian said.

"I know," Senna said. "It's useful."

She told me what she was seeing. The specifics. The measurements and the position and what each thing meant. I listened and I asked questions and I breathed through contractions that were now arriving at three minutes.

Rhydian's thumb moved on my hand.

Not rhythmic — just occasionally. A small movement, there and gone.

"Talk to me," I said. "About something that isn't this."

He was quiet for a second.

"The wolf," he said.

"The toy."

"I've been thinking about the ears," he said. "I didn't plan them. But they're there."

"I know," I said.

"I think the tail is the best part," he said. "The curve at the end."

"The curve is good," I said.

"I wasn't trying for a curve," he said. "It just — happened when I was finishing it."

Another contraction. Longer than the last. I held his hand and breathed and Senna was talking and somewhere in the building the fire popped.

"The ears," I said when it passed.

"What about them."

"They're exactly right," I said. "I didn't say that before."

He was quiet for a moment.

"No," he said. "You said I did it without knowing I was doing it."

"Same thing," I said.

"It's not the same—"

Another one. Harder. I pressed my lips together and breathed through my nose.

Rhydian was quiet.

He leaned forward.

"You're the strongest person I've ever known," he said. Not loudly. Not performing it. Just stated, directly, at three in the morning in an infirmary with Senna working and Cade in the corridor.

I looked at him.

"Don't be sentimental," I said.

"I'm being accurate," he said.

I breathed.

The contractions kept coming.

He held my hand through every one.

At some point he sat on the edge of the bed instead of the chair — I don't know when he made that move, it happened gradually, the way the blanket migration had happened in our early weeks, and by the time I noticed he was just there, beside me.

"Rhydian," I said.

"What."

I looked at him. At the gold eyes that were very present and very steady and had been steady through everything that had happened in the last four months.

"If something—" I started.

"No," he said.

"I need you to hear—"

"No," he said again. Quiet. Certain. "Nothing is happening except exactly what's supposed to happen. And after it does, the three of us are going back to that room and the wolf is going to be in the crib and you're going to sleep for about fifteen hours and then tell me I fixed the joint wrong on the right side."

I looked at him.

"The joint is fine," I said.

"The joint is exactly right," he said.

"Then why did you say—"

"Because you'd argue about it," he said, "and arguing is how I know you're okay."

I stared at him.

"That's the most infuriating thing you've ever—"

"Elena," Senna said. Her voice had changed again. The final register. "It's time."

Rhydian's hand tightened in mine.

I looked at the ceiling.

Then at him.

"Okay," I said.

And the fire burned, and Cade waited in the corridor, and Senna worked, and Rhydian held my hand, and I breathed, and the night moved forward the way nights do, carrying whatever they carry, toward whatever comes next.

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat - Chapter 77[2,061 words]

(Rhydian)

I had held my ground against six wolves.

I had fought in a frozen gorge at four in the morning with a compromised shoulder and come out with the vial. I had stood in a storage corridor with a knife at my throat and waited, because she taught me to wait.

Nothing had prepared me for this.

Elena screamed.

Not the way people scream in fights — the sound a body makes when pain is sudden and external and the brain hasn't caught up. This was different. This was a sound that came from somewhere deeper, from the center of something, and it went through the walls of the infirmary and into the corridor and I heard Cade's voice outside go quiet mid-sentence.

I held her hand.

My hand had stopped having feeling in it approximately forty minutes ago. She was holding it with everything she had and everything she had was considerable and I didn't say a word about the hand.

"Elena," Senna said. Steady. Directing. "Again. When it comes."

"I know when it comes," Elena said through her teeth. Her voice was gone to something raw and stripped. "I've been doing this for six hours."

"Four hours," Senna said.

"That's not better."

"No," Senna agreed. "It's not." She looked at me briefly. "Keep talking to her."

"About what," I said.

"Anything."

I looked at Elena's face.

She was somewhere I couldn't fully reach. Present enough to hear and respond, but mostly in the place where the work was happening, the specific interior country that only she could navigate.

"The wolf toy," I said.

She made a sound.

"The tail," I said. "You said the tail was the best part."

"You said the tail was the best part," she said. Her grip shifted. Another contraction arriving.

"I said it first," I said.

"You said the ears were the best part and then changed your mind," she said, and then she stopped talking and the sound came again and I breathed with her because it was the only thing I could do and it was not enough and I did it anyway.

Senna was talking.

I tracked Senna's voice the way you track important information in a fight — not directly, in the periphery, while the main attention is elsewhere. She was saying things about position and progress and words I'd been learning over the last four months that I now knew meant things were moving correctly.

Moving correctly did not mean not terrifying.

"Rhydian," Elena said when the contraction passed.

"I'm here."

"I know you're here," she said. "I can feel that you're here." She opened her eyes. Looked at me. Her face was completely stripped of everything except what was actually happening inside her. No management, no composure, no Alpha. Just Elena. "Talk about something real," she said.

"The wolf is real," I said.

"Something else."

I looked at her.

"The Pack," I said. "The yard. Cade running drills this morning before I was out the door." I held her gaze. "The eastern border report that Brennan had waiting for you and I took the first two

sections of because you were going to read it at breakfast and I wanted you to have breakfast." I paused. "The joinery on the right side of the crib. The way it fits now. The cedar smell."

She breathed.

"Keep going," she said.

"The hot spring," I said. "The way the steam comes off it in winter. The rock shelf that's warm from underneath." I held her gaze. "The ceiling crack. Northeast to southwest. The lifted plaster above the wardrobe." I paused. "The morning you made me promise to come back. The specific way you said it."

Her grip changed.

"And did you," she said. "Come back."

"Yes," I said.

"Good," she said.

Then the next one arrived and she stopped talking and I stopped talking and the room contracted to the sound and the grip of her hand and Senna's focused, steady voice working through the sequence of what needed to happen.

Time stopped meaning anything.

I don't know how long it went on.

Long enough that the fire needed tending twice, which Senna's assistant handled without breaking the room's attention. Long enough that outside the window the night finished and the grey started and then the grey turned toward actual morning and the infirmary got the specific quality of early daylight coming in sideways through old glass.

Long enough that I stopped thinking about anything except what was in front of me.

Elena.

Her hand.

The work she was doing that I could not do for her and could only witness and hold steady beside.

"Rhydian," she said.

"I'm here."

"I know." She looked at me with grey eyes that were utterly exhausted and completely present. "You've been saying that for six hours."

"Four," I said.

"Don't," she said.

"Okay," I said.

Another contraction.

Longer than the last one. I watched her go into it — the particular way she gathered herself before the peak of it, the way she'd taught me to breathe and was now using herself, in through the nose, the jaw set, the specific discipline of a body being asked to do something it was not entirely designed to tolerate.

When it passed she said, quietly, just for me: "I'm scared."

I held her gaze.

"I know," I said.

"Not for me," she said.

"I know," I said again.

She didn't say anything else. She didn't have to.

I pressed my lips to her hand.

Senna looked at me over Elena's shoulder.

She didn't speak. But her expression changed — not alarmed, something more like *this is the part now, be ready.*

I straightened.

Elena gripped my hand.

"One more time," Senna said. Her voice had the quality it had had in the storage corridor when she'd said *I've got her* — the specific certainty of someone who had done this enough times to know exactly where they were in the sequence. "When the next one comes. Everything you have."

"I've been giving everything I have," Elena said.

"I know," Senna said. "This is the last of it."

Silence.

I looked at Elena.

She looked at me.

"Co-Alpha," she said.

"Here," I said.

"Whatever happens—"

"No," I said. The same thing she'd said to me in the infirmary. "Nothing is happening except exactly what's supposed to happen."

She looked at me.

"I was going to say," she said, "whatever happens, don't let Cade run tomorrow's drills without supervision."

I stared at her.

"His footwork on the second sequence," she said. "He still rushes the turn."

"You're—" I stopped. "Right now you're thinking about Cade's footwork."

"I'm thinking about a lot of things," she said. "It helps."

I held her hand.

"His footwork is fine," I said.

"It's not."

"We'll argue about it tomorrow."

"We'll argue about it right now," she said, and then the last contraction arrived.

I won't describe what Elena sounded like.

What I will say is that the sound she made was the specific sound of someone at the absolute outer edge of what a person can do, giving everything that exists beyond that edge as well, because the thing she was fighting for was on the other side of it.

I held her hand.

I held it through all of it.

And then Senna said something.

I couldn't catch the words immediately. My brain was still running the last thirty seconds and the words had to travel through that to reach me.

Then they reached me.

She's here.

And then another sound.

Small. High. Completely indignant in the specific way of something that has just arrived somewhere it wasn't expecting to be and has opinions about the temperature.

A howl.

Tiny. Real. Absolutely certain of itself.

The sound the Pack made when something mattered.

She made it first.

I stood at the side of the bed and I heard it and I couldn't move for a moment. Not from shock — from the specific weight of the moment arriving all at once, the thing that had been theoretical for thirty-two weeks becoming sound, becoming real, becoming *here.*

Senna looked at me.

"The cord," she said.

She handed me the small knife.

I looked at it.

My hands were shaking. I hadn't noticed until this specific moment that my hands were shaking, but they were, distinctly and completely, and I looked at them and thought: *this is what happens when you care about something this much.*

"Rhydian," Senna said. Not impatient. Just — ready.

"I know," I said.

I did what needed doing.

The cord cut and Senna moved and the small sound that had started high and indignant was continuing, steady, present, the sound of a set of lungs that were eight weeks early and were apparently not aware they were supposed to have concerns about that.

Senna wrapped her.

She was small.

That was the first thing. She was very small. She fit in Senna's hands in a way that stopped my breath completely because her hands were not large and this was a full person in them and she was—

"Give her here," I said. My voice came out someone else's.

Senna looked at me. Then at Elena.

"Elena first," Elena said. Her voice was gone to barely a sound.

Senna placed the baby against Elena's chest.

I stood at the side of the bed with shaking hands and watched Elena's face when she felt the weight of her daughter for the first time.

I've seen Elena face things.

I've watched her walk into a room full of wolves who wanted to vote her out and walk out co-Alpha. I've seen her take a blade to the forearm and keep fighting. I've seen her walk through a gate toward Marcus when every instinct she had was probably telling her not to.

This was different.

Her face went to something I'd never seen before. Something that had no name in any language I'd learned. Not joy exactly — larger than joy. The specific quality of arriving at something you've been building toward without knowing that's what you were doing.

She looked up at me.

"Look," she said. Just that word. Quiet. Completely undone.

I looked.

Small face. Dark hair, already. Eyes closed, still figuring out the concept of light. Mouth open, the tiny sound coming out between breaths.

My throat closed completely.

"Hi," I said.

To the room. To the small certain howl. To the specific version of the future that had just decided to exist.

Elena looked at me.

"You're crying again," she said.

"I know," I said.

"You're going to do that a lot," she said.

"Probably," I said.

She looked down at the baby.

"She has your ears," she said.

I looked.

I couldn't tell. She was too small and too new and her ears were ears. But I didn't say that.

"She has your jaw," I said.

Elena looked up at me.

"That's going to be a problem," she said.

"The best kind," I said.

She almost laughed. It came out as a sound that was more than a laugh, that was the accumulated weight of everything the last hour had been, releasing in the only direction available.

I sat on the edge of the bed.

I put my arm around her, careful of everything, and she leaned into me with the baby between us and I put my other hand on the blanket covering the small certain howling thing and I held both of them.

"What do we call her," Elena said.

I'd been thinking about this for two months. I had an answer.

I looked at the ceiling crack, visible from here, northeast to southwest.

"You pick," I said.

She was quiet for a moment.

"I have an answer," she said.

"So do I," I said.

"You first," she said.

"You first," I said.

She looked at the baby. Then at me.

"Together," she said.

"Together," I said.

And outside in the corridor, Cade's voice — trying to be quiet, failing, because he always tried to be quiet and never fully managed:

"Is that — was that — Brennan, was that a howl?"

And Brennan, quieter: "Yes. Give them a minute."

"How many—"

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

Elena looked at me.

I looked at her.

"Together," I said again.

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat - Chapter 78[2,283 words]

(Elena)

She was heavier than I expected.

Not in weight — in presence. The specific gravity of her, the way she fit against my chest like she already knew exactly where she was supposed to be. She smelled like new things and salt and something underneath that was specific and hers, already hers, already entirely her own.

I hadn't expected that part.

I'd expected to feel things. I'd spent thirty-two weeks building toward this, planning for it the way I planned for everything — practically, with contingencies, with an understanding of what was coming and how to receive it.

I hadn't planned for the gravity.

She made a small sound.

Not a howl anymore — that had been her arrival, her first opinion about the world. This was smaller. A breath that became a sound that became something between a question and a statement.

"I know," I said to her. Quiet. Just for her.

Rhydian was at my shoulder.

He'd been there for the last twenty minutes without speaking, which was the right thing, which he'd learned, which was one of the hundred things he'd learned in the last five months that I'd stopped being surprised by and had started simply relying on.

His hand was on the blanket at her shoulder. Not holding her — just touching the edge of the blanket, present, the same way he held things that mattered.

Senna had moved to the far end of the room, giving us the space, which was also the right thing.

I looked at the small face.

Dark hair, still damp. Eyes that were at that stage of newness where they knew light and dark but not detail. A mouth that was doing the thing mouths do in those first minutes, working at the air, figuring out the architecture of breathing as a permanent arrangement rather than a temporary inconvenience.

She had Rhydian's jaw.

I'd said she had mine and I'd been wrong. It was his — the specific set of it, even this small, even this new. The stubbornness in the line of it. I recognized it because I'd been looking at that jaw for five months and had learned every frequency of what it meant.

I was going to have two of them now.

Something moved in my chest that had no adequate word.

"Rhydian," I said.

"I'm here," he said.

I looked up at him.

"What's your name," I said.

He looked at me.

"What name did you have," I said. "When you were born. Before everything."

He was quiet for a moment.

"Just Rhydian," he said. "My mother didn't use a second name. She said one name was enough if it was the right one."

"What does it mean," I said.

"Nothing," he said. "She just liked the sound."

I looked at the baby.

"I have an answer," I said.

"So do I," he said.

"You first," I said.

"No," he said. "You go first. I'll tell you after."

I looked at him. He looked back. That face, the morning face, the unguarded one.

"Luna," I said.

The room was very quiet.

Rhydian was still.

I watched him hear it. Watched it land in the specific way things landed on him when they were right — not dramatic, not performative. Just a settling. The way his shoulders dropped by a fraction when something fit.

"Luna," he said.

"She howled when she arrived," I said. "Like the Pack does. Like the moon calls." I looked down at her. "And she's been here all along, I think. Before we knew her name. We've just been carrying her around in the dark."

Rhydian looked at the baby.

His jaw moved.

"Luna," he said again. Testing it. Owning it.

"What was yours," I said.

He looked at me.

"The same," he said.

I stared at him.

"That was my answer too," he said. "I've been thinking about it since—" He stopped. "Since the hot spring, actually. Before we knew. I had a name that kept arriving and I didn't say it because it seemed—" He paused. "Too much."

"Luna," I said.

"Luna," he agreed.

I looked at her.

"Luna," I said to her directly. Not performing it. Just introducing. "That's your name. We both chose it without telling each other, which is probably going to be the first thing that's true about you that will keep being true."

She made the small sound again.

"She's agreeing," Rhydian said.

"She's breathing," I said.

"She's agreeing," he said. "I can tell."

I looked up at him.

Five months ago he'd come into this settlement in chains and bitten the first hand that reached for him. He'd flinched from every touch for the first two weeks. He'd woken up screaming in the dark for the first month.

He was standing in an infirmary at dawn holding the edge of his daughter's blanket and telling me she was agreeing with her own name.

I pressed my lips together.

"You're crying again," he said.

"I know," I said.

"You said I was the one who cried."

"I said you did it a lot," I said. "I didn't say I never did."

He sat on the edge of the bed.

Close. His arm came around me — careful, always careful, the specific consideration of someone who knew exactly where everything was — and he looked at Luna over my shoulder.

She was looking at the light.

Just that. The early morning light coming through the infirmary window, filtered through old glass, pale and present. Her eyes weren't tracking it precisely — she wasn't built for precision yet — but she knew it was there. You could see the awareness of it. The fact of something existing outside herself that she hadn't known about a few hours ago.

"She's going to be so loud," Rhydian said.

"Why do you say that," I said.

"That howl," he said. "That first howl. That was not a quiet person making that sound."

"She's six hours old."

"She's six hours old and she already has opinions about the temperature," he said.

"You had opinions about everything when you arrived too," I said.

"I bit you," he said.

"You did," I said.

"She's going to be better than that," he said.

"She's going to be exactly herself," I said. "Whatever that is."

He was quiet for a moment.

"Whatever that is," he agreed.

Luna made the sound again. The small questioning one. It was different from the howl — more wondering, less announcing. The sound of someone who had arrived somewhere and was taking stock.

Rhydian leaned forward.

He put his lips to her head. Just for a second. Then he pulled back.

She didn't react. She was still working on the light.

He looked at me.

"Can I—" he started.

"Hold her," I said.

"I've never—"

"Hold her," I said again.

He was careful in the way he was careful with everything that mattered. Both hands, the way Senna had shown him, supporting the head. I let her go gradually, the way you let go of things that are going to be fine, which is a specific kind of letting go different from all the others.

She went into his arms.

He held very still.

She kept looking at the light.

He looked at her.

I watched him look at her.

This was the thing nobody told you about. Not the labor or the difficulty or the weight or the exhaustion. Nobody told you about the specific quality of watching the person you love hold the person you both made, and what that did.

There wasn't a word for it either.

Maybe that was right. Maybe some things existed in the space before words. Maybe you just — felt them. The way the kick had felt, under our joined hands. The way the wolf toy had felt when I picked it up and the curve of the tail was exactly right.

He put his lips to her head again.

"Luna," he said. Barely above a breath.

She made the sound.

He looked up at me.

"She answered," he said.

"She's breathing," I said.

"She answered," he said.

I let him have that.

"My family," he said.

He said it the way he said true things. Directly. No hedging, no packaging. Just the word that was most accurate for what was in front of him, said plainly in the early morning light.

My family.

He looked at me when he said it and I felt it land in the same place that *I love you* had landed the first time he said it awake, in the daylight, the morning after the cloth strips — in the place where things that were always going to be true arrived and stayed.

I put my hand on his arm. Where Luna's head was.

"Say it again," I said.

He looked at me.

"My family," he said.

Louder this time.

Not for performance. Just because it was true and it deserved the air.

I leaned forward and I kissed him. Brief, gentle, the kind of kiss that held everything that wasn't words.

He kissed me back.

Luna made a sound between us that was not about us and entirely about her, which was probably going to be the arrangement for the foreseeable future.

We pulled back.

We looked at her.

"She has opinions," I said.

"She has opinions," he agreed.

Senna appeared at the edge of the room.

"I need to check her," she said. Not apologetically — this was Senna. "Lungs, weight, the standard things for a thirty-two week arrival." She looked at both of us. "Everything appears very good. But I want confirmation."

Rhydian looked at Luna.

He handed her to Senna with the same careful hands he'd used to take her, and I watched him watch Senna carry her to the examination table, and his arms stayed in the position after, the shape of holding something that was no longer there.

"She's going to be fine," I said.

"I know," he said.

"You're doing the thing."

"I'm not doing anything," he said.

"You're watching her the way you watched the eastern border," I said. "Like something you can't look away from in case it changes when you're not looking."

He looked at me.

"That's not the same," he said.

"I know," I said. "I'm just—" I stopped. "It's going to be okay, Rhydian. She howled. That's a good sign. Senna knows what she's doing."

He looked at Senna's back.

Then at me.

"Your father's ring," he said.

I looked at my thumb. The silver ring.

"What about it," I said.

"Is there a—" He paused. "In the Pack. Is there a tradition. For daughters." He looked at the ring. "Something you pass on."

I looked at the ring.

"My father gave it to me when I was twelve," I said. "When I started attending council." I paused. "He said it was for when I was ready to lead."

"So it's—"

"An Alpha's ring," I said. "Yes."

Rhyddian looked at Luna on the examination table. Then at the ring.

"We should make her one," he said. "When she's ready."

I looked at him.

"You want to make her a ring," I said.

"I want to make her things," he said. Simply. The same simplicity he'd said *my family* with. "That's what I do."

I looked at my thumb.

At the silver ring that my father had pressed into my twelve-year-old hand in a corridor that smelled like cedar and old stone, saying *for when you're ready.*

I took it off.

Just for a moment. Held it.

"She'll need her own," I said. "When she's ready."

"Yes," he said.

"But until then," I said. "She can know this one exists. What it means. Where it came from."

I looked at him.

"You'll tell her," I said.

He looked at the ring in my hand.

"I'll tell her everything," he said.

I believed him.

Senna turned from the examination table with Luna in her hands and her face doing the specific thing it did when information was good.

"Her lungs are clear," she said. "Her weight is lower than I'd like but within the range we work with at thirty-two weeks. She's feeding well from what I can see." She looked at both of us. "She's small and she's early and she's also very vocal and very present and those are both excellent signs."

Rhydian let out a breath.

"Can I—" he started.

Senna was already walking toward him with Luna.

He took her back.

He stood in the infirmary in the early morning light with his daughter in his arms and his eyes too bright and his jaw that I was now going to spend the rest of my life seeing twice, and he looked at me and he said nothing at all.

He didn't have to.

I knew exactly what he was saying.

From somewhere in the corridor, Cade's voice one more time, unable to help itself:

"Brennan. Brennan. Was that — that was crying. Good crying or—"

"Good," Brennan said firmly.

"How can you tell—"

"Because I've been doing this for eight years," Brennan said. "Come away, Cade."

A pause.

Then: "Can I — is it too early to ask what the name—"

"Come away," Brennan said.

I looked at Rhydian.

He looked at me.

"Luna," he said. Quietly. To both of us.

"Luna," I said back.

She made the sound.

Outside the window, the settlement was waking up. First light, first voices, the particular noise of an ordinary day beginning — patrol changes, kitchen fires, the gate guard calling the all-clear.

The most ordinary morning.

The most specific thing it had ever contained.

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat - Chapter 79[2,257 words]

(Rhydian)

Senna kept us in the infirmary for two days.

That was the right call and I knew it was the right call and I also spent most of those two days standing near the door calculating how long it would take to carry Elena and Luna to the room I actually knew how to be in.

The infirmary was Senna's space. Everything in it was Senna's — the positioning, the timing, the specific decisions about when Luna ate and when Elena rested and what order things happened in. I had no authority there. I had no protocol.

I had a chair.

I sat in the chair and I watched and I helped when I was told to help and I tried to be the thing that was useful rather than the thing that was in the way, which was a distinction that kept shifting and which Senna was patient about, mostly.

On the second morning she found me at the infirmary window at four in the morning and she stood beside me for a moment.

"You should sleep," she said.

"I know," I said.

"When did you last sleep."

"Some of it," I said.

"Some of it," she repeated.

"Two, three hours," I said. "Luna woke up twice."

"I heard her," Senna said. "And then I heard you before I heard her."

I didn't say anything.

"You're anticipating," Senna said.

"I'm—"

"You're waking up before she makes a sound because you're listening for her even while you're asleep," she said. "That's anticipating. It's also going to exhaust you within a week."

"I'll figure out the rhythm," I said.

"You will," she said. "But you have to sleep some portion of the night to have a rhythm to work with."

I looked at the window.

"Senna," I said.

"What."

"What if I do something wrong," I said.

She was quiet.

I kept looking at the window.

"She's so small," I said. "I keep—" I stopped. "When I pick her up I can feel how small. The weight of her. And I know I'm doing it right, you showed me, Elena showed me, but my hands know how to do other things." I paused. "Climbing. Fighting. The specific grip that stops someone from—" I stopped again. "I keep having to think about what my hands are doing. I can't make it automatic. And every time I think about it I think about getting it wrong and—"

"Rhydian," Senna said.

I looked at her.

"You've been picking her up correctly every time," she said. "I've watched every one. You're not getting it wrong."

"But if I—"

"You're not going to," she said. "The thinking is what's keeping it right. When it becomes automatic, that's when you stop worrying about it." She looked at me. "The fact that you're this careful is the answer to your question about what if you do something wrong."

I looked at the window.

"Go sleep," she said. "In the chair. In the bed. On the floor if that's where you land. But sleep."

I went back to the chair.

We came home on the third morning.

Senna cleared us with the specific conditions she delivered to everyone — what to watch for, when to come back, the list of things that meant come immediately rather than come in the morning. She gave the list to both of us. She made us repeat the most important parts back to her, which Elena did with the patience of someone who understood this was the last thing she had to do in the infirmary and was therefore prepared to do it with grace.

I carried Luna.

Elena could walk, which she had been demonstrating for two days with the particular determination of someone who had been told to rest and had agreed to rest and had also been walking to the window every few hours because the rest was making her restless.

She walked beside me.

We went through the settlement at mid-morning.

I hadn't thought about what that would be like. The Pack going about its day, and us walking through the middle of it. The first wolf who saw us stopped. Then the wolf beside her. Then Corvin appeared from somewhere and his face did something large and quickly managed.

"Luna," Elena said to no one in particular, like she was just answering a question that hadn't been asked.

The name spread.

I didn't hear most of it. I was focused on my hands, on the specific careful carrying, on the fact that the path between the infirmary and our room had no obstacles I couldn't anticipate.

But I heard the sound start somewhere behind us.

Low. Moving through the morning. The Pack sound, the old sound, the one that had happened in the yard after Elena's barracks speech and at the co-Alpha ceremony and the day the trials ended.

This time it was quieter.

Not the full-throat version, not the ceremony version. Something under the breath. Like they were being careful of the new thing in the air, the specific smallness of what I was carrying, the eight weeks of early arrival.

Like they were saying *welcome* without saying it at a volume that would startle her.

Luna's eyes opened.

She looked at the sky, which was grey and cold and probably not what she was seeing so much as the light of it, the difference between inside and outside.

She made the sound. The small wondering one.

"I know," I said to her. "A lot to take in."

We got to the room.

Elena sat on the bed.

She didn't argue about sitting on the bed, which meant the walk had cost her something she wasn't going to say out loud. I noticed and said nothing and made a note to tell Senna when she came tomorrow.

I stood in the middle of the room with Luna.

The crib was there. Against the far wall where I'd put it six weeks ago. The cedar smell was still in it, fainter now but there. The wolf toy sitting at one end.

I looked at the crib.

Then at Luna.

Then at my hands.

"You can put her down," Elena said.

"I know," I said.

"Rhydian."

"I know," I said again.

I kept standing there.

Elena watched me from the bed. She didn't push. She knew the thing I was working through — she'd watched me work through things enough times to know the shape of it.

"What is it," she said.

"I don't want to put her down," I said.

Silence.

"That's not the same as being afraid of breaking her," I said. "I know that's what it looked like in the infirmary. But this is—" I looked at Luna, who was still looking at the ceiling with the focused attention of someone working very hard on the concept of ceiling. "If I put her in the crib I'll have to not be holding her. And I've been holding her for three days and—"

I stopped.

"It's too short," I said. "Three days is too short."

Elena was quiet.

"That's going to be the whole thing," I said. "Isn't it. She's going to keep getting older and there's going to be a last time I carry her like this and I won't know it's the last time and then it'll be over."

"Rhydian," Elena said.

"I know," I said. "I know it's—"

"Come here," she said.

I crossed to the bed. I sat beside her, Luna still in my arms, and Elena shifted to make room, and we sat together against the headboard with Luna between us in the specific configuration we'd found in the infirmary that worked for all three.

Elena looked at me.

"Every day with her is a first time," she said. "Not just a last time. Both things." She put her hand on the blanket at Luna's edge. "First time she sees snow. First time she walks that path through the settlement. First time she hears the Pack sound and understands it." She paused. "You're going to be there for all of them."

I looked at Luna.

"What if I miss something," I said.

"You'll miss things," Elena said. "That's not failure. That's just — there's a lot of it. You'll miss some."

"I don't want to."

"Nobody does," she said.

I held Luna.

She made the sound.

"She's going to tell you when she needs you," Elena said. "She's already loud about it. You've noticed."

"I've noticed," I said.

"So you won't miss the important things," she said. "She won't let you."

I looked at the wolf toy in the crib. The small dark rocking wolf with the legs that weren't perfectly even and the ears I hadn't known I was making and the tail that came out right.

"I need to show her that," I said.

"She'll find it," Elena said.

"I want to show it to her," I said. "I want to be the one who—" I stopped. "I made it for her. I want her to know I made it."

Elena looked at me.

"She'll know," she said. "When she's old enough to ask, you'll tell her. And when she asks why, you'll tell her you made it in the corridor at two in the morning while she was figuring out how to exist." She held my gaze. "And she'll think that's exactly right."

My throat closed.

"Okay," I said.

"Hold her how I showed you in the infirmary," Elena said. "The position that lets her see your face."

I shifted my hold.

Elena reached over and adjusted my elbow by a fraction, and Luna's angle changed slightly, and suddenly she was looking up at approximately where my face was.

Her eyes — still unfocused, still finding the architecture of the world — moved.

In my direction.

She didn't see me clearly. She wasn't built for seeing clearly yet. But something about the proximity, the specific warmth of being held by this particular person, she seemed to register.

She made the sound.

"Hi," I said.

My voice came out wrecked.

"Hi," I said again, steadier.

She kept looking.

"I made the wolf," I said. "I'll show you when you're ready." I looked at her face. "I made the crib too. The joint on the right side gave me trouble. Ask your mother about it, she'll tell you the whole thing." I paused. "You're named Luna. We both chose it. At the same time. Without telling each other. That's probably going to keep being how we do things." I paused. "Your mother is the best person I've ever known. You're going to figure that out on your own but it's also just true."

Elena put her head on my shoulder.

I felt it, not saw it.

"And you," I said, still looking at Luna. "You're eight weeks early and you howled the moment you arrived and you've had opinions about everything since. The temperature and the light and the holding position and the general concept of bedtime." I paused. "You're going to be exactly like her, aren't you."

Luna made the sound.

"That's what I thought," I said.

Elena made a sound that was a laugh that caught itself.

I held Luna.

The thing started in my chest the way it always started — somewhere specific and structural, from the place where things had been stored for too long without room to go anywhere.

I didn't try to stop it.

Elena had told me not to. A long time ago, in the context of nightmares and corridors and learning to stay through things rather than pulling away from them. She hadn't said it about this specifically but the principle was the same.

Feel it. Stay. Let it be what it is.

I stayed.

The tears came the way they came now — without shame, without the performance of managing them. Just the body doing what it did when something was real and large and present.

Luna's eyes moved.

She found the direction of my voice.

"I've got you," I said.

Not as a promise about the immediate moment. As everything.

As the whole thing.

As the specific commitment of a person who had spent four years in a cave and learned to survive and had then, with a great deal of help, learned to do something else entirely.

I've got you.

The fire was warm.

The crib was in the corner with the wolf in it.

Elena's head was on my shoulder.

And Luna, eight weeks early and already opinionated and already entirely herself, kept looking in my direction with her unfocused new eyes and her small certain presence that took up every inch of the room.

"She's looking at you," Elena said quietly.

"I know," I said.

"She likes your voice," Elena said.

"How can you tell," I said.

"She does the sound," Elena said. "Only when you talk."

I looked at Luna.

She made the sound.

I held her closer.

And outside the window the settlement went about its morning, and somewhere in the corridor Cade was probably doing something inadvisable, and Brennan had reports, and the eastern border needed checking, and Marta had charter things, and all of it was there and all of it could wait, because right now there was this room and these people and the specific weight of a small certain howling thing who had decided to exist eight weeks early and not made any apologies about it.

My daughter.

My family.

The rest of my life.

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat - Chapter 80[2,145 words]

(Elena)

Nobody told me about this part.

That's the thing. There's a great deal of information that gets passed around a Pack about pregnancy and labor and what to expect in those first hours. Wolves talk about the contractions and the exhaustion and the specific difficulty of early arrival. Senna had been thorough. Marta, who had given birth twice, had been surprisingly candid one afternoon when I'd asked.

Nobody said anything about this.

About the specific, relentless, humbling difficulty of something that was supposed to be the most natural thing in the world and wasn't. Not for me. Not right away.

Luna was hungry.

She made her needs known about this the way she made everything known — with complete commitment, no hedging, the full force of eight-week-early lungs that had apparently been storing capacity for exactly this purpose.

I tried.

I'd been trying since the second morning in the infirmary, with Senna coaching, with the specific positions Senna had shown me. Sometimes it worked for a few minutes and Luna settled and I thought: *okay, we have it now.* And then it didn't work and she made the sound — not the wondering sound, not the agreeing sound, the other one, the one that meant she was unimpressed with the current situation and required immediate improvement.

Day four at home.

Four in the morning.

Luna was making the sound and I was sitting in the chair by the crib with my patience in a significantly worse state than I preferred to admit, and Rhydian was at the edge of the bed watching me with the expression he wore when he was deciding whether to speak.

"Don't say you can help," I said.

"I wasn't going to say that," he said.

"You were thinking it."

"I was thinking that you haven't slept in—"

"I know how long I haven't slept," I said.

Luna escalated.

I adjusted. Tried again. She latched for approximately three seconds, made a sound of assessment, and released.

"She has opinions," I said.

"She does," Rhydian said.

"About everything."

"Yes," he said.

I looked at Luna. Luna looked at me with the frank assessment of someone who has needs and is waiting to see if the relevant person is going to meet them.

"I'm trying," I said to her.

She made the sound.

"I know," I said.

"Elena," Rhydian said.

"What."

He got up from the bed. He came and crouched in front of me, at my level, the way he did when he was saying something he needed me to receive properly.

"Senna mentioned a wet nurse," he said. "She said there was a wolf in the settlement who has offered. She's been nursing her own pup for three months."

I looked at him.

"I know you don't want—" he started.

"It's not that I don't want," I said. "I want to be the one. I want it to work."

"It might still work," he said. "The first weeks can be—"

"Senna said that too," I said.

"So it's not—"

"It's not failure," I said. "I know it's not failure. I know that." I looked at Luna. "Knowing it and feeling it are different."

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

He sat on the floor in front of me. Just sat down, on the stone floor, at whatever hour this was. Not performing patience. Just present.

"Tell me what's making it difficult," he said.

I looked at him.

"That's—" I stopped. "Rhydian, I don't think you can—"

"I know I can't fix it," he said. "I'm asking because maybe saying it helps and also because I need to understand what's happening so I can do the right thing instead of guessing."

I looked at Luna. At the way she was doing the sound with the specific quality of someone whose patience was finite.

"She's not latching correctly," I said. "Or I'm not positioned correctly. Or both." I pressed my lips together. "Senna showed me four positions. I've tried all four of them in various combinations and sometimes it works and sometimes—" I gestured at the current situation.

"Senna showed you positions," he said.

"Yes."

"And you tried them."

"Yes."

He looked at Luna. Then at me. "Did Senna show you or tell you."

"Both," I said. "She demonstrated with her hands. She explained the angle."

He was quiet for a moment.

"When you showed me how to hold someone in a sparring position," he said, "you adjusted my grip yourself. You didn't just tell me where to put my hands."

I looked at him.

"That's different," I said.

"Is it."

"Yes," I said. "It's significantly different."

He held my gaze.

"Let me help," he said.

"Rhydian—"

"Not the—" He stopped. Organized it. "Not the nursing itself. I understand the mechanics. But you're tense." He looked at my shoulders. "You've been tense since yesterday. When you're tense the position changes and when the position changes—" He paused. "The angle is wrong."

I stared at him.

"You've been watching for four days," I said.

"I've been watching for four days," he confirmed.

"And you've figured out—"

"I've figured out that it works better when you're not thinking about whether it's going to work," he said. "Which is the same thing you figured out about me and the sparring. When I stopped thinking about the technique and just moved, the technique happened."

I looked at him.

"You're not wrong," I said.

"No," he said.

Luna made the sound.

"Okay," I said. "What do you want to do."

He got up from the floor. He moved behind me, which was the position that had worked in the early weeks when he was learning and I was teaching and everything was deliberate and careful. He put his hands on my shoulders.

"You're holding everything up here," he said. The tension in my shoulders. "The whole thing. Since the labor."

"I know," I said.

"Let go of it," he said.

"I can't just—"

"You can," he said. "You taught me that. The counting. The breathing."

"That was for pain."

"This is pain," he said. "Different kind."

I breathed.

He worked on my shoulders the way he'd learned — not the early clumsy way, the version that had developed over months of learning where the knots were and what they required. Slow. Deliberate. My shoulders dropped by a fraction.

Luna was still making the sound but it had moved from urgent to persistent, which was marginally better.

"She's so loud," I said.

"She gets that from you," he said.

"She does not."

"The council hall," he said. "The roar."

"That was a completely different—"

"The barracks speech," he said.

"I wasn't loud in the barracks speech."

"You were heard in the corridor," he said.

I opened my mouth. Closed it.

Luna made the sound.

"Focus," Rhydian said.

He moved his hands. Not toward anything inappropriate — just shifting, working the muscle along my upper back, the specific place that had been carrying tension since the labor that I hadn't fully addressed.

Something released.

Not dramatically. Just — loosened. The way held breath releases when you've been holding it long enough that you stopped noticing.

"There," he said.

He moved back around and sat beside me. "Try again," he said. "But don't think about the angle. Just—" He made a gesture. "Let it happen."

I looked at him.

"You sound very confident for someone who doesn't—"

"Try," he said.

I tried.

Luna settled within thirty seconds.

We both went very still.

"Don't say anything," I said.

"I'm not saying anything," he said.

I looked down at Luna.

She was making the small sound now, the wondering one, the one that meant she was satisfied and processing.

"The angle," I said.

"The shoulders," he said.

"Don't," I said.

"I'm not saying anything," he said again.

I looked at him sideways.

He was looking at Luna with the face. The specific one. Gold eyes soft, jaw that matched hers, the expression of someone who would never get used to this and wasn't trying to.

"You figured this out by watching for four days," I said.

"I watch things," he said.

"I know you watch things," I said. "I'm—" I stopped. "Thank you."

He looked at me.

"Don't thank me," he said.

"I'm thanking you."

"You would have figured it out," he said. "You were already figuring it out. I just said the thing you already knew."

"You said it at four in the morning in a more useful way than I was managing to say it to myself," I said. "That counts."

He looked at Luna.

"She's going to be insufferable," he said.

"Why."

"Because she already knows how to get what she needs," he said. "She's four days old and she already knows. Give her ten years and she's going to run this settlement better than both of us."

"She's going to run it differently than us," I said.

"That's what I said," he said.

"That's not what you said."

"It's what I meant," he said.

I looked at Luna.

She was quiet now, focused on the single most important thing in her world, which was the thing she'd been asking for since approximately midnight.

"I'm going to see if the wet nurse can come tomorrow," I said. "Not to replace this. Just—" I paused. "For the nights. So I can sleep some portion of the night."

"Yes," Rhydian said.

"Senna said—"

"I know what Senna said," he said. "I'll go to her in the morning and arrange it."

"You don't have to—"

"I'll go in the morning," he said.

I looked at him.

"You're going to do the thing," I said.

"What thing."

"Where you handle things before I can argue about them," I said.

"I learned that from you," he said.

I looked at the ceiling.

"Fair," I said.

Luna finished. She detached herself with the same decisive quality she brought to everything and looked at approximately where I was with the expression of someone who had accomplished what they set out to do and was satisfied with the outcome.

"She's very pleased with herself," Rhydian said.

"She should be," I said.

He stood up. He held his hands out for her and I gave her to him and he held her in the position, the one that was already automatic now, the one he'd been practicing for four days until it stopped requiring thought.

He walked with her to the window. Not to show her anything — just moving, the specific motion that settled her. We'd discovered this on day two. She liked movement. She liked voices. She had, it turned out, very strong opinions about what she liked.

"Luna," he said to her. Low. Just for her. "It's four in the morning. The settlement is asleep. In approximately two hours Cade is going to knock on the door with something urgent that isn't urgent, and your mother is going to handle it and your mother needs to sleep before that happens."

Luna made the wondering sound.

"I know," he said. "I agree. She should have been sleeping for the last two hours but she was helping you figure something out." He looked at me over his shoulder. "Which she did. So we're going to put her in the crib now and everyone is going to sleep."

"She's not going to—" I started.

"She is," he said. "She just ate. She's warm. She's held." He looked at Luna. "Right?"

Luna looked at the window.

"Right," he said. He carried her to the crib. He placed her down with the hands that had figured out careful, that knew exactly where to be and what pressure to use.

She looked at the ceiling.

She made the sound.

"One," Rhydian said quietly. He put his hand flat on her chest, the way she'd shown him, the heartbeat position. "Ten seconds."

He counted.

On five she closed her eyes.

On eight she was breathing the even breath of sleep.

He stayed with his hand on her chest for the full ten.

Then he straightened. Turned back to me.

"Come to bed," he said.

"That was—" I started.

"I know," he said.

"How did you—"

"Because I've been watching for four days," he said. "Come to bed, Elena."

I got up.

I got into the bed.

He got in beside me.

He put his arm around me and I put my head on his chest and we lay there in the dark listening to Luna breathe in the crib across the room.

"She's going to wake up in two hours," I said.

"I know," he said. "Sleep for two hours."

"The wet nurse tomorrow," I said.

"I'll handle it," he said.

"And Brennan has—"

"Elena," he said.

"What."

"Sleep," he said.

I was asleep in four minutes.

He was awake for a while longer, I could tell by his breathing. Listening.

Making sure.

