

Chapter 58 – Healing the Broken Alpha

“My father has some explaining to do!” River said, slamming the desk drawer angrily. He had kept the photograph which showed the happy looking Alpha family out. He was already halfway to the door when I caught up to him and put my body between him and the doorway.

“Wait!” I said breathlessly, “Not yet!”

“What?” He looked down at me with annoyance and impatience.

“We need to know all the facts before we confront your father,” I explained, placing the palms of my hands against his chest. I could feel his heart thumping beneath my fingers. “If you rush into this, you could be putting Dardanos in danger. You could be putting your mother in danger.”

I saw his jaw ticking as he considered the possibilities. But slowly, the tension drained out of his shoulders. “You are right. We need to confront him with facts, not just vague ideas.” He raked a hand through his thick hair and blew out a frustrated breath. “How could this have happened? How have I gone my whole life without knowing? I have a brother!”

Satisfied that he wasn’t going to run straight for his father, I moved aside so that he could escape from the office. However he snagged me and pressed me against his side like he couldn’t bear for there to be any space between us. “What else don’t I know? He always said my mother left him for another man. Was that even true? If she took Dardanos, why didn’t she take me too?”

I slid my arms around his waist and pressed myself into his hard body, seeking comfort and offering it at the same time. “Maybe it was complicated. Dardanos has a problem, maybe your father didn’t accept him.”

I saw the emotions flicker behind his stormy green eyes like flashes of lightning. “It shouldn’t matter. Dardanos was his son! Maybe he wasn’t going to be able to take on the mantle of alpha, but that didn’t mean he should just throw him away! He’s still a Blackstone!”

“Just calm down, you don’t know that’s what happened.” I tried to sooth him.

Or was it?

Darian had always been good to me. He was the one person who had made me feel welcome and safe when I stepped into the Blackstone pack house as River’s contract-bride. He had supported me at Blackstone Industries. He was the one person, apart from River and the old butler that I felt confident had my back. I had always assumed that the former Alpha was an honorable man. It disturbed me to think I could have misjudged him.

No wonder River was so agitated.

“Was any of it true?” He asked, speaking more to himself than he was to me. He kept his arm around my body and steered me down the hallway toward the stairs that would lead us back to his room. “Did my mother really leave him for another man? Or was that just a story he told me to make me hate her? What if he had a vested interest in keeping me from looking for my mother?”

I thought of the tall, pretty young woman in the photo, I thought of the way she had been lovingly gazing at Darian in every snap, and the way her hand had curled around the swell of her belly. She looked devoted, happy, and in love. I also thought of the woman I had seen at my luna ceremony.

She'd been tall, with dark hair. Her hands had been strong, the skin rough like she was engaged in some kind of manual labor. And she'd been concerned about River, imploring me to take care of him. Who would ask that, if not his mother?

And the wolf I had encountered along the stream? She'd been rather remarkable, hadn't she? Tall and lean and graceful, she had an air of authority and power. I'd had the feeling that she wasn't just some low ranking pack member out on the hunt. She'd known me, but that wasn't surprising, was it? Although I hadn't exactly made many public appearances as the Blackstone Luna, I was known, and I had made no effort to cover my scent.

But the wolf in the woods had been scentless, and for all his filth, so had Dardanos. His wolf-scent was obscured by some kind of herbal treatment.

Once inside our room, River began to pace back and forth. I took a seat on the couch, sitting sideways so that I could peer out the window and watch the sun setting over the mountains.

“How could he lie to me?” River asked, his voice broken, “I am his son, I have a right to know! More than that, I am the Alpha! This is my pack! And I don't know that my own brother is running around in the woods? That my mother— Goddess, has she been out there this whole time? Right under my goddamn nose?” He stopped in front of the window, hands on his narrow hips, chest heaving. “Who else knows? My uncle? Aunt Maggie? Does Zach know?” He turned around to face me, his face reflecting his inner turmoil. “Am I the only one who was kept in the dark?”

I held out my arms, and he came to me, dropping down on the cushion beside me like his body was suddenly too tired to hold himself up. I pulled him toward me, and let him rest his head against my bosom, stroking his hair gently, but all the while I felt a growing sense of guilt.

I was hiding something from him too. I wanted to tell him, but it didn't seem like the right time, not when he was so consumed with the discovery of his own brother. And I still had so many questions of my own.

Why did I feel so strange around Dardanos? Why did I feel so drawn to him – and so repulsed by him all at the same time. Was it simply because he was River’s brother? Was the family similarity so strong that it was confusing my wolf.

Or could it be...

Another, rather sickening possibility rolled around in my gut.

Could Dardanos be my fated mate.

I squeezed my eyes shut against the idea. The Moon Goddess wouldn’t be that cruel, would she? I had pledged myself to River, I couldn’t be fated to his brother. I couldn’t be fated to a man who was little more than a simple minded child! There had to be a different explanation, a better one?

Because, I realized with a jolt, Dardanos wasn’t just developmentally delayed. There was something dark in him. Something terrifying. Something that gave me an ill-feeling when I drew too close, a feeling like *deja vu*, a feeling like I had just woken up from a terrible nightmare.

“Nora,” I barely realized that River had gone still in my arms. The hand around that rested at my waist had found its way under the hem of my shirt and was stroking the skin at my ribs. I leaned back and ducked my chin so that I could look down into his mesmerizing eyes. “What are you thinking?”

He wanted to know, but I couldn’t tell him the terrible thoughts that were running through my mind. I couldn’t tell him I was wondering if I had a bond with his brother. I fished for something else to tell him.

“Do you know the place on the mountain where the old cellar hole is?”

He nodded against my breast, sending a thrill through my body, even as heat began to spread under his fingers along my side. “Sure,” he said absently, letting his fingers slide higher, just near the underside of my breast. “Zachary and I used to play around there when we were kids.”

“Mmmm,” I almost lost my train of thought as his fingers crept upwards toward my over-sensitive nipples, and the heat began to pool between my legs into a deep, aching need.

Our last encounter had been rough, and it had ended badly, when he walked away from me. But my body had apparently already forgiven him, because it wanted him. I wanted him. Even if Dardanos was my fated mate, I had chosen River.

I loved him.

I pulled my focus back to his eyes, lost myself in their cloudy green depths. “I think Dardanos might be lingering around there... There was another day I followed the stream up the mountain side and... well, it’s just a hunch, but I could tell someone had been there.”

“Okay,” He lifted his head and nuzzled my neck, so close to the place where I longed for his mark. “Tomorrow. We’ll check it out tomorrow.”

“Okay,” I agreed breathlessly. I think I would have agreed to just about anything, as he let his teeth scrape against my shoulder. I couldn’t hold back the moan that seemed to roll out of my chest. “River...”

He ran the hot, moist flat of his tongue against my skin. “No biting, Lenora,” he reminded me.

I sucked in a ragged breath and clamped my teeth together. His teeth were dull, and he had no venom, and my venom could very well kill him. There could be no marking. My inner wolf whined sadly as I dragged back my instinctual response.

Lifting my arms, I assisted him to pull my shirt over my head, exposing my skin to his searching hands. I shoved off all thoughts of Dardanos and the mystery of River’s secret brother, and leaned back into the couch so that River could tug my bottoms away. I spread my knees and made room for him to lay between them on the narrow couch. He settled over me, his mouth claiming one throbbing nipple, and I shivered against him.