

Bellocaro Excerpt by P.S. Meraux

Whatever was coming — it was getting closer.

Feeling tense my eyes scoured the dark bushes, trying to discern whatever was in the gloom. Tegwyn's admonishments rang out in my memory, "Nothing should be able to hurt you here, but don't push it." *Should?* Surely there weren't wild animals on the island too, right?

There was a flicker of movement, a dark shape barely visible against the blackness of the surrounding forest it traveled through. I narrowed my gaze trying to figure out what it was. The shape slowed. Head dipping to the ground like it was sniffing at something or had caught a scent. A thudding heartbeat later I realized what it smelled was *me*.

Suddenly the massive bulk of a muzzle shifted through the conifers, jaw dropping to reveal a glistening row of sharp white teeth. The intimidating display of lethal-looking incisors must have been a foot long!

Panting from its run, the creature came to a stop after passing by the last branch of a bald cypress. I used the word *creature* because it defied common sense. Having quickly caught its breath, the tongue pulled back in the muzzle and the paws began to move.

What I saw was freaking enormous, covered in dark fur. Paws the size of horse's hooves were steadily coming closer. The monster was unquestionably more lupine than equine.

"Oh my God," I huffed out a frightened breath, fearing I might hyperventilate. A chill ran down my spine that had nothing to do with the October evening breeze.

Calling it a wolf was an insult to nightmares. While it was shaped like one — it was like a wolf on steroids. The bad kind, that made the user ginormous, stupid, and overly aggressive. I imagined bulging, ugly veins hidden under the thick fur.

The clouds must have drifted past the moon, I didn't dare take my eyes off the creature to make sure. Moonlight illuminated its fur revealing touches of gray and silver in the mud-splattered hide.

My earlier dark thoughts about stepping off the railing cast aside, now I really did wonder if this was to be my last night on Scedu.

To the left I heard something else coming through the bushes, *fast* with more agile footsteps. Was there another one? My hands began to grow clammy against the cold metal.

"Oh crap!" I gulped, terrified.

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Unexpectedly, as the noise of *whatever* followed the massive beast got closer, there was a flash of blue fabric in front of me. Then two things happened so swiftly I couldn't tell which happened first.

"No chase! No!" A voice hissed in the gloom so softly I could have imagined it.

"What the hell—" the soft voice said a second later, sounding more aggrieved.

Darting through the branches of two mature cedars bounded another monster wolf. It shifted from the cover of the forest into the clearing with such speed that it took a moment to discern that it wasn't alone; not one but *two* more giant wolves! Neither as big as the first but now swarming around it. Massive teeth nipped at the grayish creature like they were trying to bite it or halt it.

They seemed to perceive this nocturnal excursion with more intensity than their larger cousin, adamant in the attempt to get the monster wolf's attention, trampling the weeds and grass in a slapdash manner.

Frightened out of my socks, I forgot there was nothing but a long drop behind me and lifted one foot off the rail with the intention of running like the wind, abruptly stumbling. I gasped and quickly tried to correct my mistake, wildly groping the metal rail with slick hands. My body vibrated with fear as I stared into the black abyss below.

Without warning, cool fingers gently encircled one wrist, locking it in place with the power of a vice. Another set grabbed the opposite forearm as I struggled to get my feet firmly back on the slippery perch.

"I've got you."

Glancing up I saw a boy standing there. His strong hands kept me from falling to my death. A disgruntled expression traveled across his face, eyes becoming distant for several seconds as though assessing some inner thought and the grimace vanished, well almost. His mouth remained twisted down.

Staring in astonishment — my mind couldn't function properly. Unable to fathom where he came from, I knew he shouldn't be there. It wasn't safe.

Incisors of the monster wolves were snapping and gnashing less than twenty-five feet away. Yet he acted as calmly as if we were alone. Didn't he see them?

The smaller creatures seemed to be corralling the grayish wolf or altering its course. And the big one didn't like it.

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Rearing back on hind legs the monster wolf growled at the other two, immense jaws scissoring open and shut over their heads as if in warning. A deep snarl that erupted from the large mouth could have been saying, "Cut it out," if it had a voice.

The wolf with the light brown fur ignored the warning, hurtling a muscular shoulder against the gray one's exposed midsection. The big wolf made a gagging noise that sounded like a grunt. The second newcomer hoisted dark forepaws against the same area and together they succeeded in knocking the third backward. All three landed in an explosion of yelps, barks and snapping teeth.

I gasped.

"Are you okay?" the strange boy asked in an annoyed tone.

Too stunned by what I saw to speak, I merely nodded.

Clouds hid the moon again. The clearing fell into darkness. I squinted to see where the monster wolves were. I felt rather than saw my would-be rescuer's head shift.

"Find him," the boy hissed so quietly I thought I might have imagined that too. Who was he talking to?

The darker wolf growled lightly, head quickly swinging toward us before returning to the downed one, muzzle pushing against the muddy body forcing it to move with some urgency. The monster creatures merged into one shapeless blob in the shadows. Unable to see them but knowing they were out there only heightened my fear.