

Chapter 51 – Healing the Broken Alpha

I felt my lip tremble. Seeing tears in River's eyes, hearing his deep strong voice cracking with emotion almost broke me.

“You are right. You always are. I should have sent you back with your grandfather. Not because I don't want you or I don't need you any more, but because I can't keep you safe here. It was on the tip of my tongue, Nora. But I couldn't do it. I couldn't send you away. Because I'm weak and I'm selfish, and I can't stand the idea of being separated from you again. Please, forgive me.”

His hands dropped from my shoulders to my waist, and pressed gently, urging me to step into his body. I couldn't hold out any more. Because even though I was hurt and I was angry, even though I felt used and manipulated, I also knew it was already too late. I loved this man.

I let him pull me close and seal our bodies together. The way that we fit into each other made it seem like we were designed for each other, predestined. My tender breasts tingled against his chest and a familiar throb started between my legs as soon as our bodies connected.

His words rolled around in the back of my mind. Did we share a bond? Without his wolf, without a mark? Was that possible? It seemed to defy explanation, but then again, the bond between mated pairs was always more mystical than biological. A couple months ago I wouldn't have believed it was possible that a strong, sexy Alpha could have a bond with a nobody like me, but somehow my perspective had changed.

Since my mother died I had been told that I was weak, ugly, worthless. My own father could hardly bear to look at me, and my brother took great pleasure in tormenting me relentlessly. Everyone acted like it was my fault... my fault that a monster had broken into the packhouse. My brother used to say that our mother died because I was weak and useless, that she had lost her life trying to defend me.

But in my dreams... my mother had died first. By the time I stepped out in the hallway, her body was already bleeding out on the floor, snowflakes from the broken window settling on a body that was already growing cold.

Everyone insisted that my dream was only a dream, that it wasn't what really happened. But they weren't there. They couldn't know that for sure.

Regardless, I had accepted their judgment. I had agreed to be weak and worthless and ugly. But being at Blackstone, being with River... I didn't want to be that person anymore.

When River walked away from me, I realized I wasn't that person. Even if people treated me that way.

His hand found its way under my ratty old t-shirt and pressed against the bare skin of my lower back. His human skin always felt unnaturally cool against mine, but at the same time, the temperature difference between our bodies was exciting, stimulating. I gave up resisting and lifted my arms to allow him to pull the t-shirt off. "I don't like these clothes," he growled, as he wadded it up and threw it toward the trash can in the corner.

I shrugged my shoulders, both at his statement, and to remove the ratty remains of my bra. "That's all I had available."

"How could they allow you to dress like this? It's shameful."

"I think that was the point," I said dryly. "They wanted me to be ashamed."

"You had nothing to be ashamed of," He said, squatting down so that he could reach the waistband of my jeans. "They were shaming themselves. They were showing their own character by neglecting you. Even if you weren't the daughter of an alpha! I wouldn't let any child in my pack be treated so carelessly."

"Because you are a good Alpha, and you care about your pack," I pointed out.

He managed to unsnap the button, which wasn't all that easy, because I had gained weight since the last time I had worn these old jeans. Not only because I ate regular, healthy, nourishing meals at River's pack, but perhaps also because there was a baby growing in my womb. Although it was probably too early for the baby to be changing my shape, I shivered when River pressed his lips against my belly, and tugged the pants down.

If River still had his wolf, he would be able to smell the changes in my hormones very soon. But he didn't have those heightened senses any more. I ran my fingers through his hair and considered telling him. We were having a moment of closeness and reconciliation, it was a perfect time to tell him I thought I was pregnant... but something held me back.

He was already paranoid about my safety. If he knew I was pregnant, maybe he would no longer let his so-called selfish-desire to keep me close to him prevail. He might try to do the gallant thing again and send me away, if not for my safety, then the safety of his unborn child.

But I didn't want to be sent away.

I also wanted, and needed to stay close to him. He didn't have a wolf, but I did. With me by his side, I could help him, I could be his senses when he needed them. I could help keep him safe, while he continued to stand proud as the Alpha of the Blackstone pack. He needed me. And I needed him. So I smiled down at him, and I kept my secret. There would be time to tell him later. When Asher was found, and justice was served.

“Did you mean what you said?” I asked, a little breathlessly, as his hands had slipped under my panties.

He looked up at me, his eyes seeming to have darkened to the color of moss. “About what?”

“Well, about everything. But, about your brother. Are you going to execute him?”

His jaw twitched as he clenched his teeth. “Yes.” His fingers tightened around my hips. “Attacking the Luna is a crime punishable by death. What Asher did, wasn’t just a spontaneous act of passion. He planned all of it. He knew exactly what he was doing. He deserves to die, and I will not make any exception, just because he is my half brother.”

I cringed at the venom in his voice, but I didn’t argue. I felt no compassion toward Asher Blackstone. I wasn’t going to be the saintly woman who stood up and saved him from the consequences of his own actions. Not only had he attacked me, but he had plotted against the Alpha. Probably he was the one who had caused River’s illness. And for that, I would gladly kill him myself.

River rolled the panties down my hips, which wasn’t hard, since the elastic was all but gone in the waist. I rested my hands on his shoulders as I stepped out of them, but my mind had wandered. “River?”

He leaned down and kissed the inside of my thigh. “Yes?”

“What...what happened to your mother?”

I felt the muscles of his shoulders stiffen under my fingers. He stood up slowly, running his fingers up my body lightly as he did so. “My mother? You want to talk about my mother now?”

I shivered slightly, but I nodded.

He sighed and ran his fingers through my hair, fanning it out over my shoulders. “She left us. I was only two, barely a toddler. They were supposed to be fated and marked mates, but rumor has it she fell in love with someone else and,” he shrugged. “She left us. My aunt told me that she knew that my father would never let her go if she tried to take me with her, so she left me behind.”

He said it calmly, matter of factly, like he had long ago made his peace with the fact that his mother had abandoned him.

“Where did she go? Did you ever see her again?”

“No idea,” his voice grew gravely, as his fingers skimmed down over my breasts. “She never came back, never tried to contact me. Or if she did, my father squashed it. But it’s

for the best. I was the alpha heir. Now I am the alpha. This is where I belong. Not with a mother who didn't honor the mate bond."

Chapter 52 – Healing the Broken Alpha

I refused to let Lenora out of my sight. In fact, when she was absent for more than a few minutes, I found myself becoming increasingly agitated and unsettled. At Blackstone we shared my corner office. I had a second, smaller desk moved in and placed near the window, at her request.

It didn't matter if she actually did any work; it was enough just for her to be present. But Lenora wasn't content just to be a showpiece in the office. She had files piled up all round her so high that I could barely see the top of her head. She was steadily familiarizing herself with all of our major projects and accounts, as well as the multitude of packs that we did business with. She kept a notebook beside her and from time to time she scribbled notes to herself.

The longer she worked, the deeper the frown line grew between her eyebrows. She flipped open another file and started to read. After a moment she cleared her throat, rose to her feet, and walked around her desk to mine, and stood beside my chair. "River?"

"Yes?"

"Can you explain something to me?" She slid the open file in front of me on the desk.

I quickly scanned the documents. "What is it that you don't understand?"

"It seems to me that Blackstone has all but taken control of the Gold Mountain Pack," she said, twisting a pen between her fingers.

"Financially, yes. But their Alpha still retains his position."

"But..." she gestured to the pile of files. "There are dozens of packs in that pile... and they are all the same... you over-extend their credit, and then seize their assets when they can't repay. Isn't that kind of... underhanded?"

I slowly closed the file. "It was Zachary's brainchild," I explained. "And it goes beyond business. There have always been problems keeping the peace between the packs. I guess it's in our blood, the need to dominate, the need to be the Alpha of all Alphas. But in this modern age, with human's peripherally aware of our existence now, and eyeing us fearfully, it's more important than ever to keep the peace. We can't continue to wage bloody battles with our rival packs without drawing unwanted media attention to the entire species. If we let the human population see that we are bloodthirsty and lawless, what do you think is going to happen?"

Lenora shivered and leaned closer to me. “They’ll want to police us. Or exterminate us.”

“Right,” I agreed grimly. Yet I was pleased that she grasped the seriousness of the problem. “In Canada they have a king, but here in the USA, no pack is going to accept an Alpha King without a fight. So Zachary came up with this plan to financially castrate problem alphas. If they don’t have the disposable income, they can’t gather the resources to wage war on other packs. It keeps their focus on their immediate duties. The health and wellbeing of their own pack.”

She chewed on her lower lip, her expression still troubled. “But who gets to decide which packs need to be controlled. Haven’t you and Zachary essentially set yourselves up as the ruling pack? The unofficial King of the Alphas?”

I ducked my head. It was true, but I had never heard it spoken out loud quite like that.

“I know it sounds bad, but it’s been an effective strategy. In the last five years, peace has prevailed in our area. There have been a few minor skirmishes, but nothing major.”

“And Blackstone gets richer and richer in the process?”

I shrugged, “Its not a crime to make money, Lenora. It’s capitalism.”

“So that’s how my father racked up a five-hundred thousand dollar debt to Blackstone?” Her voice was getting dangerously soft. She gestured to the files. “I haven’t seen my pack’s file amongst these. Are you hiding it from me?”

I frowned at her desk. “Not deliberately. Maybe you just haven’t found it yet.”

“So you were going to bankrupt Ridgemoore? Take control of it by holding the purse strings?”

I set the file she had given me carefully aside and turned to fully face her. “At the time, Lenora, your father seemed...well, erratic and unpredictable.”

“And now?” She pressed, moving closer to my chair. Her eyes were glittering in a way that I hadn’t noticed before. Her soft voice had a menacing edge that made my heart beat faster, with excitement, rather than fear.

“Your grandfather is a capable and effective leader,” I said calmly, reaching for her hand to draw her into the space between my thighs.

“Mmmhmm,” she agreed. “But my grandfather is old. He won’t be the alpha forever.”

“That’s true,” I knew we were venturing into very volatile territory.

“What will Blackstone do when my brother takes over?”

The question hung in the air between us. I think we both knew that her brother was an idiot. He was definitely the kind of Alpha we red-flagged in our closed-door meetings. “That depends on your brother,” I pointed out carefully. “If he is wise with his finances and discerning, he won’t enter into any financial agreements that would jeopardize the pack. But almost without fail, hot-headed alphas can’t resist the offers that Blackstone presents them with. No one forces them into these deals, they do it themselves.” I slid my hands around the soft swell of her hips. “Your brother is starting out with a clean slate,” I reminded her, perhaps foolishly. “Because of you, the debt that Ridgemoore owed was forgiven.”

“Oh yes,” she purred, leaning into me, climbing over my thighs so that she was seated snugly in my lap. “You traded five hundred thousand dollars... for me.”

I couldn’t tell if she was serious, or if she was playing. Given the stiffness of her spine, I knew I better handle it delicately. “I never meant it as a disrespect to you, Lenora. You were the one I wanted, and I didn’t think you would agree to marry me any other way.”

Chapter 53 – Healing the Broken Alpha

My disappointment hung over me like a wet blanket. I loved River Blackstone, but at the same time I was sorely disappointed to learn about the way he and Zachary had been taking control of other packs. I understood, by reading the files, that Zachary handled most of those deals, but no matter, River had signed off on them. He had given his stamp of approval.

Maybe I had put him on a pedestal. Even without a wolf, he seemed like the best Alpha. He was kind, caring, concerned, and I had thought, just and honorable. I had watched how he handled his pack members, and his employees at Blackstone Innovations. Now, when faced with the evidence that he wasn’t as perfect as he seemed...

I had taken my vows, and even if they were only meant to be a show to draw out his enemy, in my heart, I meant every word. I would stand by him, as my husband and my mate until he cast me aside.

But I was still disheartened. I put all the files away, slowly and mechanically. I could have called River’s secretary to put them away, but Janet still treated me like a pariah. She kept her disdain barely concealed to pacify River, but her cold stares, the sneer of her lip, the backhanded compliments and the thinly veiled insults were ever-present. I avoided her as much as possible, considering her work station was right outside the door. I certainly wasn’t going to draw her ire by asking her to do menial tasks for me.

Besides that, I needed to move, I needed to keep my hands busy. I needed to think. By the time I’d finished my task, I had decided what I really needed was some space from River. I knew he had a meeting coming up. He asked me to accompany him, but I made an excuse to remain in the office. From my seat, I could see him enter the small conference room

with Zachary, his father, and another man and a woman that I did not recognize. When the door closed securely behind him, I stood and gathered up my purse.

I walked out of the office, to Janet's desk. She was scrolling on a phone, and didn't even bother to put it away when I stood in front of her. "Will you kindly tell the Alpha that I've decided to go home early. I have a headache."

Janet raised a doubtful eyebrow at me. "Do you, now?"

I nodded, refusing to be drawn into an argument or a debate on my health. Who the hell was she to question me? I turned on my heel and walked toward the elevator. I stepped in and turned, and I couldn't help but notice, before the doors slid closed, that Janet was still watching me, and she now had the phone to her ear, speaking to someone.

I could only hope it wasn't River. Since the incident with his brother, he was stuck to me like a tick on a dog. If she told him I was leaving without him, I had no doubt he would bolt out of that meeting, and either drag me back with him, or else cancel everything to return to the pack house with me.

And right now, what I needed was space. And a run.

River had sent his best men to search the woods around the Blackstone Packhouse, but they had turned up no trace of the "Mysterious" wolf that had come to my rescue when I was fleeing from Asher. And for some reason, I didn't mention the cellar hole up on the mountain, where I suspected the mad man might be living.

I don't know why I felt some compulsion to protect Dardanos, when he had turned on me too. I pitied him, to be sure, but I feared him too. While at times he seemed so innocent and childish, there was a darkness in him. And something else. Something that drew me to him, made me feel like we had a sort of mystical connection.

Once the driver dropped me back at Blackstone, I wasted no time depositing my laptop and briefcase back in the Alpha suite, and changing out of my business attire. But, to be safe and responsible, I stopped and told the old butler, Remmy, that I was going out.

"I should call a soldier to escort you," Remmy said, reaching into his pocket for his phone.

"No!" I said, with a firm, commanding tone that surprised the both of us. I softened and offered him a smile. "It's not necessary. I'll stay close to the house, I promise. I just really need some time to clear my head. Alone."

"Please be careful, Luna," he pleaded, and I could see in his watery eyes that he felt real, genuine concern for me. He cared for me. And that touched my heart, deeply. There weren't many people in this world whom I could truly count as friends.

I reached out to touch his pale hand, with the raised blue veins and brown age spots. “Thank you, Remmy. If I’m not back in two hours, then you can send out the search and rescue team.”

He looked horrified.

“I’m joking, joking. I’ll be fine. Please tell the Alpha I asked for this time alone.”

“He won’t like it,” Remmy said, shaking his head.

“I know.” I darted out the door, to freedom.

True to my word, I circled the house and stayed close to the edge, where the manicured grounds blended seamlessly into the forest. I found a quiet, sheltered place and stripped off my clothes, and then I released my wolf, letting her spirit come to the forefront of my consciousness, letting my form meld into hers, sinking from a biped to a quadruped in mere seconds. Released, as she was, she pinned her ears back and ran, for the sheer joy of running.

We went to the small stream, waded into the icy water, which only reached our belly at the deepest point. We slacked our thirst and snapped at the trout we saw near the rocks, wetting our face without coming near to catching a fish.

Now and again, my wolf looked up stream, up the mountain, but I pulled her back. We promised to stay close, and I was afraid of what we might find up there. I climbed out of the water and shook off as much of the brook water as I could, and then laid on the grassy bank to rest, to relax, to soak in the tinkling sound of water moving over the stones in the stream, the calls of birds, the shiver of the breeze in the canopy of the trees. Even the angry chatter of a red squirrel, who was extremely offended by my presence too near his tree.

For my wolf, things were simple. Her feelings were pure and uncomplicated. She knew only love for River, and she wouldn’t, and couldn’t complicate that emotion with useless intrigue. She didn’t worry about the future, and was only vaguely aware that there was such a thing beyond the present moment, and then, only because she knew she was with child, and so she had the joyful anticipation of motherhood. She knew what she felt about Dardanos too, the fascination and the fear, the curiosity and the compassion. But she didn’t overthink it. It just was.

Sometimes I thought, if I had to be stuck in only one form, it would be better to live as a wolf, always.

I was half asleep in the warm sun, feeling dreamy and peaceful, when I heard a rustle across the river, and the slight snapping of a branch. I became instantly alert, but I didn’t move. I only twitched my ears toward the sound, and rolled my eyes in that direction.

Through the shadows of the trees, I saw the slightest movement, a flash of brown moving between the trees. But I smelled nothing, but the faintest trace of herbs.

A brown wolf emerged from the thicket, with a dead rabbit clutched in its jaws. She was beautiful, her coat, not merely ordinary brown, but streaked with silver, black, and white as well. She was tall, but sleek and lean. There was a quiet, graceful power about her, as she dropped the rabbit near the stream, and lowered her muzzle to the water to lap it with her tongue.

She seemed not to notice me, there on the bank. I lifted my head slowly, wanting to be seen.

Her head lifted with a jerk, and she backed out of the stream, slowly, warily. I stared into hers, and she stared into mine, without looking away. Her eyes drew me in, almost mesmerized me, the deepest shade of grey-blue, like the night sky just moments before the blush of dawn arrived. They were soft, intelligent, knowing, and sad. Such a soul-deep sadness, that it pulled at me.

And I saw a flash of recognition. She knew who I was. Which wasn't surprising. I was Luna. However fake and temporary that title might be, hundreds of wolves had come to witness my ceremony. So many knew me, but I couldn't possibly know them all, not yet anyway. There was something familiar about her too, and I thought, perhaps, if I could see her in her human form...

But, before I could suggest that she reveal herself, she snapped up the rabbit carcass and dashed off into the woods. I stood slowly, but I did not give chase. I heard her movement, as she went south first, and then, when she was sure I wasn't pursuing her, she doubled back, and started heading upstream, although she kept a good distance away from the stream. She was headed up the mountain, and although I couldn't explain why, I felt sure she was headed to that old cellar hole near the spring.

Did she know Dardanos? Could it be that she was bringing that small hare to feed the wild man in the woods? Perhaps then, she knew him, who he was, where he came from. How he was related to the Blackstone family, because of that, I was certain. If I could convince her to speak to me, perhaps I would find the answers I sought.

But not today. I turned and began to trot back to the house. But it occurred to me that I might not like the answers, once they came to light. If Blackstone's predatory lending project had been upsetting and disappointing, then how would I feel once I learned exactly how Dardanos was related to the Alpha family. How would I feel if I discovered that River knew of him, and had deliberately abandoned him.

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I waited until our clients had left the board room, and then I closed the door. My father and Zachary were just about to rise from their seats, but seeing the closed door and the expression on my face, they eased themselves back into their chairs and watched me warily. I was feeling too anxious to sit, so I paced around the table to the windows that overlooked the gardens at the rear of the building.

“I think we need to rethink our financial take-over policy,” I announced abruptly.

My father folded his hands on the table and looked curious but unperturbed.

Zach, on the other hand, looked like he was about to explode. A red flush was creeping up under his collar, and his eyes had narrowed to slits as he turned his chair to watch me. “What do you mean, rethink it?” Out of the corner of my eye, I saw his fingers gripping the edge of the table until his knuckles turned white.

“It has come to my attention that what we are doing may be... morally objectionable.”

“Morally what?” a vein bulged in Zachary’s forehead. “This program, this policy, has been successfully executed for almost five years now. You never had any moral objections to it before! I’m this close to taking possession of the Gold Mountain Pack,” he measured the distance with his thumb and forefinger. “Why on earth would you want to back out now?”

I forced myself to stand strong, feet slightly spread, shoulders relaxed, hands clasped behind my back as I turned and faced the table again. I said we need to re-think it, not scrap it altogether. I was... given a different perspective today.”

“A different... oh bloody hell, its that woman, isn’t it? That little bitch that you are dragging to the office with you every day–”

“Watch your mouth!” I snarled in warning.

“What the hell is wrong with you!” Zachary said, shooting out of his chair. “You are willing to put your own brother on the chopping block, for a woman?”

“That woman is the luna, and you better show her some respect!”

“Fake luna! Oh come on, River! I know it was all part of an act, Asher told me all about it.” Zachary walked close to me, too close.

“Do you think Asher is an authority on my relationships?” I challenged him, moving over him, so we were almost nose to nose. “Lenora is my chosen mate, my luna, and you will show the proper respect–”

“Or you’ll do what? Excommunicate me from the pack? Or maybe you’d like to put out a warrant for my death? Get your head out of her ass, man. Don’t let one stupid woman jeopardize all our work, all of our plans.”

I pushed him back out of my face, and immediately his fists came up, and I felt the air shimmer around him, as he was about to shift. My father rose slowly, and began easing his way around the table.

I knew I was in danger. If Zachary shifted in a fit of rage, he could rip me apart. I could put him down in hand-to-hand combat, but I had no real defense against his wolf. But I didn't back down. I knew I couldn't afford to show any fear, any weakness.

"What exactly were we working toward, Zach?" I asked him coolly.

"You know! We stopped the petty, bloody pack-on-pack attacks! We've kept the whole region peaceful for half a decade, River!"

"We've kept the entire region in a state of near-poverty," I pointed out. "We've stripped dozens of smaller packs of their autonomy."

"It was necessary," Zach fumed. His fists lowered, but I could still feel the ozone shifting around him. "You know it as well as I do! Those alphas were impulsive, incompetent! They weren't fit to lead! They should have been stripped of their titles a long time ago!"

"Who are we to make that decision? Who gave us that authority?"

"It's the natural order of things, River. The strong must overtake the weak. The powerful must maintain order!"

"We are abusing our power." I said, spitting out the words harshly.

"Man, Lenora really has brainwashed you! We didn't abuse those packs! We saved them from themselves!" Zachary looked at my father. "Tell him, Uncle!"

My father had moved to stand at my shoulder. "I'm retired," my father said. "I stepped out of retirement to help out while River was sick, but it wasn't my place to make any major changes or decisions in his absence. However," he drew in a deep breath. "The take-over policy has always been deeply concerning to me."

Zachary rolled his eyes, "Not you too."

"I'm suspending the program until we've had a chance to really study this." I said firmly. "No new deals. And do not move forward on the Gold Mountain acquisition."

"For f.u.c.k.s sake!" Zachary ran his fingers through his hair in agitation. "Do you know how long I've been working on that? How many months I've poured into that account? While you were at home pretending to be some crippled invalid, I was here, every goddamn day, sweating it out, putting in the hours, getting it done! And now you want to shut it down on the whim of some woman! A woman with no education, no business experience!"

“That’s right,” I turned away and strode to the door, suddenly very eager and anxious to hold said woman in my arms again. “A woman with compassion, understanding, personal experience, and more common sense than the both of us put together. Mind what I said, Zachary. I’ll have Janet put it in writing so that there are no misunderstandings, no accidents.”

I put my hand on the door, but before I could turn my wrist, I heard him mutter, “Your a disgrace, a f.ucking disgrace as an Alpha.”

It took all my self control to keep my composure, and walk away. I felt somewhat vulnerable, turning my back on my cousin. He might have been my best friend, and my beta once, but I had no doubt, if not for the presence of my father in the room, that he would have gladly sank his claws into my back while it was turned.

Zachary was not the man I had thought him to be. But it occurred to me that he hadn’t become this greedy, power hungry a.sshole just in the time that I was in a coma and confined to my home. He hadn’t suddenly changed. He had always been this way. I’d just been too busy, too self absorbed, too trusting to see this side of him.

I shook my head at my own gullibility and hurried back to my office, but when I strode in the door, the small desk by the window was empty. The files had been cleared away and the chair was neatly pushed in. A quick scan of the room told me that her briefcase and laptop were also gone. I swore and ran back out to Janet. “Where is she?”

Janet gave me an annoyed look. “Your so-called assistant went home for the day,” Janet said frostily. “She said she had a headache.”

“Son of a b.itch,” I went back to my office to get my keys before I flew down the hallway and into the elevator. I pushed the button for the ground floor repeatedly, as if jabbing the button a dozen times would make the elevator doors slide closed any faster. My heart was beating hard in my chest, and a thin layer of sweat had broken out on my neck.

She was angry with me. Disappointed, she had said. But surely, she wouldn’t take that as an excuse to do something rash and dangerous? I drove home like a maniac, pulling my tie loose. I would have called the house to check on her, but in my haste to get out of the office, I’d forgotten my cell phone on the charger at my desk. I skidded to a stop in front of the packhouse and ran in, almost plowing over Remmy in the foyer. “Remmy, oh thank the goddess! I grabbed him by his slender, slightly stooped shoulders. “Where is she?”

“The Luna?” he looked up at me with worried, watery eyes.

“Yeah,” I nodded, encouraging him to speak faster.

Chapter 55 – Healing the Broken Alpha

I paused in the woods, my lungs burning, and cursed my dull senses. I'd found her clothes near-by, but no sign of Lenora. I couldn't sniff out her trail, and no matter how I strained my ears, I couldn't hear any movement in the forest around me, beyond the chatter of birds and chipmunks, and the moaning of trees swaying in the light breeze.

I took deep breaths, forcing my breathing to slow, and I closed my eyes.

Even though I didn't have a wolf, I felt a connection to Lenora, a connection that was beyond explanation. I was always drawn back to her, like a compass point being drawn to the polar north. That's what she had become to me, my North star. And with eyes still shut, face lifted toward the sun, I turned a slow, careful circle. When I was facing the stream, I felt it.

Maybe I only imagined it, that tugging sensation in my chest, and in my throat. I opened my eyes and started walking in that direction, taking care to step as quietly as I could in human form, not to snap branches underfoot or disturb the bushes and low hanging tree branches. If I was forced to live in the body of a man for the rest of my life, I had to learn to adapt.

After a hundred yards I felt the sensation veer left, and I followed it, zig-zagging around the stately pines and young oaks that dotted this part of the forest. Finally, I caught sight of movement in the underbrush, and there emerged my mate, in her wolf form. Small, perhaps, for an Alpha's daughter, but no less beautiful. Her fur looked soft and shone with good health, while her deep brown eyes looked at me full of knowledge and curiosity.

She trotted up to me, fearlessly, and sat at my feet. I took that opportunity to squat down, to run my fingers along her neck, down the strength of her spine, to her full tail. "What are you doing out here by yourself?" I whispered, as I continued to stroke her. My heart twisted in my chest with longing - longing to shift into my own wolf, to run together, to hunt together with Lenora.

I had lost a part of myself, half of my being. I would never feel whole or complete again.

She whined slightly, and then the air around her became thick, and instead of a small wolf, a small woman crouched before me, beautifully, breathtakingly naked. Her honey-gold skin shone softly in the dappled light, her long, dark hair spilled down over her shoulders, creating a natural shawl over her full breasts. As she rose to her full height, her nipples peeked from behind the curtain of hair.

"I needed to run," she said softly. And when I was about to object to her running alone unguarded, she raised a small hand to stop me. "I needed to be by myself."

I didn't like it. I wanted to keep her safe at all costs, and I couldn't do that if she disappeared on me at will, but at the same time, I felt her restlessness, I felt her need for solitude and peace. I reached out, and moved her hair back behind her shoulders so that nothing was hidden from my hungry gaze.

She didn't move, but stood confidently, letting me look my fill.

Lenora had changed, I realized. She was not the shrinking girl who had stepped into my room just a few short months ago. And her newfound poise was alluring, to say the least. I wanted to kiss her. I wanted to take her, right there in the woods, but the day hung between us, her displeasure with me was like a chasm between us, and I knew I couldn't simply jump across it like nothing was wrong.

I slid my hands down her arms, and took her small hands in my own. "I want you to know that I have given a lot of thought to what you said in the office, about the take-over of the smaller packs," I smoothed my thumbs over her knuckles, and found the contact strangely soothing and calming. "And you are right. What Blackstone is doing..." I shook my head, searching for the right words. "It's not right. I've suspended the program, and stopped all new acquisitions until I've had a chance to thoroughly review everything."

She watched me solemnly, and nodded. "I'm glad you are doing that," she said, and I felt a little bit of the stiffness leave her shoulders. "It pained me to think you would act so coldly, with so much greed..."

I cringed at her assessment. "I trusted my cousin too much, I let him run the program with very little oversight. I'm not going to tell you I didn't know exactly what was going on, but it was convenient to look the other way, to be busy and distracted by so many other things." I sighed and lifted her fingers to my lips, kissing the tips of them. "Zachary isn't the man I thought he was."

"Mhmm," she hummed in agreement, and her body swayed toward me.

I released her hands so that I could touch her body, running my hands down her back to the perfect curve of her backside, pulling her closer, until our bodies melded together, separated only by the clothing I still wore. She tipped her head up, and I lowered to meet her lips, hungry, desperate to taste her again, eager to close the canyon that had opened between us since I so arrogantly walked away, and left her at the mercy of my sick brother.

I was lost in the heat of it, unaware of anything but the woman in my arms, but she pulled away suddenly, and cocked her head slightly, like she was listening for a sound that my ears could not detect, and then she twisted in my arms and faced the direction of the mountain.

Finally, I heard it too. The subtle movement through the forest, the sound of footsteps, the movement of a man, not a wolf, through the woods. I pushed Lenora behind me, shielding her nakedness with my body, prepared to defend her at all costs, even if it meant my life.

Out of the underbrush, a strange man appeared. He was wearing rags tied around his waist like a loincloth, his hair and his beard were heavily matted and dirty, full of pineneedles and even a bit of moss. His skin was so caked with layers of dirt and sweat

and grime that I couldn't tell for sure what color he was. There was blood smeared around his mouth and his chin, almost like clown make-up, making his too-wide smile even creepier. He still held the half-eaten remains of a rabbit carcass in his hand.

As he approached, he lifted the thing to his mouth, ripped out another bite of raw flesh with his teeth, and chewed thoughtfully while he looked at the two of us warily. He pointed the rabbit at the two of us. "I wanted to find her," he said, his words slow, and deliberate, as though speaking was strange and foreign to him. He shook the rabbit in agitation. "Not him!"

He was close enough now that I could see his eyes, and I had a strange sensation. His eyes were storm-green. Like my own. Like my father's. "Who are you?" I growled, tensing, ready to fight at the first sign of aggression.