

The Wolf Queen & The Alpha Brat - Chapter 82: The naming[2,886 words]

The hall had never smelled like this before.

That was Marta's doing. She'd spent two days sourcing the specific herbs that the old naming ceremonies required — dried yarrow and cedar bark and something else nobody could quite identify that Marta described as traditional and refused to elaborate on. She'd bundled them herself and placed them at each corner of the hall and lit them at the first hour of the morning so by the time anyone arrived the whole room had that quality of somewhere important.

Brennan noticed when he came in for the pre-ceremony check.

He stood at the doorway and took stock of the hall — the full table, the benches cleared to the walls, the Pack members already gathering despite the fact that the ceremony wasn't for another hour — and he said, to no one in particular:

"She did the herbs."

Cade appeared behind him.

"What herbs?" Cade said. "What do they—" He breathed in. "Oh. Oh, that's something."

"It's traditional," Brennan said.

"What does it mean?"

"It means it's a naming ceremony," Brennan said. "Come help with the benches."

Elena stood in the corridor outside the hall with Luna in her arms and Rhydian at her shoulder.

Luna was in the ceremony cloth — white linen, the Pack's naming cloth that had been used for three generations of first declarations, washed and pressed and smelling of cedar from the chest where it lived between uses. She had opinions about the ceremony cloth. She had expressed these opinions twice in the last twenty minutes with the particular commitment she brought to all opinions.

She was currently reconsidering, or possibly just distracted by the smell of the herbs coming through the hall door.

"You don't have to hold her the whole time," Rhydian said.

"I know," Elena said.

"Marta can—"

"I know," Elena said. "I'm holding her."

He looked at her sideways. At the set of her jaw, at the way her arms were arranged around Luna with the specific care of someone who was also, simultaneously, the Alpha walking into a formal ceremony and not separating those two things.

"Okay," he said.

"You're going to say something about the shoulder," she said.

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

"My shoulder is fine," she said.

"I know," he said.

She looked at him.

He looked back with the morning face, the one he couldn't turn off, the one that said everything he wasn't saying.

"The shoulder is fine," she said.

"Yes," he said.

They went in.

The hall went quiet when they came through the door.

Not the formal quiet of a council session — the specific quiet of a room of wolves receiving something. Two hundred wolves, approximately, which was the full settlement minus those on rotation at the border and those Senna had decided shouldn't be standing for two hours. They filled the hall in a way halls fill when people are genuinely there and not performing being there.

Elena walked to the front.

Rhydian walked at her left shoulder.

The co-Alpha position, which he had been occupying for weeks now as naturally as breathing, which still caused Marta to make a small note of private satisfaction whenever she observed it, as she had mentioned to Brennan twice and Brennan had declined to comment on.

Cade was near the front with Petra and Corvin and a group of the younger wolves, the ones who had come up through the drills and the battle and the aftermath as something different from who they'd been at the beginning. Cade had his hands behind his back, which was a posture he'd been practicing, and he was almost managing to look formal.

Almost.

Pip was in the third row. He'd been on the eastern line the night of the battle and had been back on rotation within a week and had told Brennan, when Brennan asked, that standing watch was the thing that helped. Brennan had not questioned this. He'd just adjusted the rotation.

Ferris was at the far end of the hall.

He'd come quietly. He'd been coming to things quietly since the trial — present, positioned at the edge rather than the center, doing the work Pia had called it. He looked at Elena when she came in, and then at Luna, and something moved across his face that Brennan, standing near him, chose to file and not address.

Marta stood at the altar position.

The old stone marker was in its place at the front of the hall — the same one they'd knelt on at the co-Alpha ceremony, smooth and worn and carrying thirty years of this Pack's moments in its surface. She had the naming scroll in her hands. The actual charter naming scroll, the one that went back to the settlement's founding, that held two generations of births and declarations in its columns.

She'd added a new column at the top.

Luna, it said. *Daughter of Elena, Alpha. Daughter of Rhydian, co-Alpha. Born in the thirty-second week of the year of the—*

The rest would be filled in at the ceremony.

She looked at Elena and Rhydian coming toward her and her expression did the thing it had been doing with increasing frequency since the co-Alpha ceremony — something between satisfaction and emotion that she would categorically deny if anyone named it.

"Alpha," she said. "Co-Alpha."

"Marta," Elena said.

They stopped at the marker.

Elena looked at Luna.

Luna looked at the hall. At all the people. At the quality of the light through the high windows, which was the mid-morning light, the settled certain light she hadn't encountered yet.

She made the wondering sound.

Several wolves nearest the front heard it and the effect moved outward through the room like something living.

"She has opinions about the ceremony," Rhydian said, quietly, to Marta.

"She comes by that honestly," Marta said.

Rhydian looked at Elena.

Elena looked at the scroll.

"Ready," she said.

Marta began.

She used the old language for the opening — not because anyone in the room required it, but because the ceremony had always used it and some things were right because they'd always been done that way and some things were right because they continued to mean something. She said the words about the Moon Goddess and the Pack and the line of succession and the declaration of a child born to the Alpha.

She said Elena's name. Her full title.

She said Rhydian's name.

She said it twice — *Rhydian Alma, co-Alpha of this Pack* — and the room was very still in a way that was different from ordinary quiet. The stillness of something being formally true that had been informally true for a while, arriving at its official shape.

Rhydian's jaw was set. He was looking at the scroll. His hands were at his sides. His ring caught the morning light.

"Luna," Marta said. She said just the name. She'd argued for more — a full formal introduction, a recitation of lineage — and Elena had said *just the name first, let them hear it.* So Marta said just the name.

The hall heard it.

"Luna," Marta said again. "Daughter of this Pack. Named in the tradition of the Moon Goddess and the full witness of—"

Luna made the sound.

Not the wondering one. The new one. The recognition one, the one she'd made in the morning at the window when the light came in.

The hall heard that too.

Brennan, at the far edge, pressed his lips together.

Cade's hands came together in front of him.

Marta cleared her throat. Continued. Her voice had the particular quality of someone who is maintaining composure by committing fully to the text in front of her.

The declaration of heir came near the end.

This was the formal part, the charter part, the thing that had to be said in specific language with specific witnesses. Marta had prepared it herself and reviewed it three times and had a quiet conversation with Elena about it the previous evening that nobody else had been present for.

"By the authority of the Pack's founding charter," Marta said, "and in the presence of full witness, Luna, born of the Alpha line, is declared heir to this territory and its leadership. First in succession. Recognized by the Pack and the Moon Goddess as daughter of Alpha Elena and co-Alpha Rhydian."

She looked at Elena.

"Do you accept this declaration," Marta said.

"I accept," Elena said.

Marta looked at Rhydian.

"Do you accept this declaration," Marta said.

Rhydian looked at Luna.

Luna looked at approximately Rhydian. Or she looked at the space around him. The distinction was getting harder to maintain.

"I accept," he said.

His voice came out lower than usual. Just slightly. The way it got when something landed.

Marta looked at the hall.

"Does this Pack accept this declaration?"

The sound started in the front row.

Cade again. Of course it was Cade. Low at first, the single voice finding the note, and then Petra beside him, and then Corvin, and then the row behind, and then the full hall, building the way it always built until the stone walls were doing what they did, carrying the sound and returning it different.

The Pack howl for Luna.

Elena stood at the stone marker with her daughter in her arms and her jaw was not entirely controlled and she pressed her lips together in the specific way she did when she was managing something that was going to win regardless.

Rhydian stood at her left shoulder.

He didn't make the sound. He wasn't making the sound yet — that was still something he came to gradually, the Pack instincts arriving in his body on their own schedule, and today wasn't the day they arrived fully. But he stood straighter than he had when he came through the door and his chin was up and his eyes were moving over the room with something in them that wasn't performance.

Pride.

The specific, unmanaged, genuine kind.

He looked at Elena.

She was looking at the hall, at the sound moving through it, at the wolves who had held through siege and poisoning and trial and had come out the other side of all of it into this morning in this room.

He looked at her profile. At the line of her jaw and the scar on her cheek and the way she held Luna — arms steady, position perfect, the ease of someone who had been learning for three weeks and made it look like it had always been this way.

He thought about the morning she'd told him she was pregnant.

He thought about the word she'd said into his shoulder in the dark.

He thought about *I love you too* said in daylight.

He thought about the gorge, the crib, the wolf toy, the ceiling crack, the co-Alpha ring on his hand that had caught the morning light when Marta said his name.

He thought about four years in a cave eating cold rabbit and believing that was the whole of what existed.

The hall was still making the sound.

Elena turned her head and looked at him.

He looked back.

She didn't say anything.

He didn't say anything.

But something passed between them that didn't require words — the specific language of two people who have been through enough together that the important things travel without them.

Luna made the recognition sound.

They both looked at her.

She was looking at the hall. At all the voices. At the sound the Pack made when something mattered.

She'd heard it before, technically — she'd been there for the barracks speech, for the ceremony, though she hadn't been outside yet, hadn't been born yet, hadn't been Luna yet. But she'd been carried through all of it.

And now she was hearing it directed at her.

Her eyes moved. Tracking. The unfocused attention becoming, in this moment, something more directed. Something that seemed to reach toward the sound the way new things reached toward light.

"She knows," Rhydian said. Quiet. Just for Elena.

"Yes," Elena said. Same volume.

"She recognizes it," he said.

"She's been hearing it her whole life," Elena said. "Since before she was born."

He looked at Luna.

Then at the hall.

Then he made the sound.

Low. Private. Not the full version, not the ceremony version. Something quieter than that, that started in his chest rather than his throat, that came from the place where the things he meant lived before he found words for them.

Luna turned.

Not toward him exactly — toward the sound. Her unfocused eyes moved in his direction.

He stopped.

She made the recognition sound.

Elena looked at him. At his face, which was doing everything he usually managed and wasn't managing right now.

"She knows your voice," Elena said.

"I know," he said.

"She recognized it," she said.

"I know," he said again.

His jaw moved.

He looked at the ceiling briefly. Then at Luna. Then at Elena.

"I'm not going to—" he started.

"You're already doing it," she said.

"I know," he said.

She put her free hand on his arm. Brief. Present. The specific touch that wasn't holding him up but was letting him know she was there.

He breathed.

Marta was saying something — the closing of the ceremony, the formal language that wrapped the declaration in charter protocol. The room was starting to shift from the howling back toward the organized noise of people with things to say and people to say them to.

Cade appeared at Rhydian's elbow.

He stood there for a moment.

"Co-Alpha," he said. Formally. Like he was practicing.

Rhydian looked at him.

"Cade," he said.

Cade looked at Luna. At her small face and the ceremony cloth and the way she was regarding the hall with the focused attention she brought to everything.

"She has your jaw," Cade said.

"I know," Rhydian said.

"She's going to be trouble," Cade said.

"She already is," Rhydian said.

Cade looked at Elena.

"Alpha," he said. "She's—" He stopped. Started again. "She's perfect."

Elena looked at Luna.

"Yes," she said. "She is."

Cade stood there for another moment, doing the specific thing he did when he had more to say and wasn't sure if this was the place for it. Then he seemed to decide.

"I'm going to teach her the drills," he said.

Rhydian stared at him.

"She's eleven days old," Rhydian said.

"When she's older," Cade said. "Obviously. I just want it on record that I'm going to—"

"She's not going in the training yard until—" Elena started.

"Obviously not now," Cade said. "I'm thinking more like when she can walk."

"When she can walk," Rhydian said, "we'll discuss it."

"Good," Cade said. Satisfied. He turned back toward Petra.

Elena and Rhydian looked at each other.

"He's going to be a problem," Elena said.

"He's already a problem," Rhydian said.

"The best kind," Elena said.

Rhydian looked at her.

"You said that about the jaw," he said.

"Still true," she said.

The ceremony had dissolved into the particular warm chaos of a settlement that had been given something good. Wolves coming forward to see Luna, to say the name, to make the small sounds that weren't quite the Pack sound but were in the same family as it. Marta completing the scroll entry. Brennan somewhere managing the logistics of two hundred wolves in one hall with quiet professional competence.

Ferris came forward.

He stopped a few feet away. Looked at Elena. At Luna. He didn't come closer than that — he'd understood, since the trial, the specific distance that was appropriate and had respected it without being told.

"Alpha," he said. "Co-Alpha." He looked at Luna. "She's healthy."

"Yes," Elena said.

"And she's—" He paused. "She's declared well. Marta's language was exactly right."

"It was," Elena said.

He stood there for another moment.

"I owe you more than apology," he said. To both of them. "I know that."

"You're doing the work," Rhydian said.

Ferris looked at him.

"Yes," Ferris said.

"Then that's the thing," Rhydian said.

Ferris looked at Luna one more time.

Then he stepped back, and moved away, and didn't look back.

Elena looked at Rhydian.

He looked at her.

"The work," she said.

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

She put her head on his shoulder for exactly one second — the specific brief contact of two people in a public space allowing themselves a private moment.

Then she straightened.

The Alpha, in a room full of her Pack, with her co-Alpha at her shoulder and her daughter in her arms and the morning light coming through the windows at the angle that made everything look like it had been arranged.

"Brennan needs us," she said.

"I know," Rhydian said.

"Marta needs the scroll—"

"I know," he said.

"And Cade is going to—"

"Elena," he said.

"What."

He looked at her. At Luna. At the hall full of their Pack.

"One more minute," he said.

She stopped.

She looked at him.

He was right.

They stood at the stone marker in the morning light with Luna between them and the Pack moving around them, and it was exactly one minute.

It was enough.