

## Chapter 56 – Healing the Broken Alpha

I stepped between the two men, and felt my wolf whining desperately within me. I had a terrible sensation in my chest, like something was being ripped in half. A part of me was being pulled, almost violently, toward the wild man in rags, and a part of me was tethered to River.

I watched River's face as I spoke the man's name, looking for any flicker of recognition, any hint that he knew Dardanos, or at least, knew of him, but River only looked confused and angry. I could tell by his expression that he saw the similarities, despite the matted beard and the filth. River could see the unmistakable resemblance to the Blackstone men.

"This is the man I saw at your uncle's house," I said quietly, laying a hand on River's chest. I could feel his heart beating rapidly. "And he saved me from Asher. His wolf did."

"Not!" Dardanos shouted, making me flinch and ease back, closer to the safety of River's arms. "Not my wolf!" He pulled on his matted hair so viciously, I thought he would rip it from his head. He shifted from foot to foot like he was physically in pain.

"But I saw you shift," I argued quietly. River wrapped his arms around me, protectively, but he was still staring, dumbfounded at the man.

"I am a monster!" Dan moaned, "A monster!"

"You said his name was... Dardanos?" River whispered in my ear.

I nodded, knowing River would feel the movement of my head even though his eyes never left Dan. Dardanos was getting agitated again, swaying his body and wringing the dead rabbit like a nervous woman with a handkerchief.

"Dardanos, where do you live?" River asked, his voice surprisingly gentle, like he was speaking to a kindergartener.

Dan flung an arm backwards, indicating the mountain behind him. "There!"

"I see, and who are your parents?" River pressed further.

"Mom!"

"Yes, your mother, do you know her name?" River asked again. I knew he was trying to figure out who Dardanos was, how he was related to the Blackstone family.

"Mom!" Dardanos repeated, his chin jutting out as he paced a few steps back and forth. He looked down at the grisly remains of the rabbit in his hand and suddenly smiled again, a

big, absent smile. “See?” He held out the mangled carcass like it was proof that he had a mother.

“The wolf I saw at the river,” I said quietly, finally making the connection. “That was your mother?”

He smiled, showing all of teeth, surprisingly straight and even, and lifted the meat to his mouth again, tearing off another piece of flesh. Dark blood dribbled down his matted beard.

“You saw a wolf?” River growled. “I thought you said you didn’t leave the packhouse!”

“Calm down,” I ordered under my breath, and twisted my way out of his arms. “You are going to upset him.” It was not the right time for River to go all over-protective on me.

I took a step closer to Dardanos, and felt my skin prickle with that strange mix of apprehension and attraction. “Dan? Would you like to come back to the pack house with us? You could get a shower, some new clothes, nice food?”

“Lenora!” River hissed behind me, with disapproval evident in his tone.

“Noooo!” Dardanos howled and flinched backward like I had struck him with my words. “Bad! Bad house! Bad man!” His eyes grew wide and frightened. “We never go there!” And then he whimpered. “Too close. We are too close.”

I took a tentative step closer, and felt River’s unease wafting behind me like a bad odor. I knew he was just as curious as I was about the wild man, but he was frightened too. Frightened for me, not himself. River was worried that Dardanos might fly off the handle and hurt me. Which I had to admit, was a definite possibility. Still, I pressed closer.

“Who is the bad man?” I asked gently. I reached out a hand, but let it hover, not quite touching him. Still I could feel something, something dark, pulling at me, like a magnet. “Do you mean Asher? The man who chased me in the woods?”

Dardanos took a sliding step backward, as though he was also avoiding that touch. His eyes screwed shut, his nose wrinkled up, his lips pressed together, and he looked for all the world like he was constipated and trying to push out a bowel movement. He grunted and pointed a finger at River with his eyes still closed.