

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat - Chapter 81[2,295 words]

(Rhydian)

Luna woke up at five-thirty.

Not with the urgent sound — the other one, the wondering one, which had a completely different quality and which I'd learned to distinguish somewhere around day three. The urgent one meant now, immediately, everything is wrong and requires resolution. The wondering one meant she was awake and processing and willing to give us approximately four minutes before escalating.

I was already moving before she made the second sound.

Elena was asleep.

Actually asleep, properly, the kind that arrived since the wet nurse arrangement started three days ago — Brennan had found her, a wolf named Hanna who had her own pup and the specific generous patience of someone who understood what she was helping with. Elena had resisted for about six hours and then the resistance had collapsed under the weight of three nights of actual sleep and she'd stopped resisting.

I got to the crib before Luna escalated.

I picked her up in the position.

It was automatic now. That was the thing that had happened somewhere in the last two weeks — my hands had stopped requiring instruction. They just knew. The weight and the angle and the specific warmth of her, and how to adjust when she shifted, and the particular pressure at the back of her head.

Automatic.

I'd been waiting for it to feel less significant when it became automatic.

It didn't.

I carried her to the chair by the window. The fire was coals — I'd tend it in a minute. The settlement outside was dark, the particular dark of the hour before anything starts. The gate lights. The perimeter torch. The cold against the glass.

Luna looked at the dark.

She looked at it with the focused attention she brought to everything she hadn't seen before, which at eleven days was still most things.

"It's dark," I said. Low. The voice I used only in this room at this hour.

She made the wondering sound.

"The sun comes up in—" I looked at the window. "Maybe an hour. You haven't seen sunrise yet. You've been asleep for all of them." I paused. "You're going to like it. It's the best light of the day."

She kept looking at the dark.

I looked at her.

At the dark hair that had dried since the birth into something that curled at the edges. At the jaw I recognized and was going to be seeing every day for the rest of my life. At the eyes that were still doing the thing where they knew light was there without knowing exactly what it was.

She was eleven days old.

She'd already changed completely since the first moment I held her.

I kept waiting for that to stop surprising me.

It didn't do that either.

"I should tell you something," I said.

She looked at the window.

"About how you got here," I said. "Not the—" I paused. "Not in a medical sense. In the other sense." I settled her more comfortably in my arms. "You should know the story. Your mother will tell you her version. This is mine."

Luna made the small sound.

"I was living in a cave," I said. "On a mountain. Alone, for four years. Which sounds worse than it was after the first year, but it was still—" I paused. "Cold. It was cold and quiet and I'd gotten used to that being the whole thing. What life was."

She shifted in my arms.

I adjusted without thinking about it.

"Then some people came for me," I said. "Wolves. Sent by your mother, though I didn't know that at the time. They had chains, which I found offensive, and I fought them, which was reasonable

given the circumstances." I paused. "I lost. Which I also found offensive. But I was half-starved and there were six of them, so." I looked at her. "The point is they brought me here. To this settlement. To this room eventually, though not right away."

Luna looked at me. Or she looked at approximately where I was. The distinction mattered less every day.

"And your mother was here," I said.

I stopped for a moment.

"She walked down the steps toward me," I said. "In the main hall. Slow. Like she had somewhere to be and wasn't hurrying to get there. And she looked at me the way she looks at everything — like she'd already done the math and was just checking the answer." I paused. "I hated her immediately."

The wondering sound.

"I know," I said. "That's not a great start to a story about how someone becomes your family. But it's the true start, and the true start matters." I paused. "I said something rude. She said something colder. I called her old, which was—" I stopped. "Don't do that. Whatever you're thinking of calling someone, don't do the age version. It's not the argument you think it is and also she was thirty-one, which is not old."

Luna blinked.

"She's going to dispute some of this," I said. "When you're old enough for her to tell you her version. She's going to say I was rude first and she was only responding." I held her gaze, such as it was. "She was also rude first. She walked past me and let her hip touch my arm on purpose. She knew exactly what she was doing."

I looked at the window.

"She started teaching me things," I said. "Not fighting. I already knew how to do that. Smaller things. How to breathe through something that hurts. How to be in a room without bracing for what's going to come at you." I paused. "How to be touched without it feeling like a threat." I felt the weight of that. "I'd forgotten. Or I'd never fully known. Four years of a cave will do that."

Luna was very still.

Watching the window. Or watching me. I still couldn't always tell.

"She was patient," I said. "I wasn't, not then. I bit her on the first day. I snarled at everyone. I called her names." I paused. "She counted to ten and she breathed and she came back and she kept teaching." I looked at Luna. "You're going to meet wolves in your life who are patient as a strategy. Waiting things out, timing their moves. That's not what she was doing. She was patient because she believed the thing she was working toward was worth the patience." I paused. "That's different. You'll learn to tell them apart."

The fire needed tending.

I'd do it in a minute. Luna was warm enough.

"I fell in love with her without knowing I was doing it," I said. "That's the embarrassing part of the story. I thought I was just — learning things. Being useful. Figuring out how to be in a Pack. And then one day she laughed in the training yard and I was standing on the other side of a fence watching her and I—" I stopped. "It was already done. I just hadn't noticed."

Luna made the sound.

"Yes," I said. "I told you. Embarrassing." I paused. "The other things happened after that. The difficult things. There were a lot of them. We can talk about that when you're older and the appropriate versions of those conversations exist." I looked at her face. "What matters for now is that we're here. The three of us. In this room. With the crib I built and the wolf toy and the ceiling crack that goes northeast to southwest."

She made the wondering sound again.

"Exactly," I said.

The door opened.

I didn't hear it at first — it was quiet, just the latch and then the soft sound of footsteps on stone. I felt the specific quality of the room changing, the warmth of someone else in it.

Elena.

She stood at the edge of the firelight in the shirt she slept in, hair loose, the particular unhurried quality of someone who had woken up not from alarm but from something else. Awareness, maybe. The specific sense of a room containing people you care about doing something without you.

I looked at her.

She looked at me.

Then at Luna.

"How long have you been up," she said.

"Twenty minutes," I said. "Maybe."

"I heard you," she said. "Through the door." She crossed to where I was sitting. "I wasn't going to come in. You sounded—" She paused. "I didn't want to interrupt."

"You didn't interrupt," I said.

She pulled the other chair close. Sat beside me. She reached out and touched Luna's hand — the small reflex grip, the automatic response of a hand that was still learning the concept of fingers.

"You were telling her a story," Elena said.

"Yes," I said.

"About us," she said.

"About you," I said. "Mostly."

She looked at me.

"You called me old," she said.

I stared at her.

"You heard that part," I said.

"I heard most of it," she said. "From the cave forward."

I looked at the window.

"I was illustrating a point about things not to say," I said.

"To an eleven-day-old," she said.

"Early lessons are important," I said.

She pressed her lips together. The almost-laugh.

"I wasn't rude first," she said.

"You walked past me and touched my arm with your hip on purpose," I said.

"That was strategic," she said.

"It was rude," I said.

"It was both," she said.

Luna made the sound.

We both looked at her.

"She's agreeing with me," Elena said.

"She's breathing," I said.

"She's agreeing with me," Elena said.

I looked at Luna.

Luna looked at approximately Elena.

"Traitor," I said.

Elena made the sound that was more than a laugh.

She stood up. She reached for Luna and I gave her over, and Elena settled her against her chest in the position that had gotten easier every day, and she sat back down in the chair with her shoulder against mine.

We sat like that.

The fire needed tending. I'd do it in a minute.

"You said I believed the thing I was working toward was worth the patience," Elena said. Quietly.

"Yes," I said.

"That's accurate," she said.

"I know," I said.

She leaned her head against my shoulder.

I put my arm around her.

Luna was between us, warm and certain and entirely present, looking at the window where the dark was starting, just starting, to think about giving up.

"The sunrise," I said. "It's almost."

Elena looked at the window.

"She's going to see it," she said.

"Yes," I said.

We waited.

The dark shifted. Not quickly — the way it happened, gradually, the grey arriving before the color, the shapes of things becoming visible before the quality of them. The gate. The fence line. The training yard.

Luna's eyes moved.

Following the change. Following the light coming in.

She made the wondering sound.

"There it is," Rhydian said.

"Luna," Elena said. Her voice had that quality. The specific gravity of saying the name. "That's morning."

Luna looked at the window.

She made the sound — not the wondering one, not the urgent one. Something new. Something she hadn't made before.

Something like recognition.

"She's seen it before," Elena said.

"She hasn't," I said.

"She has," Elena said. "In there. All of it. She's been here the whole time. She knows what morning is."

I looked at Luna.

At the small face turned toward the light with the specific attention of someone encountering something familiar.

"You've been here the whole time," I said to her.

She looked at the window.

Elena's head was on my shoulder.

My arm was around her.

Luna between us, looking at the light, making the new sound.

I thought about the cave.

About waking up alone every morning for four years in the dark with the particular cold that never fully left. About the specific quality of silence when there's nobody else in it. About counting days in scratches on rock and stopping because what was the point.

I thought about this.

This specific room at this specific hour with these specific people.

"Rhydian," Elena said.

"Yes," I said.

"Thank you," she said. "For telling her."

I held her.

"I'm going to tell her everything," I said.

"I know," she said.

"The difficult things too," I said. "When she's old enough. The cave and my parents and Marcus and the gorge and—" I paused. "All of it. I want her to know where she came from."

"She'll know," Elena said. "She's already surrounded by it."

I looked at the window.

At the morning coming in.

"The wolf toy," I said.

"What about it," Elena said.

"I want to put it in her hands today," I said. "Not in the crib. Actually in her hands."

Elena was quiet for a moment.

"She can't hold it yet," she said.

"I know," I said. "I just want to put it there. So she knows it exists."

Elena looked at Luna.

"Put it in her hands," she said.

I reached over to the crib and I took the small dark rocking wolf and I placed it against Luna's palm. Her fingers closed around it — the reflex grip, automatic, the way her hands worked before she knew they were working.

The wolf rocked slightly.

Just once.

Luna made the new sound.

The recognition sound.

"She knows," I said.

"Yes," Elena said.

We sat in the morning light, the three of us, while the settlement outside started its day and Cade was probably already in the corridor working up to knocking, and Brennan had reports, and the eastern border needed checking, and all of it waited.

All of it could wait.

For exactly as long as this lasted.