



Moonlight's Silver

**Rayne
Auster**

DARKNESS enveloped him as he ran, weaving through the city's dark alleys, graffiti mocking him at every turn. The scent of fear tickled his senses, both cloyingly sweet and repulsive, taunting him with the fact that it was his own. The predator within him fought his mind, desperately struggling to be free, wishing to glory in the chase, yearning to turn and hunt instead of flee. His wolf longed for violence and power, urging him to stand his ground and attack, but Ankerite fought him, knowing it was futile. Despite the fact that a full moon illuminated the city before him, the wolf within him could never be free, and so Ankerite continued to run, ignoring the beast, the hunger, and the yearning for blood.

Dejection coursed through him with the realization that he was being hunted yet again. He'd thought he was finally safe, working in a small bookshop in an area that could marginally be qualified as the wrong side of town. He'd remained unnoticed for three years, and those three years had made him complacent. Now disbelief and denial waged war with the reality he suddenly faced once again. He was a half-breed, to be hunted and killed simply because he belonged to neither the world of humans nor that of werewolves.

His breath rasped through a ragged throat, the pain a mere inconvenience when faced with the very real possibility of death, and the pounding of his blood beat a primal rhythm in his temples. *Run, run, faster, flee, survive, live,*

hunt, turn, attack, kill. He shook his head, trying to rid himself of the beast raging within him, but the battle was lost before it had even begun. The sharp, tangy smell of his own fear washed over him, tearing a misshapen howl from his throat, the sound weak as it passed through human vocal cords.

Realizing that the sound betrayed him to his pursuer, Ankerite took another turn, desperately hoping to lose the wolf hunting him, only to despair when confronted with the ruins of an old factory. He no longer had anywhere to hide. The large open space covered in rubble served only to hinder his efforts to escape. But the sound of pursuit urged him on, driving Ankerite into the ruins, only one thought remaining in his mind: *run*.

Dark shadows danced across the concrete, emphasizing the desolation. Shapes blurred, merging into a kaleidoscope of information and misinformation, his panicked mind no longer able to distinguish safety from danger. A moment of distraction drove him into a sharp, jagged pipe sticking all too innocently from the wreckage surrounding him. He yelped, pain coursing through him, greedily invading his senses and causing him to tumble to the ground. The metallic scent of fresh blood rose up into the night air, drawing a howl of victory as his predator rounded the corner and spotted him wounded and helpless.

A sliver of moonlight peering from behind the clouds reflected off amber eyes glowing with power as wild and ancient as the earth itself. The russet wolf hunting him paused but a moment, the expression in his eyes seeming to taunt Ankerite with the knowledge that he was helpless

against the predator before him.

Ankerite tensed, meeting his hunter's gaze. He watched in horrified fascination as the wolf prepared to leap. Despite the danger, he couldn't help but admire the wolf's muscles gracefully shifting beneath his skin; every shift was silent art in motion. Bile rose in his throat, filling his mouth with the bitter taste of defeat, drowning the wolf still fighting to break free of the boundaries of his human mind. Unable to flee, the urge to fight drained away, leaving a hollow sense of bitter acceptance of what he was powerless to change. Ankerite clenched his eyes closed just as the wolf leapt into motion, waiting for the pain that would accompany sharp teeth mercilessly tearing him apart.

He registered his hunter's loud, vicious snarl moments before it was interrupted by the sound of teeth tearing through flesh. Tension danced along Ankerite's skin, the sharp pain in his hip ebbing and flowing, seeming to synchronize with the sound of heavy panting. He felt no new source of pain, no hot breath upon his skin, and no sharp teeth tearing into him. He pried open deep blue eyes that contained the same wild glow as those of the wolf hunting him and swallowed a gasp of surprise. Before him a battle raged, a lethal clash of wills fighting for power and dominion. A second wolf had joined the first, moonlight dancing gracefully over his silver coat as he clashed with the amber-eyed wolf in a wild dance of flesh, teeth, and blood.

The sight held Ankerite captive, all thoughts of flight gone as he watched the silver wolf slowly but surely gain ground on the russet one, nipping at his flank before gracefully moving away, only to repeat the process. The

moonlight faded for a moment, slipping behind a cloud, forming dark silhouettes. The two wolves before him continued to fight, intent only upon each other. When the moon once again showed her face, the fight was over. The silver wolf stood over the russet one, teeth at his throat.

Ankerite blinked when the russet wolf began to shimmer, the lines that defined the wolf blurring and losing distinction. For a moment he was convinced his sight was fooling his senses. Shaking his head, Ankerite stared, surprised by the man lying defeated on the ground. Although he knew all about werewolves, this was the first time he'd witnessed a transformation, seeing as he was usually running before given the chance to actually witness the sight. Even though the silver wolf's teeth remained at the man's throat, Ankerite could see that the russet werewolf was still trying to challenge the wolf who held him captive, eyes filled with defiance almost as if he were daring the other to kill him.

The silver wolf released a growl, a warning clear in his tone, before also shifting into human form, hand at the defeated werewolf's throat, knee strategically shoved into his gut.

"Cole. I warned you I'd kill you the next time you entered my territory unannounced." The warm, rich voice sent pleasant shivers down Ankerite's spine even though it was filled with deadly intent and determination. Surprised by his own reaction, Ankerite took in that werewolf's form, noticing his broad shoulders, lean, toned muscles, and the fact that he was decidedly naked. The werewolf had pale blond hair that reflected the moonlight, revealing the same

silver undertones as his wolf's coat.

"I'm hunting."

He could hear the rebellion in Cole's tone, the defeated werewolf obviously displeased with the current situation. Ankerite didn't really understand what was going on, but he sensed animosity between the two werewolves, and by the looks of things, Cole wasn't taking the fact that his hunt had been interrupted very well. Ankerite absently wondered why the silver werewolf seemed to be helping him; he was unwilling to trust in anyone's good intentions. He tensed when that man turned to look at him, and his own wolf shuddered in recognition, the feeling sending confusion through him. The light of the moon danced within green eyes that seemed to pierce his very soul, seeking out all his secrets. It almost felt as if Ankerite knew him.

A shiver coursed through Ankerite; the look he was receiving made him feel naked and exposed. Hunger coiled in his belly, curling and twisting in the building tension, his wolf waking once again to fight for control over his mind. Heat sparked over his skin, bringing with it pain and longing in reaction to the sexuality he could almost taste. Seemingly unaffected, the silver werewolf turned away, dismissing Ankerite more thoroughly than any verbal rejection could have and causing the wolf within Ankerite to fight and tear at his mind in indignation.

"I can see that," the silver werewolf replied, his tone uncaring. "Yet the fact remains: you're in my territory unannounced, and I am perfectly within my rights to kill you here and now."

“Is this how far you have fallen, Linden?” Cole retorted, his eyes flashing in anger. “You’d kill me because I didn’t give up my right to my prey when it ran into your territory? Surely not even you can deny a wolf his right to a free hunt.” Cole’s tone blatantly taunted Linden, but Linden remained unaffected, simply glaring down at the werewolf who had invaded his territory without permission. Ankerite admired Linden’s control, wishing he could face his enemies as calmly as Linden seemed to face his.

“You’re in my territory,” Linden repeated. Ankerite’s breath stilled, trapped in the back of his throat, his attention now riveted to the scene playing out before him. Linden’s tone had softened, yet for some strange reason, it seemed even more deadly than before.

“Because my prey ran into it,” Cole snarled, oblivious to the warning signals Ankerite could see. “I have a right to chase my prey until I catch it.”

“Not in my territory, you don’t.” Linden growled, leaning in closer, his human teeth aiming for Cole’s throat with clear deadly intent. Ankerite found himself echoing the movement, unable to tear himself away. If not for the sickly scent of threat in the air, Ankerite was convinced the situation would almost appear sexual: two naked men on the ground, the one on top leaning in for a taste of the other’s skin. The very thought drove his wolf to rage with a vengeance, slamming against the fragile barriers of his mind. Pain blossomed in his temple, tearing a whimper from his throat before he could stop it. Green eyes flickered toward him and the sound, staring at him for a mere moment before turning back toward the task at hand.

“What’s in my territory belongs to me.”

“I found it first, in my territory,” Cole snarled in return. “By werewolf code it belongs to me.”

“*He*,” Linden placed particular emphasis on the pronoun, “is in *my* territory now.”

Ankerite’s skin prickled with premonition when Linden’s tone softened even further, now coming across as mild and almost cordial. A ghost of a memory flickered through his mind, taking Ankerite back to his childhood and another seemingly mild-mannered man. Sam had officially been hired to be his bodyguard. Unofficially he was supposed to make sure Ankerite remained hidden in his family home lest someone find out that he was not normal. What his parents hadn’t counted on was friendship. Feeling sorry for Ankerite, Sam had taken to sneaking him out, giving him a taste of freedom. It was on one such outing that they encountered a group of muggers. To this day Ankerite could still recall the soft note in Sam’s voice that preceded the destruction that followed. Needless to say, those particular muggers never bothered anyone again.

“*He*,” Cole echoed Linden’s emphasis, pulling Ankerite back into the present, “is a trespasser. He’s been hiding on my territory without making himself known and should die for his insolence. You know our laws. Or would you rather break them to protect someone who blatantly disregards them?”

Chills coursed through Ankerite at the words. The sheer venom in Cole’s tone spurred him into motion, reminding him that he was supposed to be escaping, not staring like an

enthralled child. The moment he moved, however, the wound in his hip flared, pain forcing him to still, ragged breathing raw in the cool air.

“Whatever judgment he receives is mine to dispense, seeing as he is now in my territory,” Linden retorted, tone still pleasant. “It is no longer your concern, though you might wish to take a moment to concern yourself with your own welfare, seeing as you, too, are a trespasser in my territory and answerable to the same laws you wish to judge your prey by.” Linden stood, stepping away from Cole. He paused three steps away, his manner hard and cold. “You have until I count to ten to remove yourself from my territory. Thereafter, should you still be here, I will gladly act upon that law you seem to like so much and hunt you down. One.”

Ankerite stared blankly, trying to ignore the hatred Cole directed at him. Unmoving, he watched Cole rise, barely stifling his shock when Linden casually placed himself between them. “Two.”

Cole glanced up at Linden and sneered. “You’re too soft. It’s going to get you killed, and I’ll personally piss on your grave when it does.”

Ankerite struggled to push back his anxiety when Cole’s gaze flickered to him. He could almost see the wheels turning in Cole’s head, the message in his eyes clear. Cole wanted him dead. Ignoring the pain in his hip, Ankerite shuffled back.

“Three.”

Cole's gaze stubbornly remained on him, the russet werewolf seeming to disregard Linden's warning. Even though he was now in human form, it was blatantly obvious that he still viewed Ankerite as his prey.

"Four."

Ankerite watched as Linden grabbed hold of Cole's chin, forcing Cole to look away from him.

"*Five.*" Linden emphasized the word, flashing teeth, his incisors sharp. His eyes changed to wolf eyes, outrage apparent in his demeanor.

"Six. Seven...." Just as Linden got to eight, Cole turned and loped away, head held high. Reaching the corner he looked back one more time to snarl in defiance before vanishing into the night.

Ankerite released the breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. Apprehension swirled in his gut, his mind not yet certain if danger remained. A shiver coursed through him when Linden turned to approach him. The wolf in Ankerite's mind was bouncing around like a puppy seeking attention, but the wariness in his human mind fought the wolf, not trusting the sense of familiarity the other werewolf exuded. The resulting indecision kept him in place as Linden approached.

Ankerite whimpered, unable to stop himself when Linden knelt down to pull off his coat, tearing the dress shirt Ankerite wore underneath. Ignoring his protest, Linden pulled the soft material off. The fear that had begun to dissipate with Cole's departure returned full force, visions of

rape running through his mind. Ankerite's wolf, however, howled in delight, welcoming the thought of naked skin upon naked skin.

"You should've shifted fully," Linden said, startling him. "You can move faster as a wolf."

Ankerite watched as Linden began to tie several of his dress shirt's torn strips together, tugging at them to test the knots before reaching for him once more.

Relief and confusion replaced fear when Ankerite realized Linden's true intent. He cleared his throat, reaching out to hold the makeshift bandage in place while Linden wrapped the wound on his hip, stemming the blood flow.

"Why are you doing this?" Ankerite dropped his gaze to hide his crystal blue wolf eyes, eyes he could do nothing about. Usually he hid them behind tinted glasses, playing on the stereotype that anyone who read and worked with books should in some way be farsighted.

A soft touch drifted over his cheek, fingers brushing Ankerite's black shaggy hair aside. Shocked at the unexpected touch, Ankerite looked up, only to panic when Linden reached for the cap he wore. No, not the cap! If Linden removed his cap, his secret would be revealed, and all would be lost. Reaching up to try to prevent imminent disaster, Ankerite blinked in surprise when Linden simply adjusted the cap before speaking.

"You're in my territory." Standing, Linden pulled him up. Ankerite hissed in pain, the wound on his hip flaring with the movement, but Linden ignored him, using

Ankerite's upward momentum to sling him over his shoulder. Pausing only long enough to snatch up Ankerite's coat, he began to walk.

Ankerite fought the pain in his body, his pride refusing to let another whimper escape. Dizziness accompanied by nausea disoriented him for a moment. Warm breath escaped his lips, trickling over Linden's skin, the contrast with the cool night air pulling goose bumps from the warm, naked flesh beneath him. "What are you doing?" The question was little more than a breath, tinged with uncertainty.

Unsurprisingly Linden's response was both abrupt and cryptic, telling Ankerite nothing at all. "What I must."

Hating the fear that rose up within him again, Ankerite forced himself to swallow the lump forming in his throat. "I don't suppose I could somehow convince you to let me go?" He released a nervous laugh, clearly tinged with hysteria, trying yet failing in his endeavor to appear calm.

"Don't be ridiculous," Linden retorted, turning a corner. "You're in no state to walk anywhere, and I'm not about to go chasing you around in the middle of the night. Besides, the way I understand it, it's not like you have anywhere to go, now do you?"

Ankerite didn't respond, the truth in Linden's words silencing him. The quiet that followed grew uneasy, Ankerite fighting not to drown in his conflicted emotions. Linden's pale flesh tempted the wolf within him with visions of heat, sweat, and untold pleasure, but the human part of him was not ready to give up control, not ready to trust a werewolf, even if the physical attraction between them was strong.

Lost in the dilemma facing him, Ankerite was caught by surprise when Linden playfully bounced his step, causing him to shift in his hold. Hissing, Ankerite scrambled for a handhold, fearing he would fall. His hands slid over smooth, heated skin, nails leaving marks, the silky feel of Linden's flesh beneath his palms only serving to make him want the man even more.

"Hey!" Linden reprimanded, chuckling softly. "I kind of like my skin scratch-free."

"Then you should've thought about that before treating me like a sack of potatoes," Ankerite retorted before he could think better of it. The moment the words escaped he regretted them, silently reprimanding himself. Here he was, hanging upside down at this true werewolf's mercy, yet he was making smart-alec comments as if talking to a harmless child. He cursed himself for a fool. Hadn't he already learned that the only thing full-blooded werewolves wanted from him was his death? How could he be foolish enough to goad one?

"So you have a little fire, do you? Good, I was beginning to think life with you was going to be rather dull."

Ankerite scowled at the words, not really liking their implication. He wasn't a coward. What fault was it of his that he was hunted by creatures he couldn't fight, his own wolf trapped in his mind, unable to truly be free?

Biting back the retort on his lips, he stared blankly ahead, street lamps and artificial light only half registering. He absently wondered how Linden managed to walk down the street in nothing more than his birthday suit. Glancing up he saw hookers standing on shaded street corners,

dressed in little more than Linden, and it all made sense. Although not nearly as dark as the demolished factory they'd just left behind, this was still the wrong side of town, an area where no one cared if they heard you scream....

Ankerite shivered, morbidly fascinated by the realization that this would be the perfect place for a hunt.

Closing his eyes, Ankerite readied himself to battle his wolf's lust for blood, only to frown in confusion when all he encountered was a dark rumble of satisfaction. He didn't understand it. Usually the wolf in his mind would leap at the thought, eager for a hunt. Ankerite began to suspect his wolf liked Linden, while he himself hated the idea. Why, after all these years of fighting him, did his wolf give in to another?

A shift in Linden's pace tore Ankerite from his thoughts, his eyes opening to see the rickety steps of a rather derelict apartment building. Linden climbed the steps with ease, not even out of breath, and before Ankerite knew it he was inside a small apartment, the front door closing sharply behind them. He stared at the door in disbelief, shocked by the realization that Linden must have brought him "home." Before his mind could even begin to process the implications, Linden carried him farther in, stepping into a bedroom and dropping him without so much as a warning.

Ankerite gasped, his vision shifting with the change in perspective. Instead of looking down, he was now looking up, the soft sensuality of cool silk sheets caressing his naked back and arms. Linden turned and left the room. The moment Linden left, Ankerite's flight instinct returned. Leaping into motion, he began to crawl down the bed toward

the door, only to freeze. Linden was back, carrying a cloth and a bowl filled with water.

Ankerite licked dry lips, waiting for Linden's reaction, knowing he was caught. Part of him had known he would be, but he'd still hoped that he could get away. He tried to resist when Linden crossed the room and pushed him, forcing him to lean back and sit on the bed. Reflex kicked in, forcing Ankerite to reach out in order to prevent the bowl that Linden simply dropped into his lap from tipping. He hissed when Linden pulled the makeshift bandage from his wound, tossing the torn material aside, before moving toward his pants. Heat-tinged arousal coursed through him, his wolf perking in interest, keenly anticipating further developments. Ankerite scrambled to try to cover himself, mortified when Linden suddenly extended his claws, ripping the fabric. Whimpering in protest, he clung to what remained of his pants, trying to fight Linden but failing miserably. The shredded material slipped through his fingers, Linden pulling it away with ease. Massaging Ankerite's fingers, Linden forced him to unclench his hands.

"Don't fight it, pup. We both know this is inevitable," Linden ordered softly.

Ankerite whined when Linden dropped a hand into his lap, suspiciously close to his groin. The soft chuckle escaping Linden's lips sent slivers of electricity through Ankerite's blood, the scent of his own arousal now dominating his senses. He didn't want this. He *couldn't* want this. It simply wasn't possible. His wolf, now fully alert, eagerly panted, begging for more of the touch. Ankerite gasped, Linden's fingers dancing over his warm skin, the

scent of Linden's arousal now mixing with his own.

Hating the arousal that coursed through him at Linden's touch, Ankerite reached out to pry Linden's hand off, brutally fighting down his wolf and his wolf's desire for more. Linden, however, was quicker. Reaching out with his other hand he effectively immobilized Ankerite's hands, managing to catch both.

"Stop it." Ankerite whispered in protest, glaring heatedly at Linden as he fought his grip. Linden didn't even appear fazed, restraining Ankerite with ease.

Ankerite watched in horror as a cheeky grin spread over Linden's features, his hand sliding up the smooth skin of Ankerite's thigh, moving to his tented briefs, and shredding them just like he'd shredded the pants mere moments earlier. He cried out in pleasure when Linden rubbed the skin he discovered underneath. His skin flushed, heat dancing over his nerves with every caress. Burning with need, Ankerite leaned into the touch, his dying whimpers of protest reluctantly changing to soft moans of pleasure.

Linden's soft rumble of satisfaction broke through the haze surrounding him, bothering Ankerite. He immediately hated the casual way Linden pulled away, lifting the cloth and dipping it into the water as if nothing had transpired. His wolf howled in outrage, his human mind unwilling to accept the disappointment he now felt. Clenching his fists, he bit his lip, resisting the urge to reach out to Linden. He watched Linden's smooth hands, yearning for their caress, but hissed when the moist cool cloth touched his heated skin.

Ankerite's mind drifted, trying to make sense of it all, while Linden cleaned his wound. Linden confused him, waking within him more conflict than he'd ever known in his life. One moment Linden was sexually harassing him, only to turn around and clinically treat his wound the next without so much as a pause between the two contrary actions. How could anyone switch modes that fast?

"Why are you doing this?" Ankerite demanded for the second time that evening. "And don't you dare say it's because I'm in your territory again." He added, "From what I understand, werewolf law gives you the right to kill me, not to sexually harass or..." Ankerite's tone softened in uncertainty, "help me."

Ankerite waited in vain for a response, hissing at the sting of antiseptic being rubbed into his skin. The reason Linden had shredded both his pants and underwear became clear when Linden reached for the bandage, wrapping it around Ankerite's thigh and hips. Sighing in defeat, Ankerite reached out to help, holding the bandage in place while Linden tied it off. He narrowed his eyes when Linden stood, finally breaking the silence.

"Go to sleep," Linden ordered softly, pushing against his chest.

Ankerite tried but failed to resist the insistent push, lying back and scowling up at Linden. "I'm not a whore," he hissed, some rebellious part of him demanding that he at least attempt to protest Linden's high-handed manner. He found himself regretting his words, suddenly surrounded by silk and heated flesh. Linden pressed into his body, his

arousal throbbing against Ankerite's newly bandaged thigh. Hot breath danced over his skin, pooling at his lips, Linden's lips a mere hair's breadth away from his own. Time froze, the moment stretching on between them until Ankerite could take it no longer. Licking his dry lips, he watched Linden's move, the rumbling tone stoking his desire.

"I see we can add selective hearing to your list of faults. I told you to go to sleep, not to have sex with me."

Before Ankerite even had a chance to reply, Linden was gone. Shock, confusion, and an intense feeling of loneliness dampened the arousal still hot within him, leaving his mind in turmoil. Unable to find the will to fight the events of the past day any longer, Ankerite gave in to the exhaustion deep in his soul.

"You never answered my question," he mumbled miserably into the cool night air before curling around one of the pillows on the bed, burying his face into the silky softness. Heart filled with grief, he lost himself to his own despair, drifting off into turbulent sleep.

ANKERITE sleepily opened his eyes, absently focusing on russet hair and amber eyes. Something about the color niggled at his senses, strangely familiar. Memories swirled around in his mind, calling for recognition. He'd been hunted again, by yet another in a long string of wolves, all howling for his blood.

Then he remembered the fur and eyes, the memory tearing a scream from his throat as he finally registered the person before him. Blind terror propelled him across the bed. Leaping off, Ankerite yelped, the flare of pain in his hip causing him to crash to the ground, effectively ruining his flight. The bitter taste of fear and despair was back, tainted further by regret. He couldn't understand it, couldn't connect it to last night's behavior, but it seemed that Linden had betrayed him. Cole was back.

A face peered down at him, amber eyes watching him curiously. Hands reached out to touch his forehead, the movement bringing with it the realization that his cap had fallen off, revealing the two wolf ears he fought so desperately to hide. Ankerite immediately lowered them, hiding them in the shaggy haircut he'd deliberately chosen for this purpose. Knowing he wouldn't be able to get away, he closed his eyes tight and waited for the blow.

The expected blow never landed. Instead, fingers ran over his forehead and through his hair, searching for injury.

"Are you all right?" The gentleness in the voice addressing him surprised Ankerite into opening his eyes in disbelief, seeking confirmation for what could only be his insanity. He frowned in puzzlement when he once again saw russet hair and amber eyes, confusion keeping him in place. He wasn't mistaken. The man before him was Cole, the werewolf from the evening before, the wolf that had hunted him, only something didn't make sense. Why was Cole asking him if he was all right, when not all too long ago he had wanted him dead?

The door to the bedroom creaked open cutting into the tension lying thick between Ankerite and Cole.

"Is everything okay in here?" A stranger peered into the bedroom, seeming to scowl at Ankerite.

Cole responded by simply raising an eyebrow, his hand still running through Ankerite's hair. "The pup got a fright and fell off the bed," he explained. "I'm just making sure he's not hurt, Ron."

"And why exactly did he get a fright?" Ron stepped into the room, closing the door. "Darren, Linden told you to let the pup be. Obviously," he gestured at Ankerite's prone form, "he had a good reason to."

Darren? Ankerite turned to face the russet werewolf once more, processing the name. He completely ignored Ron when the other man knelt beside him, aggressively kissing Darren in front of him in an obvious show of possession. *Darren*. The werewolf was Darren, not Cole.

Ankerite blinked up at the two of them. "Your name is Darren?" he blurted out in disbelief. No matter how he looked at it, the man before him looked like Cole... but something was different. He was softer somehow, and his actions kinder. This could be a different person, which might explain the new name, but not the mirror image. "But last night when he rescued me, Linden called you Cole," Ankerite mused, frowning in puzzlement, speaking his thoughts aloud without realizing it. He backtracked through recent events, trying to recall what he'd seen and heard in a bid to make sense of current events. The moment the words left his lips it all clicked into place. "Cole has an identical twin brother?"

He gaped at Darren. As unbelievable as this whole situation seemed to be, that was the only logical explanation he could come up with.

“Well, I guess that answers the question of why Linden told you to stay away from the pup, Dar,” Ron commented, pulling away from Darren. “Looks like the pup had a run in with your brother, and if history is anything to go by, I’m sure it wasn’t a pleasant encounter. Your old pack doesn’t take kindly to stray wolves, do they?”

Ankerite growled softly when Ron reached for one of his ears, tugging softly on it. The soft touch confused him. His ears, up to now, had been the bane of his existence. A dull, familiar pain shifted in his heart, making its all too familiar presence known. No one had ever touched his ears this gently, his parents usually pulling roughly on them, raging that he was a freak, an abomination that had been sent to curse their family.

“It’s not Cole’s fault,” Darren protested. “I’ve told you. Things are... complicated. Our father, well, he runs things with an iron fist, and Cole and I never really had a say in anything. We obey or we die. It’s how things work. If it wasn’t for you and Linden, I would still be there doing exactly what Cole is doing.”

Ron’s continued tugging grew irritating, its unfamiliarity too much to bear. Still growling, Ankerite was about to say something about it when a soft knock interrupted him. The door opened once more, and Linden peered in, raising an eyebrow at Ankerite.

“Ron?” Linden’s voice again contained that deceptively

mild tone Ankerite had learned to be wary of. "I thought I asked you to please fetch your mate and to make sure he leaves my pup alone. I don't, however, recall asking you to manhandle my pup in the process."

Ankerite's ear was suddenly released, Ron pulling away so fast one would think he'd burned his hand. Ankerite watched, fascinated, when Ron stood, pulling Darren up with him.

"I guess this means we will be seeing you at the pack meeting, pup." Ron's grin appeared to be filled with glee, mischief clearly sparkling in his gaze. "Don't worry, we'll see ourselves out." Winking cheekily at Linden, he left, taking Darren with him.

Finally free, Ankerite sat up and stared after the departing figures before turning to face Linden. The interaction he'd just witnessed had revealed two things to him. First, Linden was a man to be obeyed, his very demeanor demanded it. It made sense, as everything pointed toward him being a pack alpha. Second, he was liked, meaning he was probably both fair and approachable. The way Ron and Darren had departed so quickly stressed the first while the second was emphasized by the fact that Ron teased Linden as he left.

"Pack members," Linden explained, answering Ankerite's silent question. Closing the door, Linden walked toward him. Ankerite opened his mouth to ask about Darren's presence in Linden's pack only to be interrupted by a knowing gaze from him. "Don't ask."

Ankerite took hold of the hand Linden offered, letting

him pull him up. He shivered, reaching out to steady himself when Linden unexpectedly ran a hand over his tail.

“I meant to ask about this.”

Ankerite turned and headed to the bed, Linden's heated touch guiding him back. Pushing him down, Linden forced him to sit and began to examine the bandaging.

“Why don't you transform fully back into human form?” Linden asked, looking up at Ankerite.

Shame coursed through Ankerite, coloring his skin red. He dropped his gaze, trying to avoid answering the question by remaining silent. Bitter snippets of memory returned to haunt him, their pain as fresh as the day the memories were made. He was a freak that didn't belong in this world, and everyone in his life seemed to strive to prove that to him. His parents hated him for being neither here nor there, and the few people who had seen his eyes, ears, and tail had feared him, whispering soft warding spells against what they perceived to be a bad omen.

He was so lost in thought that it took him a moment to realize that Linden was gripping his chin, restraining him and forcing Ankerite to face him.

“All right, let's try this again,” Linden stated mildly, the authority he'd used on Ron visible in every line of his posture. “Let's get the formalities out of the way first. My name is Linden Reed. What's yours?”

Ankerite licked suddenly dry lips, trying but failing to pull away from Linden's grasp. Breathing in deeply he blew air out of his nose with a whoosh before speaking softly.

“Ankerite.” He gave only his first name, nothing less, nothing more. He didn’t want his last name, the memory of it bearing nothing but pain and rejection.

“Ankerite? That’s a strange name.” Linden remarked.

“My parents have a strange sense of humor.” Ankerite retorted dryly, not really wanting to go into it. He suspected his strange name was a means to further emphasize the fact that he was abnormal. Although cruel, it was rather profound, a twisted reminder meant to indirectly influence his life.

“All right, Ankerite. How old are you?”

Ankerite frowned, confused by the question. It was an innocent enough question in and of itself, but he suspected that with Linden there was more to it than there appeared to be. However, seeing no reason to protest, he paused for just a moment before replying. “Twenty-four.”

The relief on Linden’s face confirmed Ankerite’s suspicion that there was more to Linden’s question than idle curiosity, but for the life of him he couldn’t begin to imagine what it could be. Why was his age important?

“I’m twenty-six.”

So Linden was only two years older than he was? It felt like far more to Ankerite. There was a world of difference between them. Ankerite envied Linden’s surety and confidence, so used to being lost in a sea of low self-esteem that he couldn’t even begin to imagine what it was like to know what you wanted and fearlessly aim for it.

He could hear the next question coming before Linden even uttered a sound.

“Why didn’t you transform fully into a wolf last night, and why haven’t you transformed back into a human now?” Linden asked the dreaded question again.

Ankerite was unsurprised. He’d known all along that Linden wouldn’t drop this topic. He swallowed, Linden’s gaze making him more than a touch uncomfortable. As much as he wanted to look away, he was unable to. He knew he wouldn’t be able to escape this, not now that Linden had picked up on it. “Because...” He licked his lips, drawing the moment of truth out, watching Linden’s eyes so intently he picked up on the subtle shift in their color. “I can’t.”

That was the crux of all his problems. He’d been born to a werewolf mother and a human father, belonging to neither world. He was trapped in a mainly human body, his ears, eyes, and tail that of a wolf. He pushed Linden’s restraining hand away, surprised at how easy it was to get it off now that he’d finally answered Linden’s question.

“I can’t shift at all. I’m trapped in this form, neither here nor there. Are you happy now?” Anger and bitterness colored his tone. It was an all-too-familiar feeling, having defined his very existence for as long as he could remember, even tearing a rift between him and his family. He was a freak, a curse, an abomination.

Ankerite flinched when Linden reached up to trail his fingers through his hair, searching for something. He forced his midnight black ears down against his scalp, his hair hiding them, in an effort to avoid Linden’s questing touch.

The action was in vain. Linden easily found an ear, gently coaxing it up once more, rubbing the soft fur soothingly before moving to scratch behind it.

Ankerite's breath hitched. Surprised at the pleasure Linden's gentle touch brought, he leaned into it, seeking more. Although similar to Ron's touch earlier, Linden's seemed less invasive and, strangely enough, not overwhelming at all. Longing coursed through him, his wolf stirring in his mind to rumble in smug satisfaction. A soft moan mixed with a very animalistic rumble of pleasure escaped his lips, encouraging him to lean even further into the touch, his wolf in agreement with him for once.

"How did you survive?" Linden's question was unexpected, abruptly pulling Ankerite out of his reverie. He pulled away from the caress, avoiding Linden's gaze. The question brought back bad memories. The day he turned sixteen, he'd run away from home, believing that his parents would be better off without him. With that had come a hard lesson in reality.

On his first night out he'd bumped into a few people, his ears peeking up curiously. He'd been excited, eager to socialize, his wolf wanting to play. He hadn't been prepared for what followed. He'd only been out a handful of times before and always with Sam. Sam had kept him isolated from the humans who surrounded them, always fussing and bundling him up. Ankerite hadn't even noticed the precautions the bodyguard took to keep him safe on those trips. Needless to say, his appearance hadn't gone down well, and that evening had ended with a group of humans chasing him, accusing him of being a demon and crying for a stake.

That had only been the beginning.

Shifting awkwardly on the bed, he gestured at his coat, hanging from the headboard. "I have tinted glasses in my right pocket, and I usually wear some form of hat." He lowered his ears tugging at his hair in demonstration. "I also went to a lot of effort to find a haircut that hides my ears when I lower them." He shrugged, trying to appear casual, forcing a wry smile to his lips. This was a sensitive topic, and he didn't want Linden to know just how much it really hurt. "Other than that, I guess, I simply keep a low profile. People don't really look too closely at you if you're a shy bookseller."

Ankerite tried to brush the topic off completely, but he could feel himself trembling, the cool air in the room drifting over his ears, making him feel naked and exposed. He shifted, Linden's continuing silence making him nervous. "I... I've answered your questions," Ankerite said, the urge to flee growing strong again. He was willing to do anything to get rid of the awkwardness that was slowly rising between them, his revelations seeming to mock him with their presence. He hated pity, hated being viewed as weak, and wanted nothing more than to run and pretend none of this ever happened. "Now can I leave?" he finished on a hoarse whisper, pleading with Linden.

"No."

Ankerite didn't even have time to react as Linden moved, abruptly invading his space. Still trying to register what was going on, Ankerite whimpered as Linden's aggressive kiss caught him off guard. Linden's heated lips met his, the other's tongue slipping into his mouth before he

could even think of doing anything to prevent it. The caress was sensual, all consuming, Linden's tongue aggressively exploring. He moaned when Linden lapped at the roof of his mouth, heat coursing through him, his wolf howling in delight. Unable to fight the rising passion, Ankerite's tongue flicked back, desire to taste this virile man growing strong within him.

Having lost himself in Linden's unique flavor, Ankerite was disappointed when Linden pulled away. However, there was something he wanted to ask, so he prevented Linden from kissing him again by placing a finger to his lips. Gentle pants sounded in the air between them for the longest moment, the only sound to break the expectant silence in the room.

"Why are you doing this?" Ankerite breathed, pain, fear, and uncertainty tainting his lust. He wanted this, hungered for Linden's touch upon his skin, his wolf almost mad with mating fever, but the more logical part of him distrusted this, fearing that it was too good to be true.

Ankerite fought to ignore Linden's fingers tracing the curve of his face before moving into his hair, the touch light and gentle. It made Ankerite want to cry. He couldn't remember the last time someone had shown him any form of affection.

"Because you're mine," Linden whispered, his words startling Ankerite. Oh, how he wished that could be true. "Can't you feel it?" Linden's soft whisper soothed him, the fingers dancing through his shaggy-cut hair faintly tickling. "Doesn't my scent call to you?"

Ankerite watched Linden, something about Linden's touch calming him even though, for all intents and purposes, it had no right to. He licked his lips, acutely aware of Linden's warm breath against them.

"I can't smell as well as a wolf can," he whispered, raising a hand to point at his own nose. "It's human." He chose not to tell Linden that his wolf craved this, cried out for Linden's touch, howling, ached for it with a passion that bordered on frightening.

Squinting to follow Linden's finger, Ankerite tracked its progress as Linden ran it over his nose, hooking it into his own and using the leverage to pull his hand down.

"That's okay." Linden's feather light kiss upon his nose pleased him, though it would probably rain cats and dogs before he admitted it. "That's just the way I like it." The approval in the soft words pulled at Ankerite's heart, waking a thread of hope within him. He yearned for the acceptance Linden seemed to be promising him. Opening his lips to respond, he abruptly clicked them closed, pulling a face when Linden playfully licked his nose.

"Why?" Ankerite squinted at his nose, trying to look at the damp tip, before focusing on Linden once more. "Why do you like it?"

"Because it's a part of my mate," Linden responded, the simplicity of the statement affecting Ankerite in ways he couldn't even begin to understand.

Ankerite blinked at him, his breath hitching. His wolf rumbled in agreement, smug at finally being recognized.

Ignoring his wolf, Ankerite concentrated on the thread of hope mixed with fear coursing through him. Could he possibly dare to hope? “Mate?” His voice squeaked when he spoke the word. Ankerite desperately fought to hold onto disbelief, disregarding his wolf’s outrage over the denial. He was scared to believe Linden. He couldn’t afford to. It was dangerous. He didn’t want to lose any more than he already had.

“Yes, Anke. You’re my mate,” Linden declared softly. Ankerite picked up on the shortening of his name, liking the sound of it on Linden’s lips. It was so personal, representing a form of acceptance he’d never hoped to find. “Surely you know about werewolves and mating?”

Ankerite blushed, nodding when he recalled the research he’d done on werewolves as soon as he was old enough to comprehend what it was that formed part of him. It had taken a lot of creative begging to get Sam to agree to bring him books on the subject, but it had been well worth the effort. The knowledge he’d gained had provided Ankerite with a glimpse of understanding into what constantly drove the wolf in his head and had given him enough sense to run when he’d first stumbled into another werewolf’s territory.

He licked his lips, using the motion to gather his thoughts before speaking. “*Werewolves have one life mate, recognized by scent. They mate for life.*” He quoted information that had come from one of the books in his father’s library. He’d been thirteen when he’d first read that, waking within him a strong desire to find his mate. The isolation forced upon him had him yearning for someone—anyone—to be there for him when he needed them. He’d

given up the hope shortly after his seventeenth birthday, resigning himself to the fact that he was destined to be alone. He'd believed that living on the run would never help him find his mate. Apparently he'd been mistaken.

Linden's touch tickled Ankerite's skin when he traced the contour of his chin. "Yes, we do." Ankerite picked up the subtle emphasis on "we." "We also protect our mates."

Ankerite flinched at the words. How could he possibly hope for protection? He was hunted by men and werewolves alike, bound to be discovered and driven off yet again. It wouldn't be fair to Linden.

"I don't care how much running you've had to do until now. It's over. The only running you will be doing now is with my pack."

"I... I ca—"

Linden's finger silenced his protest. Blinking, Ankerite moved to lick his lips once more, the action a nervous habit. His eyes widened in surprise when a familiar flavor danced over his taste buds, making him realize he'd just managed to lick Linden in the process.

"You're my mate," Linden repeated. "I will protect you no matter what. Besides," Ankerite caught the sudden grin Linden flashed at him, the action making him want to smile, "if I gather this correctly, you've done most of your running away from other werewolves." Linden tugged on his hair. "You seem to be hiding what you are from humans rather well from what I can see. Werewolves, on the other hand, are another matter." He tapped Ankerite's nose. "It's hard to fool

our sense of smell. This is my territory, Anke, and what I say in it goes. I won't let another hunt you as long as we both breathe, and if you run from me, I will follow."

"I...." Ankerite didn't know what to say. He'd spent so much of his life disillusioned, ostracized by those who were meant to love and protect him, that he didn't really know or understand what it was that Linden was offering him. Despite that, he wanted it. He wanted to stop running, to feel safe, cared for, and loved more than he wanted anything else in the world. He wanted to reach out and hold onto what Linden seemed to so freely offer—safety. He smiled tensely at Linden, the protest he'd intended to voice silent and dead in the back of his throat.

Linden's gentle kiss came as a surprise. Ankerite leaned into the hand now sensually caressing his ear, hungry for the touch. He gave in to his desire to accept Linden's offer, his lips parting when Linden traced them with his tongue, silently requesting entrance. His wolf shivered in delight at the sound of Linden's soft moan, satisfaction coursing through Ankerite with the knowledge that he pleased his mate.

Savoring both the texture and flavor of his mate, Ankerite returned the embrace, suddenly hungry for more. Linden growled, changing the gentle kiss into an aggressive, possessive one, fueling Ankerite's desire to be possessed. Threading fingers through Linden's hair, he arched into his mate's body, silently demanding to be taken, marked, and dominated. Ankerite trembled in pleasure when Linden straddled him, thrusting his arousal against his hip. This was wrong but, at the same time, oh so right. Ankerite knew

logically that they shouldn't be doing this, but he no longer cared. The walls between him and his wolf came crashing down, both crying out for the same thing, and for the first time in his life, Ankerite felt whole.

Linden tore his lips away, leaving Ankerite yearning for more as burning lips and teeth marked a path down his body. Soft pants and whimpers filled the air, Ankerite barely aware that they were escaping his own lips. Linden found a nipple, sucking it into his mouth and biting softly down on it, causing Ankerite to cry out in pleasure. He arched wantonly into the touch as heat and desire coursed through him. His body reacted to his mate, and his wolf urged the mating on. Reaching up, Ankerite clung to Linden's skin, tugging at the heated flesh, asking for more.

He whined in displeasure when Linden pulled away, trying to follow.

"Shh, pup." Linden's voice soothed him, his breath trickling over the shell of his ear. The soft breath was followed by teeth, Linden playfully tugging on the sensitive skin. "I'm only going to fetch the lubricant. I don't want to hurt you." Ankerite's body twisted, moving with Linden's hand on his skin, trying to prolong the touch just a little longer, panting in loss when Linden shifted away. Reaching into the bedside drawer, Linden pulled out a tube; he was gone for only a moment. It was a moment too long for Ankerite, his wolf rumbling in pleasure when Linden's touch returned, his mate's lips hot against his own.

Reaching up, Ankerite buried his fingers in Linden's hair, hungrily nibbling Linden's mouth. He couldn't get

enough of him, longing for more with every passing moment. The wolf within panted and snarled, encouraging Ankerite to taunt Linden in a bid to get what he wanted. Losing Linden's lips, Ankerite nibbled at salty flesh, part of him wanting to mark Linden as much as he wanted to be marked by him. Shudders of bliss shook him, triggered by the feel of Linden's teeth and tongue playing with his inner ear. Drowning in the erotic swirls of moist heat, Ankerite writhed, gasped, panted, and moaned, thrusting up, seeking the friction of Linden's sweat-slicked skin against his own.

Linden trailed a hand over his inner thigh, waking a violent need to be touched. Encouraged by his wolf, Ankerite parted his legs, begging for what was to come. He thrust up into Linden's hand when Linden cupped his erection, milking the precome that seeped out the slit. Losing himself to the hot friction, Ankerite cried out, arching further into the touch, thrusting desperately into Linden's hand, completely oblivious to the fact that a finger was circling his entrance until it slipped smoothly inside, slick with warm gel. Hissing in surprise, Ankerite tensed, blinking up at Linden with lust-filled eyes.

"It's okay," Linden whispered, his finger still sliding in.

The sensation was strangely overwhelming. Ankerite felt himself stretching slightly to accommodate the foreign object slipping in. He didn't know what to make of it and wasn't quite certain he liked it. Indecision danced through Ankerite's mind, the feeling of the finger inside him too strange to accept. He was torn between wanting to stop and wanting to thrust into the hand still stroking his erection. Linden's tongue began to torment his lips, and the indecision

slipped away, the slight discomfort of the finger nothing compared to the pleasure the rest of his body received.

Relaxing into Linden's touch, Ankerite barely noticed when Linden added a second and then a third finger, the slight burning in his rear mingling with and heightening his pleasure. He gave in to the rhythm, thrusting erratically between the sensations surrounding him. Linden's fingers twisted aggressively deep, brushing over something buried within him.

Ankerite howled. His wolf's pleasure mingled with his own, electricity dancing across his nerves. Wanting more, he twisted, impaling himself on Linden's fingers, the hand around his erection forgotten. His body begged to be possessed, to have Linden buried deep within him, stretching him and filling him.

Ankerite couldn't help but whimper in protest when Linden's fingers slid out of him, not really caring about Linden's whispered warning.

"This will sting a little, pup."

He wanted more and he wanted it now. Reaching up, he gave in to his wolf's desire, thrusting his tongue into Linden's mouth, swallowing his own whimper of pain when Linden finally thrust deep into him. Pulling back at the unexpected pain, Ankerite breathed heavily, remaining still to give himself time to adjust to the feeling of being stretched and filled. The moment he was claimed he was overwhelmed by the feeling of building pressure, demanding that something be done to alleviate the sheer want that had taken possession of him. Unable to bear the building pressure any

longer, Ankerite moved, groaning when it caused Linden to slide out a fraction and sent delicious sensation throughout him. The sound that escaped Ankerite's lips was a mixture of lust and pain. Swallowing the pain, he whined, aiming to urge Linden on, and it wasn't long before Linden was thrusting rhythmically in and out of him, skin slapping against smooth, damp, equally heated skin.

Ankerite's garbled cries grew ragged as he arched forcefully into Linden. Mating heat clouded both his mind and his senses, causing him to thrust harder, meeting each and every of Linden's strokes until the very lines of sanity were undone, pulling them both into the realm of ecstasy. Ankerite came with a hoarse, ragged cry, clenching and tightening around Linden, the sticky flow of come filling him more satisfying than anything he'd ever known. His wolf delighted in the feel, howling in satisfaction when Linden's teeth sank into the tender flesh of Ankerite's shoulder, pleased with finally being marked.

Sated and drained, Ankerite collapsed back onto the bed, eyes drifting closed. The rough texture of Linden's tongue lapping up the blood on his skin tickled his senses, bringing him gently down from his high. Feeling Linden withdraw, Ankerite released the soft rumble his wolf gave, for the first time in his life feeling like he could finally truly belong.

"You're mine." Linden's possessive words embraced him, wrapped around his soul, confirming that he was finally home. "Whatever past we have to face, whomever we have to fight, we will do it together. You are mine to protect and love."

RAYNE AUSTER always had a passion for writing. However, growing up, she didn't have the patience to finish what she started. Most of her projects died before even seeing the light of day. While studying for a master's degree in computer science, she decided to post what she wrote online. That is when she discovered the joy of sharing the stories in her head. Unable to bear the thought of leaving her readers hanging, she finished her first piece of fiction. The satisfaction of actually completing a story quickly led to further inspiration, and she hasn't looked back since.

You can contact Rayne at rayne.auster@gmail.com.



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Published by
Dreamspinner Press
4760 Preston Road
Suite 244-149
Frisco, TX 75034
<http://www.dreamspinnerpress.com/>

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Cover art by Evelysis, <http://www.evelysis.net>
Cover Design by Mara McKennen

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Released in the United States of America
September 2009

eBook Edition
eBook ISBN: 978-1-61581-065-9