

Chapter 46 – Healing the Broken Alpha

I felt uneasy, shifting back into my human form around this stranger. Nudity was nothing for werewolves, but there was something about this man, the way he stared at me, the way the shadows kept shifting behind his gaze, I felt like a hundred eyes were watching me, not merely one simple minded man.

But I couldn't tend to his wound in my wolf form. And whatever, or whoever the man was, he had saved my life.

I shifted, and watched the man's expression closely. If I saw any sign of lust, I was ready to run again, even if my poor, shaking legs couldn't carry me far. But the man didn't seem to notice my naked form. He gripped his arm and rocked back and forth, whimpering like a child.

Moving forward, I scuttled like a crab, and he flinched, like he thought I was the one who might hurt him. I was still breathing hard, and my whole body was shaking, I couldn't have hurt him if I wanted to.

When I reached for his arm, he yanked it away with a slight, threatening growl, showing me his teeth while he cradled the arm against his chest.

"It's okay," I said soothingly, "I just want to help you."

His lower lip jutted out a little but this time, he let me touch his arm. When my finger tips connected with his dirty skin, I felt a strange, dizzy sensation, like the earth underneath me was moving. I shook my head, trying to clear it, and forced myself to focus on the jagged wound. "It's not too deep," I said, turning his bicep slightly to get a better look. "I don't think you will need stitches. It's already stopped bleeding."

The man stared at me with wide eyes, and I found myself staring back, unable to look away. I blinked hard. "We should clean it though, and maybe put a bandage over it. I don't have any medical supplies though. I don't suppose you have a first aid kit?"

His lips quivered into a crooked smile under the beard. The smile at least, did not resemble River's so much. He reached out with his good hand and touched a piece of my hair that was dangling in front of my face. "Nice... Lady," he said, very slowly, as though articulating the words took a lot of effort and concentration.

"Yes, that's right. I'm your friend. My name is Lenora. What's your name?"

"Dar...dan...os," he sounded out the syllables carefully, tapping his chest with each part. I couldn't help but notice his long, broken and dirty fingernails.

"Dardanos?"

His smile turned into a wide, almost grotesque grin. “Dan!” He scrambled to his feet, his injured arm forgotten, and turned in a circle like he was doing a little dance. “Dan!”

I stood up too, unsure of what I should do with this wild man. Being near him was arousing all sorts of confusing feelings in me. He seemed at once innocent and harmless, but then, there was a darkness around him too, a darkness that made me feel sick to my stomach.

His happy smile faded as he watched me, his green eyes seemed to flicker, like they were mere windows, and someone else was watching me through the glass.

“I can feel you,” the voice that spoke through the man’s lips was no longer slow and careful. It came out almost as a hiss. “Your soul calls to me...” He took an unsteady step toward me, like a drunk staggering.

“Dan?” I took a frightened step back.

“Go! Go away!” Dardanos voice changed again, squeaking like a panicked child. He clutched his long hair and pulled at it. “I...can’t... I can’t!” He squeezed his eyes shut and moaned.

I wanted to help him, but at the same time, he was scaring me. That raspy, hissing voice had burned into my ears, and there was something terribly familiar about it. I turned and began running again, back down the hill, away from the madman. But I couldn’t return to the pack house. No doubt Asher was there, just waiting for me like a fox in the henhouse.

I tripped over stones on the bank and splashed across the river and headed in what I thought was the direction of the road. I didn’t dare look back to see if Dan was following me. I tried to shift back into my wolf, but she had retreated somewhere far in the back of my mind, and she would not come forward.

She left me stumbling, alone and naked in the forest, without her protection. Twigs caught and pulled at my hair, and overgrown blackberry canes tore at my skin with sharp thorns, leaving long bloody scratches in their wake. I had fallen several times, and my skin was now covered with dirt, blood and pine pitch. I was almost as dirty as Dardanos.

I had left my clothing in tatters somewhere near the packhouse, so I had nothing to cover myself with.

I don’t know how far I went, sometimes running, sometimes barely crawling before I heard the distant sound of a motor, and the whir of tires on pavement. I almost cried with relief as I made my way down a steep hill, into the overgrown ditch at the side of the road. When I heard a car approaching I crawled out of the ditch to the shoulder of the road, and sat on my knees, waving my hands desperately at the black vehicle speeding toward me.

It was a dark SUV with tinted windows, the kind that alphas liked to drive. The kind that River drove.

There was a sound of squealing tires, and the smell of burning rubber and hot brakes as the fast-approaching car skidded to a stop just feet away from me. My eyes watered, with relief, with anxiety, blurring my vision. I did my best to cover breasts with my hands and to squeeze my thighs together to hide my sex as I heard shouting and the slamming of car doors.

“Lenni! What the hell?”

Someone threw a jacket roughly around me, and the slightly boozy scent hit me before the blurry face cleared in my vision.

Chapter 47 – Healing the Broken Alpha

The clan leader on the far outskirt settlement of Henderly scratched his head as he looked between me and my father. “Sorry Alphas, I have no idea what you are talking about. I didn’t call for a meeting.” He waved his arm toward the sleepy looking village. “As you can see, we are getting on just fine.”

Indeed, the settlement looked good. The houses were small, but they all seemed to be in good repair. There were an assortment of vehicles parked in front of and beside the homes with pretty flower gardens and the occasional garage. Economical options, but most of them roadworthy. Here and there I spotted movement. There was an older gentleman out mowing his patch of lawn with a push mower. A young woman was hanging her laundry out on a clothesline to dry. Another woman was sitting on her front steps blowing bubbles with a toddler. No one seemed anxious or afraid.

There was no sign of the ‘dangerous unrest’ Asher had reported to me this morning. He had insisted it was urgent, that Henderly had called requesting immediate assistance from their Alpha as they were being torn apart from the inside by insurrectionists and rogues. That’s why I had rushed up here, making the two our drive with my father, and two car loads of my best warriors.

“No rogues?” I asked, just to be sure.

“No, Alpha,” Cade, the clan leader, shook his head. He was a short, stocky man with kind brown eyes. “We haven’t seen a rogue around these parts in months. And even then they were just a few stragglers passing through; they didn’t cause any trouble.”

I sucked in a breath and pulled out my phone, attempting to call Asher for the third time. He must have gotten his wires crossed somewhere, and sent me to the wrong damn town. Which could mean that there really was another settlement somewhere in trouble, waiting for their Alpha to come to their aid. But the call went straight to voicemail. Again.

“What about your neighbors? Have any of them had any problems lately?”

“No sir, not that I’m aware of. And we had a barbeque with some of the guys from Quinett a few days ago, I’m sure they would have mentioned it if something was brewing around here.”

“Alright, sorry for the mix-up.” I looked at my father, who could do nothing more than shrug. “Things look great around here, Cade, keep up the good work.” I clapped the shorter man on the back and then turned back toward the vehicle. I had taken about three steps when suddenly I stopped. I reached my hand out to brace on something, but the only thing available was my father’s arm.

“What is it?” My dad asked, his brow wrinkling with concern.

“I- I don’t know. I don’t... s.hit, I don’t feel so good.” My stomach was rolling like I was speeding through a loop-de-loop on the Steamin’ Demon roller coaster. When the feeling of nausea and vertigo finally started to pass, an incredible pain started in the base of my neck, making my legs feel so weak that I dropped down on one knee.

“What? What’s happening?” My father looked around anxiously, and bent over me. “What do you need me to do?”

“Just...get me back to the car,” I groaned. I didn’t want to fall apart out here in the open. People already had enough doubts about my ability to lead them as a wolfless alpha. Dad grabbed my arm under the shoulder and hauled me up to my feet, and then he slung my arm over his shoulders as he started guiding me back to the SUV. I had driven on the way over to Henderly, but obviously I was in no condition to drive back. He dumped me in the passenger seat.

I hunched over, putting my head between my knees. I tried to focus on my breathing. My father was talking, but his words were just noise in the background, like he was far, far away. Even while I was swallowing bile back down my throat, I had one thing on my mind.

“Lenora,” her name came off my lips like a plea for mercy.

“What?” My father looked confused. “What’s wrong with Lenora?”

“I don’t know,” I gasped out. I took another deep breath and blew it out slowly. The sick feeling was starting to pass.

I sat up and took another slow breath through my nose. “Let’s go.”

“But the warriors-” my father started to point out that our men had gone to check the perimeter of the town.

“They can find their own way home. Now get moving, or I will drive myself.” I growled.

While my father tested the speed limits, I had my cell phone out trying to get a line on Asher, or Lenora. Asher’s phone was still switched off, and Lenora didn’t have her own phone. The staff 9j[wasn’t picking up the landline.

“Call your stepmother,” Dad said tersely as he navigated a sharp turn. The tires squealed in protest and I was thrown against the door by the centrifugal force. I pushed myself upright and searched for Gayle’s number in my contacts list.

When she picked up, I could hear by the background noise that she was not alone. “Where are you?” I asked, without greeting.

“I’m at the Lake House Club,” she answered testily.

“Is Asher with you?”

“What? No, of course not! This is a she-wolf meeting, he wouldn’t be here. Why? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” I snapped. At least I hoped it was nothing. “His phone is off.” I switched hands and held the phone close to my ear. “What about Lenora? Have you seen her?”

“I wasn’t aware that I was supposed to be babysitting the new luna!” Gayle said, clearly annoyed now. “Really, River, get your household together. I’ve got better things to do.” She cut the call. I looked across at my father. Judging by the way he was pursing his lips, he had heard both ends of the conversation, and he wasn’t particularly pleased.

I had never really understood why a kind and jovial man like my father would be attracted to a bitch like Gayle, but I didn’t have the time to ponder that now. I dialed the phone again, this time dialing Remmy. Even though it was his day off, he was the one person I knew I could always count on.

“Yes, Alpha?”

“Remmy, are you at the house?”

“No sir, I’ve gone to visit my sister Caroline. Is there a problem?” His voice betrayed his age with a slight wheeze.

“I hope not. I hate to disturb you on your day off, but I’m still about an hour and a half away from the pack house. Would you mind popping over and checking on Lenora for me?”

“Not at all, Alpha, it’s only a ten minute drive from here. I’ll head there right now.”

I almost breathed a sigh of relief. I laid my head back against the headrest and closed my eyes. I tried to convince myself that everything was fine. Remmy would call me back in ten minutes and assure me that everything was in order. Lenora was probably in our room, or in the library where she sometimes went to work, sorting through Blackstone business for the office. I'd ask him to put her on the phone, and her soft pleasant voice would chase away the feeling of dark foreboding in my chest.

I felt the car decelerating slightly, and without opening my eyes I snarled, "Don't slow down. I need to get back to her."

Precisely twelve minutes later, Remmy called me back. I gripped the phone tightly as I pushed the button on the screen to receive the call. Immediately I heard Remmy's raspy breath as the old man was breathing hard. "Alpha River," he panted. "I can't find her, she's not here... but there's blood in the entryway."

"Lenora's blood?" I snapped upright in the seat, causing the seatbelt to lock into place.

"No Alpha, it smells of young master Asher, but I can't find him either. There isn't a soul in the house, even the kitchen staff is gone." I heard a door open and shut, and he mumbled to someone, like he had his hand over the phone's speaker. "Jenny's just come in, she said Asher gave them the day off, said they didn't need to come in until it was time to prepare dinner."

"Son of a b.itch!" I swore.

"What is it?" My father asked, his hands tightening reflexively on the steering wheel.

"I don't know," I growled, "But something is very, very wrong, and Asher's in the middle of it."

Chapter 48 – Healing the Broken Alpha

"What the hell did he do to you?" Jenson snarled, as he paced back and forth in my grandfather's office. He seemed sober, for a change, but he still smelled like an old, musty bar.

"River didn't do this," I said dully. "Can I go get cleaned up before you start the inquisition?"

Jenson's eyes bugged slightly, as though he were shocked that I had actually talked back to him. Come to think of it, it had been a long time since I'd done anything but submissively agreed to everything he demanded. "Fine!" He snapped. "Pops won't be back for another hour anyway."

I cringed at the disrespectful way he referred to our alpha grandfather as “Pops.” I was very sure he never called the man that to his face. However, I took advantage of the opportunity and slipped out of the office, still only covered in my brother’s oversized jacket. I hurried down the long hall that led to the room I had occupied since I was a toddler.

Down the hallway that I had dreamed of, hundreds of times.

When I pushed open the door, I found that someone had started to use the space as storage. There were some dusty boxes, an old vacuum cleaner, and a plastic tote full of old sheets piled on my bed. But luckily, I still had some old clothes stuffed in the closet, things that were too raggedy and too old to even bother carrying with me to Blackstone when I left. I pulled down a t-shirt that was all stretched out around the collar, and a pair of jeans with one leg that was so ripped out at the knees it was almost shorts on one side. I even dug some old, holey underwear with no elastic left out of my dresser and headed across the hall to the shower.

I locked the door and twisted on the water, letting the steam fill up the small room. Some Alpha’s daughters lived lives of high luxury, but my life had always been on the miserable side of normal. I had shared this small bathroom with my brother and some of the other ranking members who lived in the packhouse on this floor. Luckily, they had left some of their soaps and shampoos on the side of the tub. I’m sure they wouldn’t mind if I borrowed enough to scrub my body and wash my hair. The water pressure was lacking, and I knew I had to hurry, because the old water heater wouldn’t last long.

I used a clean washcloth to scrub away the dirt and the grime. There were a lot of scratches on my body, but nothing serious.

I knew I was lucky, I had escaped not only one madman, but two.

Dan might have saved me from Asher, but nobody was there to save me from Dardanos when he went mad.

I recalled the way he had spoken to me, not the slow, innocent voice, but the sharp, hissing voice that had made my blood run cold. For some reason my fingers automatically went to the long slashing scars that covered my torso. They were so far apart that I couldn’t fit my fingers into the grooves.

That’s why my father said it wasn’t a wolf’s claw that slashed me open. I had to have been cut with a machete or a knife. The attacker had just slashed me several times, making the four broad cuts across my chest and abdomen. My father had always insisted it was just a rogue, armed with something sharp.

It was a rogue who murdered my mother, and left me for dead.

I died that night.

But my father denied that too.

And in all my nightmares it was always a great beast with massive, razor sharp claws that ripped me open. Not a mere rogue with a machete.

Why did that sharp, serpent-like voice make me think of that monster?

That poor, unfortunate madman couldn't have been the beast that killed my mother. I had seen him shift, and he was just a wolf. A large, powerful wolf, but still, just a wolf.

I twisted off the water which was already changing from hot to luke warm, and reached for a towel. Who was Dardanos anyway? I didn't care what River said, the family resemblance was too striking to be a coincidence. Not to mention that the big, black wolf I had seen was clearly of Alpha stock. Could Dan be some dirty family secret? An illegitimate son, perhaps? Had they been so ashamed of his mental condition that they had left him out in the woods to die alone? Except, he didn't die, he managed to fend for himself in a half-feral state?

The idea made me feel sad. If the Blackstone family had done that to one of their own, they ought to be ashamed of themselves. This wasn't the dark ages! There was all kinds of help and treatment for children and adults with special needs! They should have taken care of Dan, enrolled him in special education classes, helped him to find a purpose and live a good life, despite any perceived limitations.

I remembered the strange shifting sensation behind the man's green eyes. What was that, really? Multiple personalities? Schizophrenia? Well, there were psychiatric hospitals for that. Places where Dardanos could get help, so that hopefully he could live a normal, peaceful life.

I dried myself off, and then used the towel to wipe the condensation from the mirror. I cringed when I saw the reflection. My skin was cross-hatched with all kinds of angry red scratches, but at least I hadn't been seriously hurt. I didn't care that much about what happened to me, but now I had someone more important to think about. But I put my hands over my lower belly, creating an upside down triangle between my fingers and thumbs.

I still hadn't had a chance to verify, but my heart already knew. I was pregnant with River's baby.

I was just pulling on my old, but clean clothes when I was startled by heavy pounding on the door. "Lenni! Hurry up! Grandpa is home, and he wants to talk to you!"

"I'm coming," I shouted back, finger combing my hair away from my face. The baggy clothes had at least covered a lot of the scratches, but there was one welt across my forehead, and some more on my forearms. Still, looking at my reflection, which was a bit drippy from the condensation, I looked like the old me.

Except I wasn't the old me any more, was I? I was the luna of one of the largest, most prestigious packs in the region. I was assistant to the Alpha CEO of Blackstone Innovations. Granted, I was pretty much a luna in name only, but my brother didn't need to know those private details. He started to pound on the door again, and I yanked it open and gave him a glare. "Do you mind?"

He looked taken aback. A year ago he would have slapped me for speaking to him like that, but now he looked confused, like he didn't know what to do with me. "I told you to hurry up," he grumbled. He pushed away from the bathroom door and headed down the hallway back toward the office. I followed him, making sure to keep enough space between the two of us, in case he changed his mind about trying to give me a slap.

My grandfather was sitting at the desk with his shoulders bowed. Somehow he looked even older than he had the last time I had seen him, at my Luna Ceremony. The lines on his proud face seemed etched deeper, his snow white hair seemed a little thinner than it had been. "Lenora!" He stood up when he realized I had entered the office, like my presence had shaken him from deep thought.

I went to him and gave him a hug, just as I had since I was a little girl. "Hello, Grandpa," I said.

He hugged me back, tightly, almost fiercely, before he let go and pushed me back so that he could get a good look at me. "What's this I hear about Jenson finding you naked and bleeding on the side of the road?"

"Why don't we sit down," I said, slipping out from under his hands and taking a seat without being invited. "It's kind of a long story."

Jenson rolled his eyes and slouched into his chair. He didn't have a drink in his hand, but I figured that was a momentary aberration. My grandfather sat behind his desk, and I began my narration, starting with how the Alpha's brother tried to assault me in the alpha's chambers.

"Yeah, yeah, so he chased you into the woods, then what?" My brother asked impatiently.

Suddenly, I didn't feel like telling my brother or my grandfather about Dardanos. "Yeah, well, he was chasing me, and when I nearly couldn't run anymore, we ran into another wolf in the woods."

"Who?" My grandfather asked, leaning forward in interest.

"I-I don't know. I'd never seen him before and I didn't wait for introductions. While they fought, I ran away, looking for the road. I shifted back into my human form, when I thought I was a safe distance away...and that's how I ended up all dirty and scratched." I looked at my brother, "So you see, it wasn't River's fault at all."

“The hell it wasn’t!” My grandfather practically exploded. “It is his job to keep you safe! He left you alone and vulnerable!”

I felt my hackles raise. It was partially true, what my grandfather was saying. River had walked away and left me alone. “He left me in the safety of the packhouse,” I said, still defending River, even though his actions that morning had hurt my feelings. “How was River supposed to know his brother was going to...” I swallowed hard, I couldn’t even bring myself to say the words out loud.

“How indeed,” Jenson snorted. “Lenni was probably leading the poor brother on all this time. Hell, maybe she was already doing Asher on the side—”

Chapter 49 – Healing the Broken Alpha

I was nearly out of my mind with worry. I had sent out my best trackers to find Lenora. They had followed her scent trail out into the woods, where they came upon a clearing near the small stream where there had been some kind of a fight. There was blood there, from an unknown wolf, and from Asher. But although Lenora’s scent was there, she had not left any blood. And then Lenora’s trail headed northeast, back to the road, where it suddenly disappeared. Probably, the trackers said, because she’d been taken away in a vehicle.

My half-brother was also nowhere to be found, probably because he knew I was going to tear him apart when I found him. I didn’t know exactly what he had done, but whatever it was, it was premeditated. He had sent dad and I to a distant town on a wild goose chase, and he had made sure all the workers were out of the house for most of the day. And now my mate, my wife, my luna, was missing.

Hadn’t my father predicted this? Didn’t he say my enemies would use my attachment to Lenora to bring me down? He just hadn’t anticipated that it would be his other son to do it. He was almost as upset as I was. I had heard him having some kind of heated argument with Gayle about Asher. Maybe he thought Gayle knew where her son was, or maybe he suspected she had some part in his plan.

Maybe if I still had a wolf, I would have been able to hear what they were saying, but as it was, the only thing I knew for sure was that their voices were raised, and after a few minutes, doors slammed and Gayle stomped and screamed her way over to the opposite wing, probably intending to sleep in one of the guest suites on that end.

I could care less about their domestic squabbles. All I wanted was Lenora back, safe and sound. Goddess help me, if she was hurt or harmed in any way, I would make sure that Asher’s final days were a complete, living hell.

It was my father who came running down the stairs, “Security just called, a car from Moorridge is approaching, they said they saw the luna in the back.”

I ran for the front door, with my father still on my heels. I was waiting on the steps when the black car pulled around, slowed to a stop, and the doors opened. The old man got out of the passenger's side. Lenora's brother slid out from behind the driver's seat. No one opened the back door, but it didn't matter, Lenora let herself out of the backseat.

She was dressed in rags that didn't fit her body. Both of her knees were sticking out of a pair of ripped and torn jeans, and the collar of the old t-shirt she wore was so stretched that it was slipping off her shoulder. But, she stood tall and walked straight, and at first glance, I didn't see any obvious injury. I breathed a sigh of relief.

Her brother, on the other hand, seemed to have a very bruised and swollen neck. I didn't care enough about the asshat to inquire into the nature of his injuries. I only cared about Lenora.

"Nora..." I breathed out her name as she pushed past her brother and approached me directly. I was impressed with the way she met my eyes directly. I frowned. Now that she was up close I could see a scratch across her forehead, and more on her arms. I took her gently by the elbows, afraid that I might accidentally hurt her more. "You're injured."

"We need to talk, Alpha," She said in a firm voice that brooked no argument. Her gaze then moved to my father. "All of us. Where is Asher?"

"Missing," my father said curtly.

"He's not missing," Lenora said with a curious tip of her head. "He's probably on the run."

"Lenora—" I wanted to crush her against my chest and reassure myself that she was back, she was safe, and she was mine. But she brushed off my hands, walked past me and headed toward the library. Everyone else followed her. My father clapped me on the shoulder and then we too turned and entered the packhouse.

I would have preferred that the meeting take place in the Alpha's office, a place where I felt I could stand with authority, even if I was merely a man. But Lenora went to the less formal library. She took a seat on a leather loveseat, and before I could claim the seat next to her, her grandfather gave me a stern look and took the place. Jenson, for once strangely silent, slouched into a corner of the larger couch. He glowered at his sister, and then at me, his lips pulled downward. My father occupied the other end of the long couch. Sitting between them seemed undignified, so I dragged a chair closer to the group and sat alone.

Alpha Moore started, clearing his throat harshly before he announced, "There has been a severe breach of your internal security, Alpha Blackstone." I wasn't entirely sure if he was speaking to me, or speaking to my father, as he seemed to be directing his words to my dad.

"What do you mean?" My father asked, sitting up straighter, as though he were offended by the older Alpha's choice of words.

Lenora laid her hand on her grandfather's arm. "What he means," she said, cutting the old man off. "Is that Asher attacked me while you were away. I'm very sure he intended to r-rape me." She was trying very hard to act confident and strong, but she stumbled over the terrible word.

"Did he?" I couldn't help the question that ripped out of my mouth.

"No," she said, her lips pressing into a hard line for a moment before she continued. "I was able to escape from him. But the truth is, this is not the first time that Asher has made inappropriate advances toward me."

I could no longer contain my rage, and I shot off the chair. "What? I'll kill him! What did he do! Why didn't you tell me?"

She looked at me with her sad, brown eyes. "At first, I didn't think you would believe me. And then I thought I could handle it. I thought he was just trying to intimidate me. I didn't believe he would actually... and I thought, once you were recovered—" she swallowed and looked away. "I was wrong."

I had so many questions. What had prompted my brother to do such a heinous thing? I knew he'd always been something of a womanizer, but I'd never known him to force any female against her will. He didn't even need to. Plenty of she-wolves were ready to throw themselves at an Alpha's son, even if he was second in line.

How had my timid little Nora managed to escape from my brother? He wasn't the best fighter, but he was still an alpha wolf, and he was fast and strong. And how had she managed to go back to her Grandfather's pack?

And how the hell had I managed to fail my mate so completely?

"I assure you," my father was speaking. "When we find Asher, he will be dealt with severely. I won't accept this behavior from any wolf, not even my son."

"When Asher is found, he will be executed," I announced coldly. A hush fell over the room.

"River..." My father's expression was pained.

"What is the penalty for an attack on the Luna, Father?" I demanded harshly.

My father bowed his head. "Death."

I'd like to say that it gave me no satisfaction to sentence my brother to die, but I'd be lying. I didn't care if we shared half the same blood. He tried to put his hands on my woman, and he was going to pay with his life. But not before he suffered every pain and humiliation I could think of.

Lenora said nothing. She sat with her hands clasped on her lap, like a small statue. When I met her eyes, she seemed to be trying to tell me something, but I couldn't interpret her message. "Gentlemen," I said, walking over to the loveseat. "I think this meeting is over. Alpha Moore, I am deeply sorry for what happened, and I accept full responsibility. I assure you, my brother will be punished, and I will take great care for Lenora's security in the future."

Stanley Moore pushed to his feet gracefully, proving that his advanced age had not yet robbed him of his strength and stamina. But once again, when he spoke, he seemed to be addressing my father more than he was me. "See to it that you do," he said forcefully. "I'll remind you that Lenora doesn't bear the alpha's mark. We can nullify this agreement at any time, and take her back to Moorridge."

I stiffened. I had always intended to send her back, when my plans were finished and my attacker was apprehended. I wondered if I should do it sooner, rather than later, for Lenora's safety. I almost opened my mouth to say so, but then I closed it again. I needed her near me. It was selfish, it was weak, but I couldn't stand to send her away. Not yet.

At the same time, my father's jaw tightened. "We had a financial agreement, Stanley."

Stanley shrugged his shoulders. "You canceled a debt. You can reinstate it. Lenora's safety is more important than any sum of money."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Lenora blink in surprise, like she hadn't expected her grandfather to stick up for her so adamantly. I couldn't blame her for being surprised. After all, her family hadn't hesitated to trade her away in the first place. On the couch, Jenson looked dark sullen, but he said nothing. Perhaps that injury on his neck had damaged his vocal cords.

My father looked like he wanted to say something else, but my grandfather raised a finger, silencing him. That was surprising, I had never seen anyone overpower my father with a mere gesture. "It seems you've sired another bad seed," he said cryptically, before he motioned to the sullen young man on the couch. "Let's go, Jenson."

I stood as well, my hands tightening into fists. Another bad seed? That implied that the old man not only thought my younger brother was worthless, but me as well. But how could I argue with him, after all, I was the one standing in the room without a wolf.

While Jenson was getting to his feet, Stanley turned to Lenora. "You can always come home, Lenni, if you don't feel safe here."

Lenora rose to her feet and slipped her small hand around my elbow. "Thank you, Grandfather. But my place is here, beside River." Her fingers felt warm and comforting through the thin fabric of my shirt. I placed my hand over hers, and glanced down at her, feeling a mix of gratitude for her loyalty and guilt.

Tremendous guilt. I didn't deserve this beautiful woman. If I didn't get her killed, I was surely going to ruin her life.

Chapter 50 – Healing the Broken Alpha

I let River hold my elbow until we were alone behind the closed door, and then I shook him off. He looked at me with an almost tortured expression which was totally at odds with the cold and closed expression he had worn when he left me alone and walked away.

“Lenora...” his voice was ragged. “Tell me the truth. Did Ashton...violate you?”

I walked away from him and stood at the window, looking out at the grounds and the woods beyond. “No,” I said flatly, and turned back around because I wanted to see his face when I spoke the words. “But you did.”

He flinched, like I had slapped him. “Nora—“

“You used my body and then walked away. How is that any different than what your brother would have done to me?” I asked harshly.

“I didn't...I didn't mean—“ he swore and raked his hands through his hair, standing it on end, giving him a wild appearance which only reminded me of Dardanos.

I sighed heavily and rested a hand over my stomach. “No, your brother didn't rape me, but I'm sure he would have, if I hadn't gotten away from him.”

“I'm sorry, Lenora. I'm sorry you were left alone, I'm sorry my brother... I'm sorry I dragged you into all this. I thought... if I kept my distance from you in public, you would be safe. I didn't realize the threat was right under my own roof.”

I swallowed and dropped my hand, in case he noticed and wondered why I kept covering my womb. “So how much longer do you need me to play my part?” I asked flatly.

Although we didn't have any concrete evidence that Asher had attempted to murder his older brother, I think it was very clear that he was the villain. And now that Asher's character had been revealed, was it really necessary for me to continue to stand beside him as his fake Luna.

It seemed like we had accomplished his objective.

River shifted uncomfortably on his feet.

“Remember the day I found out you could walk?” I asked, swallowing back a feeling of tears. “That day you asked me to play along with your ruse, and I did. I played it so well that I keep forgetting it was only pretend marriage.”

I reached up and rubbed my unmarked shoulder. I was silly and innocent and naive. I had assumed that our little arranged marriage was real and meaningful. It hadn't occurred to me that I was just another piece of this false front he was building in order to flush out the person who had attacked him.

And who wouldn't be fooled? With the kisses and the soft touches, all the times we had made love, with the exception of the last time, even the way he stuck close to me and acted all possessive and protective? His acting was so good, even I had believed him.

I had thought that even despite the fact that we had started off with an arranged marriage, that we might have actually been falling in love. That somehow we would make it through this dark time, and find our happy ending somewhere around the corner.

River would rise again, as a strong and respected Alpha, I would stand beside him, a loyal and devoted Luna, and I would give him sons and daughters. And we would live happily ever after as a perfect loving family.

I shook my head and turned back to the window. "Why didn't you just send me back with my grandfather today? It would have been the perfect opportunity to get rid of me, and extract yourself from this arrangement."

Hugging my arms around my middle, I stared out over the tops of the trees. I thought of the big black wolf who had saved me from River's brother. I thought about the strange feelings that Dardanos evoked in my body and the way my wolf was practically paralyzed around him. I thought of the haunting resemblance between the wild man in the woods, and the Blackstone family.

I thought my birth family was seriously f.ucked up. My mother was murdered, my father slowly went insane until he too died under mysterious circumstances, and my brother was an alcoholic playboy. But I think the Blackstone family was even worse off than mine. Full of toxic people and dark secrets.

I was about to turn and ask River about Dardanos, when his hands descended on my shoulders. His touch, despite everything, was cool, gentle and strangely calming. I always imagined a mate's touch would be like that. Comforting. Connecting.

But I knew it was only wishful thinking. There could be no fated bond without River's wolf.

"You are right, Lenora," he admitted. I could feel my heart physically breaking as he confirmed it. "That's how I planned it, at the start." His hands slid down my arms and rubbed them gently.

I wanted so badly to lean back into his arms, but I resisted it. I kept my back straight and my shoulders stiff. However, when he urged me to turn and face him, I let him guide me around. I had to tip my head back to meet his stormy green eyes.

“I thought I could bring you here, use you to help flush out my attacker, and then quietly send you away. My father has been pushing so hard for me to settle down, take a mate, and I thought this would kill two birds with one stone. I can’t even explain how I justified everything in my head, Lenora, but it made sense at the time.”

He reached out and brushed a strand of hair off my face and tucked it behind my ear. “I never anticipated that it would be like this. I didn’t know I would...” he swallowed with some difficulty. “I would become so attached to you. That I would... desire you, this way. That I would have this need to be with you, and near you every time. I know I can’t mark you, but I almost feel like...” He pushed my hair aside and drew a slow, tantalizing circle over my barren shoulder. “I almost feel like we have that bond, anyway.”

He breathed deeply, and his other hand came to touch my cheek. “When you had that run-in at my uncle’s I suddenly realized how much danger I am putting you in. My father warned me, but I didn’t see it until...” his breath shuddered in his chest. “I told myself I had to pull away from you. You will only be safe if I leave you alone. I told myself I need to send you away and...”

River squeezed his eyes shut. “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, what happened last time. I told myself it was the last time I would hold you. I’d take you one last time, like...like an alcoholic having one last drink. But I couldn’t...I couldn’t let you go. So I thought, if you pushed me away...if you hated me...”

His head dropped forward. “I hated myself as soon as I walked away. By the time I got downstairs I’d made up my mind to come back, to apologize. To beg and grovel if that’s what it took. But then Asher showed up and...” he let go of my face to rub his eyes.