

## **Moon Wolf**

by Joni Latham

The young woman sighed taking one last look at the warm light spilling from the castle windows onto the ground below. She shivered a little in night air; she would miss the castle and some of its inhabitants, but she had grown weary of the way they treated her. Tightening the leather cinch around the last bundle of her belongings, she reached over and picked up the horse's reigns from their place around the saddle horn. There was one last thing to do before she left Ondara and the Castle Tanaria behind forever. Leading her horse to the inlet near the docks, they walked quietly along the shoreline. The moon was full, and its silvery rays shone down on her warming her tired frame.

She stopped, dropped the reigns, and walked toward an inlet until the toes of her boots were just inches away from the water. Standing quietly for a moment with her hands clasped behind her, she stared up at the glowing orb in the night sky. Was there really a lady in the moon, or was it all just a legend? Her father told before he died that she was the daughter of the moon. The Lady was her mother and the stars her father. She was only loaned to them as a favor to an old couple who had no children. Whether it was true or not, it was a nice story. It gave her comfort on nights such as these and explained some of the extraordinary abilities she possessed.

Taking a deep breath and clasping her hands together in front of her, she stared up at the moon. "Lady of the Moon, Queen of Night. I humble myself before you tonight to seek counsel. If it is my destiny to be solitary the rest of my days, then tell me so now so I may cease the heart aching task of searching for my true love."

Her eyes closed, she waited for the slightest indication the Lady heard her request. About the time she decided she was to receive no answer, a voice spoke softly in her ear.

"My Daughter. Yes, you are indeed my child. You are not to spend your life alone. Your true love has waited as long for you as you have for him. Just be patient a little longer. Keep your heart open and empty of despair, and you will find him."

Startled, the young woman said nothing. Finally, the goddess's words found their mark in her heart and she lowered her head in reverence. "Thank you, milady."

Looking down at the black leather breeches she wore, she fingered its matching vest then the ruffled cuff of the shirt underneath. She wished she had not worn men's clothing for her first meeting with her mother. However, they were more suited to her needs at the moment and were infinitely more comfortable than the long gowns and petticoats she was expected to wear.

As the young woman turned to walk back to her horse, a voice echoed through the night. "Remember, my child. I love you. If you are ever in need, I will be there."

The young woman did not answer this time; she only stared at the moon with a tear in her eye. It was the first time since her earthly parents' death she felt the warmth of love wrapped around her.

Shaking her head she walked back to her horse, waiting by a rock formation. It lifted its massive head and nuzzled her cheek. The fuzz on the horse's muzzle tickled her cheek. She giggled. In response to her giggle, the horse threw his head high in the air and whinnied.

She laughed and rubbed the horse's nose. "I forgot you love me, Intimidation. Believe me, I'll never forget *that* again, I promise."

Intimidation knelt down on his front legs allowing his lady easier access to the saddle. She grabbed the reins and mounted her faithful steed. Without even a second glance back at the castle, she dug her heels into the horse's side. She was off to explore the world.

The lady and her steed rode along the shoreline until it disappeared into the forest. From there, she picked one of the paths leading into trees. It really did not matter to her where she went. She only wanted to be some place warmer than Ondara; a place where no one knew her so she could start anew.

The first day she passed no other travelers on the road, so she spent the day watching the wildlife and talking to Intimidation. Towards dusk, she began looking for a place to camp. Sleeping on the hard ground was not exactly her first choice, but it was better than staying at an inn and having the whole male population in the area know there was a woman traveling alone in the woods. She chose, instead, to move farther into the woods and find a place to hide amongst the low-lying greenery.

She finally found a spot hidden from the naked eye. There was a small cave formed by the surrounding bushes, and if one did not know it was there, they would have ridden on by it. She pulled Intimidation up to one of the trees and prepared to dismount. A noise from her newfound shelter caused her to stop before her foot was out of the stirrup. She immediately grabbed the hilt of the sword strapped to her saddle.

"Who's there?" she called, pulling the sword out of its scabbard and holding it high in the air.

Back in Ondara, she was renowned for her skill with the sword and bow, and for her riding abilities. That may have been one of her problems. She had a tendency to best the men in the contests held in the kingdom. It was not her fault though, her father taught her to do the best she could and never give up anything to anyone. Maybe when she arrived wherever it was she was going, she would be able to hide her abilities or at least downplay them.

Now she heard leaves rustling no more than twenty feet away from her. She waved the sword once more and called, "Come out and show yourself!"

There was a moment of silence, and then the tree limbs parted as a large male wolf stepped into the small clearing in front of her. He was the most beautiful wolf she had ever seen. His fur was very thick and framed his face in a lion's mane. Other than his massive size, the colors in his coat were the most unusual thing about him. The silver streaking through his pale gray topcoat glimmered in the rising moonlight.

She remained steadfast in her saddle, her sword raised against attack. Several minutes past, neither of them moved. There was not even so much as a twitch. The sword was heavy and she grew tired of holding it up in the air.

*This is going nowhere. It would be useless to run. He could probably catch us. If I stay here, I'm also open to attack.*

After weighing the situation, she decided she and Intimidation were in need of a much-deserved rest. She would just take her chances with the wolf. Her father had taught her that the forest creatures were not to be feared. Few attacked humans and that was only when they were hungry, hurt, or scared. This wolf appeared to be none of the three. He looked quite healthy and well fed. Also,

Intimidation was not afraid of him. Both animals stood calmly looking at each other.

She dropped her sword to her side, but kept her hand wrapped tightly around the hilt. She leaned forward on her saddle horn, not quite ready to join the wolf on the forest floor yet.

"Well, you are a handsome fellow," she said smiling. "Where are your pack mates, or are you traveling alone?"

At the sound of her voice the wolf sat on his haunches and cocked its head from side to side as if catching her every word.

"I must be losing my mind. Are you nodding your head?"

Almost as if in response to her statement, the wolf shook its head up and down.

"Would you mind if I joined you for the night? I'm tired and that cubbyhole looks like a perfect place to sleep."

Again, the wolf shook its mighty head. He stood up and walked twenty yards away from the opening then lay down with his head resting on his paws.

"I'm taking that as a yes." She climbed down from her horse with her sword still at her side. "Oh by the way, my name is Kyna." She stopped suddenly and shook head then turned to the wolf. "Why am I talking to you as if you were human?"

The wolf looked up at her with crystal blue eyes. He was definitely not an ordinary wolf, but exactly who or what he was she did not know. At the moment she really did not care, he was company and an extra security measure. Who would be stupid enough to bother her when there was such a large wolf in close proximity?

Before starting dinner, she removed the saddle and all its bundles off Intimidation allowing him to have his freedom for the night. All this she did, without ever taking her hand off the hilt of the sword. By the time she began to undo several of her bundles and spread them on ground before the opening to the cubbyhole, the wolf's eyes were closed and his shallow breathing signified he was napping. It might now be safe to place the sword on the ground beside her while she cooked something to eat. While she built a fire and unpacked, she continually took small glances at the wolf, which snoozed about twenty yards away.

She made herself comfortable against a large rock holding a portion of food. As she ate, she watched the wolf. He stirred from his nap and after cleaning himself and stretching, he sat up and watched her eat.

She tentatively held out a piece of the meat. "Would you like some?"

He did not move towards her. Only when she tossed it in his direction did he stand up. He walked over, picked up the meat in his mouth, and returned to his resting place.

"Well, I can't keep calling you 'the wolf' or 'you.'" How about I give you a name?"

The wolf swallowed and smiled a wolf sort of smile. His mouth was open and his tongue hung out to one side.

She made herself comfortable on a pallet in front of the fire. After tossing him another piece of meat, she continued her one-sided conversation with her new friend.

"Now what do I call you? Duncan? No. Leland? No. Not special enough." She thought a while longer before exclaiming, "I know! I'll call you, Riane."

"Do you like that name?"

The wolf swallowed the last bit of meat and smiled again.

"All right. Riane it is then. You know Riane was a prince I once loved. He was very handsome and very sweet, but what would someone like me have in common with a prince. Like all the others, he didn't even know I existed." She sighed softly.

Riane's ears dropped at the change in her mood. He crouched down on his belly and crawled slowly towards her. She placed her hand on the hilt of her sword, but she soon discovered she had no need of it. The wolf stayed in the submissive crawling position until he reached her then he simply laid his head in her lap and gently licked her free hand. The wolf's apparent concern and kindness caused a floodgate of tears to burst from Kyna's eyes. Releasing her grip on the sword and laying her cheek against the wolf's soft fur, she let the tears, built up from years of frustration, flow freely. What had she to worry about? There was just her, her new friend, and Intimidation to see her cry, and who would a wolf and horse tell?

Once the tears stopped flowing, she straightened up and scratched behind the wolf's ears. "Since you seem to be as alone as I, I wonder if you would like to travel with me and keep company."

Riane looked at her for moment before covering her face with sloppy wet wolf kisses.

The wolf's rough tongue tickled her cheeks and nose with every lick. Between giggles, she said, "I suppose that's a yes too. I sort of like the way you say yes."

Riane slept outside the cubbyhole all night keeping a watchful eye on Kyna. The next morning when she woke, she found her head lying on the wolf's side and her arm wrapped around his neck. She was half in the cubbyhole and half out. Despite her odd position, she had one of the most peaceful sleeps she had experienced in ages.

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Kyna found traveling with Riane had its distinct advantages. No one pestered her. They would not even get near her, especially when they met Riane's white-toothed stare. She was even able to spend a few nights in the soft downy beds of a few inns. One word was out about her traveling companion, the men steered clear of her, allowing her to rest in peace.

After two weeks of traveling, they reached a fork in the road. Kyna began riding into the right fork but was stopped by Riane's constant howling. He sat in the middle of left fork and howled until she rode over to him. He was adamant that she choose the left fork. It really did not matter to her which fork they took since she had no idea where she was going anyway. Riane obviously knew something she did not, so she decided to bow to her companion's wishes. Only when she turned Intimidation and rode several yards down the left road, did the wolf hush and follow her.

For the next five days, every time they came to a fork in the road, the wolf chose which way to go. He was definitely leading her somewhere. Finally in the evening of the fifth day, they reached what appeared to be a deep ditch of some kind. In the darkness it was hard for her to tell what it was. She climbed off Intimidation and held on tightly to his reigns as she walked along the edge, being careful not to fall into the dark crevice. She focused her attention on the crevice and forgot to watch in front of her. The toe of her boot

hit the corner of something hard, and she almost fell. After gaining her balance, she knelt down to inspect the object. It seemed to be made of wood and was quite large.

"Could it be a bridge?" She felt the wood span out over the crevice. "Are maybe a drawbridge?"

She scanned the darkness for her friend. "Riane, what is this? Where are we?"

After moment of silence, she felt him bump against her leg. She reached over and stroked the soft fur. "Like you could really tell me. I forget you aren't human, but sometimes I sure wish you were. You're the sweetest man I've ever met."

As a way of an answer, the wolf nudged her hand with his head then gently took it in his mouth. When he started pulling her over the spanning plank, she tightened her hand on Intimidation's reigns and followed him. She had nothing to lose. Her feet left the hardness of the wood for the crunchiness of a gravel walkway. It was a little awkward walking in the dark, holding on to a horse's reins with one hand and crouched so a wolf could lead her by the other. She fared reasonably well under the circumstance, stumbling only once or twice. Each time she tripped Riane slowed allowing to her regain her footing before continuing.

They wound their way through the darkness until Kyna bumped in to something made of wood. She felt around in front of her and found a large wooden door with a ring in the middle.

"I suppose you want me to open the door?" She felt for the wolf's head and scratched behind his ears.

The wolf nodded in response, so she felt around for the ring again. She dropped Intimidation's reins and grabbed the metal ring tightly with both hands. She yanked it, but the door did not budge. Repositioning her grip, she pulled harder on the ring and felt the door move a little. It was not more than an inch but it was enough to encourage her to continue tugging on the metallic ring.

The door finally squeaked slowly open. A waft of cool air blew across her face. She carefully stepped through the door. The room was as dark as the other places Riane had led her through. Maybe she had something in her bags she could use as a torch. She whistled for Intimidation to come to her. When she felt him nudge the top of her back, she reached for his head and felt down his neck and then his back for her bags. Just as she started fingering through one of the

bags, an unusually bright moon appeared in the sky illuminating the area around her.

The bag dropped to the ground. Kyna stood at the entrance of a beautiful courtyard. In the center stood a fountain in the shape of a rearing unicorn with water spewing from its horn. Four stone benches formed a ring around the fountain. Cobblestone paths wound around the yard looking something like a labyrinth. Lining the walls on the outer edges were rows and rows of flowers, shrubs, and small trees.

"Oh, Riane. It's so pretty!" She stepped out onto one of the cobblestone paths. "Who lives here?"

Riane ran around her barking playfully while Intimidation quietly followed behind. As she walked around the courtyard admiring its contents, the wolf stayed close. She reached a door on the other side and was turning away from it when he took her hand gently in his mouth and pulled her towards it.

She pulled against him. "Now Riane, I can't just walk into someone's house."

The wolf was persistent and continued to tug on her hand. There was no way she was going to change her companion's mind, so she decided to peek inside and hope the owner did not mind. Before she walked through the door, she called out a warning several times. When there was no answer, she cautiously pushed the door open afraid she might disturb a sleeping resident.

Kyna stuck her head through the opening and peered tentatively inside. Her lower jaw dropped open in shock. She stepped away from the door and surveyed the size of the structure. There was no way the cottage was large enough to contain the room on the other side of the door.

Riane bumped against her leg, pushing her back towards the door. She glanced down at him as her hand scuffed behind his ears. "You are definitely an enchanted wolf. The question is just who are you."

At the wolf's insistence, she finally swung the door open and stepped inside. To her right, a fire roared in a stone fireplace surrounded by several large plush chairs. The left side the room held a bed, a small dresser, and wardrobe. In front of her stood a medium sized table with several wooden cabinets along the wall behind it for storage. Just to the right of the cabinets she saw the outline of another door.

Normally, she would not have entered someone else's home, but the warm comfortable room beckoned her to come inside. Actually, "beckon" was probably too weak a word to use to describe the room's pull on her. The force drawing her into the room was very strong almost as if the room had been waiting just for her. With the room pulling on her from the front and Riane pushing on her from behind, she really did not have much choice but to walk to the center of the room. When she reached the middle of the floor, the door slammed shut behind her. She spun around to find both wolf and horse in the room with her. Kyna had intended to explore the room a little more, but now she should attend to Intimidation. Her mount was weary and in need a mean and good night's rest. But, just where was she going to put him?

Riane ran to the door beside the cabinets and pushed on it with his paw.

Shrugging, she walked over to him and turned the doorknob. "What's in here, Riane? A stable?" The door swung open and Kyna merely shook her head. "Never mind. I should've known."

She called to Intimidation. "Come look at the nice stable complete with food and water, Intimidation. Pick your stall and I'll make you comfy for the night."

The horse never hesitated. He walked immediately through the door and placed himself in the first stall. After she removed his saddle, feed him, and made sure he had enough water for the night, she walked back into the cottage to the smell of something delicious. It was the first time she realized something was cooking in the hearth. She lifted the lid on a black kettle to discover it was full of simmering soup.

"Riane! Whose food is this?"

The wolf appeared beside her with a bowl in his mouth and dropped it at her feet.

"Mine?"

His nose nudged the bowl towards her.

"Are you sure we won't get in trouble?"

Sitting on his haunches, he stared at the pot.

"All right, go get yourself a bowl too. I won't eat without you."

A ladle hung on a hook by the fireplace. She grabbed it and filled the first bowl halfway. When Riane brought the second bowl, she filled it to the brim for him. She carried both bowls over to the table where spoons and napkins lay waiting and sat down in one of the chairs. After she set her bowl on the table, she placed his on the floor.

One spoonful of the soup led to another and another. She glanced down at the wolf's empty bowl. "You know, Riane. I don't know if I'm just very hungry, but this is the best soup I've ever had. I guess you like it too. Thank you."

The wolf sat up and placed his paws on her lap then nuzzled her cheek with his nose. Her arms hugged his massive neck as he continued to lick her neck and cheeks. "Did you know you're the best friend I've ever had?"

Suddenly, she was very tired. The bed looked so inviting, but what if she fell asleep and the true owners of the cottage came home to discover her there?

Even though Riane had not put her life in danger thus far, she thought it better to spread her own pallet in front of the fire. Maybe in the light of day she could find a clue as to where she was and whose cottage she was using. As she crawled fully clothed between the covers of her pallet and closed her eyes, she thought how funny it was she felt she could trust this wolf with her life. A point further driven home when she felt the weight of his head lying on her leg.

The next morning the odor of cooking food stirred Kyna from her slumber. *Oh, the owners have returned. I wonder why they allowed me to sleep uninterrupted in front of their hearth.*

There was no one at the hearth, so she sat up and looked around one of the large chairs, but she saw no one in the cottage with her - not even Riane. Leaving her pallet behind, she crawled over to the hearth. Lifting the lid on the kettle from the night before, she discovered it full of steaming porridge.

"Riane!"

The door instantly flew open. The silver wolf landed in the center of the room in a protective crouch, snarling.

Kyna stood up and held her hand high in the air. "Riane, it's all right. Nothing's wrong. I just wondered where you were. I thought you left me or something happened to you."

The snarl was replaced with a hanging tongue and the crouch with a playful bounce. His bottom wiggled as he wagged his tail.

"Riane, do you know anything about this porridge?"

The wolf walked over to the kettle, carrying a bowl just as he had the night before. Since he could not answer her and there was no obvious evidence anyone besides her had been in the cottage, she let the matter drop.

After breakfast, she washed and changed clothes then went out for a walk. It seemed Riane had brought Kyna to the ruins of an old castle. Although the protective outer wall and the drawbridge were in working order, every other structure lay in the ruins except for the cottage and the surrounding courtyard.

A search of the cottage brought her no closer to ascertaining its owner, but she did find something interesting in one of the bottom drawers of the wardrobe. Hidden under the women's clothing in the draw, she found a small drawing of herself as teenager. She did not remember the portrait or even when it could have been done. It was as big a mystery as the fact all the clothes in the wardrobe were women's clothes and her exact size.

She decided to stay for a few days to see if the owner returned. Besides, something about the little cottage called to her, asking her to make it her own.

No one ever showed up to claim the cottage, so Kyna's stay extended into the months. She lived a peaceful and happy existence with Intimidation and Riane. Food and items she needed always miraculously appeared in the kettle, on the table, or in the wardrobe. She and the wolf remained constant companions, doing most everything together even hunting. Occasionally Riane would leave on his own, but he always stayed within calling distance returning home within a few hours. Her life could have gone on peacefully for years had the folk in the town below not formed a misconception about Riane.

The village set quietly in the valley below the castle ruins. The inhabitants were not much different than most of the people she encountered on her journey with Riane. They were simple country folk with a strong hold on the old legends and the suspicions of the fathers and grandfathers. The castle, according to the local gossip, was supposedly haunted by the specter of a ghostly prince. She had

never seen or heard anything out of the ordinary during her entire stay, so she dismissed it as a local legend. She rarely visited the village, because everything she needed was provided her at the cottage. The only times she dared to venture into the midst of the stares and whispers were when she was in desperate need of human conversation. If Riane or Intimidation spoke human language, she would not have need of these sojourns, but they did not and she craved to hear another voice besides her own.

Another weird thing about the villagers was that on the few occasions any of them did journey to the castle, they saw only ruins and destruction. They were not able to see her cute cottage or her lovely garden. It was simply further proof she was living in a ring of enchantment cast by some benevolent sorcerer. Not carrying any of the old superstitions or prejudices, magic nor its source frightened her. Everyone had magic in them. It was only a matter of recognizing the magic and learning how to harness its power. Kyna never had need of her inner magic, so she had never spent much time developing her talents. She much preferred the manual way of doing things, a habit that almost cost her dearly.

One night, Kyna was sitting on the edge of the fountain watching the moon's reflection in the rippling water. Riane lay nearby watching her intently through eyes tinged with a white glow. Fireflies lit the surrounding shrubbery with soft pulsating lights while crickets sang from the crevices in the stonewalls. The young woman lifted her head and spoke softly to moon, thanking her mother for watching over her and sending Riane to her.

Riane suddenly jumped to his feet and turned towards the front of the castle, a deep growl building in his throat.

Kyna stood and walked over to him, placing her hand on his back. "Riane, what's wrong?"

Violence suddenly shattered the quiet. A mob of men from the village spilled through the opening into the garden. Obviously, disregarding their fears and superstitions, they had entered the castle grounds and were now facing Kyna. They spread out around the front edge of the garden wall, waving weapons of pitchforks, hoes, scythes, and sticks.

"We want the wolf," the apparent leader demanded, brandishing a pitchfork.

Kyna placed herself as best she could between the men and Riane. "No one touches Riane," she answered wishing she had her sword with her.

"We want the wolf," the man repeated, looking around at his comrades.

"What's he done?" As she spoke, she felt something materialize in the palm of her hand. Flexing her fingers around the object, she recognized the hilt of her sword. It was hidden from the view of the villagers by her skirts. She was thrilled to have it with her and did not care how it came to be there, just that it was there.

The lead man pointed to Riane with the pitchfork. "Tonight, he came to our village and stole several cows."

Laughter filled the air as she tightened her hand around the sword. She glanced down at her growling companion, who was now standing beside her his hair bristled. "Riane's been with me all night, and if he hadn't been, one wolf cannot carry off one full-grown cow, let alone cows."

The men surrounded them and tried to grab Riane. "Don't lie to us, wench. We want him now."

Kyna's sword flashed before them. "I said. No one touches the wolf. Ever." And, she meant it too. She would die before she allowed them to harm one hair on Riane.

One of the men lunged for Kyna from behind but was immediately stopped by Riane with a nip to the wrist. The fighting began with one man then another trying Kyna's sword then being forced to retreat. Several of the men tried to take Riane, but the wolf was faster and sent them away bleeding. Wolf and woman stood back to back, so they could protect the other from a sneak attack. Unfortunately, it was not enough against all the villagers. There were just too many of them.

Kyna heard a noise to her left and turned, but it was decoy. As she turned, the leader struck her in the shoulder with his pitchfork. She sunk to her knees, holding her hand over the wound and her sword in her injured hand. The puncture was not too serious. She would be sore for a few days but that was all. Before she had the chance to tell Riane she was all right, the wolf was standing on top of the man with his mouth around his throat. All the men froze. Had they not expected that someone might possibly be harmed in their idiotic attack?

The injured woman crawled to the wolf and wrapped her good arm around his neck. "It's all right, Riane. It's just a flesh wound." Riane's eyes moved to the side and looked at her, but his mouth stayed clamped on the man's neck. "Please, Riane. Let him go. If you hurt him, they'll take you from me. I love you. I couldn't stand to be without you."

Tears welled up in her eyes and dropped one by one on his thick gray coat. He stared at the men standing around them then at Kyna. The men were visibly shaken by the wolf's gaze as evidenced by their trembling hands. Riane opened his mouth and slowly backed off the man's chest. As he stepped off and onto the flagstone patio, a knife came up from underneath and into his abdomen. The blood flowed and the wolf collapsed.

"NO!" Kyna grabbed him, forgetting about her own pain.

Tears rained from her eyes now and bathed Riane's face as she placed her cheek against his. He lay lifeless in her arms, except for the flick of his tongue on her cheek just before his breathing stopped.

Slowly she laid the lifeless body on the ground and grabbed her sword in her good hand. Rising to her feet, she fixed her eyes on the eyes of the leader who was still holding the bloody knife. "By all that's holy, I swear the whole village will suffer for what you've done. You've taken from me the only one in my life who cares for me. You will pay for that."

She pulled herself up to her full height, forgetting entirely about the gash in her shoulder. Although the moon above shone brightly around them, the area where Kyna stood over the fallen Riane was the brightest spot in the garden. Not only was she bathed in the moon's light but she was the only one able to move. The villagers stood around as stiff as statues. Her mother had kept her promise and came when she needed her. She could now deliver her retribution.

Kyna had raised her sword and stepped towards the leader when a voice behind her called out, "KYNA! NO!"

She knew that voice. It was a voice from her past, from much happier times. Her imagination must be playing tricks on her. That person was not in this part of the country anymore, let alone with her.

"Turn around. Please," the voice pleaded. "The villagers will cause no more harm."

Was it a trick? Had the enchantment of this place finally turned on her? She was afraid if she turned around, she either would be gravely disappointed or attacked by the men before her. Maybe even both.

"I-i-it can't be? It can't be you?" Her sword trembled in her hand.

A hand fell on her shoulder. "Yes, Kyna."

"But, they killed Riane. I can't let them..."

The hand squeezed her shoulder gently. "No, they didn't. I'm very much alive. Turn around and see for yourself."

The look of confusion on the men's faces only mirrored her own feelings. If the voice did belong to whom she thought it did and Riane, the wolf, was not dead, then that meant one thing. The man she had been in love with all these years knew everything that was in heart for she had spilled it all to the wolf.

"Riane... Prince Riane?" she whispered tentatively.

Strong hands clasped her shoulders and turned her around. She slowly lifted her eyes and found herself staring into the same crystal blue eyes she had lived with for the past few months. The prince smiled down at her and her knees grew weak. He was even more handsome than she remembered. The black hair from his younger years was now tinged with gray, which made a most wonderful contrast with his blue eye. Over the years it seemed he had not lost his tall lean athletic physique.

Her sword fell to the ground. "Riane, you were my wolf?"

His fingertips touched her lips. "We'll talk in a minute." He turned to the villagers. "I suggest that all my subjects return to their homes. Now!"

A sudden flurry of activity and dust was followed by the sound of running feet on the wooden drawbridge. As Kyna watched them scatter, she noticed for the first time the castle no longer lay in ruins. The towers and parapets stood before her strong and whole. All the trees and shrubbery outside her little garden were green and plush.

Riane interrupted her thoughts. "We will talk now." He took Kyna's hand and escorted her to the fountain. Her mind was still so distracted by what was taking place that she missed the wide bench built into the fountain and almost sat in the water. The prince quickly grabbed her and set her gently on the bench.

He dropped to his knees beside her still holding hand. "To answer your question. Yes, I was under an enchantment."

Her face blushed with embarrassment as she pulled her hand out of his. "I told you all my inner thoughts and feelings. How could you?"

"I had no choice. One night I went for a walk when the moon was full. I was lamenting on how I couldn't find a woman in my kingdom who was my equal. They all acted so brainless and meek. I want someone who can stand beside me not behind me. Anyway, the moon grew bright and a ray shone on the ground in front of me. A beautiful woman appeared in the light. Funny thing is, she looked just like you. She told me the woman I desired was out there and I had known her all my life. She changed me into a wolf with the understanding that once I found her, I could only be changed back if we were willing to die for each other."

"She's me?"

"As I said the woman looked uncannily like you. Once I was in my wolf form, I thought over all the women I've known in my lifetime. You are the only one with whom I've ever really been comfortable. I suppose I never thought of it as love until then. I knew I had to find you. It was pure luck I encountered you that night."

Kyna stared up at the heavens and the round moon beaming down on her. "Luck had nothing to do it. The moon goddess is my mother, which is why she looked like me. And the encounter with you was no accident, she arranged it all. She knew."

"Are you still angry with me for not being able to tell you who I was?"

"I was never angry with you. Just embarrassed I told all my deep dark secrets. Especially that I was in love with you."

His fingers gently stroked her cheek. "My love, you can't imagine what your revelation did to me. I wanted to hold you so badly, but I had no arms."

Tears welled in her eyes. She placed her hand over his and rubbed her cheek against his palm. "Oh Riane!"

The prince rose to his feet and gathered her in his arms. Holding her close, he tilted her face up and placed a gentle kiss on her lips. "Will you be my princess and rule over this land at my side?"

Her eyes remained closed. The emotions his kiss awakened filled her being. How could she not say yes to this man? What she would gain ruling at his side was not as appealing as merely having him at her side loving her. She opened her eyes to find Riane's eyes glowing in the moonlight. In the center of his eyes, she saw the face of the moon goddess smiling down at her.

There were no words to adequately convey her feelings, so she simply said, "Yes."

Riane lowered his head and covered her lips with his. As the prince kissed his princess, a ray of light radiated down from the moon and hugged them in her silvery arms.

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