

Wild Rose

Morning Encounter

Told from Alasdair's perspective

"For a first night, I'd say that's gone pretty well."

Alasdair looked at the Watchman, then at the figure being escorted away. Running with the wolves always made his heart sing, and he usually loved it when they ran early into the morning, but this time he couldn't shake a twinge of unease.

Conall nudged at his leg and whined.

"Hopefully other runners will be scared off the streets now they know you're here.

Sorry – I don't know your name," the Watchman said.

"I'm Alasdair. This is Conall."

"Great to meet you both. I'm Tony." Tony held out a hand for Alasdair to shake; his grip was cold from being out in the night air. "How are you finding Redcross?"

"It's..." Alasdair looked at the buildings surrounding them. They were far larger than the houses at Kilshiel, and the shadows they cast filled the entire street.

"Not used to being behind walls?" Tony's tone held a note of sympathy. "I haven't been outside the city for ages. I think I've almost forgotten what a tree looks like!"

Alasdair's glance strayed towards the runner again. Two Watchmen held him firmly by the arms as they marched him towards the correction facility. Conall had brought that one down himself; he'd launched himself at the runner's back and sent him tumbling heavily to the ground, narrowly missing the broken glass lying a few inches away.

"Do they always look so afraid?" Alasdair asked.

"Who? The runners?"

"Yes. Are they always so scared when they're caught?"

Tony's friendly expression faltered for a moment, and Alasdair thought he saw sadness in the man's eyes. But then Tony blinked, and the sorrow was gone.

"Sometimes they are, yes; nobody *wants* to go to the facility, after all. Then again, not every runner has a wolf after him." Tony smiled and nodded to Alasdair and Conall. "Hope you get some rest before tomorrow night!"

Alasdair knew he should go back to the Complex and the rooms they'd been assigned, but he didn't want to go to sleep just yet. In fact, he felt a little restless and he wasn't sure why. Conall's tail swished from side to side.

Alasdair raised his eyebrows at the wolf, and they wandered in the opposite direction from Tony. It felt like it had been a long time since Alasdair and Conall had taken a walk by themselves, although it might actually have only been a few days. He'd lost track of time since they'd left Kilshiel.

Soon, they heard someone running after them. Alasdair knew who she was by the way she approached. Sorchu came to a halt beside him.

"You don't feel tired either, do you?" she said.

"No."

"Mind if we join you?"

Alasdair smiled at her. "Not at all."

Lyall, Sorchu's wolf, trotted amicably alongside Conall, her black fur a sharp contrast to his red and grey.

As they walked through the streets, Alasdair had the feeling that Sorchu wanted to ask him something. He knew it was best to let her get the question out rather than ask what was bothering her, and sure enough she asked: "Do you know when we're going back home?"

"We've only just arrived. Kendrick and Aela can't have found someone that quickly."

“But how will they know what they’re looking for?”

Alasdair didn’t have an answer to that. He just hoped it went better than the last time. It *had* to.

Suddenly, Conall stopped, his ears pricked. Without warning, he loped ahead and around the corner, Lyall a little way behind him.

Sorcha and Alasdair followed them.

They had reached an open square in the middle of the city. Alasdair barely had time to realise this when he saw what had attracted the wolves’ attention. A figure stood in the middle of the square, in the centre of a pool of sunlight. She wore a pale pink dress that just brushed her knees and left her arms bare. Her blonde hair was loose and reached down past her shoulders.

What was she doing there? Alasdair knew curfew had ended several minutes ago, but why was she out so early?

Just then, the girl turned and saw the wolves. She froze, fear flashing across her face – and then she went very still, her arms by her sides. The fear vanished, leaving an expression of forced calm.

Conall padded towards her. Alasdair was about to call him back when Sorcha put a hand on his shoulder and shook her head. She looked back at the girl, as if waiting to see what would happen next.

The girl shuddered as Conall sniffed at her hand.

Alasdair decided that was enough. He stepped into the square and walked towards the three figures. Lyall noticed him and went back the way she had come, her black fur melting into the shadows.

“Hello,” Alasdair said.

Conall twitched his ears and went to join his human. Alasdair scratched the fur on Conall’s neck as they waited for the girl to respond.

“Hi.” Her voice was light as a breeze.

Wait – Alasdair knew her. “You were part of the emigration, weren’t you?” There hadn’t been many people his age there, but he definitely remembered her.

Now he was seeing her up close, he couldn’t help but notice she was very pretty. Her eyes were the same colour as the sky above them.

“Yes.”

Trying to put her at ease, Alasdair asked: “What’s your name?”

She swallowed. “I’m Emilia.”

“I’m Alasdair, and this here is Conall.”

“Hi, Conall.” A flush lit up Emilia’s face and she looked away from the wolf.

“What are you doing out here so early?” Maybe she had a job that started after curfew ended. “Do you have to be somewhere?”

“Not yet. I just wanted to walk around for a bit while everything was so quiet. I’m actually going home now.”

She was still nervous. Alasdair didn’t blame her in the slightest.

“Would you feel safer if we walked you home?”

Emilia looked surprised. Alasdair couldn’t blame her for that either. Why had he asked her that? Maybe he was uncomfortable about leaving her alone in the streets with nobody else around. Or maybe – not that Alasdair would ever have admitted it – it was because he didn’t want her to be afraid of Conall or himself when she had no reason to be frightened.

“Thank you,” Emilia said.

Alasdair frowned at her. “Does that mean you mind, or you don’t?”

“I don’t mind. My home’s this way.”

Alasdair glanced back towards where Sorcha and Lyall were hiding in the nearby street. Sorcha motioned rapidly for him to catch up with Emilia. To his surprise, Alasdair saw Conall was walking on Emilia’s other side, as if he belonged there.

“You’re staying in the Complex,” Emilia said after a moment. “How do you like it?”

"I don't know. It's different. There's not a lot of space here – open space, I mean." Alasdair could feel a yawn threatening to escape, so he quickly covered his mouth. "It's like being shut away from everywhere. Sorry," he added. For all he knew, Emilia liked living in Redcross; he didn't want to insult her home.

"It's OK."

"Was it different for you too?" Alasdair asked. He didn't remember the emigration stopping at other walled cities on the journey. "Where did you come from before you moved here?"

"Kindainn."

"An open town? Yeah, that is different. We collected you from so many places, but we never got to see any of them. Could you tell me what Kindainn's like?"

"Well, it's..." Emilia paused, her eyes softening a little. She glanced upwards before replying: "It's beautiful, and I'm not just saying that. There are three rivers; well, they're more like streams but we call them rivers. Two of them run right through the town and the third goes right past it. We swam in them when it was warm enough. Every single house has wild roses growing right in front of it; the Mayor's house is practically surrounded by roses and they are so gorgeous when they're in full bloom. We lived in a very pretty house. It wasn't as big as the Mayor's, but it was enough for us."

She started blinking rapidly.

"Was it just you and your parents?"

Emilia shook her head. "I've got two sisters. They moved out before we did. Have you got brothers and sisters?"

"Nope." Actually, that wasn't true. He did have brothers and sisters, just not by blood. "Well, I guess I do. You know how a pack is a family? Once you bond with a wolf cub, you become part of that family. Got to keep on the right side of the wolf in charge, though."

It had been a good idea to keep on the right side of Alban even if he hadn't been Gabrielle's wolf.

"What happened to her?" Emilia asked softly.

Of course she wouldn't know why Kendrick was the *teaghlach* leader now.

Alasdair pressed his lips together and looked at the ground. "She fell." He hadn't seen the body afterwards, and he'd been thankful for that. All he'd seen during the funeral was the white shroud wrapped around her.

A breeze whipped at them, sending Emilia's hair blowing around her shoulders and nipping at Alasdair's fingers.

"Are you cold?" Alasdair asked.

"I can handle it."

By now, they were nearly surrounded by small, identical homes. Emilia stopped in front of a house with a dark blue door. "This is my home," she said. "Thanks for walking me back."

"You're welcome."

Emilia walked towards the door. She was just about to touch the handle when something made Alasdair blurt out: "I just remembered – you didn't say your last name."

He wasn't sure why he wanted to know what it was.

"Oh. It's Costello."

Just then, Emilia glanced down at Conall and her expression changed. She reminded Alasdair of a bird who had just noticed a threat in the area. "Goodbye."

She went inside the house and closed the door, leaving Alasdair and Conall standing outside.

He supposed he should have expected that. He knew some people didn't see Wolf-Lords as fully human, not after what Joshua Haigan had done. The fear still hadn't gone away.

Was it him she had been wary of, or Conall?

Conall nudged his leg again. Alasdair smiled and caressed his head. "Let's go."

Kendrick would be wondering where they were.

Fortunately, they knew exactly where they were going, as it was virtually impossible to get lost on the way to the Complex. But as they walked, Alasdair couldn't stop thinking about Emilia. As far as wolves went, Conall was very friendly, but it was rare for wolves to take quickly to people they didn't know.

He had walked beside *her*, not Alasdair.

When they approached the Complex, Alasdair saw Kendrick and Aela standing outside. Kendrick was talking to Tony; it was impossible to hear what they were saying, but Kendrick glanced at Alasdair and nodded to him. The slight raise of his eyebrows told Alasdair that Kendrick would want to know why he and Conall hadn't come back with the others.

The sleep Alasdair had fought off for hours was starting to catch up with him. He trudged through the corridors and towards the rooms allocated to the Wolf-Lords, trying to keep his heavy eyelids from closing. Even Conall was unable to keep himself from yawning.

Emilia Costello. It was a lovely name.

Alasdair might not be able to show everyone that they didn't need to be afraid of wolves or Wolf-Lords – but maybe he could convince Emilia.

He hoped he would get the chance to do so.