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The Wolf's Moon

NAUGHTY

Fairy Tales

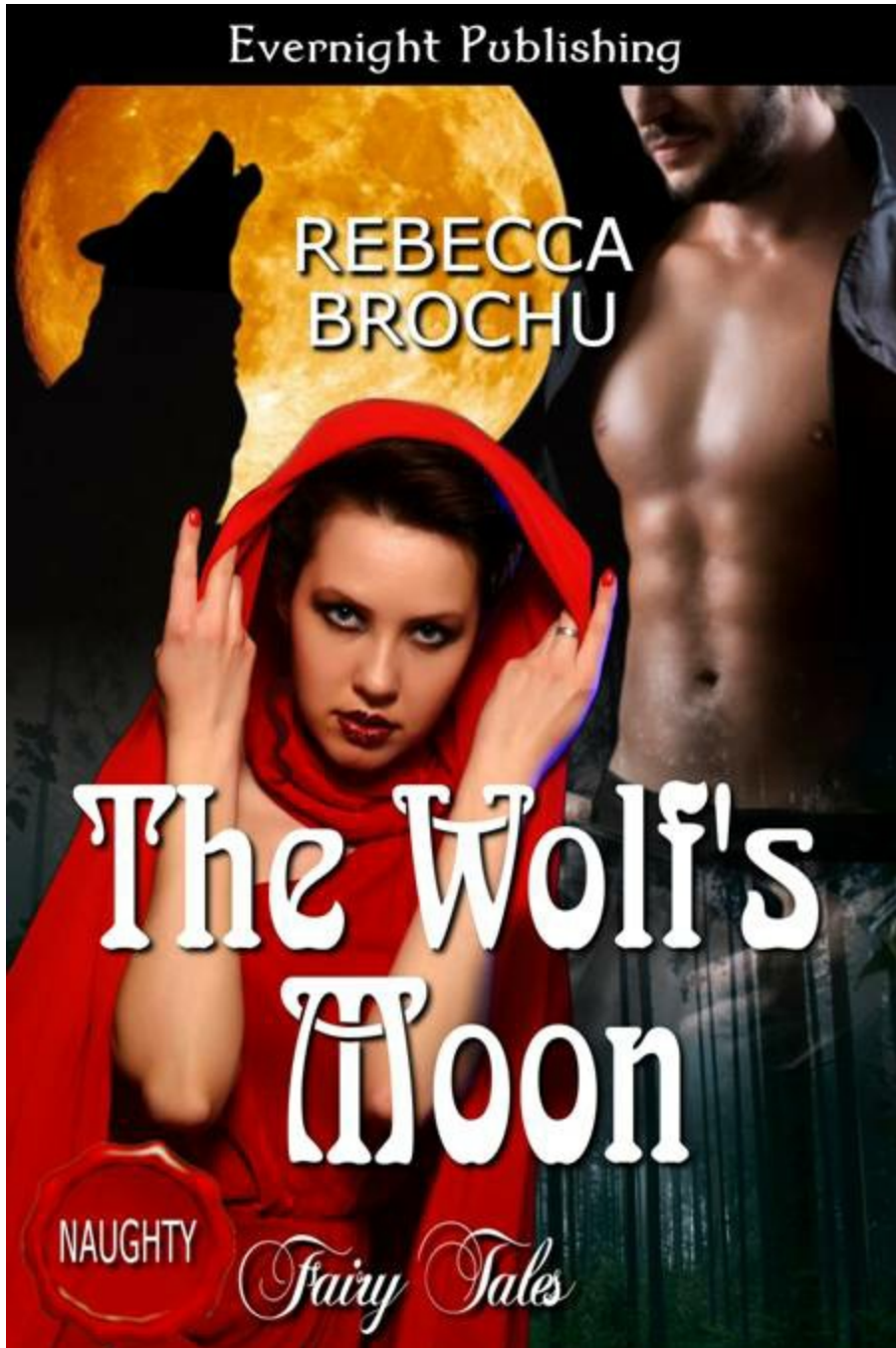
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DEDICATION

For you, as always.

THE WOLF'S MOON

Naughty Fairy Tales

Rebecca Brochu

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Chapter One

Silke stops a short ways from Oma's house to rest beside a burbling creek. She knows that she's on the last leg of the journey, and that she'll be within sight of her cottage with only a half hour more of travel. She could press on, but the day is young and her throat is dry and the combination makes the cool waters of the creek entirely too appealing to pass by.

She's resting on the edge of the bank, thin cloak doing little in the way of protecting her from the cold and the light dusting of snow on the ground as she rests, basket filled with bread and other gifts sitting beside her. She's leaned over the edge of the creek, hands cupped to lift icy water to her lips, when the feeling of being watched creeps down her spine. She tenses, feels the hair on the back of her neck prickle with awareness as she slowly raises her head. Silke jerks in shock, water clinging to the tips of her fingers as one of her hands automatically moves towards the dagger at her waist, because standing on the opposite side of the creek is a man.

The first thing Silke notices is the fact that he's massive, taller even than Emil, Silke suspects. He's dark is what Silke sees next, skin tanned to a rich golden hue. His hair is a deep brown and long enough that it brushes the nape of his neck, edges uneven like they've been hacked off instead of cut smoothly. Too much space separates them for Silke to make out the color of his eyes, but she's sure they're dark as well. What gets her attention the most is the fact that he's also bare-chested, flat copper nipples and thick ropey muscles on full display despite the winter's chill. Clad only in a pair of light tan breeches that strain against the thick muscles of his thighs and a small pouch tied securely at his hip, he looks more than slightly wild.

Silke feels a bubble of appreciation well up in her stomach, a sense of awareness sliding along the edges of her mind before she shakes it off. She cannot afford to allow herself to be distracted, no matter how tempting the stranger's skin looks, or how Silke is sure that it would be more than pleasing to run her fingers over the well-defined muscles of his stomach. Eyes moving over the rest of the stranger, Silke's startled to notice that he's not even wearing boots and his feet are dirty from trekking through the forest.

The man takes a step forward, and Silke hastily levers herself to her feet so she can take one back to match. She watches, confused as the stranger's thick brows draw down and his lips twist into a deep frown of displeasure.

"Do you have business with me, stranger?" Silke's voice is steady and her hand grips the hilt of her dagger firmly as she calls out her question. The man is large and obviously strong, muscles thick and shoulders wide, but Silke has seen scarier things. She'll be damned before she'll flee at the

first sight of an unknown man.

“What is your name?” The man ignores her question and asks one of his own in a deep, honey smooth voice that sends a shiver down Silke’s spine.

“I see no reason to answer a man who will not answer me.” Silke is ridiculed and pushed around enough in her own village; she will not allow some stranger in the forest to run roughshod over her as well. Not even a handsome one.

“I saw you from a distance. I mean you no harm.” He waves a large-palmed hand in the air to punctuate his statement and then he takes another step forward, stopping just shy of the creek.

“What’s your name, little one?” This time his voice is gentler, almost coaxing.

“Silke. They call me Silke.” Silke eyes the stranger warily, but she can see no actual harm in giving the man her name.

“Silke.” He says it slowly, like he’s testing it out or savoring the flavor of it on his tongue.

“Yes, and your name?” Silke prompts him.

“Raoul.” The now named Raoul gazes at her steadily, attention focused to such a degree that Silke has to resist the urge to fidget. It’s unusual for her to be the focus of someone’s attention like this, for someone to seem so eager to observe her. She doesn’t have long to focus on the thought before Raoul is speaking again.

“You’re going to see the old woman in the woods, the one called Oma.” He gestures down towards Silke’s feet as he speaks. It’s not exactly a question; it’s more of a statement as if Raoul knows exactly what Silke is doing. Silke glances down, eyes locking on the covered basket that she’d forgotten all about and when she looks back up she draws in a sharp startled breath.

That quickly Raoul has made his way across the creek, moving so silently through the icy water that Silke had not heard him approach, and is standing directly in front of her.

Raoul holds her gaze as he bends at the knees, movements slow and careful, and reaches out a hand to pick up Silke’s basket. Silke goes to protest, hand still on her dagger and words on her tongue, but before she can, Raoul straightens to his full height, basket in hand, and takes a step back and away.

“These woods are not always safe, Silke. I’d like to go with you, at least part of the ways if you would allow it.” He says it with a sort of soft, gentle patience that seems so out of place with his massive size that it renders Silke speechless.

Mouth agape and mind blank, Silke stares at Raoul for a moment before she manages to shake herself out of her daze. Then, caution rearing up inside her once more, she takes another step back so that she’s even farther out of arm’s reach. She is aware that Raoul has had ample time to harm her and hasn’t, but it’s a delayed reaction. It’s a survival tactic that she has honed over the years spent in her village where being close enough to grab is never a wise idea. Mistakes like that can get her beaten in the wrong company, and it’s a lesson that Silke has taken to heart and normally tries to follow.

Raoul frowns at her again, his brows drawing downward and his lips tightening like he can sense the direction of Silke’s thoughts, and for the first time his eyes capture Silke’s attention. They’re not dark like Silke thought they would be; instead they’re a strange shade of blue green, the colors seeping into one another in a way she’s never seen before. For a moment they remind her of her own eyes, of what it would look like if her own green and blue were to mix.

Their gazes lock and hold, and Silke feels like she’s floating and sinking all at the same time, like some part of her that she never knew existed is waking up for the first time in her life. A sense of awareness, an almost nervous sort of energy that’s never been there before is running underneath her

skin. It's curling fitfully in her chest and making her aware of Raoul on a level that's almost uncomfortable.

"Why?" Her voice sounds far away to her own ears, but she knows the question is an important one, knows that she needs the answer for Oma's safety if not her own.

"Because I would not see you trek through these woods alone and without proper protection, Silke. You're far too precious to be lost to some beast on the prowl for easy prey."

The words send a jolt through Silke's system, and this time when Raoul takes a step closer to her Silke doesn't move away. Instead she sways forward into Raoul's space, head tipped back and throat exposed as she gazes up at him. Raoul's eyes narrow, and Silke doesn't miss the way his gaze dips down to stare at the pale expanse of her neck. She can't help but lick her lips as a surge of lust hits her low in the belly at the way Raoul's eyes brighten. It's unlike anything she's ever felt before, and it makes her almost giddy, makes her willing to consider doing all sorts of things that she's never been willing to do before, especially not with a stranger.

"Will you let me take you where you need to go, Silke?" The question rings with dual meaning, like there are two conversations happening at once. Silke can't help but respond to both of them, can't help the way her body and her heart are tugging her to respond even though she doesn't know why.

"Yes." It comes out like a breathy sigh, a quiet little noise that's practically pulled out of her.

"Silke." Raoul's voice is a low rumble of sound bordering on a growl. Raoul's head dips down towards Silke, so close she can feel his breath on her face, warm puffs of air warming the tip of her nose and her red bitten lips. For a moment Silke thinks Raoul is going to kiss her, lick his way into her mouth and tangle their tongues together hotly, and she sucks in a sharp breath. The sound seems to break the spell that's holding the both of them, and Raoul takes a step back and away, massive chest rising and falling in a deep sigh as he pointedly turns in the direction of Oma's cottage.

Silke can feel her cheeks flush red as the embarrassment over her lapse in attention and obvious staring sweeps over her. She can't believe the way she was so easily swayed and tempted by this man. She can't let herself get tangled up in some shallow infatuation with a stranger when she knows that it will more than likely only end in her getting hurt.

Silke clears her throat loudly and does her best to keep from meeting Raoul's eyes as she steps up beside him, hand held out to get her basket back. She's slightly ashamed and extremely embarrassed that she'd acted like some weak-willed, swooning village girl for a moment. Still she's not going to go back on giving Raoul her permission to escort her the rest of the way. All other things aside she's extremely curious. Even though she knows better, even though she knows she should walk away and never look back, she still wants to know more about this man. This man, whose presence alone makes Silke hungry, makes her want to press herself closer to his chest when she's always been wary of contact and distant with most people. This man who can make her ignore the precautions she's always lived by so easily.

"I have it." Raoul seems adamant about it, and Silke drops her hand back down by her side, slightly puzzled. She doesn't understand why it seems like such an important issue to Raoul but letting him carry the basket is a small matter so Silke does her best to ignore the childish urge to snatch it back. She has other things to focus on, like trying to tamp down her reactions to this man she's only just met and making her way to Oma's house. She needs to keep her mind focused firmly on those issues and not wandering off on fanciful daydreams.

"Do you know Oma well?" she asks curiously after they've been moving together for a bit and she can no longer abide the silence. Silke is sure that Oma would have mentioned Raoul to her if they

were acquainted, would have told Silke somewhere along the line about the stranger in the woods.

“After a fashion. Most know of her and her ways, and she’s well known for being generous and kind when it comes to bartering for healing,” Raoul replies, voice even and eyes trained on the path before them.

Silke smiles softly to herself because she remembers Oma lecturing her about the importance of such things over the years. She’d always made it a point to tell her that with her runes and charms, the potions and poultices, came the responsibility to help others. While Oma was open about her anger with the villagers she’d never encouraged Silke to turn them away when they approached her. Oma’d always told her to help them while she was still there and that a time would come when they would no longer be her concern. Silke’s still not sure Oma meant by that exactly but as always she took her words to heart. Brought out of her thoughts, Silke catches the way Raoul is staring at her curiously and arches a brow in response.

“I had heard rumors that she’d finally taken on an apprentice a few years back, a girl with a gift for charms and runes. You must be powerful if she took you under her wing.” Raoul’s voice is casual, but Silke tenses and draws in on herself anyways, used to the idea of her gifts bringing her nothing but grief.

“Indeed.” She doesn’t try to deny it, doesn’t try to act as if it isn’t true, but she can’t bring herself to say anything else either.

“I’ve said something to upset you.” There’s a tension in Raoul’s voice that wasn’t there before. Silke is pleasantly surprised to find only confusion on the man’s face when she looks at him again.

“It doesn’t bother you to be alone in the woods with a sorceress? I could curse you.” Silke feels ridiculous saying the word, calling herself by the same title the villagers do, but she wants to know the truth for once. If this stranger is leery of her then there is little hope of her ever finding companionship.

“Sorceress, is that what they call you?” Silke is surprised by the way Raoul bites the question out.

“Yes, well it’s one of many names the villagers have for me. I’m surprised you didn’t know that if word of Oma teaching me has spread as far as you say,” Silke says.

“None I know of would ever be so disrespectful. People with your power should be honored, their abilities treated as the gifts that they are. Your village is filled with fools.” Raoul practically snarls, and Silke is stunned when she looks up at him and sees the barely leashed anger in his face.

Silke is silent as they keep walking, surprised at his defense and surprised at the idea of someone else besides Oma who openly appreciates her gifts instead of shunning them. The thought is enough to distract her from her other questions for the moment so they walk together in silence. She’s lost inside her own head; mind consumed with thoughts of what her life would have been like in a village filled with people like Raoul. Silke almost doesn’t notice it when Raoul stops walking. She takes a moment to look around and realizes that somehow they’ve covered far more distance than she thought they had and Oma’s cottage is just past the next line of trees.

“What’s the matter, Raoul? Why’ve you stopped?” Silke is looking forward to seeing him and Oma interact, to finding out just what the older woman thinks of him.

“I have no need to visit her today, Silke. I only wanted to walk with you for a while.” Raoul steps forward until they’re close enough again for Silke to feel his breath on her face, to see the pulse beating strong in his neck. Silke feels her own breath catch in her throat, feels her heart speed up again in her chest just like it had before. She has to force herself to breathe deeply, to take a step

back and to ignore the way disappointment flashes across Raoul's face when she puts a bit of distance between them. She can't let herself fall into the same daze she had before.

Desperate for a distraction, for anything to focus on that isn't Raoul's eyes or the tiny licks of lust that are once again stirring to life in her own belly, Silke casts her eyes around frantically. The expanse of Raoul's wide, bare shoulders catches her eyes, and Silke blurts out the first thing that comes to mind.

"Aren't you cold dressed that way? You should at least have boots."

"I've clothes elsewhere, but the cold doesn't bother me overmuch." Raoul's eyes rake over the thin and obviously old cloak that Silke is wearing. "I could ask you the same, Silke. Your cloak is little more than a ragged cloth."

"True, but it's the only one I have and at least it covers me for the most part." Silke doesn't bother acting offended. She knows it's true. She's had the cloak for years, but she's never gotten around to buying or making a new one. She knew the villagers would overcharge her for either the cloth required to make one or a new cloak itself.

"You should have a fine cloak, little one, something to keep you warm on your travels." Raoul smiles, and Silke is almost dismayed to realize he has dimples, deep little nooks carved into the corners of his mouth. Silke needs to get away from this conversation quickly.

"I'm afraid this one will have to do. Now thank you for walking with me." Silke holds her hand out for her basket, fingers curling around the handle when Raoul finally hands it to her. She shifts it to the crook of her elbow and reaches back to draw her hood up again when Raoul reaches out and wraps thick fingers around her left wrist.

"What are you doing?" Alarm arches through Silke, and she curses herself for not heeding a lifetime of learning and staying out of arm's reach the entire time. Raoul's grip is strong, his fingers a hot, unbreakable circle around her wrist. The skin of his palm is warm enough that Silke can actually understand why he's only half dressed even in the face of such a chill.

"Hush now, little one, I'm not going to hurt you," Raoul says calmly.

"Then let me go!" She tugs against the hold Raoul has on her, but her struggle goes unnoticed. Silke can feel her breathing begin to quicken again, can feel panic forming in her breast and she's ready to drop her basket and reach for her dagger when Raoul lifts her captured wrist up towards his face. She watches, confused, as Raoul simply runs his nose across the soft skin of her inner wrist and breathes deeply like he's taking in her scent.

"Raoul?" She can't help the way it comes out, a half breathless whisper.

Raoul drops her wrist like he's been burnt and takes a hasty step back, face blank and thick eyebrows drawn down in a harsh arch.

"Apologies. I didn't mean to frighten you again. Forgive me?" Raoul seems honestly apologetic, and Silke only hesitates a moment before she nods at him in acceptance.

"Of course. Just let me go next time if I ask you to." Silke ignores the way she's automatically assuming there's going to be a next time, another occasion in which Raoul will lay hands on her.

Raoul just looks pleased.

"Alright."

They stare at each other again for a moment, the air between them thick with tension as the silence stretches out. Raoul doesn't seem too eager to end the moment. He seems content to stand there indefinitely and continue looking at Silke as if he's studying her. Silke can't help but fidget after a few moments. She's not uncomfortable under Raoul's gaze, but she does feel restless, like her skin is too small or someone's running a finger down her spine. Silke breaks the silence when she can't

handle it anymore.

“It was a pleasure meeting you then. I hope we’ll see each other again.” She takes another step back and then another before she smiles and nods towards Raoul’s still form and turns towards Oma’s cottage.

“We will.” The words come out of nowhere, and Silke turns quickly to look back over her shoulder but Raoul is nowhere to be seen.

Brow furrowed, Silke turns back towards the faint glow of light in the distance that she knows comes from Oma’s cottage. She’s curious and more than a bit unsettled by her reactions to Raoul, but she can’t deny the flush of heady anticipation that rushes through her at the thought of seeing him again.

Chapter Two

It's begun to snow lightly by the time Silke sets out to make her way towards the village and the promise of a hot meal and a warm fire back at her cottage. Oma had been more than pleased to see her, her weathered face creasing in a wide smile as she'd tottered around the cottage and lectured her on some of the more advanced potions and tonics she's yet to master. Night is rapidly approaching, and it's biting cold away from the warmth and security of Oma's raging fire. Normally Silke would not be overly concerned, as the Black Woods have always put her at ease even if she knows better than to underestimate just how dangerous the forest can be.

Tonight it's different.

There's a pressure in the air, a tension filling the forest that Silke is not used to, and it sets her teeth on edge and her senses on alert. It's not long before caution overtakes Silke as she moves through the trees. The grass on the route she always takes is worn down from the tread of her thin boots to form a trail she's sure she could travel with her eyes closed, but the familiarity of it is a small comfort. Her chest of herbs is a heavy yet reassuring weight on her back, and the thin raggedy cloak she's had for years does little to drive off the chill in the air. Even when she pulls up the hood and wraps the hand not holding her small lantern tightly in the front of the fabric to draw it closed, the wind still bites at her.

There's something amiss, something that Silke can feel in the air of the woods that makes her quicken her pace. It takes her a moment before she finally realizes what it is that's disturbing her so. The woods are silent around her; the sound of her breathing and her footsteps ring heavy in the air, and Silke feels the hairs on the back of her neck stand up.

It's too quiet.

The woods are normally alive with the music of the animals that live within it, even at night when the rest of the world is bedding down, but now it's deathly silent and Silke knows that doesn't bode well for her. While she loves the woods and respects the creatures within it, she isn't foolish. Silke knows that she could be easily killed by any of the numerous predators that stalk the trees, the ones she knows about and the ones she doesn't. Silence such as this is a telling sign that something is on the hunt, that a predator of some sort is active and moving and the other animals are seeking refuge in the hope that they'll go unnoticed.

Silke's grip tightens on her lantern, and her eyes strain to see farther into the darkness as she untangles her fingers from the edges of her cloak and her now free hand once again palms the hilt of her dagger. She draws it this time, wraps her fingers around the thin base and holds it close to her chest beneath the cloak, wickedly sharp blade pointing towards the ground. As if in response to her actions a loud howl shatters the silence, the noise ripping through the snowy air around her. The sound of it sends Silke's heart to pounding in her chest. It's answered by another and then another, and Silke feels herself go white in apprehension.

Wolves.

She respects the animals, admires them even, but she's more than aware of the fact that it's a one-sided sort of admiration and respect. The wolves of Black Woods are vicious and smart, able to avoid most traps and snares and well known for having no qualms about taking humans. More than once livestock in the village has been quietly snatched. Often times a paw print or the occasional tuft of fur the only clues as to who or what had stolen them.

Silke darts forward, cloak billowing out behind her and her wooden chest clanking painfully

against her back as she takes to running down the path. Silke can feel eyes on her, can feel the way her pulse stutters for half a second when a predator locks its gaze on her. The lantern in her hand swings wildly, the flame sputtering from her harsh treatment, but she doesn't stop, doesn't dare slow down. Silke can practically feel breath on the back of her neck, and she doesn't even think about letting up on her pace long enough to glance behind her to see if it's real or a product of her imagination. Her thin-soled boots are whisper quiet over the well-trodden ground, and the weight of her dagger in her hand offers little in the way of comfort.

She knows she's too far out from the village still to make it to safety, but there's an ancient tree not too much farther down the path, its roots protruding from the ground enough to offer her a leg up. It's not an ideal solution, treeing herself in such a way, but it's better than staying on the ground, better than being overrun and then taken down like prey. At least in the branches of the tree she'll have time to think and plan, and if all else fails she can try to wait them out since her herb chest guarantees that she won't starve for quite some time.

Silke's rounding the bend to where she knows the tree is when the sight of something in the middle of the path sends her flailing wildly in a desperate attempt to stop. She skids across the grass, boots losing traction and feet flying out from underneath her. She goes down hard, herb chest clanking painfully against her back, and she hears her lantern shatter, sees the small flame of her light go out when it hits the ground beside her. Silke freezes for a moment but then she's up and running again, one hand wrapped deep in the fabric of her skirts, and in the process she does the one thing Oma had always warned her against.

She steps off of the path.

What she saw in those brief seconds before the lantern went dark was enough to convince her body to move, that the direction doesn't matter, only putting distance between her and the path does. Standing tall and fierce on the beaten grass trail had been a wolf, its body enormous and its fur dark. In the brief second she'd managed to look at it, Silke could have sworn its eyes had glowed a devilish crimson.

She's breathing in harsh pants as she races through the forest, cloak flowing out behind her as the cold night air and stray branches bite at the unprotected skin of her face. Silke can't hear anything behind her, but she knows that doesn't really mean anything. Predators of that caliber only make noise when they want to. Silke knows that her hearing is nowhere near good enough to pick out the light footfalls of a wolf above the sound of her own ragged breathing. Silke curses low and harsh, wasting precious breath when she flexes her fingers and realizes that she's managed to lose her dagger along with her lantern. She suspects it had flown out of her hand when she'd fallen even if she doesn't really remember letting it go.

Silke keeps running, ignoring the stitch in her side as best she can, weaving in and out of the trees in the low light of the moon that shines down through the branches. It's barely enough to navigate the woods by and most certainly not enough for her to be able to truly get her bearings, but Silke is grateful for it anyways. She puts her head down and charges forward, tries her best to ignore the sharp pain in her side and to concentrate on moving.

Moments later her ankle crumples beneath her between one step and the next. A short scream punches its way out of her throat before she can choke it down as she hits the ground for a second time. Pain bursts across the arch of her cheek, and Silke feels the skin split open and begin to bleed when her face glances off the side of a random stone on the forest floor.

Silke sobs out a harsh breath against the snow brushed ground and stays still for a moment. She's tired and frightened and now her ankle and her face are throbbing with pain. It's almost too

much on top of everything else she always has to deal with, and she gives serious thought to not moving, to letting the wolf come and take her life. Then she thinks about Oma and strangely enough about Emil, about the villagers who would sneer and laugh at the thought of her being devoured, and rage arches through her chest.

She can't do it, refuses to do it. She can't lie down and give up, can't waste all the time and effort Oma had put into keeping her alive. Can't give the villagers the satisfaction of knowing that she'd met her end in the woods they'd always mocked her for loving. Determined, Silke struggles to get to her feet, cursing when she's sent sprawling again when she tries to put weight on her ankle. She pounds balled up fists against the leaves and dirt beneath her in helpless rage and then she pushes her way up again.

This time she braces herself against the trunk of a nearby tree until she's steady enough to move forward slowly, limping and keeping as much of her weight off of her ankle as she can. It doesn't feel like she's broken the bone, but she's more than aware that there are other ways it can be injured, ways that make the skin feel hot and tight where it's beginning to swell in her boot. Silke stumbles forward a few feet and then has to admit to herself that she's not going to move fast enough or far enough in the shape she's in.

Her mind races, searching desperately for a way out of this situation, anything that'll help her survive, when she manages to think up a rough outline of a plan. It's foolish and will more than likely fail, but it's better than doing nothing so she'll take her chances. Since she has to be careful not to topple over sideways, it takes Silke longer than it normally does to work the herb chest off of her back beneath the shelter of her cloak. When it's finally done she slides down the trunk of the tree she's leaning against and pulls the chest around until it's pressed against the side her leg. The light in the woods is still poor so she goes mainly by touch, runs her fingers over the latches on the carefully carved drawers, counts down and over until her nail finds the lightly carved flower that marks the compartment she's looking for.

She fumbles the latch open and carefully draws out the fat bottle that's inside. The glass is cool and smooth beneath her fingertips, and she has to force herself to breath slow and even. She'll only get one chance, one split second to use it before the wolf will have her throat in its jaws. If she fails, it's over so Silke is more than a bit nervous as she tries to prepare herself to make one last ditch stand with only an herb to protect her.

Wolfsbane.

She'd gathered the herb under Oma's watchful eye and the light of the full moon some months back after they'd stumbled upon a rare patch growing in the trees earlier during one of their walks. She had listened and watched in fascinated awe as Oma showed her how to grind it down into a fine powder and told her its properties. She'd whispered to her about how it could confuse and repeal a wolf, how it was deadly to man but deadlier still to a beast. Most of all she'd told her to use it wisely, to guard what bit she'd managed to gather and to make sure her chest always had a small supply on hand.

Silke tightens her sweaty fingers around the body of the bottle and feels her heart stutter in her chest when she hears a twig snap in the trees across from her. It's the wolf she knows, the monstrously huge beast that she'd crossed paths with earlier. It's the thing that's been hunting her through the woods this entire time, the animal that's been toying with her to draw the hunt out a bit.

It'll have to get a lot closer for this to work; have to get close enough for Silke to toss some of the powder in its face, to get it into the wolf's nose and eyes. She hopes that'll be enough to turn it away, that the pain and irritation the powder will cause will convince the creature that she's more

trouble than she's worth and that it had best seek its meal elsewhere.

It paces closer to her, and she can just see the way the shadows shift around its body as it slinks fluidly through the trees. Breath hitching in her chest Silke keeps her movements slow and hopefully unnoticeable as she cautiously works the cork out of the bottle's neck. It gives a pop that's unbelievably loud in the night air around her and she sees the shadows go still, feels the tension in the air ramp up another notch.

What steps out of the trees surprises Silke enough that she almost drops the bottle. It's not the wolf, not the massive thick furred creature she'd caught a glimpse of on the path, but it's almost worst. It's a cat, wide chested and tall, lips pulled back far enough for its teeth to glint silver in the moonlight. Silke wonders if this is what has been hunting her all along or if she's managed to pick up two predators at once. The cat paces around the small clearing, eyes fixed unwaveringly upon Silke as it slowly begins to close in on her. She knows distantly that the animal isn't truly malicious, that it's just hungry and she's relatively easy prey. Still she can't help but feel like it's mocking her, like it's toying with her.

Silke lets the bottle she's been clutching like a lifeline fall from her hand, hears it thump faintly against the ground. It doesn't matter now if she loses the carefully hoarded powder, not when she knows it won't be of any use against the cat, not when she knows she might not survive the next few minutes. The cat stalks closer to her, a low chuffing noise breaking the silence of the night, and Silke can practically feel her life winding down. Her fingers scramble over the ground beside her, searching for anything, a rock, a branch, anything she can use as a weapon. Finally for lack of a better option she wraps her fists in the straps of her chest, gathers her strength and prepares herself to swing. It won't do more than buy her a few seconds she knows, the hits more likely to anger the cat than deter it, but she's determined to fight until she simply can't anymore.

She sees it the moment the cat gets tired of waiting, sees the way it arches its back and brings its chest closer to the ground, thick muscular legs preparing to pounce. She'll only have one chance, one narrow gap of time in which to strike, but either way Silke is sure it's over, that she won't live to see the sunrise.

The cat springs, front legs spread wide and claws extended, and Silke feels time slow down around her, feels her breath freeze in her chest for a second as her mind blanks out. She uses all of her strength to bring the chest up in a wide arch, feels the impact in her spine as the blow lands firm against the cat's side, surprising it enough to knock it off course. It lands a few feet to her left, snarling in rage and already leaping for a second time before Silke can get her bearings back. Something massive and dark barrels into its side, sends it flying through the air to land dazed upon the ground a few yards away. It's back on its feet within seconds, circling the clearing, large paws swiping out against this newest intruder as it roars its anger for the entire forest to hear. Silke can barely see it past the wall of fur that's only an arm's length away from her.

It takes her a moment to realize what she's seeing, to register that she's been saved from one predator by another. That the wolf she'd run from before, the one she'd thought was chasing her, had been the one to interfere with the cat's plans. The beast growls, low and vicious enough to raise the hair on the back of Silke's neck, and the cat answers its challenge, hissing and spitting as they both rush forward.

They clash in the middle of the clearing, a tangled heap of fur and teeth and claws that moves almost too fast for Silke to keep up. They roll around the clearing, teeth flashing in the moonlight as they fill the air around them with the sounds of feral battle. Then, just as suddenly as it began, there's a yelp and the sound of bone snapping, and the cat goes down and doesn't move again. The wolf rises,

victorious and panting to stand above its downed foe, and when it swings its massive head back around to stare at Silke their gazes catch and hold.

The light snow that was falling has finally stopped, and the forest is slowly growing brighter as the moon works its way out from behind the clouds. Silke holds the wolf's gaze, one hand wrapped tightly around the straps of her chest. Nothing happens at first. They both stay frozen, gazes locked in what feels to Silke like a silent battle of wills. Then there's the sound of a light sneeze and the wolf moves. It doesn't rush forward, doesn't leap across the distance and go for Silke's throat; doesn't try to finish what the cat started. Instead it paces forward slowly, stepping away from the cat's corpse and into the slowly growing pool of moonlight that's trickled down through the leaves to the forest floor. Silke gets her first real, clear look at the creature.

It's just as tall as she'd thought it was when she'd seen it earlier, and its eyes are a bright devilish crimson that should be impossible. It's the wolf's coat that's not what she expected. It's not the dark black she thought she saw earlier. Instead it's a strange dappled color, a mix of red and black that almost shines in the low light. The wolf is magnificent; its chest is broad and solid, its muzzle elegant, and its legs are long and obviously strong. It's beautiful in a deadly way, a mesmerizing example of an animal truly built for the hunt. Silke can't help but be in awe of such a creature, can't help but feel the admiration and respect she's always felt for the wolves well up within her to a greater degree after seeing it in action.

The fact that it could kill her with ease doesn't detract from its beauty. It adds to it in some strange way, makes it more glorious because it's so alive, so strong and smart and capable.

Looking deep into the wolf's eyes, Silke feels something within her almost settle. She feels the fear in her chest fold in on itself and then sink down and away. She's peaceful inside in a way she's never really been before, and it baffles her. Silke feels safer where she is now, in the middle of the forest at night with a bear-sized wolf less than a few yards away from her, than she has since her parents died.

"Your eyes are beautiful." The sound of her own voice almost startles Silke because she doesn't remember deciding to speak, especially not to say something so nonsensical.

The wolf cocks its head to the side when she speaks, as if Silke has startled it too. Its ears perk forward, and it moves closer a few steps. Silke feels her heart thump loudly in her chest. It's not fear. The fear is gone from her completely and unexplainably, but it is anxiety of a sort. The wolf freezes again and then, its movements slow and almost exaggerated, it lowers itself to the forest floor and lies down on the moonlit patch of earth. Its eyes remain on Silke, and she feels as if she's almost being reassured, as if the wolf is trying to show her that it's not trying to hurt her, that it won't come closer unless she wants it to.

It is a ridiculous thought—Silke knows that, she really does—but she can't help the way it creeps its way into her mind and refuses to leave. The way her emotions have shifted so suddenly from fear to calm, from a sense of danger and impending death to the certainty that she's safe and almost protected unsettles her. Even if the fear is gone Silke isn't a simpleton so she doesn't move, doesn't make any sudden gestures or do anything foolish like try to gain her feet again. She keeps her eyes on the wolf and forces her muscles to stay tense and prepared just in case she has to react suddenly.

The wolf stays almost unnaturally still.

What has to be hours pass by slowly, and Silke can feel the heavy weight of the night's activities pressing down on her. Exhaustion makes her eyelids heavy, and the strain from keeping her body pulled taut and ready to move bows her shoulders with a bone-deep weariness. Her ankle is

swollen and painful, her face still aches and the blood that's dried on her cheek is itchy and unpleasant.

She blinks, long and slow, catches sight of the wolf still sitting in the same place as before and still staring at her intently. Silke sighs out a tiny breath and without conscious thought slips into sleep.

Chapter Three

Silke drifts in and out of awareness, warm and content in a way she doesn't remember experiencing since before her parents died. She rubs her cheek against the warm, firm surface beneath her and sighs in pleasure. Silke is distantly aware of the pleased sounding rumbling that answers her, but she's too comfortable to worry about it at the moment. Instead she snuggles down farther into the solid heat beneath her, lets a small smile stretch across her lips, and willingly tumbles back into unconsciousness.

When she wakes again it's with a jolt this time, a loud screeching and a flapping of wings ripping her out of the peace of sleep and sending her heart to pounding in her chest as she sits straight up. A crow, large and black and relatively harmless, eyes her warily from a tree and Silke lets out a humorless chuckle at having been startled so badly by a bird. She takes a deep breath, but before she can get her bearings the previous night comes rushing back to her all at once. She starts, eyes widening and heart skipping a beat as her gaze frantically scans the surrounding woods for the wolf.

There's nothing, no sign of the creature at all, and Silke is torn between relief and bitter disappointment. She presses a hand to her chest, feels the way her heart is beating hard and strong, and she forces herself to take deep breaths as she looks at her surroundings. Silke feels her brow furrow in confusion when she's actually clearheaded enough to register where she is. She's propped up against a tree just like she was before she'd fallen asleep, but it's different, the situation all wrong. She's not where she should be.

The tree she's resting underneath now is massive, and the ground beneath her is soft and springy with dead leaves. There's a small creek to her right, and her herb chest is resting against a large stone on her left. Her cloak is spread out underneath her on the forest floor, the ragged material doing little to shield her from the cold. Everything is just so familiar and Silke realizes that she knows exactly where she is. It's a small clearing of sorts in the woods that's not too far from her village. Silke knows if she walks straight ahead for no more than a handful of minutes she'll break through the tree line and come out onto the backside of the small plot of land her cottage rests on.

Somehow she's woken up little more than a stone's throw from her home, and that should be impossible. When she'd veered from the path the night before, she'd run in the opposite direction of the village, had scrambled through unfamiliar trees until she'd finally been forced to stop. Silke is confident that even in the state she'd been in she would have recognized the clearing if she'd stumbled into it. She's spent far too much of her time staring at the sprawling branches above her, or wading in the shallow creek for her not to have been able to recognize it even in the dark.

She pushes her confusion down and back for the moment because there are more important things for her to worry about, things that take precedent over her location. Things like the way her face is swollen and achy and how her entire body is sore from her headlong rush through the trees. Most importantly she needs to concentrate on getting out of the woods and back to her cottage so she can take care of everything else in the relative safety of her home.

Silke shifts and makes to get to her feet, but her ankle gives a twinge and she glances down at it only to feel her mouth drop open in surprise. Her boot is gone, and in its place is a bandage of sorts. There are thin strips of what looks to be deer hide wrapped carefully around her ankle and the heel of her foot forming a warm cocoon around her tender and swollen injury.

Silke feels something within her soften slightly even as her confusion comes roaring back and threatens to overwhelm her. She's been moved, she's already established that to be a fact, but

whoever or whatever had moved her had taken the time to try to care for her. That small act of kindness is something that she is not used to receiving from anyone besides Oma. It has her smiling wistfully almost without realizing it. It's nice to be cared for, even if she was unconscious at the time.

"Thank you." Silke whispers it to the trees around her in the hopes that somehow whoever had helped her will hear it. It's unlikely but saying it aloud makes her feel better.

It takes her a moment, but Silke manages to use the tree behind her to pull her way up and onto her feet, being careful to keep as much weight as possible off of her wounded ankle. She has to lean against the tree as she struggles to get her chest up and onto her back without falling over, but she refuses to let it out of her sight. It's too precious to her to even consider the thought of leaving it in the woods even if its weight is going to make the short trip to her cottage harder.

A walk that should only take minutes takes far longer, and Silke is sweating, her face aching and her ankle hurting even worse than before, by the time she finally reaches the edge of the trees. She stumbles but stops herself from going down by grabbing on to a low hanging branch at the last second. The village, her cottage, is just beyond the tree line and well within sight.

It's a relief to finally be almost home, to almost be safe, but at the same time a new sort of anxiety rears its head. The villagers will be cruel if they see any sign of weakness in her, will poke and prod and bite at anything they can to get to her. So Silke will have to be careful, will have to try her hardest to go relatively unnoticed, and to not let on that today is different than any other day.

Silke leans against the tree beside her; one arm is still raised to grip the low hanging branch as she reaches back and pulls her hood up to shadow her face once again. It's a small thing, but it's all that she has, all she can do to hide in plain sight. It normally works pretty well since the villagers are usually reluctant to get close enough to her to see through the shadow it casts. Silke takes another second to get her breath back, to gather her strength and her resolve, and then she heaves a heavy sigh, lets the limb go, and takes a shaky step forward out of the trees.

Silke has to move even slower without the trees to lean against and stumble between, but she takes care to try to make her gait as even as possible. She keeps her head down, eyes locked on the slow shuffle of her feet as she tries to keep weight off of her ankle and not limp too noticeably at the same time. She's halfway to her door when a hand grips her elbow tightly and spins her around without a warning. Silke yelps and pitches forward but instead of hitting the ground she finds her face pressed deep into a thick fur vest that she immediately recognizes.

Emil.

Silke barely stops herself from groaning aloud. Out of all the people to catch her Emil is the last one she wants to face at the moment. The two of them have never gotten along, have never been able to be more than civil with one another, though Silke places the blame firmly on Emil for that. Emil had been popular in their youth thanks to his father's excellent aim with a bow and his status as a huntsman. It had only gotten worse as they aged when Emil's handsome face and build and the fact that he'd taken over his father's position had made him extremely sought after. Still, despite the many offers and the numerous women in the village who would gladly welcome him into their beds, Emil was still unmarried.

Emil is a tall, broad-shouldered man now who still takes great pleasure in tormenting Silke for her coltish build and her chosen trade. Emil's always been rough and quick to anger, just like his father before him, and unfortunately for Silke the huntsman has no qualms about lashing out at her in a million ways both big and small.

Early on in their youth Silke had learned to avoid Emil as often as possible. If she didn't want

the herbs she'd gathered destroyed, the fish she'd caught in a nearby river stolen, or the precious bits of cloth she'd managed to barter for ripped or destroyed it was best to avoid him. More than once she'd been painstakingly sewing something just as Oma had taught her in the sunlight outside of her cottage only to have Emil wander by and destroy her work. She's not really sure what she ever did to make Emil focus on her so intently, but she spends more time than she wants to admit wishing she knew how to undo it.

Silke starts to jump back, to take the pain that will come with hurting her ankle in order to get out of arm's reach of Emil, but the huntsman doesn't let her go. Instead he tightens his grip on Silke's elbow. When Silke peeks up at him from the shadow of her hood she finds Emil frowning down at her, blond brows drawn down sharply and mouth pursed tightly. Silke shifts away from him as much as she's able to, and it's far enough that her breasts are not pressed directly against his chest anymore and she can look up at Emil without straining her neck.

"You're limping." Emil says it like a declaration and a question all in one, like he's demanding Silke tell him what happened without him actually having to ask her to.

Silke just glares up at him and pulls her elbow back again in a useless attempt to get free and to put more distance between them. Emil jerks her closer in retaliation and sends Silke sprawling against the wide expanse of his chest for a second time. Silke pushes at him with her free hand, still trying to get Emil to let her go, but he's stubborn. Instead of letting her go Emil simply stands still, an immovable mass of muscle, and waits Silke's struggles out. She's too tired to put up the kind of fight she normally would if Emil got this touchy with her. Still she can't help but admit to herself that Emil's large hands are surprisingly gentle, his grip firm but not bruising. A part of her is curious as to what's prompted such behavior in full view of the other villagers. Emil normally takes great measures to be rough and crude towards her when others can see.

He saves this type of behavior, this almost reluctant gentleness of a sort, for when he manages to corner Silke alone.

"It's nothing; now let me go, Emil. I have things to do." Silke spits the words out from behind clenched teeth. Emil doesn't move, doesn't flinch at her acidic tone. He only frowns harder and lifts his free hand up towards Silke's face. Silke can't help the way she flinches and draws in on herself as much as possible at the sudden movement. She's been the victim of one too many cuffs and slaps upside the head to not be on her guard.

Emil's hand freezes halfway towards reaching for Silke's hood, and his face seems to almost spasm. Something that Silke might call regret if it was anyone but Emil flickers across his expression. Whatever it is Emil shrugs it off quickly and then his hand is moving again, tugging Silke's hood down despite her hissed protests. He cups Silke's jaw in the palm of his hand in a way that makes her go silent and still.

"You've been bleeding as well. What happened, Silke?" Emil's voice is surprisingly soft, almost coaxing, like Silke is a skittish animal he's trying to gentle. The idea is ridiculous because this isn't the first time Silke's been bruised, isn't the first time Emil's seen her with blood on her face. Far too often Emil's the one who put it there.

"There was a noise, and it startled me. I was running, and I tripped over a root sticking up on the path." It's partially a lie; one of omission more than anything, because Silke can't bring herself to mention the wolf, can't bear to speak of it to Emil for some reason. Not to Emil who takes such pleasure in hunting and killing. Something inside of Silke whispers to her that to tell Emil would be a mistake because Emil would set out on a quest to kill the creature. Even though Silke is confident that the wolf she'd encounter would be more than a match for Emil, it's a battle she wants no part of, a

fight for survival that she refuses to initiate.

Silke can feel a hot, hard ball of sick forming in her stomach at the mere thought of something happening to the wolf.

Emil brushes the pad of his thumb gently across the cut on Silke's cheek, and he looks as if he's about to say something else before he seems to get ahold of himself. He drops both of his hands away from Silke in the next second and takes a large step back from her. Silke sways with the removal of the support Emil had been lending her, but she keeps her feet and gazes up at the huntsman in confusion. She doesn't bother to pull her hood back up; Emil's already seen her up close. Emil's always been one of the main instigators in the village when it comes to Silke so if he knows then there's no sense in trying to hide anymore.

Silke takes an unsteady step backwards, intent on ignoring what's just happened between her and Emil. She just wants to go home, back to her cottage and her warm fireplace so she can shake the chill in her bones and finally rest. And yet something stops her, something makes her pause in the middle of turning around so that she can look Emil directly in the eye.

"Why do you care? You've hurt me more times than I can count, Emil, so why do you care now?" It comes out more accusing than she meant it to, but Silke doesn't really care. Her anger with Emil is and always has been a strange thing. It's fully awake and alive, a writhing spitting thing in her breast whenever Emil taunts her. But other times, when Silke's alone or even on some of the rare occasions when Emil corners her and it's just them, it's quieter, a more subtle flare that's made up less of anger and more of hurt. Like in another time and place she might care for Emil and the cruelty he shows her on a regular basis almost tastes like betrayal.

"I don't like seeing blood on you that I didn't put there myself. I don't like seeing bruises on you that didn't come from me." Emil practically whispers the words, but they're as loud as thunder in Silke's ears. Emil stares at her silently for a moment and then he turns and strides away, long legs eating up the distance as he goes back to his own home. Silke can only stare after him, torn between shocked confusion and a faint sense of horror before she too finally turns and continues on her way to her cottage.

That night, when she's washed the dirt and sweat from her body with what little water she has left, when she's eaten and treated her wounds and she's almost too exhausted to sleep, Emil's words still ring in her ears.

But when she finally does fall into a restless sleep it's the burning eyes of the wolf that haunt her. They're as bright and bold as she remembers and instead of fear they send feelings of comfort and safety rushing through her veins. It's like Silke knows, deep down inside, that as long as those eyes are on her nothing can touch her, nothing can harm her.

Emil doesn't appear in her dreams at all.

Chapter Four

Silke has always been a bit different when compared to the rest of the people in her village. She's always been quieter than the others her age, less inclined to boisterous games or loud noises, preferring to keep to herself. It's something many of the villagers have always looked down on her for, something that they've twisted to fit their warped opinion of her. In all actuality she's just never had much to say to most of them. They've never made much of an effort to talk *to* her instead of *about* her so she figures they're even on that regard. Plus she's honest enough with herself to admit that the way they've all whispered about her behind her back ever since she was a girl hasn't exactly created an overwhelming desire to fit in with them either.

She can't deny the fact that there are days when she wishes she had a friend, had someone to talk to, but she's long grown used to the way she's alone even when she's surrounded by people. Any attempts the villagers had made in the past to be anything beyond frostily polite to her had died years ago with her parents, stolen from her by a winter sickness that refused to be expelled. She's grown used to their disdain, their whispers and heavy-handed verbal abuse. She's grown used to finding bags of salt and mint, little pouches filled with herbs meant to ward off evil, nailed to her door in the mornings. To the way parents pull their children away from her at the well near the center of town, mumbling about the evil eye and curses while they avoid her mismatched gaze. She's used to being ignored for the most part except for when someone is taunting her, taking the time to hurl insults or blame that she'd done nothing to earn, or when they're grudgingly forced to seek her out for aid.

It doesn't bother her for the most part anymore. She refuses to let it twist her up inside like it used to when she was small, when she'd look up at her mother and beg her to make her understand. She'd run her thumbs underneath Silke's eyes one at a time, first the green one and then the blue, and she'd smile sadly and tell her to be brave. Silke tries to remember that about her mother, tries to remember the way she always urged her to be strong.

So when Silke wakes the morning after her adventure in the forest, body sore and face aching, she takes a deep breath, grits her teeth, and levers herself off of her bed.

She hobbles around the cottage for a while, stokes the fire and washes her face with the last of her clean water before she can bring herself to sit down with her chest and see if it can be salvaged. She has few things with sentimental value attached to them but the wooden herb chest that Oma had gifted to her years before is one of them. In the end she's thrilled to discover that there are only a few places that she has to repair. There are spots where the slats of wood that make up the body have shifted out of place or buckled entirely; the latches on a few of the drawers are bent, and she has to retighten the shoulder straps. It's time-consuming work but rewarding, and contentment hums inside of her as she runs expert hands and eyes over the chest as she painstakingly repairs it. When she's done she wipes it down with a soft rag and a bit of oil from an extra bottle she keeps set aside specifically for that purpose.

Besides the repairs that needed to be done Silke's pleased to see that there's nothing missing from her herb supply. The bottles and pouches she keeps her ingredients in are all accounted for with only a handful cracked or broken. All that is, but one.

The Wolfsbane is missing.

Silke can't remember what had happened to the fat little bottle she'd clutched so desperately in the woods. She remembers dropping it to grope for a rock, and she knows that it had been gone when she'd woken up in the forest, but she wasn't in the right frame of mind at the time to worry about its

disappearance. Still the loss of it hits her hard. The flower is rare this time of year, the small patches that she knows of just having finished flowering and dying down for the heavy winter months, and Silke knows there's a chance she'll have to wait a while before she can replenish her stock.

Silke resolves herself to telling Oma exactly what happened and asking her if she has enough of the powder herself to spare so that she can renew her supply as soon as she's up to taking the trip again. She knows she'll be happy to help her if she's able to after a mandatory scolding. She'd impressed the importance of always having a bit of it around the first time she'd shown her how to harvest the flower.

More importantly she knows she has to tell her about the wolf, has to talk to her about what had happened in the forest. Unlike with Emil, Silke knows that Oma will keep her confidence without repercussions and that she can speak with her without being afraid of her reaction. She'll help her figure out what she should do and how to go about doing it. She always has.

It is only because of Oma that Silke has managed to survive at all. The old woman had been friendly with her mother and father when they were alive. She had always stayed and shared a meal with her family whenever she came into the village to trade her herbs and tonics for other goods. Oma had rode into the village one day on her swayback pony, and she'd seen the bags of salt and mint nailed to Silke's cottage door and the way that her mother hadn't come out to greet her and she'd been concerned. When she'd found Silke, pale, despondent, and wracked with sickness on the ground beside her parent's bed, she'd been furious.

She'd flown into a rage, had raved and spit at the villagers and told them all that she should curse their children and their children's children for not fetching her, for allowing Silke's parents to waste away when a cure could have been easily procured. Afterwards, when Oma calmed down and Silke had cried silent exhausted tears into the front of her threadbare dress, the woman had helped Silke clean and prepare their bodies for burial. She'd sat up with her that entire night, as was traditional to watch over the dead, and then she'd browbeat a few of the villagers into helping her give them a proper burial. When Silke had finally collapsed, exhausted and feverish, Oma had been the one there to nurse her back to health.

Oma had stayed with her for a while after that. She'd cleaned the cottage from one end to the other, muttering all the while. The rest of the villagers had given her a wide berth and whispered behind their hands as she'd heated water and scrubbed everything down. During her stay she'd taught Silke about things she'd never thought of before, things about how to prevent sickness, about what plants were safe and what were not. She taught her through trial and error, through rapped knuckles and ruffled hair how to bake and cook and sew and clean. She finished teaching her all of the things she'd been learning from her parents but had never had the time to master.

She'd offered to take Silke with her, to whisk her away to her small cottage deep within the forest and far from the village, but Silke had refused. She'd liked the idea of staying in her own place, even if she knew it would be lonely without Oma around. Oma had left eventually, riding back through the woods on her pony, leaving Silke with a fond smile and promise to return. Oma had kept that promise, had made the long trip from her cottage deep in the Black Woods every week or two and had continued to teach her things and to threaten the villagers into silence.

Eventually, when Silke proved patient and interested, Oma had sat her down and began to teach Silke her own craft as well, the secrets behind her remedies and tonics, her potions and poultices. And then when she'd noticed the way Silke eyed the talisman she wore around her neck with undisguised interest, she'd taught her more. Oma had taught her to read and write runes and how to weave talismans of her own, how to turn rocks and feathers and herbs into charms. She taught her

how to draw symbols of good fortune and protection with thread and needle, with ash or blood or any number of things. It was because of her that Silke saw magic as a gift, saw it as something to be used and nurtured instead of feared and stifled like the villagers did.

It did nothing to better their opinion of Silke; in fact, it made the ridicule and mistrust she'd always received because of her eyes and her withdrawn nature worse. But she'd become Oma's apprentice of a sort and that had been enough for her. Silke asked Oma once why she'd picked her out of everyone to pass her knowledge on to.

"You've a gift for herbs and runes that I've never seen, girl. One day, sweet Silke, I'll be gone, dead and returned to the earth, and these foolish people will need my medicines and your charms still. They'll come to you for your help. They'll have no choice, and you'll reap the benefits of their trade." Oma had cackled gleefully. "Then one day, one day they'll come to you and you won't be here to answer and they'll realize that they drove the only one with the knowledge and ability to help them from their midst with their ignorance. And on that day I'll look on from the afterlife, me and your sweet mother and your dear father, and we'll laugh because then, then they will finally be forced to repent for what they did to you and yours."

Silke had frowned at her in confusion, unable to fathom a time when she might not live in her village, unable to think of leaving the cottage where she'd lived with her parents or the Black Woods that enchanted her so. Silke had told Oma that, had whispered it softly to her that same night inside her cottage, their faces illuminated with the glow of the fire. Oma had stared at her for a moment and then she had patted Silke on the head like she was so fond of doing, smiled a secretive smile and changed the subject.

Life had moved on like that for years for Silke, her world consisting mainly of Oma and her teachings and the harsh whispers of the villagers as she continued to learn how to work the earth. The small garden her parents had started had expanded and flourished under her attention and Oma's tutelage and combined with the snares she often set for rabbits and the fish she caught Silke never went hungry. Her own understanding of the things Oma had begun to teach her had grown rapidly in the meantime, and she'd found a quiet kind of enjoyment in dedicating herself to the work. It had helped to fill the ache inside of her, the one left behind by her family and carved deeper by her loneliness.

Silke forces herself to put the matter and the memories aside, to push them to the back of her mind because there's nothing she can do about any of it at the moment. She needs to heal, to regain her strength and treat her injuries. She's just returned from Oma's cottage, but she likes to make regular trips and her ankle means she might have to delay her next outing. She doesn't like to go too long between visits with Oma, not now that she's gotten so old. Silke doesn't want to run the risk of the old woman slipping away without her there by her side.

So Silke does her best to take her mind off of the situation. She empties and then restocks her chest, takes the wrap off of her ankle to apply a poultice for swelling before she rewraps it. Inspiration strikes her out of nowhere and she gathers a few items together, a few strips of leather and a carefully chosen stone from her collection, and begins to work. The talisman takes her minutes to finish, and she's once again at loose ends. She's reduced to putting around her cottage so she does a handful of other small tasks she's been putting off for far too long, tasks that she can do without moving too much. Then when she can delay no longer, when she's run out of things to do around the cottage, she pushes her way up from the small table she'd been sitting at and limps her way to her door. Morning is close to giving way to the afternoon, and Silke knows that now is the time for her to make a trip to the well in the center of the village to get what water she'll need for the rest of the day.

If she goes now she should be able to avoid the majority of the villagers who will be too busy going about their daily routine to bother her. Plus with her ankle still tender she'll move slower than she normally would so the sooner she goes the better. With her ragged, threadbare cloak settled firmly around her shoulders and pail in hand, Silke pulls her door open only to freeze in shock.

A cloak is hanging innocently from the hilt of a dagger that's been buried deep in the wood of her door. It's an almost unbelievable crimson color, the inside lined with soft rabbit fur while the fabric itself is thick and plush to the touch. It's beautiful and finer than anything she has ever owned, and Silke isn't ashamed of the way her hands shake when she reaches out and takes hold of it. She draws the fabric close to her chest, steps back inside of her small cottage, and closes the door gently, chores forgotten.

"Beautiful." Silke breathes the word out as her fingertips stroke over the material helplessly for a moment. Unable to help herself Silke drops the pail in her hand and unclips the worn clasp that keeps her old cloak around her shoulders, hardly noticing when it slips down and pools on the ground at her feet. She takes a deep breath and with a flick of her wrists she swirls the new cloak around so that it rests across her shoulders. Silke's hands tremble a bit, and she fumbles for a moment when she tries to tie it firmly with the thick green cord that's attached to it.

When she finally manages to secure it, the cloak settles perfectly. It fits like it was tailored especially for her, flowing over her shoulders and down to her ankles, thick and warm and perfect, the hood just waiting to be drawn up. When she reaches down to draw the edges of the cloak together she realizes why it's so comfortable. There are small swirling patterns, protection wards and various other symbols that Silke recognizes, stitched with vibrant green thread all around the edges. She can feel the magic in the cloth, the power in the symbols and runes dancing across her senses almost like nimble little fingers running across her skin in a light caress.

Silke finds it hard to believe that someone would give her something so fine, something so obviously made with care. Her mind automatically flips to Raoul, to how the man had commented on her cloak days ago with a displeased frown. She knows that it's unlikely, that she and Raoul had only spoken once and that she'd given the man no reason to gift her with something so fine. Still the thought of Raoul being responsible sends a pleasurable shiver down Silke's spine.

Her fingers clench in the material of the cloak suddenly when the reality of the situation hits her fully. Her throat tightens as panic eats her breath from her lungs and a trickle of cold dread flows down her spine. Silke knows what the villagers will say if they see her wearing something so fine, something so obviously a gift. They'll whisper behind their hands about her magic, swear she must have stolen it or at the very least enchanted someone in order to get it. She gives serious thought to not wearing the cloak, to keeping it a secret.

After a moment Silke squares her shoulders and firms her jaw even though her body still aches and she's alone in her cottage with no one to see her gather her pride around her like a shield. She doesn't want to keep it a secret, doesn't want to deny the gift. To not wear the cloak would be to outright reject the gift, and Silke refuses to do that. Not when she's never been given something so fine. She's aware that the gossip, the taunting and the stares, will likely be harsher than normal, but she'll be damned before she lets them ruin this for her.

She won't give them the satisfaction of ignoring this completely and hiding away in the cottage her parents had built, the one she'd been born in and they had died in, the only home she's ever known. She refuses to give them the satisfaction of ignoring the only gift she's gotten in years just because of the whispers and the cruelty she knows it is going to bring. After all of the pain and ridicule she's lived through, she deserves to enjoy something so fine that's obviously meant for her.

She's going to walk out of her door, make her way into the village to do her business, and she's not going to let anyone stop her from enjoying this moment.

Chapter Five

“You know I always thought you’d make an excellent whore. Looks like I must have been right. We should put you to work doing something besides pedaling those fucking potions that witch teaches you to make.” Emil snarls.

Silke does her best to keep her eyes averted and to ignore the taunting words Emil throws at her when she passes him on her way into the woods. Words that are, as always, accompanied by the delicate giggles and harsh guttural laughs of the other women and men who follow the hunter around and enjoy laughing at the mockery he throws at Silke. Emil had taken his father’s place as huntsman of the village when Gregor, slowed down by age and a rattling cough, had died on a hunt a few seasons back. The man had been too proud to go to either Silke or Oma for treatment, and while Silke didn’t personally mourn him she did regret that she’d been unable to help. Still the whispers Silke overheard from the villagers who witnessed Emil carrying his father’s body back from the woods had hinted that wolves had ultimately been responsible for his death.

Silke is sure the story is true. Emil seems dead set on hunting any wolf that crosses his path and with the Black Woods being as large and as deep as they are there are plenty to be found. Emil’s almost kind in the days that follow each kill, never saying anything untoward to Silke and on occasion even nodding at her in a neighborly sort of way.

“I’m talking to you! Don’t ignore me, Silke!” Emil’s voice is loud and angry behind Silke, but she keeps walking, head held high, eyes steady and focused on the tree line. Her cloak swirls around her, a tidal wave of crimson, and the hood does an excellent job of shielding her face from anyone who might look at her closely. Her hand tightens around the edge of her cloak, and she wishes that she’d brought her chest with her, that the comforting weight was on her back. It was large and bulky, but it made her feel safe for some reason.

Her other hand palms the thin dagger she’d eventually managed to pry from her door. It is of a far better quality than the one she’d lost in the woods, the blade thin and wickedly sharp. It’s perfect for the fine delicate work she has to do but still deadly enough to afford her some protection against man and beast. Not that she thinks Emil will actually try to hurt her bad enough to warrant pulling her new blade, but she’s also not willing to stake her life on that fact.

Emil’s always had a nasty temper, especially where Silke is concerned, but ever since Silke had started wearing the cloak out in the open, Emil has only gotten worse. With every day that passes Emil seems to grow angrier. His taunts and threats grow more vicious as Silke continues to wear what is obviously a gift, even though no one has stepped forward to claim responsibility yet.

Silke freezes, her muscles going hard and tense, when a large palm wraps around her thin shoulder tightly. She knows without turning around that it’s Emil, recognizes the hard press of his hands just as she always does and the fact that Silke hadn’t heard him approach at all. Emil might be a brute, but he is the village huntsman and he’s good at what he does, knows how to move silently across almost any surface.

“What do you want, Emil?” Silke is proud of the way her voice is calm and steady even if her hand flex around the hilt of her dagger.

“Aw, don’t be like that, little witch. You know I’ve only got your best interests at heart.” Emil sounds entirely too smug and satisfied at having caught Silke, and she has to grit her teeth to keep the scathing reply in her head from slipping out.

“Of course you do.”

Emil's hand tightens on her shoulder in what Silke knows is a warning. Emil doesn't like it when Silke gets too mouthy around the rest of the villagers. Once, a few summers back, Silke had made the mistake of mouthing off too heatedly in front of an audience. Emil had wrapped a thick fist in her hair and held her down on the ground so he could press the sharp blade of a knife to her throat as he threatened her. Silke had been terrified and angry, had hated herself for being so weak and easily subdued.

Afterwards, in some form of petty defiance she'd taken a blade of her own to her hair, had hacked off the thick brown strands that she'd always worn long and loose. Her mother had loved to run her fingers through them when she was a child. Emil had been white faced and thin lipped when he'd seen Silke next, his eyes tracking over her now short and disheveled hair. Silke has kept the same style since for a few years before she'd finally felt comfortable with growing it out again. It wasn't as long as it had once been, but it still fell in a thick wave to down below her breasts.

Emil had never reached that level of violence again, had in fact stayed away from her for a while after that particular incident. When he'd finally gone back to his habit of tormenting Silke, there'd been a sort of restrained quality to him. He still always leaves bruises on Silke's pale skin if there's someone else around to see her getting snippy with him. But in some strange sort of reverse, it's when they're alone that Emil doesn't do more than hover over her and talk. In those moments he's more gruff than threatening and Silke can't help but wish for all of their meetings to go that way.

"You're spending a lot of time in the woods, little witch. Going to see that hag of yours?" Emil's voice is sharp and loud enough to carry to the other villagers nearby.

Silke jerks her shoulder out of Emil's grasp, and she knows from the flare of pain that runs through her that she's most certainly going to bruise. It's worth it for the brief look of surprise that rushes across Emil's face when Silke spins around, a snarl visibly twisting her lips when her hood falls down around her shoulders. Silke can deal with what the huntsman has to say about her but bringing Oma into the situation is something that she refuses to stand for no matter how many times she calls her foolish.

Oma has saved her in so many different ways over the years that refusing to hear her being spoken ill of is the least Silke can do.

"Leave her out of this, Emil, or so help me I will curse you." Silke wishes her ankle was healed enough for her to run on it. There's a chance that she might need a means of escape soon. Regardless she means what she says, means it whole-heartedly. She'll find the nastiest, most embarrassing potion there is and she'll pour all of her not inconsiderable will power into it before she slips it to Emil if he continues.

Silke doesn't have to touch him to hurt him, and it's only her self-control and the rules that Oma had drilled into her mind that keeps her from living up to the expectations of the villagers as it is. She'd promised both herself and Oma a long time ago that she wouldn't harm anyone like that, that she wouldn't sink into that particular trap of power. Her potions and tonics, her work with runes and charms are all meant to help and never to harm, no matter what the villagers believe of her.

Emil must see something in her face, must see how serious she is, because he frowns suddenly, thin lips going tight and brow furrowing deeply. He doesn't make another move towards Silke, instead his hands drop down to his side and clench uselessly on the air before he curls them into tight fists.

"Maybe the wolves will do us all a favor then and devour you whole this time. There's so many prowling around that you're bound to run into one sooner or later. The mangy things need to be good for something." Emil sneers and then whirls around and stalks back towards the small knot of

people who are watching from a distance.

Silke watches him go for a moment and then turns and resumes her trek towards the woods, the soles of her worn out boots dragging over the ground. They're thin and barely useable, but they're all she has at the moment with the loss of her other boot in the woods so they'll have to do until she can make a new pair.

It's not until Silke's well on her way towards Oma's cottage that a new thought hits her. Perhaps Emil had been trying, in his own gruff and backwards way, to warn her to be on her guard. Perhaps the huntsman has some idea about what had really happened to her in the woods, about the cat and the wolf and the chase through the trees. She shakes the thought off after a moment because she knows that she never mentioned anything to Emil. She hasn't told anyone in the village. Besides that, there's no reason for Emil to try to warn her about anything.

It's not as if the huntsman cares about Silke.

Chapter Six

She's on her way back from Oma's, after being harshly scolded for venturing out in her condition, when the creek where she'd met Raoul comes into view once again. It's still early afternoon, and there's plenty of sunlight left for her to make her way home so Silke only hesitates for a moment before she settles down by the bank again. Her ankle twinges in the confines of her old boot, and Silke lets out a sigh of relief when she sits down. Oma was right, and she's regretting her decision to travel so soon after her adventure in the forest. The desire to be in the woods, to escape from the village into the peacefulness of the trees, had been too great to ignore. Silke knows she should be leery, knows that she should be frightened or reluctant to go into the woods after her encounter with the cat and the wolf, but she isn't.

After all, the cat was dead and the wolf ... well, the wolf had not harmed her.

Plus Silke might not want to admit it to herself but she knows that she's been drawn to the creek for a reason. She's eager to see if Raoul will appear again, eager for the promised meeting to happen sooner rather than later. Eager to give him the gift that she'd made on a whim a few days before.

"Silke." She's lost in thought, staring blankly at the burbling surface of the creek, and the sudden sound of her name being spoken so close to her startles Silke. She's quick to turn her head in the direction it came from, heart pounding in her chest, only to let out a relieved breath when she sees Raoul standing only a few feet behind her. He looks the same, still shirtless and shoeless, skin tanned dark and hair wild. Silke feels a burst of warmth in her chest at the sight of him.

"I'm sorry if I startled you." Raoul takes a few steps closer to where Silke is sitting, dark eyes taking in her form with that same intensity from before.

"You move so quietly, Raoul. I didn't hear you approach." Silke smiles up at him, trying to ignore the way her heart is pounding in her chest.

"I see you replaced your cloak." Raoul's eyes trace the bright fabric, and Silke feels unexpectedly shy.

"It was uh ... it was a gift although I'm not sure who from. It was hanging from my door and it was too lovely to ignore." Slightly flustered Silke can feel her cheeks begin to heat.

Raoul simply smiles at her, satisfaction and a subtle sort of pleasure plain in his face. Silke thinks to ask him if the cloak was a gift from him, if he was the one who'd left it for her, but she shakes the thought off as wishful thinking. Raoul doesn't know where she lives, which cottage in the village belongs to her and if the villagers were asked she'd surely know about it.

When it becomes obvious that Raoul has nothing else to say on the matter Silke moves to get back on her feet only to wince when her ankle throbs.

A large tanned hand makes its way into her line of sight, and Silke pauses for a moment before she reaches out and grabs it. It's warm and the feel of it brings forth a hazy memory, something she'd thought was a dream after the encounter with the wolf. She remembers being carried, remembers being surrounded by warmth and comfort. She remembers feeling safe and cared for as strong arms wrapped around her tightly and lifted her from the snowy ground. She remembers burrowing farther into that heat and how the person carrying her had made a pleased rumbling noise that made their chest vibrate beneath her cheek. Silke remembers the sound of a loud and steady heartbeat lulling her back to sleep. She'd shrugged it off as nothing but a dream but now, with her hand firmly wrapped in Raoul's as he tugs her to her feet without the slightest hint of effort, it seems so very real.

"You shouldn't be out here alone with your ankle hurting you like it is," Raoul states plainly as they

stand there together, hands still wrapped around one another, and Silke snaps out of the daze she'd fallen into.

"I'm not; you're here now after all." The words slip out before Silke can stop them but the way Raoul stops and stares at her, a small smile curling his lips, is worth whatever embarrassment she might feel.

"True. You're heading back to that village of yours, aren't you?" Raoul asks but the way he says it makes Silke sure that he already knows the answer.

"Yes. I need to rest this ankle if I'm ever going to heal properly. Oma already lectured me about being foolish enough to travel on it as well, and I'm afraid that you are both right. It was too soon to try for such a long distance." Silke smiles ruefully.

"Does it hurt a great deal?" Raoul seems concerned as he glances between Silke's face and her feet, as if he can see the injury through the barrier of Silke's boot.

"I've had worse, Raoul. I just have to be careful that this heals properly so it doesn't become a problem later." Silke knows that she's said something to upset Raoul. She can see it in the way the man's thick brows draw down into a deep frown, how his jaw tightens as his eyes narrow angrily.

"You should not have had worse. You should not be injured at all," Raoul bites out between clenched teeth, and Silke finds herself shocked. No one but Oma had ever shown such vehement concern for her since her parent's death.

"I'm not weak, Raoul. I can handle pain," Silke says firmly. She's strong, maybe not in the traditional sense like Emil and Raoul obviously are, but her will is a thing made of iron. To Silke that means a lot.

"I never thought you were. But being strong doesn't mean that you don't need help, Silke. There's no shame in that." Raoul's voice is gentle, a direct contrast to the coiled strength of his body, the power that Silke can feel radiating from him. Silke hums in agreement, surprised to hear her own thoughts and feelings on the subject being spoken so freely by someone like Raoul.

Instead of letting go of her hand Raoul moves in closer to Silke's side. Like it is second nature, like he has the right, Raoul tucks Silke's captured hand into the crook of his arm and slowly turns them both in the direction of the village. Silke doesn't protest when they begin to move, too distracted by the warmth that Raoul exudes. The feel of Raoul's muscled arm beneath her hand and the way she can see the muscles in Raoul's chest shift when he breathes keeps her distracted for far longer than she wants to admit.

They've covered a surprising amount of distance before Silke remembers the talisman she'd tuck away inside of her dress that morning in the hopes that she'd see him again.

"I have something for you." She reaches up and pulls a small pouch out of the bodice of her dress, conscious of the way she can feel Raoul's eyes upon her. "It's nothing special but please consider it a thank you for walking me to Oma's before and accompanying me back to the village today."

"I didn't do it for thanks, Silke. I did it because I wanted to. I enjoy your company, what little of it I've had the pleasure of experiencing." Raoul's free hand comes up to cover the one Silke has resting on his other arm.

"If you don't want it, I'll have to burn it. It was made with you in mind, and it won't work for anyone else." Silke frowns, eyes turned towards the ground, unable to stop the small bit of hurt that's welling up inside of her at Raoul's rejection. She sucks in a harsh breath when Raoul stops moving and cups her chin in the palm of a warm hand so he can lift her face up towards his.

"I never said I didn't want it, Silke. I'd never turn down anything you wanted to give me, no

matter what it is.” Raoul’s voice was husky, and the sound of it sent a shiver down her spine. “Now, may I have my gift?” Silke swallows hard and licks her lips, heat curling through her at the way Raoul’s eyes follow the movement hungrily. She is reasonably sure he has something else in mind besides the talisman she’s clutching in her free hand, but she forces herself to brush the thought aside and to hand him the pouch.

Raoul pulls the leather open carefully and upends it so that the necklace inside tumbles out and into his open palm. It’s a simple thing, made from a long strip of leather and a piece of red jasper that she’d found a month before but had never been able to bring herself to use.

“It’s for protection,” Silke states softly. She’d poured her will into the stone when she’d made the necklace. The jasper would help to keep her wishes for his safety strong and fresh.

Raoul doesn’t say anything. He simply hands Silke the pouch back and slips the talisman over his head until the stone is nestled directly above his heart and pulls her forward again back down the path. They walk together in a surprisingly comfortable silence for a few moments, Silke’s hand still wrapped around Raoul’s elbow as they move back down the path together. Out of the corner of her eye Silke sees Raoul’s hand come up to toy with the stone on more than one occasion, but she stays silent. She can tell that he’s pleased with the gift. Finally when Silke can see the trees ahead of them begin to thin as they approach the village her curiosity pushes her to speak.

“Do you ... do you have a home, Raoul? A place to get out of the cold? I know you said you had clothes and things elsewhere and you talked of your people, but I just wanted to make sure you have shelter.” Silke’s voice is soft and even, her tone sure. Raoul has been kinder to her than anyone she’s met in years besides Oma. The thought of him forced to live in the wilderness or going hungry fills her with sadness even if he looks perfectly healthy and capable of taking care of his own needs. The talisman is a small gift and will help to protect him, but the cold and starvation are formidable foes and she feels strangely invested in the thought of him being safe.

“I have a home, Silke, perhaps not one like yours but a home that suits me.” Raoul sounds almost insulted and Silke winces, realizing just how her questions might have sounded.

“I didn’t mean to insult you, Raoul. I just, I know how difficult the winter months can be at times, how hard it is to ward off the cold and the hunger. More times than I want to count it’s been only my herbs and Oma’s care that have kept me from growing thin with hunger.” Silke doesn’t like to admit it, but it was true and it was something that she’s learned to live with over the years.

“You struggle so much? Can you not trade for what you need?” Raoul asks.

“I can for some things, but the villagers, well, they aren’t exactly fair in their prices. I normally rely on my snares or fish for the occasional supplement to whatever I manage to store for the winter.” Silke grimaces at the memory of weeks spent rationing what little she had when the snows were too deep to travel and the villagers too cruel to barter.

“The way they treat you is shameful, Silke. You should not suffer so.” Raoul sounds so adamant again, but she shrugs lightly, trying to appear unconcerned despite the fact that the memories still sting.

“I know what hunger feels like, and I don’t like the thought of you suffering the same way. I’m not trying to wound your pride or anything of the sort.”

“You truly worry about me? Even though we’re practically strangers?” Raoul sounds almost mystified. When Silke finally gathers the nerve to look up at him she finds that he’s studying her closely, eyes dark and mouth drawn up into a small smile. Flustered Silke looks away from Raoul quickly and does her best to ignore the blush she can feel rising on her cheeks.

“I know we’ve only met twice but you’ve been ... kind to me, more so than most. I would

repay the favor.” Silke’s voice is low, almost a whisper, but she knows that Raoul hears her from the way he stops moving and gently removes her hand from his arm.

“You are an unusual woman, Silke.” Raoul’s hands are gentle on her shoulders as he turns her until they can face one another. “I find you fascinating.” One of his hands comes up and cups her jaw gently as his thumb rubs softly across her bottom lip. “Fascinating and singularly beautiful.”

Silke knows what he’s about to do, can feel it in her bones and see it in his face, in the way he’s slowly moving closer to her, head bent and eyes trained on her lips. She doesn’t protest, doesn’t try to stop him. Instead she tilts her face up, lets her eyes slip closed, and gives herself up to the kiss.

It starts off slow, just the soft press of Raoul’s lips against hers, but he deepens it quickly. His tongue slides gently across the seam of her lips as he teases her bottom lip. Silke’s mouth opens almost immediately. She wants to taste him. She knows that deep down she’s wanted to know what his kiss was like since the moment she first saw him.

Raoul’s arm comes up and wraps around her waist, pulls her closer to his broad, bare chest until she can feel the heat of him through her clothes as he groans low in his throat and licks his way almost delicately into her mouth. Silke shivers and brings her own hands up to clutch at his shoulders as she shyly tries to return his kiss. She feels awkward at first, but Raoul’s tongue sends licks of heat down her spine with every move, and it isn’t long before she feels herself melt even further into him, eager to follow his lead.

She can feel her breasts begin to swell, can feel the way her nipples have hardened against the rough fabric of her dress, the way her thighs are growing moist with heavy desire. It’s unlike anything she’s ever felt, anything she’s ever expected to feel, and Silke throws herself into it without looking back.

In the next second Silke jumps, an embarrassing squeak ripping its way out of her mouth when his other hand drifts beneath her cloak and down to palm her ass. Raoul breaks the kiss with a rough sounding growl. Silke’s eyes flutter open, and she goes to protest, goes to pull him back down and *force* him to kiss her like that again, but the look on his face stops her. He looks just as affected as Silke feels. Raoul’s chest is heaving, his cheeks are flushed, and in some trick of the light his eyes flash crimson for a brief second.

The way he leans down to press their foreheads together makes Silke smile softly even though her heart feels as if it is trying to escape her chest. Had it been anyone but Raoul, Silke is sure that she would feel differently. She knows she would take her dagger to Emil or any of the other village men if they tried the same.

But with Raoul it’s different; she not only enjoyed the kiss, she wants more. She wants to feel Raoul’s heated skin against her own, wants to touch and taste and *feel* in ways she never has before.

“Silke, we can’t.” Raoul groans the words out, regret heavy in his voice. Silke hears him and, stung, she forces herself to calm down, to pull back and away from Raoul. Still she’s almost disappointed when he lets her go.

“Right.” She sounds bitter even to her ears but when she goes to move away from him Raoul grabs her firmly but gently by the wrist.

“No, don’t think that way. This has all gone so much quicker than I intended and the time just isn’t right, not for what I want from you, Silke.” Raoul’s voice is coaxing and for some reason it makes Silke angry.

“So you decide when the time is right then?” Silke glares at him. She knows she’s overreacting a bit, but her skin feels like it’s too small and she’s frustrated.

“There are things you need to know, things I *have* to do before we can have this, Silke. Just be

patient with me please,” Raoul pleads. Just that quickly Silke feels the resistance and the anger melt out of her at the way Raoul is so obviously serious. Instead she’s unexpectedly tired.

“Alright, Raoul, but I ... I won’t wait forever. Not even for you.” It’s not true, but Silke won’t admit that out loud to him. She has no other prospects, but that doesn’t really matter to her, isn’t the reason why she feels the way she does. Even though she didn’t realize that Raoul was truly and seriously interested in her till moments ago she’s felt a connection of sorts with him since the moment they met. No one else had ever made her feel the way he does, had gotten so close so quickly, wormed their way behind her defenses with so little effort.

She feels like she knows him deep down inside, on some level that she doesn’t understand but can’t deny. Even if it’s foolish, even if she knows that she should be wary and cautious, Silke doesn’t really want to. After a lifetime of caution and looking over her shoulder and avoiding every man to come near her as best she can, she just wants to have this, to have Raoul. She wants him however she can have him, damn the consequences.

“You won’t have to. I’d never take that chance, Silke, not with you, not with losing you.” Raoul dips down and kisses her again, a short hard press of lips that still manages to take her breath away. Then he smooths his hand down her hair and steps back. “Night’s coming and so is the cold, get inside before you catch a chill. I’ll see you soon, Silke.”

Silke nods and moves away from him, begins to walk towards the edge of the trees and the promise of her cottage when she pauses and turns to look back at him one last time.

“Come with me.” Silke blurts the words out without thinking about them, but they feel and sound right to her so she doesn’t regret them.

“Not this time but I’ll be near, Silke, always closer than you think even if it’s farther than either of us wants.” Raoul’s words are cryptic, but his voice is soft and tender.

Silke can’t help but smile up at him through her disappointment before she turns and resumes walking.

“Silke.” Raoul’s voice calls out to her again, and she stops even though she doesn’t turn.

“Yes?”

“The cloak truly does look lovely on you.” There’s something in his voice that makes Silke smile even though he can’t see it.

“Thank you.” She says it softly and then once again begins to move towards the edge of the trees. She doesn’t stop again after that, doesn’t turn back around, but she can feel his eyes on her back, can feel him watching her.

She feels safe.

Chapter Seven

Silke finds her thoughts lingering on Raoul again the next morning, on the way she'd lost herself so easily around the man. She's never felt such a strong connection, such a pull to someone like that before. And the way Raoul had kissed her made Silke's breath catch in her chest even now.

She pushes the memory away for later because she needs to go out and get water for the day, to get started on the numerous tasks she needs to accomplish. She'd slept later than normal after a restless night of Raoul consuming her thoughts. Memories of how warm his skin had been, of the appealing width of his shoulders and the heat in his kiss had kept her awake well into the early hours of the morning.

Silke forces herself to move, to push open her front door even as her mind fills with the list of things she needs to accomplish. Pail in hand she goes to step outside only to freeze in shock.

On the ground directly in front of her door, throat neatly ripped out but otherwise intact, is the body of a doe. Questions whirl their way across her mind because there is no reason for the deer to be there in the first place. There's no one in the village who would willingly leave such a healthy looking animal on her doorstep, no one who would be willing to part with such fine cuts of meat. Not to mention a hide that looks soft and thick and almost completely intact.

Silke goes to step forward, to try to see if there's a clue or a hint as to where the deer came from when she feels the breath in her lungs freeze. Beside the doe, standing upright and looking exactly the same as the last time she saw it, is Silke's missing boot. Placing the pail in her hand on the ground beside the doe, Silke shuffles forward carefully until she can bend over slowly to pick up her shoe.

"Where did you find a doe this size and how did you manage to get it back here in the shape you're in?" Emil's voice cuts through the silence, and Silke straightens abruptly the hand clutching her boot slipping behind her back. She doesn't answer Emil, because she honestly doesn't know. It's when her eyes are busy scanning the ground one last time before she goes to meet Emil's gaze head on that she sees it.

A paw print as wide as her hand stands out in stark relief in the soft ground directly beside the doe. The shape of it, the clear imprint of a padded foot and the gouges cut into the ground by deadly claws makes all of the pieces snap into place in the back of Silke's mind with an almost audible click.

The wolf.

The wolf she'd seen in the woods, the one that had rescued her and then in the end had watched her silently from the distance. The massive creature had somehow followed her home and left the doe's carcass on her doorstep alongside her missing boot days after their meeting. It sounds preposterous, Silke knows that; even in the safety of her own mind the very idea seems foolish but she knows, in the same way she'd known not to tell Emil about the wolf in the first place, that she's right. Calm floods her, clears the panic and the haze of half-formed thoughts from her mind, and she knows exactly what to do. Silke looks up into Emil's impatient face and takes a single limping step forward until her boot covered foot lands directly on top of the paw print. Slowly, careful not to draw Emil's attention to what she's doing, Silke grinds her foot into the earth and erases the print from existence.

"It's a gift from Oma. She told me she would be sending me meat for the winter months. You know she has her own ways of keeping promises." The lie flows smoothly off of Silke's tongue, her voice strong and without any hesitation. She'll use the village's distrust towards herself and Oma,

their willingness to believe them unnatural, to distract Emil from discovering the doe's true origins.

Emil's handsome face twists into a deep grimace, and his voice is harsh and filled with a sort of anxious anger when he speaks again.

"You should keep your witchery far from the village, Silke. Not everyone is as inclined as I am to be gentle with you when you flaunt such things so openly. There are those who would see you banished into those damned woods you love so much. Something such as this," Emil gestures sharply towards the deer with one large hand, "will make them even more eager to see you gone or worse, dead." In a move that confuses Silke Emil steps forward and reaches down to haul the doe up and into his arms, muscles bulging with the strain. Before Silke can protest Emil is brushing past her to move towards the still open door of Silke's cottage and then he's slipping inside without even bothering to ask for permission.

Silke rushes after him as best she can. She's careful to drop the boot in her hand just inside the door even though her pail is forgotten on the ground outside. Emil's standing calmly inside the cottage, eyes tracking around the room, taking in the bundles of herbs and flowers hanging from the walls, and the various bits and pieces of Silke's life that are scattered around.

"What are you doing, Emil?" Silke's voice sounds harsh even to her, but she has a right to question Emil, a right to feel uncomfortable with this man barging into her home. It hits her then just how at ease and comfortable she'd felt offering Raoul the same thing the day before.

"I've always thought it would look different in here, like in the fairy stories. But it's all just plants and cloth, bits of bone and pretty stones." Emil sounds almost puzzled, and Silke can't help but shake her head at the ignorance of the villagers, an ignorance that Emil has just proved. Still she doesn't try to correct him, doesn't try to persuade him as she might have in the past. Not when those beliefs, that ignorance, might just be what she needs to keep suspicion off of her and off of the wolf. She doesn't feel the need to defend herself like that any longer, not when she still has Raoul's words ringing in her ears, the memory of his touch heating up her skin.

"Answer my question, Emil. Why are you in my home?"

Emil eyes her for a moment, a blond brow arched high, and then he jerks his head towards Silke's cluttered table.

"You won't be able to dress this thing outside with your ankle paining you, and you're much too small to haul it around yourself. Clear a spot and I'll put it down. There's no real reason to let meat like this go to waste, even if you are the only one who'll eat it after it's been touched by that witch's magic."

Silke doesn't second guess Emil's random decision to be kind, the same way she's forcefully put his words about bruises and blood from a few days past out of her mind. Instead she limps forward as quickly as she can and moves her chest and other objects off of the table. There will be some inconvenience to dressing the deer indoors, a mess to clear and a lingering odor, but Emil is right. Emil surprisingly enough lays the doe down so gently that the table doesn't even shift and then he wipes his hands on the legs of his breeches and turns to leave without another word.

"Thank you." Silke almost whispers it, but she knows that Emil hears her from the way he falters for a moment and then keeps going. He doesn't respond, but Silke's given up all hope of ever understanding Emil. One minute he's harsh and angry, flinging cutting words at Silke and grabbing her with rough hands, and the next he's almost gentle and sort of awkwardly thoughtful.

Once again Silke can't help but think that if things had been different, if Emil had never been so cruel to her for so many years on end her feelings towards the huntsman would be different. Emil is tall and strong, wide shouldered and solid. He's handsome with his thick blond hair and dark eyes.

More than a few of the villagers can't help but admire the figure he cuts when he's draped in his furs in the winter, or wandering around shirtless in just his breeches during the summer heat.

More than once Silke had felt lust stir to life in the pit of her stomach when she'd looked at Emil when they were younger. She'd dreamed of Emil in those years, of feeling those hands, wide palmed and calloused even then, running over her smaller, more delicate frame. She'd fantasized about what it would be like to be covered by that large body, to claw at those wide shoulders and that muscled back as Emil brought her pleasure. Emil had been everything Silke had wanted; the very sight of him had made Silke flushed and hot. But the cruelty that had grown more frequent and harsher over the years had erased that desire.

Now she feels no stirring inside of her, no building of lust or the sharp ache to have Emil, to feel the weight of his cock in her mouth or her hands, to be blanketed by his large form. Now when she lays aching and unfulfilled at night Emil is the furthest thing from her mind. Instead her fantasies are normally blurry and half formed; a jumbled mix of vague wants and desires.

Except for last night.

When she'd felt arousal stir in the pit of her stomach as she lay in bed it had been Raoul's face she'd thought of. It was Raoul's kiss and his touch that had left her squirming in need in the darkness of her home until she'd forced herself to roll over, to bury her face in her thin pillow and go to sleep.

It was the first time since her desire for Emil had faded that she'd considered thinking of an actual person during her fantasies. Silke could never give herself to someone who's spent so much time being cruel to her, could never want to give that much of herself to someone who has dedicated so much time and energy to spitefulness. To finally have found another outlet, another fantasy in Raoul, is a relief.

And that, is that. Silke thinks to herself before she turns to limp back outside so she can gather her previously forgotten pail and continue on with her quest for water. She'll need much more than she originally planned on now.

Chapter Eight

That night a heavy snow fall hits the village and the surrounding forest, and when Silke sees it the next morning she's instantly dismayed. Her thoughts immediately turn to Raoul, to the hope that he's safe and warm. Disappointment wells up inside of her because Silke knows she won't get to see him for a while. The snowfall is too thick for her to travel in so she knows that she'll be forced to stay in the village, only venturing out of her cottage when she has to, for some time.

Silke brushes it off as best she can and continues on with her life, holding Raoul's promise to see her again close to her heart. Emil goes back to his old self and taunts Silke whenever the opportunity presents itself but otherwise keeps his distance. The doe is handled with the efficiency she'd learned at Oma's side and the amount of meat and material she gets off it goes a long ways towards soothing her worries about winter. Her ankle finishes healing quickly, the poultice she's been diligent about applying reduces the swelling and she's back to almost full strength. The cut on her cheek and the other assortment of bruises are only tiny spots on her skin, almost completely gone and barely noticeable.

Life is normal, except for the fact that the doe on her doorstep was apparently just the beginning.

A week or so later, Silke wakes just as the sun is creeping over the horizon, casting a gentle light through the trees and across the snow-covered ground. She wraps her cloak tightly around her and stumbles sleepily to the door of her cottage intent on enjoying the sunrise for a moment before she goes about her day. When she pulls the door open she's stunned to find a hare, neck snapped and fur intact, waiting on the cold ground in front of her.

Her thoughts immediately fly to Raoul. The suspicion that she'd had after the cloak had appeared had come back to life when the doe arrived, and this new gift of meat only made it stronger. Raoul had questioned her about staying warm, and the next day she had a cloak and a dagger driven into the wood of her door. They'd talked about her struggles during the winter, and now she was receiving meat. She feels excitement rise in her chest and happiness bubble in her veins at the idea of Raoul being behind the gifts.

Silke steps forward and once again catches sight of a paw print in the soft snow beside the hare. At first she's disappointed but the thought of Raoul being responsible still won't leave her mind so she shakes the feeling off just as fast. She's almost too fascinated with the idea that's beginning to circle around in her mind that perhaps the wolf and Raoul were connected somehow.

She picks the rabbit up and is unable to stop the laugh that spills out of her when she catches sight of her old dagger lying in the snow underneath it. This wolf, this vicious hulking creature that had frightened her so at first, is returning her things to her. Even though she's taken to using the dagger she'd pulled from her door it is still nice to have her old one back, still nice to have something she's had for years returned to her.

"Thank you." Silke calls out softly in the direction of the forest in the hopes that there's someone there to hear and then she turns and makes her way back inside so she can start her day.

After that things settle into a sort of routine. Silke wakes early and outside her door some sort of gift is almost always waiting on her in the snow. There is never another doe or anything so large, but there are more rabbits and a few fish. There is even some sort of fowl whose meat is stringy, but the grease Silke harvests off of it along with its feathers will surely prove useful. There are others things as well, gifts of a sort that leave Silke even more convinced that Raoul is behind them because

they're nothing a wolf, even one so unusual, would be interested in. But like always there are paw prints pressed deep into the earth beside each gift, and Silke's curiosity continues to grow.

After her dagger Silke's almost delighted when her lantern reappears, glass broken and candle missing. Silke always keeps her gaze turned towards the forest when she's outside, finds herself peeking out of her windows when she's not and making sure that she keeps her senses alert and her mind sharp as she searches for any sign of the wolf. Every morning she whispers another quiet 'thank you' towards the trees and prays silently that the wolf will remain safe, that she'll have a chance to meet the creature again. She ignores the strange looks Emil sends her and the way the villagers whisper suspiciously about the way she's being lavished with gifts.

Within the span of a few weeks she has an odd assortment of gifts piled around the inside of her cottage. There are bundles of feathers and pouches of beads, various hides tanning and drying in the heat of her cottage, and meat being dried in the small hut behind her home. The gifts are all things that she can use, things that will make her life easier. That fact, more than anything, makes Silke believe that Raoul is behind the gifts somehow even if she can't figure out exactly what's going on.

Silke knows something isn't right, knows that she's still missing some vital piece of the puzzle, but she focuses on doing what she can to keep the wolf a secret. It's been weeks, and she hasn't seen Raoul at all, but she feels like he's nearby, like he's keeping his promise and that he's watching over her. There's no evidence that she's right, but Silke believes it anyways. More than once it's that strange sort of faith that pushes her to hurry to erase the paw prints around her cottage before anyone else could see them. Each time she darts out into the cold and the snow to pick up a gift and to erase the prints her heart stutters at the thought of Emil catching wind of what is happening.

It baffles her, this attachment she's formed to a creature she's seen only once, to a beast that by all rights should frighten her immensely. But her desire for the wolf to be safe, for it to come to no harm, feels natural and easy in a way that reminds her of Raoul. Even if she never sees the creature again, even if this puzzling ritual of gifts and trinkets stops, Silke wants the wolf to be safe.

But then a bolt of cloth dyed a deep luxurious red and soft to the touch is propped carefully against her doorframe one morning. Silke runs shaking hands across the material carefully, basking in its quality. In that moment she's completely sure. Raoul and the wolf are connected, and now all she has to do is find out how.

When the snow finally melts enough for travel to be safe again, Silke decides that it's time to make her way to Oma's once again. More time has passed since her last visit than she normally allows, and she knows that Oma will take it upon herself to travel to the village if she doesn't go to see her soon. Silke's eager to tell her about the gifts from the wolf, eager to see what she has to say about the possibility of Raoul and the wolf being connected. She's ready to set out much earlier than she normally is, but she feels refreshed and eager to talk to her about what's been happening as well as to take Oma some of her bounty.

The last thing she's expecting to see when she pulls open the door, cloak in place, herb chest settled firmly against her back and another covered basket at her feet, is the wolf.

It's as massive as she remembers it being, so tall she can look it in the eyes easily, and just as beautiful. Its coat is the same beautiful mesh of browns and reds that she'd glimpsed in the moonlight, and its eyes are a bright burning crimson even in the light of the early morning. The animal holds Silke's gaze for a moment and then it takes a single step forward and slowly extends its neck towards Silke like it's offering her something.

Trembling but unafraid, Silke reaches a hand out slowly towards the wolf and starts in surprise when something smooth and hard is deposited in her open palm. It's a bottle, the glass undamaged

and the cork in place. The squat little container is one that Silke recognizes instantly as what she'd stored her small supply of Wolfsbane in.

It's empty.

The wolf continues to gaze at her as Silke blinks in shock. There is intelligence in the animal's eyes that would have taken Silke off guard if she didn't already know deep in her heart that this creature is more than it seems.

"What are you?" Silke breathes the question out before she can stop herself. She immediately regrets it when the wolf takes a startled step back, ears lying back against its head and mouth opening in a snarl. It turns like it is going to leave and Silke, reacting without thinking, darts forward and tangles the fingers of her free hand deep into the fur of its side. The wolf freezes and turns its head to look at Silke over its shoulder.

"Please. I meant no disrespect." Silke practically begs the creature. She can't bear to think that she's managed to ruin being this close to the wolf for the first time by not being able to control her tongue. Not when she *knows* that she's right and Raoul and this wolf are somehow connected.

After a moment of indecision, the wolf relaxes, and Silke slowly untangles her hand from its fur as it turns and settles on its haunches directly in front of her. Silke takes a deep breath, tries to steady herself and collect her thoughts as best she can because she has so many questions, so many things she wants to know. It might be foolish to think the wolf will actually give her answers but the drive to speak to the creature is too strong for Silke to ignore.

"Are these things ... are these gifts from you?" Silke is sure that she knows the answer but she still has to ask, still needs to know for certain. The wolf seems to ponder her question for a moment before it woofs lightly at her and almost seems to nod. Silke isn't startled, not really. She's known in the back of her mind that the wolf was far more intelligent than should be possible.

"The cloth, the feathers and beads, all of that was you, wasn't it?" Silke asks quietly, gaze locked with the wolf's. Again the beast nods and Silke sucks in a sharp breath and then lets it out slowly before she asks her next question in a whisper. "The cloak?"

Almost as if it can sense her hesitation the wolf goes still for a moment before it nods again slowly. Silke feels laughter bubble up in her chest because she was right, she knew it.

The wolf stands in a smooth shift of muscle and then it's close enough to Silke that she can feel warm puffs of breath washing across her face. It gazes at her for a moment and then it moves even closer, hooks its head over her shoulder and pulls her forward until she crashes against its wide chest with a muffled thump. Its coat is thick and slightly damp from the morning dew, and Silke can feel the way its muscles clinch and relax beneath its skin. She can't help but press herself closer, bury her face in the fur beneath her cheek and listen to the heartbeat beneath her ear. Silke feels the tension drain out of her slowly as she breathes in the scent that clings to the wolf's fur, the smell of smoke and snow and fresh turned earth.

They stand there for a few moments, each of them relaxed and enjoying the silent comfort the other offers, and then Silke pulls back slowly. Her eyes are heavy lidded, and her heart is calm. She feels almost lethargic when she stares into the wolf's unblinking red eyes and lifts a hand to run her fingers gently over its massive muzzle and back behind its ears.

"Thank you for everything. Just ... thank you. I'm not sure why you saved me, why you didn't kill me, or why you've given me what you have, but I want you to know that I'm grateful. I know that you probably don't understand me, but I have to tell you that you should be more careful coming here. There are many in the village that would enjoy taking your pelt." Silke can't help the way she darts a look towards Emil's cottage when she speaks.

The wolf's head turns with her, and the growl that rumbles low and long in its chest is enough to make Silke jump but not enough to make her pull away. Instead her hands continue to sift through its thick fur slowly. She feels her brow furrow when her fingers bump up against something out of place and she can't help but get a finger underneath it and lift it up and out of the wolf's fur.

Silke's breath catches in her throat and her heart begins to hammer when she finally sees what it is. The talisman, the red stone and leather creation that she'd given to Raoul for protection, is hanging around the wolf's neck. All of her suspicions, all of her thoughts on how Raoul and the wolf could be connected come together in one brilliant moment. The talisman slips through her fingers and falls back to rest against the wolf's chest as Silke rocks back and lands on her ass in the snow.

"Raoul?" Silke whispers and watches in awe as the wolf's eyes grow wide and its body goes stiff.

There's a moment of silence between them as they stare at one another and then the wolf, Raoul, turns and rushes back towards the trees. Silke gives a low cry and scrambles to her feet, the bottle in her hand falling to the ground forgotten as she wraps a fist in her skirt and takes off running after him.

"Raoul!" Silke calls as soon as she's deep enough in the trees that she doesn't have to worry about anyone in the village hearing her. There's no sign of Raoul, only the tracks he's left in the remaining snow that Silke does her best to follow. "Raoul, please don't go!"

Silke rushes deeper into the forest. The only thing on her mind is finding Raoul, in finding the man that was apparently a wolf. She doesn't care what he is, doesn't care what he can do or become. She isn't normal either and Raoul, Raoul makes her feel like no one else ever has. He makes her feel safe and warm and comfortable. His touch brings her body to life in a way she almost can't believe is real.

All she knows is that she doesn't want that to go away, she doesn't want to lose what she's just beginning to understand she's found because of something like this.

Panting, Silke stops in a small clearing and spins in a circle, trying to see if she can spot any sign that Raoul's still nearby.

"I don't care what you are, Raoul! I don't care if you're a wolf or a man or both." Silke feels a sob rise in her chest, but she forces herself to push it down. "Just ... don't leave me here."

There's a rustle in the underbrush to her right, and Silke whirls around to face it just as the wolf, Raoul, steps out into the clearing. She can tell that he's wary, can see it in the way his fur is ever so slightly on end, the way his shoulders are tense and his ears are laid back.

"Don't leave when we've just found each other, Raoul. Don't run away now, not when you can finally tell me the truth." Silke takes a handful of steps closer to Raoul. "I knew, Raoul. Somehow I knew it was you. I knew you were the one giving me things, taking care of me."

Raoul watches her intently, and Silke can see him slowly beginning to relax, can see the way his body's losing its tension piece by piece so she moves a little bit closer to him.

"The paw prints, they had me confused, but I just *knew*." Silke's directly in front of him when she whispers the confession. Silke moves forward then and wraps her arms around Raoul's neck and buries her face in his thick fur like she had outside her cottage. "I knew, and I'm not afraid of you, Raoul. No matter what you are, I still want you, Raoul, all of you. Even this."

One second Silke's wrapped around the wolf version of Raoul and then in the next the fur beneath her hands begins to ripple and shift. Before she can move away and figure out just what is happening the fur gives way to smooth hot skin and a pair of thick, strong arms come up to wrap around her waist. Raoul presses her close to him, and Silke can feel every inch of him, bare despite the cold and the snow still on the ground, pressing up against her.

“Do you mean that, Silke? Tell me the truth. Would you have me even now that you know what I am? Would you give yourself to me knowing that I’m more beast than man? That most would call me a monster.” Raoul’s voice is harsh, barely above a growl. The sound of it sends shivers down Silke’s spine even as she presses her face against the warm expanse of his chest.

“I don’t know what you are, Raoul, but you are not a monster. I’ve met monsters, seen people who are cruel and uncaring, terrible in so many ways. You’ve protected me, provided for me; done things for me that no one else would ever consider. I would give myself to you because of that, because you’ve shown me your worth in a hundred different ways since you saved me from that cat in the forest.” Silke speaks with total honesty. Raoul has given her more, in both of his forms, than anyone else ever has. She refuses to let that slip through her fingers.

Raoul growls low in his throat and yanks Silke’s body back up against his own as one of his hands forces her head to tilt back. His lips close over hers, and there’s no hesitation this time, no gentle coaxing or playful teasing. He dominates her mouth, tongue sweeping in and going deep as he licks at the back of her teeth like he’s chasing her flavor. Silke gives back as good as she can as she digs her nails into his naked shoulders and returns his passion to the best of her abilities.

Silke almost doesn’t feel it when he begins to move them, but she doesn’t stop him when he begins to pull at her skirt, rucking it up until he can wrap large, hot hands around her thighs. She moans and clutches at his shoulder harder as he lifts her without any effort and presses her back up against a nearby tree as he steps into the space between her thighs. Silke gasps, breaking the kiss and bucking her hips up into the cage of his hands as best she can. She can feel him, can feel his heat as he presses the hard line of his cock against her.

“Raoul!” Silke cries out and Raoul answers her by dipping his head down to mouth at her neck as he presses his hips down against her. He racks the vulnerable, pale line of her throat with surprisingly sharp teeth before he soothes the sting with his tongue.

“Silke.” She hears him murmur against the skin of her throat, but she pays him no mind, too caught up in the pleasure of having him against her. Then one of his hands shifts and he trails it slowly up the soft flesh of her thigh, fingertips tracing lightly over her skin. For the first time, despite how much she wants him, she feels uneasy, hesitant.

Raoul makes a soft noise and brings his face back up so he can capture her mouth again in a surprisingly gentle kiss. When he pulls back his hand has stilled high on her thigh, the ends of his fingers just brushing her curls.

“I won’t take you, Silke, not here, not like this. Just let me. Please.” Raoul sounds almost as if he’s pleading, as if he’s begging her to give him something precious. Silke doesn’t want to deny him, doesn’t want to deny herself, so she looks him in the eyes and nods.

The triumph and pleasure on Raoul’s face is plain to see, but Silke doesn’t focus on it. Instead all she can do is tip her head back against the tree behind her as he tangles his fingers in her curls and then presses two of them down and more importantly *in*. His fingers are thicker and hotter than her own and the way her body stretches as she takes them in makes her ache in an entirely too pleasurable way, and Silke feels herself grow wetter.

“That’s it, like that, so warm, so giving.” Raoul rasps against her lips as he works his fingers in and out of her body, curling them and sending shivers down her spine on every other stroke.

“Raoul, please!” Silke cries out, as pleasure curls tight and sharp in her stomach. She can feel it, can feel the heat seeping into the rest of her body, taking over her senses and clouding over her vision. Raoul bites down on her neck again, fingers speeding up until Silke can hear the wet sound they make as they move in and out of her body. Silke’s body goes taut and her spine bows out as she

tumbles over the edge with a sharp, high-pitched scream.

She's panting, breathing ragged and face flushed, when she finally comes back to herself. Raoul's still between her spread thighs and she can still feel him, hot and hard where he's pressed against her. The hand that's not supporting her is rubbing up and down the outside of her hip and he's whispering soft, soothing words in her ear. They stay there for a few more moments, and Silke takes the time to run her fingers through Raoul's hair and across the breadth of his shoulders, enjoying the feel of him beneath her hands.

Her mind is hazy and her body tingles pleasantly when Raoul finally lowers her to her feet. Silke hears him chuckle at the way her legs tremble and the way she stumbles even as he is quick to steady her. He pulls her close to him immediately, one of his hands reaching down to set her skirt to rights as the other comes up to smooth her tangled hair back from her face and into some semblance of order.

"I shouldn't have done that, not without your permission." Raoul's voice is husky and thick with restrained passion. "But you are the most glorious thing I've ever touched and I don't regret a second of it."

"Then why ... why did you stop?" Silke's surprised at the way her own voice sounds, hoarse and raw from pleasure.

"I told you I wasn't going to take you against a tree and out in the open the first time you gave yourself to me, Silke. You'll be mine when I finally take you, Silke, mine in ways I don't think you understand yet." There's something dark in Raoul's voice then, something wild and fierce and strong. It calls out to something deep inside of Silke and her hand comes up and presses against the talisman that Raoul's wearing almost without her noticing it.

His possessiveness and his obvious strength are alluring to her in a way that she's unfamiliar with. She's always balked at that sort of force, reminded too much of Emil and the pain he's caused her, but with Raoul, like so many other things, it's different.

"You wouldn't hurt me." It's a statement, not a question, an unwavering truth that Silke knows in her heart to be real and solid. With Raoul she is, for the first time in years, undeniably safe.

"Never." It's a vow. Silke hears it in Raoul's voice, and she can't help the way her eyes slip shut as she sways forward slightly to place a lingering kiss on the stone that hangs from his neck. She pours all of her thoughts, all of her newfound knowledge and her hopes into the stone. Silke's absolutely certain that she's never made a talisman as strong as the one that Raoul's wearing at the moment.

They stand there in silence, wrapped up in each other and both reluctant to move and shatter the sense of peace that's washed over them both. Finally Silke sighs low and long and pulls away enough to look up into Raoul's face.

"Will you come home with me this time?" she asks softly.

"Is that really what you want, Silke? Are you ready for that?" Raoul watches her closely, and Silke knows what he's really asking, what will happen if she takes him back to her cottage.

"Yes." She breathes it out, sure of her decision because she wants him. She wants Raoul in her home, wants to see him in her cottage and amongst her things, wants his body back up against her own. She wants to feel him over her and in her and even under her. She wants to touch and taste and take him just like she wants to be touched and tasted and taken by him.

"There are things I need to tell you first, things you should understand. Then ... then if you still want me..." Raoul trails off, the rest of the words going unspoken, but Silke still understands.

"Alright." Silke smiles up at him softly.

Raoul stares down at her for a moment before he smiles back, the grin devastatingly wide and pleased, and then he turns and makes his way back towards the trees. Startled, Silke moves to follow him.

“Wait there a moment.” Raoul calls out to her just as he disappears around a tree. Puzzled, Silke reaches down and wraps her cloak tighter around her body to help fight off the chill and determinedly stays put.

A few minutes pass and then Raoul lopez back into the clearing, clad in the same pair of breeches he always wears, and Silke realizes that he must have stashed them somewhere nearby. Raoul doesn't slow down as he moves into the clearing. Instead he just bends down and scoops Silke into his arms without breaking stride. Seemingly unconcerned with the cold or anything else really, Raoul begins to swiftly make his way back towards her cottage.

Silke doesn't say anything. Instead she finds herself laughing breathlessly and settling deeper into his arms. She's eager to hear what he has to say, eager to understand more about him and then hopefully move on to more pleasant things.

Chapter Nine

They manage to slip into her cottage without anyone in the village being the wiser. Silke is, not for the first time, grateful that her cottage sits so close to the tree line. Raoul puts her back on her feet slowly, lets their bodies slide against each other in a way that makes Silke's breath catch and her legs go weak even as Raoul smirks at her knowingly. When she finally has control of herself, Silke hangs her cloak on a peg by the door and then settles down on the edge of her bed to watch Raoul explore her small home.

Raoul's more relaxed than Silke's ever seen him before. The intensity that he's always carried around is still there, but it's different now, less wary and more natural. His body moves with a fluid grace that's almost at odds with his size as he trails his fingertips over the different bundles of herbs and other items she has hanging from the walls.

"I was young, the first time I shifted, only eight or nine, I think." Silke is so lost in watching Raoul prowl around her home that his announcement startles her, but she's immediately intrigued. "I remember the cold and the way the wolf moon shone brightly in the sky. I was outside, I don't remember why anymore, but I do remember the moon and the wolves. There were so many of them, thin and starved from the winter, and they were on me so fast I couldn't move. Biting."

Silke can't help but gasp in horror at the thought of a small, young Raoul being so viciously attacked. She knows Raoul hears her, but he only smiles softly in her direction over his shoulder as he moves to trace the stitching in the new dress she has been painstakingly sewing out of the bolt of cloth he'd given her.

"My father came running, sword and torch in hand, and he managed to drive them off but the damage they'd done..." Raoul trails off and shakes his head, as a pained look drifts across his face. "They didn't expect me to survive the night, and I'm not entirely sure that I did. I remember realizing that I was dying and being filled with such determination to live, such desperation to survive. There was nothing but pain after that, like I was burning alive, but the next morning I was fine. My wounds were gone and I was ... different. My parents, they never looked at me the same. There was always fear in their eyes after that."

"Oh Raoul. I'm so sorry." Silke pushes herself to her feet and makes her way to Raoul's side so she can lay gentle and comforting hands on his bare shoulders. Raoul reaches up and covers them with his own for a moment before he slips away from her side and goes back to prowling the floor. Silke feels hurt well up inside of her for a brief second before she pushes it down angrily. She can tell that this story is hard for Raoul to tell. If he needs space in order to tell it then that's the least she can do for him.

"It wasn't long before I could feel it inside of me. Like something underneath my skin, trying to claw its way out. Night made it worse; the light of the moon nearly drove me mad. Then when the next full moon came I couldn't hold it in anymore. The first shift was painful, worse than the attack or the fever. I remember tearing out of our home, blind with madness and desperate for the forest as my mother screamed for me. My father followed and when he saw me, trapped between wolf and man ... well, he could not bear to let me live."

Silke felt her legs go weak, and she slowly lowered herself into a chair as she felt tears begin to sting her eyes. She knew pain and abuse, knew despair and sadness, but the thought of having one of her parent's turn on her was something she'd never considered. Her own mother and father had loved her fiercely despite what the villagers said about her.

“I ran that night, ran hard and far and never looked back. The shift was ... unreliable in the beginning. My wolf came and went, left me vulnerable and weak randomly. After months in the wild, barely surviving, I met real wolves. They were wild and untamed like the ones that attacked me, but I found that we were connected, that there was a bond between us no matter what skin I wore. They saved me, taught me to hunt and track, to use my senses and my body until I decided to move on, to explore and to meet other packs. I spent years after that learning to control the change, moving in and out of the forests and small villages. Always hiding what I am from the villagers even as I watched for any sign that there were others like myself. Eventually I found my way here. I intended to move on, to continue traveling and to spend time with another pack.” Raoul’s story is entrancing, and the nostalgia in his voice tugs at Silke’s heartstrings.

“But you did stay.” Silke can’t help but say, unsure if she’s trying to remind him or herself.

“I wasn’t going to, but then I met Oma.” Raoul’s smile turns amused and almost embarrassed. “I don’t know how she knew I was there, or how she knew what I was, but she confronted me, threatened to curse me, and showed me no fear. I didn’t know how to handle her so I ran again, fully intent on never coming back to this place.”

“Why didn’t you?” she asks softly.

“I saw you.” Silke’s stunned, but before she has a chance to question him about what he means Raoul keeps on speaking with a thoughtful look on his face. “I was leaving, going to head west and never come back, and I saw you. It was summer, years ago now, and you were by that same creek in the woods. Your hair was short, and you were crying.”

Silke is speechless because she remembers the day he’s talking about. It had been right after her fight with Emil, right after she’d cut her hair. She’d fled into the woods and cried as if her heart were breaking.

“I remember thinking that you were so beautiful, too beautiful to be crying like that.” Raoul turns and smiles at her then, and Silke’s heart stutters at the warmth she sees in his eyes, the genuine affection in his gaze. “I followed you back to Oma’s that day, shadowed you through the trees as a wolf, careful not to be seen, and that night I made sure you made it safely back to the village. I did leave for a while after that. I stayed gone for months, but I was drawn back here, back to you. For years I did the same, left only to return months later. I’d seek you out, shadow your walks through the forest, reassure myself that you were alive and well and then I’d run again.”

“Why ... why didn’t you say something? Why didn’t you approach me or tell me the truth the first time we met?” Silke cries out as she pushes herself to her feet and closes the distance between them. All she can think of is the fact that she could have had him years ago, that they could have had each other long before now.

“Would you have listened, Silke, or would you have been afraid? If I’d told you that I’d known you for years, that I’d watched you from a distance. If you’d known that I’d seen and *yearned*, would you have been accepting or afraid of me?” Raoul reaches out and wraps his hands around her shoulders firmly, his grip tight but not painful as he shakes her lightly and then abruptly pulls her close to him. “I could barely handle the fact that I was tied to a place for the first time since I was a child, since I was human. If I’d approached you and you rejected me out of fear, I would have gone mad.”

“You’re right. You’re right, Raoul. I’m sorry.” Silke presses closer to his warmth and buries her face in the smooth expanse of his chest. “I know I’m being selfish, but I can’t help it. The thought of all the years we could have had together, of all the time we could have known each other ... it hurts to know that we were both alone instead.”

“My heart stopped that night in the forest, when I realized the cat was hunting you. I didn’t mean to frighten you the way I did, but the thought of anything happening to you was more than I could bear. My fear of your death was stronger than my fear of your rejection. Then when you spoke to me ... when you told me my eyes were beautiful I was stunned and lost. Of all the ways I’d ever imagined us meeting I’d never imagined it like that. After that, I couldn’t stay away.” Raoul practically whispers the words into her ear, his breath warm and moist on the sensitive skin of her neck. “So I started bringing you things, tokens and gifts to show that I can provide for you, that I can make you happy.”

“I love them, Raoul. I loved them even when I didn’t know who they came from, when I only knew the wolf was involved and any thoughts of you two being connected were only vague suspicions.” Silke’s earnest about that. She wants him to understand just how much those gifts meant to her then and how much they still mean to her now. “I’m glad you didn’t stay away, Raoul. This is all so strange, almost unbelievable really, but above all I’m happy that we met. I know it’s been fast but I ... want you no matter what. Who you were, what you are, none of that matters to me. You’ve shown me so much kindness, Raoul ...” She trails off, not sure how to make him understand just what his actions have meant to her.

“You truly mean that, don’t you? You would have me, knowing what I am, how I became something less than human?” Raoul sounds almost vulnerable, and Silke can’t help but reach up and cup his face in her palm.

“Not less than human, Raoul, never less. You’re more than human, more than anyone I’ve ever met.” Silke goes up on her toes so that she can look him in the eye and when she speaks her voice is low and soft. “I think ... I think I would want you no matter what you are, no matter what form you could take.”

This time it’s Silke who kisses Raoul, presses their mouths together as she grips his shoulders tightly to keep her balance. Raoul hesitates for only a second before he groans low in his throat and takes control of the kiss. He turns it deep and slightly rough. His tongue licks its way into her mouth as his hands come up to palm the dip in her waist. Silke meets him move for move for a moment, and then she breaks it off suddenly.

They’re both panting and staring into each other’s eyes in the warm silence of the cottage. Silke studies Raoul for a moment and then wordlessly she turns, gathers her hair up in her hands and pulls it over her shoulder to expose the ties of her dress. She hears Raoul suck in a harsh breath, and she can feel her own heart beating wildly out of control, but she doesn’t move, doesn’t take back her silent offer. After a few seconds she lets her eyes slip closed when she feels Raoul’s hands begin to work the strings, loosening the ties so that her dress begins to sag on her shoulders.

Silke takes a deep breath and forces herself to stay still, to not raise her arms in order to try to preserve her modesty. Instead she lets the dress go loose and when Raoul’s hands come up to cup her shoulders and slowly nudge the fabric down she lets him. It slides slowly down her arms, catches briefly on the points of her nipples and then falls to pool around her ankles. Raoul’s on her before she can blink, the muscled length of him pressed up against her back as his hands slide across her hips and up her stomach to cup her breasts in his palms.

His thumbs tease her nipples until they’re drawn up into tight buds and her breasts feel swollen and full. Silke moans, a low breathy sound, and relaxes back into Raoul’s hold. Raoul plays a string of soft, hot kisses across the wing of her shoulder and up the side of her neck until he can bury his face in her hair and inhale deeply.

“You smell so enticing, so rich and full. It makes me want to taste you.” Raoul’s voice is deep

and raspy, barely above a growl, and when he leans back down to nip at the side of her neck Silke can tell that his teeth are sharper than normal. Still she isn't frightened; she trusts Raoul despite everything that says she shouldn't, and so the feel of his teeth and his mouth on her skin only makes her blood run hotter.

Raoul's hands trail back down across her stomach and follow the lines of her body as he palms her hips again and pulls her back against him. She can feel him pressing against her ass; the thick line of his cock is hot and heavy against her even through the barrier of his breeches. She can't help but press back against him, and she finds that she enjoys the choked off growl that earns her so she does it again.

The hands on her hips tighten, and Raoul lets out a huff of air against the sensitive skin of her throat. Silke has to repress a whimper when he lets her go and pulls away. Still before she can really protest his hands are on her shoulders and guiding her to step out of the circle of her dress and to turn and face him. Legs weak and heart pounding she does, only to feel her breath catch when she looks up at him and sees the way his eyes have gone red, shining the bright crimson of the wolf, and his teeth long and sharp.

"Your eyes ..." Silke breathes out and then immediately regrets it when Raoul's expression shudders and he goes to draw back and away from her. She reaches out and grabs his chin, forces him to look at her, even as her other hand wraps around his wrist and brings his hand up to rest on her breast again. "They're beautiful, just like I told you before."

Raoul smiles at her then, a small private expression that floods her with a gentle sort of warmth as the hand on her breast slides its way up to cup the back of her neck. He leans down and places a soft kiss directly beneath each one of her eyes before he captures her mouth again in a kiss that leaves her breathless.

"They are nothing next to yours," he says in a husky whisper before he once again sweeps her into his arms in a single, effortless move. Raoul makes his way to the bed in the corner of the room and lays her gently on top of the quilt, and then he steps back. Their eyes meet and hold as his hands move down to tug at his laces, pulling the leather loose and then pushing his breeches down thickly muscled thighs before he steps out of them. He stands beside the bed for a moment, completely bare and open for her eyes.

His cock is long and thick, so hard it's curving up towards his stomach, and Silke feels a brief flare of panic before she tamps it down. She knows that Raoul will not hurt her, not in the ways she's heard some of the village girls whisper about, not in the ways she's had to make poultices and tonics for. He's huge and beautiful, all rippling muscles and tanned skin, and more importantly he's hers just as she belongs to him.

She refuses to be frightened of this side of him either, not when there is so much pleasure to be had for the both of them.

Her legs shift open on their own accord, a brazen invitation that he's quick to take her up on. He moves to the bed quickly and when he's hovering over her she welcomes him into the cradle of her thighs with soft hands and heated kisses. She squirms beneath him when he finally settles on top of her and takes her mouth in another kiss, unable to stay still when he's flooding her with such heat. His mouth leaves hers after a few moments and traces fire through her veins as it works its way down her throat, fangs scraping her delicate flesh and seducing shivers from her form.

He works his way down her body, nipping, kissing and sucking as he goes, wringing whimpers and moans from her throat. Without preamble his lips wrapped themselves around her rosy-tipped breast, sucking the nipple deep inside and lashing it with his tongue. His teeth work her flesh, careful

of his fangs but set on teasing her.

Silke's panting when he finally abandons her breasts and sets his mouth to attacking her stomach. Raoul's hands move up to cup her breasts again as his fingers torture already sensitive nipples into even more painful points. She mewls as he maps the contours of her stomach with his tongue as he moves slowly downward, ever closer to the juncture of her thighs. Finally he's hovering over her, his breath hot and moist on her core, and Silke can't help but twitch, can't help but push her hips up into the air.

Raoul must take it as permission because he's on her in the next second, his tongue flickering out and flittering with her button for a split second before it plunges itself deep into the very heart of her. Silke's hands clench in the quilt beneath her and her back bows up off of the mattress, but Raoul gives her no time to adjust. He assaults her with lips and teeth and tongue, and then his hands leave her breasts to join in the fray. Within seconds she's moaning and writhing, hips bucking up off of the mattress so hard Raoul places a hand upon her stomach to keep her still.

The fingers of his other hand dip inside and begin to stretch her as his mouth moves to suck what Silke knows will be a dark mark into the soft skin of her thigh. Silke's overwhelmed with pleasure because Raoul's finally touching her, filling her like he had in her dreams, in the darker parts of her imagination. Still it's not enough. Silke wants all of him, wants to feel his cock deep inside of her, filling her and touching her in ways that no one else ever has or ever will if she has her way about it. She wants that connection to him, wants it almost more than she wants her next breath.

"Raoul!" Silke whimpers, mind gone hazy with helpless need and sharp desire as she reaches out for him in desperation.

Raoul growls low and long as he makes his way back up her body to capture her lips for another deep kiss. Silke can feel Raoul pressing against her, the smooth head of his cock sliding against her opening teasingly in a way that makes her ache inside. She can see the same impatience in Raoul's face as he reaches down and slowly positions himself at her entrance before he stops and asks her a silent question with his eyes.

Silke smiles, nods ever so slightly and that's the only encouragement that Raoul needs. He kisses her again and then finally begins to move. The first thrust is exquisite; the pain that she feels as he breaks through her barrier gives her a sense of biting pleasure because she's given him a part of her that no one can take from them.

Their lips part, and his mouth takes residence by her ear as he begins to whisper to her, each word punctuated by a deep thrust of his hips, the movements threatening to steal her breath away.

"You're mine, Silke, mine for now and for always. I'll tie us together in so many ways we'll lose sight of where you end and I begin," Raoul rasps. The slick sound of their mating underlines his words as his hips work his cock deeper and deeper inside of her, the strokes sending pleasure washing over her on every other breath.

"Raoul!" Her moan is want and lust given form. She wants the connection he's talking about, wants to feel it every day for the rest of her life.

Raoul rides her hard, and Silke revels in the feel of him possessing her body, in the way his thrusts become more forceful when she digs her nails into his shoulders and the gentle way his fingertips trail over her face. Silke manages to wrap her legs around Raoul's waist, and they both moan as it changes the angles of his thrusts.

She bucks her hips up against Raoul's, and the move drives his cock deeper inside of her than before, leaving a sharp flare of heat in its wake. She does it over and over, panting and desperate to find that feeling again and again as it drives her closer and closer to the peak. She can feel the

pleasure building inside of her, the hot sweet ache of it nipping at her spine and twisting in her belly.

When it happens it's all at once, a tidal wave of sensation. Her legs tighten around Raoul's waist and her body bows up off of the bed in a harsh arch. Silke moans long and low and claws at Raoul's shoulders as pleasure whites out her vision. Vaguely she can feel the way that Raoul's movements have gone jerky and frenzied, and she knows that he's fallen over the edge with her.

When she comes back to herself, Silke finds that her hands are stroking over the damp skin of Raoul's back absently. He's laid out on top of her and while he's heavy it's not unpleasant, to Silke's surprise. She likes having him on top of her, likes being able to feel his heat and the hard lines of his body pressed against her own. She likes the way he surrounds her on all sides, makes her feel safe and protected. When he finally lifts his face up and she can look him in the eyes again, she doesn't even try to stop the sleepy smile that curls her mouth up at the corners.

Still she can't suppress the slight wince that breaks across her face when he leans down and kisses her sweetly again before he slowly pulls out and away from her. She shifts to sit up, but his hands are on her shoulders to stop her even as the low, dull ache of pain in between her thighs finally registers.

"Shh, lovely, there's no need to move. Let me take care of you, Silke." Raoul smiles down at her from where he's standing beside the bed. Silke only hesitates for a second before she relaxes back against the quilt. She watches, a quiet sort of contentment humming in her mind, as Raoul moves to the corner of the cottage and cleans himself quickly with the water that's warming by the fire. Then he gathers a cloth and a small bowl that he fills with water and moves back towards her.

He perches on the edge of the bed, wets the cloth, and gently cleans the light smears of blood and seed from her body. Unexpectedly Silke feels the sting of tears begin to prickle at the corners of her eyes, but she pushes them down and takes a shaky breath. When Raoul looks back up at her, concern clear on his face, she smiles and shakes her head at him.

She's happy. Happy in a way she almost can't explain.

When he's satisfied that she's clean, Raoul sets the bowl and cloth aside and then crawls his way up to lie beside her on the bed. He reaches out and pulls her closer to him until she's sprawled across his chest. He runs long fingers through her hair while his free hand slips beneath his own head.

"Our scents are mixed now." Raoul's voice is a satisfied rumble in Silke's ear from where her head is resting on his chest.

"Oh?" She's genuinely interested given how important her scent had seemed to him before.

"Hm, yes. In time there will be no way to tell them apart. It helps to soothe the other ... urges I might have." The way he hesitates automatically catches Silke's attention.

"Urges? Is there something you need, Raoul?" She wants there to be equality in this thing between them, a give and take where they both have what they want and what they need from each other.

"Everything in me screams to mate you, Silke, to take you over and over until you are heavy with child, to sink my teeth into your throat until you become what I am. I won't take those choices from you, not ever. Mingling our scents, having that kind of claim on you, it helps to quiet those thoughts." Raoul sighs out, and Silke shifts until she can look up at him, her chin pillowed on his chest.

"Our children would be different, Raoul, whether or not I was able to be changed as you are. Either from you or from me or even from both of us they would be different. I can't raise them here, not with these people. Not after what they've done to me. I'd kill them if they tried to harm any child

of ours,” Silke says with conviction.

“I’d expect no less from you, Silke, and I’d do the same.” Raoul hesitates for a moment, and his next words are deliberately casual. “The place I call home is nothing special, but I’ve gathered more than enough in the way of gold and items over the years to provide for you. We could leave here, go somewhere else and make a home of our own.”

Silke feels her breath catch in her throat, and she automatically starts to dismiss the idea before she stops herself. She’s clung to her home in the village, to the cottage that her parents lived in, for so long. It’s been a safe haven and a source of comfort in between the time she gets to spend with Oma. Normally she’d never consider leaving it, but now that she has Raoul the idea doesn’t hurt as much.

“I would miss Oma. She’s been the only thing I’ve had for years now. She would not be willing to leave her cottage, and I don’t want to abandon her now,” Silke replies quietly.

“I wouldn’t ask you to. Anywhere we go would be no more than a few days travel, less if you’re willing to ride. I would be more than happy to take you to see her whenever you want.” Raoul’s hand splays out and he cups the back of her head gently. “Whatever you want, Silke, you only have to ask and I’ll find a way to make it yours.”

“Then I would go anywhere with you, Raoul.” Silke breaks eye contact with Raoul and tilts her head so she can once again hear the strong, steady rhythm of his heart beneath her ear. It sends waves of peace washing over her senses, and she feels her eyes begin to grow heavy. “There is nothing else holding me here, not anymore.”

Raoul’s other hand comes down and grasps hers lightly so that he can raise it up and press a soft kiss to the center of her palm.

“Tomorrow we’ll talk of where to go. There’s no need to hurry the decision. Sleep, Silke, I’ll watch over you,” Raoul whispers to her softly.

It’s only morning, and she knows there are a hundred other things she should be doing but at that moment she doesn’t care. Silke, content and comfortable, slips back into sleep effortlessly.

Chapter Ten

When Silke wakes up, she can tell that it's later than she normally sleeps. The sun is shining through the fabric she's hung over the cottage's single window and in the distance she can hear the sounds of life in the village. Yawning she stretches her arms up above her head only to yelp when she realizes that she's completely naked. Startled her eyes fly open and she sits up, confusion whirling in her mind only to calm when she sees Raoul and the memories from before come back to her.

"I was beginning to wonder if you would ever wake up. Morning's long past by now." Raoul chuckles from where he's sitting at her table, her dagger and a whetstone in hand. Silke blushes fiercely, and Raoul's chuckle turns into an outright laugh as he puts down his work and walks over to the bed. He bends down and kisses her sweetly before he buries his face in the base of her throat. Silke revels in the warmth that the action sends racing through her.

"You are beautiful even when you sleep. I wanted to wake you like this, with my mouth and my hands, but I didn't want to hurt you," Raoul murmurs against her skin. Silke knows he's right. Even now she can feel the light ache between her thighs and while she's sure Raoul would have been able to make her forget it she's still beyond pleased at how attentive and considerate he is with her needs. "There will be plenty of mornings for us now." She presses a kiss against his temple as her hands come up to run across the width of his shoulders. "You'll have many more opportunities to wake me as you see fit. And so will I for that matter."

"Those are mornings I look forward to then." Raoul lifts his head to grin down at her, and Silke can just see the tint of red in his gaze. There's a barely banked passion in his eyes that she knows will run wild through her when he finally lets it loose. Raoul has been gentle with her, far more so than she expected him to be. Silke is almost sure that it goes against some part of him; against the wildness she'd seen when they'd first met and that she continues to see at odd moments.

One day when she's ready Silke knows that she'll provoke that wildness out of him, will bring it to the surface and let it wash over her. She wants all of Raoul, all of his pieces and parts, all of his instincts and forms. She wants all of him that she can have and in return she's ready to give him the same.

She opens her mouth to tell him that, to tell him that one day she'll be ready for the things he still hasn't told her about but they both know exist, when he suddenly goes rigid against her.

"Someone's outside." Raoul growls lowly, and Silke stares at him in surprise when he quickly scents the air. "The scent is male, young, and full of anger."

Silke has a moment to feel horror rush through her as realization hits her square in the chest. "Emil." She breathes the name out and scrambles to get off of the bed. Raoul's attention is immediately on her, and she's slightly startled by the dark look on his face.

"Who is he?" Raoul's voice is low and deep and filled with a sort of anger that Silke has only heard from him once before.

"He's the village huntsman, he ... he is not fond of me and is often cruel though he rarely does actual harm." Silke hurries to say as she reaches for her dress that Raoul had apparently folded and placed on the edge of the table just as a loud knock on the door fills the cottage. It's the only way Silke can think to phrase the unique way Emil acts around her.

"He should be taught some respect." Raoul growls angrily as he stalks forward and pushes her hands out of the way to quickly pull the laces of her dress tighter. Silke remembers how angry he'd been

when she'd first told him of the fear and cruelty that the villagers aim towards her. "It doesn't matter, Raoul, not anymore. We'll decide where to go, pack my things and then we'll never have to worry about this village or these people ever again. Emil included. So please just let me handle him. I want no more trouble than necessary," Silke reminds him softly as she hands him his breeches. The more she thinks about the idea the more she likes it. While she's sure that she'll always miss the cottage and the forest, if she's with Raoul none of that matters. They'll find a home where they can be at peace and most of all where they can be together.

Raoul gives her a sour look as he pulls the tight material up over his hips and tightens the laces before he sighs deeply. "I can already tell who shall have the real power in our life together," he says with a slight smile.

Another loud rap on the door interrupts anything else they might have said. Silke feels anxiety begin to curl in her stomach before she forcefully reminds herself that she's no longer alone. She breathes deeply, runs her hands down the front of her skirts and moves towards the door. When she pulls it open a bit and looks out, Emil's fist is already raised to fall again and Silke can clearly see the annoyance on his face.

"What took you so long, witch ..." Emil's normal insult trails off, and Silke is surprised at the way his annoyance is quickly replaced by a level of rage that she doesn't understand.

"Who?" Emil snarls and Silke is so stunned that she can only stare at him in confusion. Emil doesn't stay idle for long. His hand shoots out and grips her tightly by the chin to tilt her head to the side and expose the mark that Silke had forgotten about. "You've lain with someone. Who?" he demands in a harsh voice.

Before Silke can say or do anything, a low snarl rips through the air and the door is snatched out of her grasp and flung wide. She can feel Raoul's heat against her back and can feel his anger like something living as he steps forward and wraps a clawed hand around Emil's wrist. There's a brief pause, and then Raoul's grip tightens. Silke hears the bones in Emil's wrist crack even before Emil screams.

"Touch her again and I will kill you." Raoul snarls as he flings Emil's wounded appendage away from him with enough force to send the huntsman sprawling. Emil's face is pale, and he's clutching his arm to his chest, but there's more than pain in his face. There's also fear. When Silke looks back and up at Raoul, she sees why. Raoul's eyes are a bright, burning crimson and when he snarls his teeth are more like fangs. If she didn't trust Raoul so completely, Silke knows that she'd be terrified at the sight of him as well.

"Demon." Emil's frightened whisper brings Silke's attention back to him. "You've brought a demon into the village, taken it into your bed."

"Emil ..." Silke reaches out a hand to him, goes to step forward, but Raoul's arm around her waist and the way Emil immediately scuttles backwards stops her cold.

"Stay away from me! I should have known!" Emil shouts at her as he finally manages to get to his feet and stumbles off towards the center of the village. Emil's words don't make much sense to Silke, but she doesn't allow herself to linger on them, not when Raoul is drawing her back inside the cottage with gentle hands.

"Silke, we have to go ... we have to go now!" Raoul's voice is urgent and it manages to knock Silke out of the trance she'd fallen into. She knows he's right, knows that Emil will tell the villagers just what he thinks Silke has done. She knows that they'll come for her and for Raoul and that they need to leave as quickly as possible.

Mind racing, Silke pulls away from Raoul and begins to gather things to take with them. She

points Raoul towards a small sack in the corner and he needs no other encouragement to begin gathering some of the food that Silke has managed to store in the cottage. He might not need it, but she will and neither of them knows how long it'll be before they'll be able to safely stop so he can hunt.

She grabs her extra dress, pulls the laces as loose as they'll go and slips it on over the one she's already wearing before she hurries to pull on her boots. She straps her dagger to her waist and her herb chest onto her back before she snatches her cloak from the peg by the door and swirls it around her shoulders. The feel of the protection runes that are woven into the fabric helps to calm her, and she moves with purpose after that.

"They're here!" She hears Raoul snarl from the corner where he's tying the sack closed. She turns to go towards him only to scream when the window behind her shatters as a rock goes through the glass. Silke hurries to move closer to Raoul because she can hear them, the low angry murmurs and shouts of the villagers who've gathered outside her home.

"What are we going to do, Raoul? They won't just let us go!" Silke's more terrified than she's ever been, even more so than when the cat had chased her through the forest. At least the cat had not hated her; at least her death would have been quick underneath its claws. The same could not be said for the villagers.

Just then there's a rattle and a thump on the roof and smoke begins to pour into the cottage. Another crash sounds when a heavy boot forces the door open and a torch flies through the now open portal to land on Silke's bed, where it immediately catches the quilt on fire. Silke can only stare in horror.

"Do you trust me?" Raoul asks her as he grabs her by the shoulders and turns her around to face him. "Silke, do you trust me?"

"Always, Raoul." Silke's sure of that fact even as a cough racks her frame from the fire that's quickly beginning to eat at the cottage.

"Then if they won't stand aside, we'll go through them. Stand back." The way Raoul's eyes are shining an even brighter crimson and his speech is slurred from his fangs has Silke backing away quickly, her heart pounding in her chest.

For the first time Silke gets to see the shift in person. Raoul doesn't bother with getting undressed. He just drops to his knees on the cottage floor. Silke sees it when it starts, the way something seems to ripple beneath Raoul's skin like it's bursting to get out. His breeches are shredded in seconds, the tattered remains littering the floor around him. Short dark hairs begin to sprout up from the ridge of Raoul's spine, and she watches in fascination as his bones shift beneath his skin.

With an almost sickening crunch the shift is completed, and in Raoul's place stands the wolf.

Raoul stands, shakes once and then moves to Silke's side. Silke knows what he wants, and with another ragged cough she grabs the sack Raoul had dropped and, ignoring the slight ache in her body, hitches up her skirts and climbs onto his back. Once she's settled she places the sack in front of her, pulls up her hood, and leans forward to wrap her hands in the thick fur of Raoul's neck.

"Oma, Raoul. We have to warn her," she whispers in his ear as he paces across the floor until they have a clear line out the front door.

Raoul snorts and nods, and she knows that he understands her. Silke tightens her grip as between her thighs Raoul gathers himself for a long moment and then leaps. They fly over the doorway, and Silke has a moment to take in the sight of almost the entire village gathered around her rapidly burning cottage before they see Raoul and the screaming begins.

Then, almost as if time stops for a second, Silke sees Emil. The huntsman is standing off to the

side, broken arm clutched close to his chest, his eyes wide and his face pale as he takes in the sight of her astride a giant wolf. Silke knows in that instant that Emil knows the truth, that he's put the pieces together and has figured out just what Raoul is. She wonders almost absently if she should tell Raoul to kill him because she's sure that this will not be the end, that somehow in some way Emil will haunt them.

Raoul doesn't pause, doesn't slow in the slightest, instead he barrels through the crowd and towards the tree line. Silke forces herself to turn her eyes towards the trees and to not look back. Instead she molds herself to Raoul's back and pushes all thoughts of Emil aside.

He's made his choices, and she has made hers.

Raoul is swift and strong, and they cover the ground between the cottage and the woods quickly and once they're in the forest he's even faster. The giant wolf weaves in and out of the trees, hurtles over the underbrush and around rocks. It isn't long before the smell of smoke and the sound of the villagers' cries fade in the distance.

Still Raoul does not slow.

They cover the distance between the village and Oma's cottage in a fraction of the time it normally takes, and Silke stumbles slightly when she drops the sack to the ground and slides off of Raoul's wide back. Raoul stays a wolf and prowls the clearing in front of Oma's cottage, ears up and sense alert even though they both know no one from the village could have followed them so quickly. Silke rushes to Oma's door and feels her heart stutter and her stomach clench when she finds it locked.

"Oma!" She screams as she pounds the flat of her hand on the wood. "Oma, please!"

"Hush, child, I'm here!" Oma's raspy voice calls to the left, and Silke whirls around only to gape in surprise. Oma's dressed for travel, a thick shawl spread across her thin shoulders and her gray hair covered by a kerchief. More surprising is the fact that the pony she's had for years stands behind her calmly, attached to a wagon that's packed to the brim.

"Oma? You're leaving?" Silke asks, confused, and Oma laughs harsh and low.

"I told you years ago that you'd leave this place one day, child. I just never thought I'd be alive to see the day! Since I am I can hardly let you leave without me." A sharp grin creases Oma's old face, and Silke feels tears well up in her eyes again. "Now come on! There'll be plenty of time for tears and introducing me to that stray you've managed to tame. We need to put as much distance between us and those foolish people as possible."

Silke moves forward and helps Oma climb the step to settle into the seat of the wagon and then she hands her the sack of food from her cottage as well. Raoul moves to her side, rubs his large head against her shoulder gently and then motions towards his back with a short jerk of his snout.

"Listen to that man of yours, girl! It wouldn't do to have an old woman outpace the two of you," Oma calls as she slaps the reins and sets her pony to moving down the path.

Silke can't help herself, can't keep it contained any longer. Her laughter rings out loud and long in the clearing as she climbs back onto Raoul's back.

She's leaving the only home she's ever known, the cottage that she'd been born in was probably a pile of smoldering ash by now, but she didn't care. She had Raoul, and she had Oma. They were alive and whole and leaving together. They'd find a home, a place where they could put down roots. Oma could continue to teach her, and one day she would give Raoul many strong sons and daughters.

So she was leaving the only home she'd ever known, but her family was going with her, and to Silke that was all that mattered anymore.

Epilogue

Ten Years Later

Silke lets her mind wander as her hands continue to move, placing stitches in cloth without a thought, thanks to years of practice.

The years since their flight from the village have not always been easy. They had escaped the villagers' wrath that day, had escaped the huntsman who would have seen them all dead. But Emil's story had spread, had followed them out of the village and into the surrounding towns. At first they, herself, Oma, and Raoul, had been forced to constantly move to stay one step ahead of Emil's tale and the suspicious looks and trouble that followed it.

Then, slowly, a few months later, things had changed.

The stories had begun to change, the tale warping until fact became fiction and truth became the beginning of legend. Now, a decade later, she and Raoul could move around unhindered, had managed to build a life together. Together they had built a new, beautiful cottage to call home deep in a forest that reminded them both of her home. Silke does as Oma, peacefully in her grave for a handful of years now and still sorely missed, had in their original village. She sells her potions and tonics to the local people, who are shockingly welcoming and eager to have anyone with knowledge of the healing arts near their homes.

For the first time in her life, Silke has those she would call friends. The local village women flock to her for aid in times of childbirth or fever, for gossip and recipes, and most often of all simply for the pleasure of her company.

Raoul has found a place among the village men, has impressed them with his strength and his hunting abilities. A fact that always makes Silke and Raoul smile secretively at each other as they both know the secret of his success.

They are safe, healthy, and most of all blissfully happy.

Sometimes, in the quiet moments of the early afternoon when she is alone with only the birdsong to keep her company, Silke can hardly believe that this is all real.

"You grow more beautiful every time I return home." Raoul's voice drawls from the open doorway of their cottage, and the sound of it shakes Silke out of her thoughts.

"You've been gone for barely half the morning!" Silke laughs, but she can feel the pleased blush slowly taking over her cheeks. Even after all of their years together, Raoul still makes her feel as he did when they first met, flushed and giddy, a slow curl of desire for him constantly twisting through her.

"And yet, somehow, you are more beautiful now than when I left. I had thought that impossible, but I see you have proven me wrong, as you so often do." Raoul grins at her, eyes shining crimson the way they normally do when he is in the safety of their home, with no one around to hide their true nature from.

She smiles softly, puts her stitching down on the table beside her, and pushes herself out of her chair and to her feet, one hand pressed against the rounded curve of her stomach. Raoul's large, warm hands are quick to help her, to wrap around her elbow and steady her as she gains her feet.

"And you, husband, are as handsome and charming as ever but not half as sly as you think. You have brought our sons home filthy yet again and if they track that mud and muck into my house, I'll show you that the daughter I carry has not slowed me down in the slightest." Silke grins up at Raoul

as he throws his head back and laughs, and she hears the sound of giggling from just past the doorway. She knows their sons stand outside together, covered in the mud and dirt she can smell from where she is after another day spent learning their heritage in the forest with Raoul.

“I hope our daughter is as fiery and fierce as her mother. Nothing would please me more than to have another beautiful she-wolf to bow to in devotion.” Raoul leans down and kisses her softly, a sweet brush of lips and a sharp nip of teeth.

“She will be as stubborn and wild as her father and brothers before her instead,” Silke says as she wraps her arms around Raoul’s neck and leans all of her weight on him, confident that he’ll support her as he always does. “Either way she will be magnificent, just as our sons are.”

Raoul wraps his arms around her waist and pulls her close to him in response. Then he leans down and buries his face in her neck. Silke can feel him taking in her scent the same way she cannot help but do when he is close to her, the instinctive urge to wrap herself up in his presence.

“Now come with me, wife, our sons want you to run with us,” Raoul says as he pulls away from her, a large and slightly wild grin spreading across his face.

“Then I would hate to disappoint them, or you, love.” Silke chuckles, low and deep and slightly rough as she feels her wolf begin to rise to the surface, and she knows that her own eyes are shining red now to match her mate’s eyes.

She is as wild as Raoul now, able to change into a wolf as large and as fierce as Raoul thanks to an accidental bite years before in the heat of passion. Together with their children they race through the trees of the deep forest that is their home, laughter and joyful howls filling the night air. Together they are a new breed of animal, a new type of existence.

Silke has never been happier.

The End

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