

Chapter 41 – Healing the Broken Alpha

I followed Aunt Maggie out the back door into a beautiful, wild-looking garden. The beds were arranged in concentric circles, but that was the only order. Every kind of herb, flower, shrub and even small trees seemed to have been planted at random, and yet I knew it wasn't random at all. It was too beautiful to be an accident.

The old dwarf apple tree still put out a few fruits on its gnarled branches, while a climbing rose used the trunk to draw itself upward toward the sky. Another bed was overrun with lilies of the valley, while still another was a riot of color of petunias in white, pink, and deep purple around clumps of bright yellow and orange marigolds. Moon flowers opened their white trumpets amongst the day's closed morning glories. The sky was dark, and the flowers perfumed the night air so sweetly.

Maggie trailed her fingers over the leaves of a shrub that I couldn't identify, and smiled at the plant like it was a child she was caressing. "You know, I was worried when I heard that River was going to take a chosen mate," she confessed, but the words were softened when she turned that motherly smile on me. "River is like a son to me. Well, naturally, he is my nephew, but he was so small when his mother left...I took care of him until Darian found another mate."

She walked a little farther, following a path toward the innermost circle, where a small marble bench had been placed under a trellis of honeysuckle. There was a potted lemon tree next to a stone birdbath a few feet away.

Maggie sat down and patted the bench next to her. "I always hoped he would find his fated mate," She continued, "Of course, I still hold out the same hope for Zachary as well. But, now that I've seen the two of you together...I can see that River has made a wise choice. You are good for him, Lenora."

I felt my cheeks warm under her compliment, even as I sat down next to her on the cool stone slab.

She took a deep breath in through her nose and let it out slowly. "I guess it hasn't been easy for you," she reached over and patted my hand. "I can't imagine marrying or mating a stranger. Especially an Alpha like River. But I can tell that he truly cares about you. And you have such a calming influence on him. It's quite remarkable, actually."

Even from our place in the garden, I could still hear the men arguing in the house. Their voices drifted out through the open windows, polluting the night air with their vitriol. I winced as I heard someone thump the table, and River's voice grew louder, almost shouting.

Beside me, Maggie shook her head. "Men! I suppose I better go in and try to keep the peace. You can just relax out here a while longer if you like, dear," she offered kindly.

“Thank you,” I answered. “I think...just a few minutes more.” I knew I was being a coward. Maggie had just complimented me on my ability to help River stay calm, but here I was hiding in the garden while he was ranting and raving in her dining room. I watched Maggie’s strong back disappear in the door. I could tell when she entered the dining room, because the men’s voices grew quiet again.

I stood and continued to wander around the garden, making my way slowly to the back of the circle, nearer to the dark edge of the pine forest that surrounded the grounds.

It was an old growth forest. The trunks of the trees were huge and the canopy above was so thick that the moonlight couldn’t penetrate. Even with my excellent night vision, I could barely discern the trunk from the branches, the forest floor from the darkness all around.

An eerie feeling of foreboding crept over me, even as I took one step, and then another into the trees. Like something in the darkness was calling me, drawing me to enter the wood, against the instinct that told me to turn quickly and return to the house.

I hadn’t gone far, maybe fifty feet, when I felt, rather than saw, a presence, somewhere deeper in the forest. I lifted my nose, but I couldn’t detect anything, except the faint scent of crushed herbs. Mint, thyme, sage and lavender. It was like someone had stomped through one of Maggie’s herb beds.

And then rolled in it to cover their scent.

Despite myself, I stepped closer to the unknown. I couldn’t help myself. It was as though my wolf was in a daze, pressing forward whether I wanted to or not. The closer I got, the more I felt the darkness pressing in on me, heavy, foreboding, and sad...

Unbearably sad, like I had just stepped into a palpable cloud of depression and misery.

Something shifted in the dark, and I froze. Straining my eyes to see the black-on-black shape of a man, crouching near the base of an old oak. His face turned toward me, but I couldn’t make out his features. I could tell it was a man by the breadth of his shoulders, and I could see that his hair was long and matted into dreads. He seemed to have a long, overgrown and tangled beard as well.

I was terrified. I could feel my heart beating wildly in my chest, and my breathing was rapid and shallow. Goosebumps were rising along my arms, and my neck felt tingly with adrenaline. A cold sweat glazed my brow.

Yet I still stepped closer.

“Hello?” my voice squeaked a bit in my nervousness. I stood with my feet wide, and my arms out like I was trying to keep balance. I wondered if I could shift quickly into my wolf and escape if the stranger in the woods made an aggressive move.

The man shifted, and I had the sense that he must be quite large. Even squatting the way he was, he was almost as tall as I.

A breeze stirred the tree limbs above, and for a moment, moonlight filtered through. I could almost make out a long nose, and the vague outline of wide eyes under bushy brows, and a flash of white smile that stretched wide under so much facial hair. The man was so dirty, and it was so dark, I couldn't even tell what color his hair was.

It was the face of a man, but the smile of a child...and I had the haunting feeling that I knew it well.

"River?" I whispered.

The man flinched like I had slapped him.

Chapter 42 – Healing the Broken Alpha

My temper was getting out of control, and Lenora wasn't beside me to help calm me down.

"I have no issue with you taking a loan from the company," I said to my uncle between gritted teeth. "But taking pack funds for your private business was against policy. You, of all people, ought to know that, Uncle Richard."

He shrugged and lifted his shoulders. "I suppose I must have overlooked it in my eagerness to make these necessary investments. But really, River, you have nothing to worry about. Once we complete these contracts, I will be able to repay the loans in full, with interest. No one will have anything to complain about, as long as the money is returned to the coffers in due time, right?"

Maggie had returned to the house, and was serving slices of cake on hand painted china plates.

I opened my mouth, about to argue further, when I heard a scream through the open window. Immediately, I knew it was Lenora. Everyone's head swiveled toward the back door, and without thinking, I jumped from my chair, toppling it over backwards, and ran for the door. I forgot entirely that I was nearly as defenseless and weak as she was, if not more, since I couldn't shift into my wolf. My aunt and uncle, and even Zachary were right behind me, pushing me out into the dark garden.

I cursed my dull human eyesight, as I could barely make out anything in the moonlight. Everything was dull, monochromatic, black and grey bleeding together in one indistinct night panorama. I raced toward the treeline, navigating the garden more from memory than from sight. I was nearly to the pines when Lenora burst out, and ran straight into my arms.

“River!” she cried, burying her head into my chest, and wrapping her arms tightly around my neck. Her body was quaking. I held her close and scanned the trees, looking for the danger she’d been running from, but the forest seemed quiet.

“What is it, Nora?”

“There...there was a man in the woods!” She whispered, her breath shuddering in her ribs.

I tightened my hold on her and looked over her head to my uncle, who had drawn up beside me. “Rogues?” I asked him.

Lenora shook her head under my chin. “I-I don’t think so. He didn’t smell like a rogue, but he had applied herbs to cover his scent. He... he looked like a wild man.”

“What do you mean?” Uncle Richard demanded.

“He...he was dirty and unkept,” she stuttered. “His hair was long and tangled. Like...like a homeless person.”

“How strange!” Maggie exclaimed behind me.

“Did he hurt you?”

“N-no.” Her fingers tightened around me. “When I tried to come near him, he started to scream and thrash, and I was frightened...so I ran.” She released me and looked back into the woods. “But I don’t think he followed me.”

“That’s very unsettling,” Uncle Richard said, propping his hands on his hips. “I don’t know of anyone like that around here. Zachary, maybe you should go check it out.”

“Right,” Zachary made a show of stripping off his shirt. When he reached for his belt buckle, I turned, using my body to block Lenora’s view of my cousin’s naked body as he dropped his pants. He gave me a wicked grin before he shifted into his grey streaked wolf.

His wolf was an impressive animal, as was expected from a descendant of a powerful alpha. He took a moment to stretch, and I swear he was preening on purpose, reminding me of what I no longer had. He lifted his snout into the sky and gave a sniff before he loped off into the woods at a lazy pace, like he wasn’t particularly worried about Lenora’s report of a strange vagrant so near the house.

However, Richard and Maggie looked properly concerned. “Let’s get back inside the house,” Richard said, putting his hand on my shoulder and steering me back toward the door. Maggie kept looking back over her shoulder as she walked beside Lenora, a protective arm also wrapped around her shoulders.

“I’m so sorry dear, I shouldn’t have left you outside alone. I never expected—well! We haven’t had any issues out here in years! I can’t imagine how that man found his way here!”

Back inside the warm confines of the house, Uncle Richard shut the back door and bolted it, apparently not worried about the fact that he had left Zachary alone outside. I clenched my fists and realized the hypocrisy of the situation.

I was the alpha. It was my job to keep my lands free from rogues and any other criminal elements. I should be out with Zachary investigating this incident. In fact, upon finding the man, I should rip him apart for frightening my mate. And yet, there I was, shut up in the house like I was one of the elderly wolves, or the women and children who couldn’t fight and protect themselves.

Because I wasn’t even a wolf.

Lenora seemed to sense my despair, and placed her hand against the small of my back. “It’s okay, River. I don’t think the man was dangerous...”

I allowed myself just a second to indulge in the comfort she offered, and then I ripped myself away. I paced to the other side of the room and turned to stare out the window at the garden with its circular beds.

I was a selfish a.sshole, putting an innocent she-wolf in danger for my own purposes. She’d gotten lucky this time, if the man she met was truly just a harmless mad man in the woods. But what about next time? What if my attempted murderer caught her alone somewhere?

I curled my fingers into my palms. I had no claws to extend, but my dull fingernails bit into my skin nonetheless.

“Anyway, River, about the money,” My uncle approached me contritely, “I really am sorry if I overstepped my bounds and took advantage of the family connection while you were ill. I might have allowed the excitement to cloud my better judgment. Please forgive me.”

I shut my eyes and tilted my face toward the ceiling, as if seeking divine help to keep my temper in check. There wasn’t anything I could do to rectify the situation now. I had already investigated the demolition company’s finances, and they were just barely in the black. He would not be able to pay back the loan in full any time soon. In order to make sure that the pack remained financially solvent and to remove both the risk and the potential accusations of nepotism and favoritism, I would have to pay back the loan myself, from my personal assets.

I didn’t bother to inform my uncle of the decision. He’d find out when my lawyer presented him with the buy out in a neat and tidy legal package. I spun around once more and motioned to Lenora. “Let’s go,” I said shortly. “We’re finished here.”

She walked to me obediently, but I saw her cast an apologetic look back at Maggie. “I’m sorry that I’ve ruined everyone’s night. I think he was just a harmless, confused man. I shouldn’t have overreacted.”

“It’s fine dear. I’m sure anyone would have been frightened, in your position,” Maggie said graciously. “But please come to visit me again, I really enjoyed meeting you.”

I held Lenora’s hand and pulled her toward the door. The motion-sensored lights switched on in the front yard, clearly illuminating my SUV. I helped Lenora into her side before I climbed into the driver’s seat. Once we were safely out on the road, I glanced at her, watching her from the corner of my eye. “Describe him to me.”

“The man in the woods?”

Chapter 43 – Healing the Broken Alpha

My wolf spirit was usually fairly quiet and reserved, but since we had come to stay with River, she was becoming increasingly active and...well, forceful. When it came to River, she was especially over-protective and possessive. If another female so much as looked at him, she had hackles raised, growling so loud in my head that I couldn’t think straight. If we got separated from him for any length of time she got restless and irritated.

But meeting the man in the woods had really messed her up. I felt her terror, but then she also felt a strange attraction, a fascination, a frustration... It was hard to put words to the swirling emotions. I think she was confused by his concealed scent, and maybe his unlikely physical resemblance to River had added to her befuddlement.

“Could the man have been a relative of yours?” I asked, once we were back in the Alpha suite.

River shucked off his jacket and lowered himself onto the couch. He’d been especially quiet and moody since we had left his uncle’s place. I suppose I should be used to his moods by now, but it still made me feel anxious when he regarded me with that cold, masked expression. It was like he had shut a door, keeping me firmly on the outside.

He brushed his hair back with one hand. “A relative?” He shook his head. “Our family line is pretty well documented, all the way back to my great-great grandfather. As far as I know I don’t have any homeless long lost third cousins running around the territory.” There was something in his tone that I didn’t like, something sort of dismissive and derogatory, like I was a fool for even suggesting it.

But he hadn’t seen the man, so he didn’t know.

My wolf was practically writhing in my head, so much so that I lifted both hands to hold my temples.

“Just forget about it.” River suggested. “I’ll get the report from Zachary. There’s nothing you need to worry about.”

I slowly dropped my hands, staring at him.

He was kind of being an asshole. I should probably just walk away, go change into my pajamas for the night, and slide into the bed, alone. He could sleep on his side, and I would sleep on mine, like two strangers forced to share a blanket.

He was behaving in such an unattractive manner, and yet...

My eyes trailed down from his mussed hair to the strong line of his stubbled jaw, to the corded column of his neck. My wolf growled with appreciation, and I felt a familiar heat gathering in my core. He had reached up to undo the first few buttons of his shirt, baring just enough of his chest to make me lick my lips in appreciation. I continued lower, to his narrow waist, lingering on his belt buckle too long.

“Lenora...” He had noticed my tense appraisal. There was a warning in his voice. “Not tonight.”

My wolf snarled so viciously in response that it actually escaped from my throat, earning me a surprised look and a raised eyebrow from River. He shifted, pretending to be unaffected, but I could see that his body was responding. I trembled for a moment, torn between the human desire to flee from him, and my wolf’s demand that we go to him.

I took a step closer, and saw something flicker in his eyes, like a spark being fanned into a small fire. I felt a warm flush creeping over my whole body.

“Lenora...”

I continued to stalk closer, and I swear I could smell his vanilla-sandalwood scent growing stronger and more musky, even though that shouldn’t have been possible. He was just a human, after all.

Even though I was still in my human form, my wolf spirit was quickly taking control of my motor neurons. My eyesight sharpened and felt my gums itching as my fangs elongated. I moved differently, with a longer stride, keeping my center of gravity lower to the ground. I circled slightly, so that I was approaching his flank instead of straight on.

With every step closer, the heat was growing more unbearable. I began to tug my shirt off over my head, even so, my breasts felt swollen and extra sensitive. The brush of my own fingers as I stripped off the shirt made them ache. River’s green eyes were following my movements. They grew darker and darker as I came closer. By the time I leaned down, placing one hand on either side of his shoulders, they were almost black.

My breath came heavily, like I had run a great distance instead of just crossing the room. I kept him pinned to the couch and tipped my head to one side.

He was no longer protesting. And he made no attempt to escape from the cage of my arms, even though he could have easily shoved me aside.

He didn't. He couldn't.

My wolf growled, and the noise rumbled out of my throat. I slowly settled myself over his lap, and cupped my hands around his face. My thumbs stroked over the stubble of his jaw, and I stared at his lips like I'd never seen them before.

How could a man's lips be so appealing? So firm and so...delicious. I lowered my head to trail my tongue along the fuller bottom portion.

He always made me feel so bold, so fearless, so alive.

His hands slid up my back, his palms feeling unnaturally cool against my heated skin. He lifted his head to capture my mouth, and my wolf purred with contentment.

He finally broke the liplock so that we could both suck in a much needed breath. I rested my forehead against his.

"What are you doing, Lenora?" He asked, his voice low and rumbling, his warm breath fanning my face.

"I- I don't know. My wolf... I need..."

He wrapped his arms around me, and pulled me down, so that his mouth could close over my marking spot. He sucked on it and I gasped, writhing beneath him.

"You can't be in heat," he mused, lifting his lips to nip the skin along my neck.

I hummed in some kind of agreement. A she-wolf didn't go into heat without being marked.

He pushed the straps of my bra down my arms and freed my breasts. I leaned back on his lap to give him better access. I moaned when he pressed his palms against my tingling, oversensitive nipples. He lifted one globe and brought the peak higher, so he could stroke it with his tongue.

It felt different, exquisite, almost painful.

He kissed one side and then moved to the other. "Strange," He murmured before he captured the other nipple. "I could almost swear they're larger than before."

When his teeth closed around them, I yelped and pushed his head away.

He raised head and looked at me, his eyes clouded with passion and surprise. “What’s wrong?”

I covered my breasts with my hands. “Nothing,” I said, my cheeks flushing with embarrassment. “Just a bit sore, that’s all. Um... it happens like that sometimes, before my cycle.”

“Oh,” He looked a bit relieved to know that he hadn’t actually hurt me. His lips curved into a smile. “I’ll be extra gentle...” He bent his head again, and this time used only his hot, wet tongue to tease me. His nimble fingers finished unhooking the clasp, freeing me from the restraining garment entirely.

Within moments the pain was forgotten, and he was turning me over on the couch. He peeled off my pants and then stripped off his own. He returned to kiss me as he his fingers delved under the elastic of my panties, parting my folds and dipping into my center.

“So beautiful,” he murmured against my lips, before he reared back, and ripped away my underwear like it was mere tissue paper. His thumb found my clit and rocked against it, causing my hips to jerk and roll. My eyes wanted to close, but I forced them to remain open. I wanted to see him, all of him. I wanted to watch his expression and his eyes, to see if in the throws of passion they revealed any of his deepest feelings.

He lifted my leg and draped it across the back of the couch, opening my core wider. Just before I shattered under his thumb, he plunged inside. My body was already growing used to it, since we had made love many times since he moved back into the big bed. My core stretched willingly around his invading shaft, and a heady moan escaped from my lips.

My wolf was growing frantic in my head again, frantic in a way I didn’t understand. I knew she was dying to mark him, and I didn’t blame her for that. I wasn’t sure that she could really comprehend the fact that River was unable to take our mark, that our venom could kill him. But her palpable anxiety seemed different this time.

When I looked into his eyes, it seemed like I saw the same desperation in their stormy green depths. His lips were parted slightly as he held my thighs and pushed into me, causing my body to rock deep into the couch cushions.

I met his urgency with my own, lifting my hips. I wanted to clasp hold of him, but the position kept him just out of my reach, except for his wrists, so I grabbed hold of him, locking him in the shackles of my fingers, pulling on his hands to communicate my need. I was so close, but completion eluded me.

Unexpectedly, River stopped thrusting and pulled his member out. I saw it, glistening with my fluids, just before he grabbed my hips and flipped me over from my back, to my

front. Before I had quite gathered my wits, he was elevating my rear end. He slid a finger up and down my slit before he slid back inside, even deeper than before.

When he began to move, he was rougher than usual, almost like he was in a hurry to get to the finish line. He pushed my head down and wrapped his hands in my hair, tugging at my scalp with every push, grunting with satisfaction when his head crashed into my cervix.

Finally, my thighs began to quiver as my pleasure reached its crescendo peak. My cries were muffled by the couch cushions.

River swore and began to pump harder, “Oh f.uck, Nora...” I loved the way he used my nickname, and I tried to lift myself up, back onto all fours. I felt him go stiff, as he pushed into me a few more times, and then he roared with his own release. I could feel his member twitching deep inside, and the hot flood of his seed in my womb.

When he finished, he didn’t cuddle me as he usually did. He withdrew, and left me on the couch alone while he went to the bathroom to clean up. I knew I should go shower too, before I left an unsightly stain on the cushions.

However, I was feeling too limp to move, like all my bones and muscles had turned to liquid. I rolled over to my back and rested my head on the armrest, which wasn’t a particularly comfortable position. I stared out the window at the moon, which was in its waning stage, and put a hand over my throbbing breasts, which only seemed even more tender after our love making.

Chapter 44 – Healing the Broken Alpha

He left. He took a shower, pulled on fresh clothes, and left me lying there on the couch, still naked and raw. My body ached from the rough sex, but more so, my heart felt bruised. I pulled myself off the couch and staggered over to the side table, and used the remote to lock the door.

I locked my husband out of his own room, but I didn’t feel any remorse. I felt emotionally numb, like I couldn’t think beyond the pain in my body. I stumbled to the bathroom, and twisted on the shower, setting it as hot as the tap would go. I stepped under the spray and turned my back to the water, letting the heat soak into my sore muscles, while I braced my arms against the wall.

pop

I finally forced my mind to focus on the fact that I might be pregnant.

It was unusual for an unmarked wolf to become pregnant. It was even more rare for a werewolf to intermix with a human. I’d heard of a few male werewolves who had taken

on human mates, but I couldn't think of a single case where a female werewolf had taken on a human, and then bore his child. It must have happened though, somewhere, sometime. I couldn't possibly be the first.

I wanted to be happy, but instead, I felt a shiver of apprehension.

River had gone through with the Luna ceremony, not because he intended to make me his real luna, but because he wanted to put on a show and attract the attention of his would-be assassin. He had married me, but I was only his wife when it was convenient and it served his purpose. He made love to me, but he wasn't IN love with me. I was a pawn in the game he was playing. He was only using me as it suited him, and I had quietly and meekly gone along with all of it.

Out of fear, at first.

Maybe, out of love.

I felt, deep down, that River would not be pleased to know he'd put a child in me. At least not now. Maybe, later, when the stress and anxiety of his own attempted murder were finally laid to rest, and the person was found, maybe then I could tell him. Until then...

Well, I wasn't even sure. Maybe it was nothing, maybe stress was messing with my cycle. Maybe my sore breasts really were just impending PMS. Unfortunately it wasn't as simple as going out to the local pharmacy to buy a test. Blackstone was isolated, and I hardly ever set foot out of the packhouse fortress without River or his father by my side.

I turned, adjusted the temperature down a few degrees so I wouldn't scald myself, and leaned my head against the tiles.

Not for the first time, I wished my mother were alive. I wished I had another woman to turn to, to confide in, to seek advice from. Unfortunately, there didn't seem to be a single friendly female in this house. The former luna hated me. Most of the staff seemed hostile too. The only kind hearted, motherly woman I had met so far was River's aunt.

I took a cloth and began to wash my skin. I winced when I ran over tender places. Would I have bruises later.

River had never been rough with me like that. I'm not going to lie, I had wanted it, and in the moment, I had thoroughly enjoyed it. I had practically begged for it. It was...exciting. But at the end, when he had so coldly pulled out of me and walked away, it had hurt. It made me feel used and discarded. It made me feel like a prostitute.

I scrubbed between my legs and along my inner thighs, but I still felt like I was somehow soiled. When my tender skin couldn't take any more abuse I slowly and carefully washed and conditioned my hair, and then I stood under the spray until the water slowly grew cold.

How could a place this big have such a small hot water tank? I finally twisted off the tap and stepped out. The air was thick with steam. I wrapped myself up in towels and went to the closet to get clean clothes. By the time I emerged, someone was knocking at the door. But it wasn't River.

It wasn't Remy either.

I plaited my damp hair and threw the long braid over my shoulder as I approached the door, feeling some sense of trepidation as I approached it. I undid the lock manually and pulled open the door.

Asher stood there, one arm braced against the door jamb. His collared shirt was half unbuttoned, and he smelled of sweat and musk. His face was leaner than River's more angular, his eyes set closer together, with a certain meanness that River's didn't possess. Even when River was ignoring me, he did it with cold detachment, not hostility. His blond hair was flopping on either side of his pale forehead, and his lashes were half lowered over lecherous eyes.

I followed his stare and realized my wet hair had soaked the white t-shirt that I was wearing, and my dark nipples were clearly visible through the semi-transparent fabric. I quickly folded my arms over my breasts and glared at him, something I wouldn't have dared to do a few weeks ago. "What do you want?"

Bad choice of words. He took a threatening step forward. "I think that should be obvious by now."

I wanted to retreat, but I planted my feet and held my ground. "I think it should be obvious by now that I am not interested."

He breathed in deeply, and licked his lips. "What is it about you?" his eyes raked over my body again, and I could feel him undressing me, inch by inch. "I can't stop thinking about you. Thinking about all the things I want to do to you."

He reached out a hand like he was going to touch my face, and I slapped it away. "Don't touch me!"

Chapter 45 – Healing the Broken Alpha

I felt a surprising sense of calm wash over me as I quickly analyzed the situation. I was not a strong woman, nor was I an exceptionally strong wolf. I knew I could never beat Asher in a fair fight. He had his legs spread as he leaned over me, leaving just enough room between his thighs for me to drive my knee into his testicles. I knew I had to make it count, and I used all of my strength to ram my boney knee into his tender bits.

His hands slipped off of me as he coughed out air like I had hit him in the lungs instead of the balls. I wasted no time to slip out of his reach and dart for the door. I had to get as far away from him as possible. I had to get around other wolves, wolves that would protect me from the Alpha's lascivious brother. I had to believe that he was only acting so boldly because he was alone with me in the house. Surely out in public he would have to show some decency.

I flew down the stairs as fast as my legs would take me. I knew from the commotion and the swearing that Asher was not far behind me, but his progress was being slowed by the pain in his nether regions. I briefly considered running for the kitchen, where surely I could find some staff at work. However, most of the staff had treated me with cold disdain, I wasn't at all confident that any of them would do anything to stop the Alpha's brother from attempting to rape me right there in the kitchens. Remmy was the only member of the household who treated me like I was actually his luna, but I had no idea where the old man was, or if he would be capable of stopping the lunatic on my heels.

I heard his feet slapping the stone floor behind me as I hit the front doors, jumped off the steps and continued running. I looked frantically around the yard for any other person. Surely there should be a guard on duty, or a gardener, or anyone. But the front grounds were completely deserted, making me wonder if Asher had been planning this all along. Could he have actually dismissed all the staff ahead of time so he could do as he wished?

Instinctively I took off toward the woods, and shifted in flight, not caring at all as my clothes ripped away from my body. I knew Asher would shift, there was no chance I could continue to outrun him as a human. My muscles burned and my lungs screamed for more oxygen as I raced deeper into the woods. I gave over my motor function to my wolf, trusting her senses more than I trusted my own.

Running to the woods was a stupid choice, I realized as I crashed through the underbrush. The forest that surrounded the castle was still unfamiliar to me. I had only had a few days to explore it, while Asher had had his whole life to familiarize himself with every tree, rock and ravine. I crashed toward the small river and started to race upstream.

I knew where my wolf was taking us. She was headed for the ruined homestead, the abandoned cellar hole up on the mountainside. But she must have been crazy and confused, because that place was miles from the Blackstone packhouse, and Asher was close behind us. I could hear his furious snarls and growls, but I couldn't waste precious seconds to look back and pinpoint his position.

The terrain grew steeper, and I knew I wouldn't be able to keep running much longer. I had never spent much time in my wolf form, and I wasn't in good physical condition. I could feel my muscles beginning to tremble. I had no other options left, I had to turn and fight. I reached a small clearing beneath a stand of birch and skidded to a stop, and then spun around to face my adversary.

Seeing that I had given up my flight, Asher's wolf had also stopped running. Like the man, his wolf was pale, with cruel, pale blue eyes. His coat was silvery-blond, and his body was lean and lanky, giving him more of the appearance of a greyhound than a wolf.

Nevertheless, I was no match for his size or his strength, nor was I skilled at fighting.

I could do nothing, but crouch low to the ground and wait for him to make the first move. Maybe I would get lucky. Maybe he would be cocky and make a stupid mistake. Maybe I could injure him enough to make a second escape.

Asher growled and snarled and snapped at me, while drool dripped from his mouth in long, disgusting ribbons. I saw his muscles bunch as he prepared to leap at me. Probably he intended to knock me off my feet, roll me to my back, and pin me by my neck. He could easily rip through my jugular if he wanted, but some part of me knew he wanted me alive when he took me.

I braced myself, and looked to my right, all the while I was intending to jump to the left, and hopefully avoid the full weight of his body slamming into mine. Fear and adrenaline left a metallic taste in my mouth, but just as Asher's paws left the ground, a dark shadow moved over me, momentarily blotting out the sun. Flesh collided with flesh as the two wolves collided in midair just in front of me, and then fell to the ground in a tangle of dark and light fur, sharp teeth and long claws.

I should have used that opportunity to run, although I had no idea who or where I was supposed to run to. But I couldn't move. My wolf was standing, trembling, as if paralyzed, watching the two wolves fight, but in the end, it wasn't really a fight at all. The dark wolf was bigger, bulkier, more powerful than Asher's pale beast. They rolled, parted from each other, only to spring again.

Even though he was fighting a losing battle, Asher's wolf managed to sink his teeth into the larger wolf's foreleg, tearing the flesh and leaving a large, ragged wound. The pain of the wound only seemed to strengthen the dark wolf and it lunged again, this time only narrowly missing Asher's throat. Perhaps it finally dawned on the young man that there was no winning this fight. He slipped out from under the claws of the larger wolf, tucked his tail between his long legs and took off running down hill, away from his attacker, and away from me.

I was left, my feet planted to the ground, staring at my rescuer. The old saying "out of the pot and into the fire" was rolling around in my confused brain as the beast limped closer. I realized that the strange wolf had no scent, only the vague, lingering odor of mixed herbs. I also realized that there was something strangely dark and sad about him, as if the very air around him were devoid of hope and devoid of joy.

I was terrified.

I was mystified.

And it didn't matter what I wanted, my wolf refused to budge. She wouldn't take a step, neither closer, nor away from the creature. When I tried to connect with her mind, all I felt was confusion, anger, sadness, but no coherent thoughts. It was like being near the black wolf had caused radio interference between us, and there was now nothing but static in my mind.

He came closer, and I wondered what he would do to me. Unexpectedly, he let out a whimper that was completely at odds with his massive size and brutish appearance. It was the sound a puppy made when a brother or sister was playing too rough.

And then the air grew thick with ozone as the great wolf shifted back into a very large and very naked man. At first sight my addled brain thought I was looking at River's body, but then I began to sort out the differences. Although similar in size and shape, the man before me had a ripped look that did not come from doing exercise routines in secret, but rather the sort of musculature that came from hard living and scarce nutrition. There was evidence of scars, but they were well concealed under a layer of dirt and filth. His green eyes were hauntingly similar to River's but this man's gaze was strangely vacant and simple. His dark hair was matted, and his beard was long and tangled into rope-like dreads.

It was the strange man I had seen in the woods at River's uncle's house. The grown man with the child's smile. He was my unlikely savior.

The man whimpered again and clutched his arm against his chest. The wound he had sustained as a wolf was now oozing blood down his bicep until it dripped off his elbow. He rocked slightly and looked at me with pleading eyes, like he expected me to make it all better.