Farewell To Oregon

My hand collided firmly with Sam's, a tense smile on my face as I shook hands with the luna's oldest friend. "Thank you, Sam, for everything. I learned a lot from you."

Sam laughed. "I wished I knew you better, Keegan. Maybe if things were different."

A moment passed in silence before Sam shook his head. He had a wistful smile on his face as he shrugged and grabbed a hold of his crutches. "Maybe."

I grimaced. "Good luck with everything." Sam returned the sentiment, and I turned away, moving on to say my goodbyes to a few others who were lingering around the main tent.

I had spent the night with Lux and the majority of the day making my rounds around the camp, trying to get to everybody before I left.

I passed by one of the elderly ladies and kissed her cheek. Her smile was gap-toothed as she said her farewells. I kept walking, passing by tents, waving to those I wasn't too close to.

I saw the luna up ahead with Colton and Deelia and ran over, weaving around a few kids who were kicking a soccer ball around.

Colton grinned at me as I came toward him, reaching out a hand for me to shake.

"I wasn't sure if you were going to stop and say goodbye before you left," Colton said. "I'm glad you did. When are you leaving?"

I didn't miss the way Deelia's lips pursed as though she had tasted something sour.

I shifted on my feet. "Not until tonight. I have a lot of things to sort out."

Livy smiled. "I was surprised when Cole told me you were resigning. I never thought you'd run from Oregon." Like her daughter, the luna seemed bitter.

I tried my best not to react to her choice of words.

I scratched the back of my head. "I don't have any family here, Luna. I have other obligations and other reasons that draw me northward. I'm not running, I'm trying to move on."

Deelia's voice was sharp. "What other reasons?"

Livy frowned. "Dee, not the time to ask."

"When should I then, Mom?" Deelia shot back. Her hazel eyes held an accusation. Deelia raised a dark eyebrow as she waited for my response.

I cleared my throat. "My parents were heading north before they died. I figured I would go and find what they were looking for."

Deelia's lips fell open slightly before she looked down and crossed her arms over her chest. Usually, she was hard to read, but she wore pity openly.

Livy's expression softened slightly. "You're taking your servant with you?"

Deelia's reaction was instantaneous. "What?" The pity vanished and was replaced with a bitter mixture of surprise and jealousy.

I prayed to the Goddess she would stay quiet. "Yes, I'm going to need help to start my life over. I didn't want to leave her here where she would just be a burden."

Colton smiled at me. "Good luck, Keegan. If things ever get better here, you should come back. Oregon is your home and I like to think that we are family."

Loyalty was what defined a werewolf. "Thank you, Colt." I pulled him into a quick hug and slapped his shoulder, wishing he was coming with me.

Colton had turned out to be a decent guy, and if I was going to miss anyone, it was him.

Livy looked at me for a long time under the brim of her hat before she reached up and took it off, smiling.

"I hope the Goddess is kind in the North. You've been a good friend not only to my husband but also to my children."

Her eyes held a stiff sort of gratefulness. "Your talents and contributions to the war effort are appreciated will be missed. Good luck in the next stage of your life."

Without another word, the luna turned back toward the main tent.

Colton smiled at me one more time before turning and leaving as well, his movements slow and full of dread. I smiled at his retreating figure.

Finally, I forced myself to meet Deelia's eyes. Before Lux, Deelia and I had been close. We had started as friends, but eventually, filled another role in each other's lives.

I was fond of the memories I shared with her, but nervous that she might exploit them now.

"I don't understand it," she started. I opened my mouth to protest but she held up a hand. "But I know you'd never leave unless it was serious."

"Dee—"

She grimaced. "I thought I loved you, Keegan, and in a way, I think I did." She looked down, her hair covering her face for a moment. "What is it about her?"

"She's my mate," I told her softly. "And she turned."

Deelia's eyes welled up with tears. "What else though? What else do you love about her? I want to know that you're really going to be happy.

"Especially since there's a good chance we'll never meet again."

I sucked in a breath, feeling stifled. What was I supposed to say? "Deelia, I don't think—"

"Please."

"I love her passion, her understanding of the world, her resilience, her bravery," I said. "To be honest, there's nothing about her that I don't find endearing, or beautiful, or breathtaking.

"She's my mate, Deelia, I just love *her*. It's that simple."

Deelia looked like she had been struck. "Okay," she said, her voice shaking. "Okay, that's good. I'll just… Goodbye, Keegan."

I watched as she turned and ran from me, her arms hooked around her sides like armor. I frowned, understanding that she'd hoped her question would prompt me to realize I didn't love Lux.

I let my shoulders sag as the sky opened up and the sun started to set. I swatted a few flies away as I walked through the camp, chuckling as a couple of kids rolled around in the mud.

I blinked the rain out of my eyes and kept walking, heading for my tent.

A hand on my shoulder made me jump and turn. As soon as I saw my uncle, my wolf growled and its hackles rose.

“Nephew,” he greeted, grinning like a wolf.

I smiled tersely and took a step back, letting his hand fall in between us. “Uncle Eric, I was meaning to come and see you. To say goodbye.”

His eyes were cold. “You would’ve missed me if you’d carried on this way. My tent is toward the back of the camp, as you are aware.”

I tensed. “I was going to—”

“Of course, Keegan,” he glided over the topic we were discussing the weather.

“I feel like I haven’t had a proper look at you since you came back to us. Stand straight… That’s it.” He grabbed hold of my shoulders and squared them, his fingers digging painfully into my skin.

“I’m not much different from how I left you, Uncle,” I told him.

Eric raised an eyebrow. “But you *are* different.” I held my breath as he inhaled. “There’s a lingering smell on you… Perhaps it has something to do with your conversation with Miss Deelia just now?”

My entire body stiffened, and my eyes wandered to my tent across the way. He knew. Of course, he knew.

Suddenly, all I think about was Lux and her safety. I couldn’t delay our departure any longer; we had to leave now.

I tried to move away from my uncle’s grasp. “I’m sure I’m just a little taller. If you’ll excuse me, I have some last-minute packing to do before—”

Eric’s lip curled. “You insolent child. Do you really think I’m going to let you abandon this pack to run north with your tail tucked between your legs?

“What a disgrace to your family and species. I’d rather kill you now than have people think we have cowardice in our blood.”

“It’s not cowardice to refuse to fight for something you don’t believe in,” I argued. “It’s bravery.”

My uncle scoffed. “What do you know of bravery? You’ve never had to do what it takes. Never had to do something so horrible for the sake of the greater good.”

My entire body radiated hatred and heat. “Like kill your own brother?”

My uncle didn’t flinch. He smiled. “Exactly.”

I recoiled, this time strong enough to pull myself out of his grasp. “No.”

Eric stepped toward me. “I loved your father. I loved him more than life itself, but he was foolish, his ideas were poison, and poison is dangerous to everyone.”

“What are you talking about?” I gasped, feeling lightheaded. I looked around, wondering if anyone had noticed our disagreement, but we were alone. Everyone was inside due to the rain.

My uncle glared at me. “Your father didn’t understand the danger that we were in. *We* as a pack, *we* as a species. He was a fool to think that the humans would relent.”

“You killed them when they were defenseless!”

My uncle snarled. “Do you think they would have spared me if I was without a weapon? Do you think the human I slaughtered would have hesitated if the situation was reversed?”

“Did you even hesitate?” I asked, horrified.

“No!” he shouted. “Of course not! It would have meant my death.”

“You wouldn’t listen to reason. I read my father’s journal.”

My uncle’s expression was livid.

“Your father was the one who was blind! He couldn’t see the damage the humans were doing to us. He wanted to believe that they were acting out of circumstance and not instinct. He was a fool.”

Tears mixed with rain on my face. “So, you killed him? You just killed him?”

“Killing your father was the best and most terrible thing I’ve ever had to do,” Eric said, his voice unwavering and his eyes hard.

He had the look of a man who had accepted his demons long ago. “It was necessary.”

“Necessary?” I exploded. “You killed him! And you killed my mother too! And you killed me and my future and you ruined everything!

“Why didn’t you just let him leave? They were going north. Why didn’t you just let him go?” I looked down, feeling my jaw tense with fury.

“Because he was taking half our forces with him,” he yelled. “Your father was a respected man. People listened when he spoke, people trusted his words.

“When he decided to leave instead of fight, many people wanted to follow his example. We would have been ruined.”

My ears were ringing. The truth was deafening. “He was your family.”

“He was our downfall.”

“You couldn’t have known that,” I gasped. “You couldn’t have.”

“It wasn’t a chance I wanted to take,” Eric said stiffly. “I knew there was only one way to keep his followers here.

“I used a human weapon to kill him. I convinced his followers that their leader had been killed by the very thing he sympathized with.”

“My mother,” I whispered. “What do you have to say about that?”

“Her death wasn’t my fault. She killed herself.”

“Because you killed my father,” I snapped.

“Collateral.”

I lunged for him, unable to listen to him speak about my parents anymore.

Within seconds, I was reminded that I wasn’t made for fighting. My uncle moved quickly, grabbing my throat and slamming me to the wet ground.

“I should have killed you off when your mother died,” he whispered to me, his face inches from mine. “I took pity on you; perhaps, I was even feeling remnants of remorse.

“That was a mistake.” His fingers tightened around my throat and I coughed.

“Let me go,” I wheezed.

My uncle growled. “Let you go so you can disgrace this family by mating with that half-breed and skipping town? I don’t think so.

“I warned you, Keegan. I thought I’d made it clear that I wouldn’t tolerate any disobedience.” He let go of my throat and I jammed my knee upward, hitting him in the stomach. He barely reacted.

“You disgraced this family when you decided to tear it apart,” I seethed, rolling to my knees.

My mind was reeling as it tried to process what it had learned. My uncle had killed my father. And he knew about Lux.

“I saved this family,” Eric yelled. “I saved it from weakness!”

My whole body started to shake as my wolf clawed at my skin, ready to take control. I closed my eyes, trying to push him back. I had to get to Lux.

“I’m leaving, Eric,” I told him. “Let me go, right your wrong.”

His lip curled. “You’re not taking the Freeman girl.”

The shift was close. “She’s my mate.”

“She’s a bargaining chip,” he argued. “And if Stan Freeman doesn’t want to trade, then she becomes a sacrifice to the Goddess and a warning to their race.”

“She’s one of us!” I countered. “Werewolf blood is dominant!”

“She needs to be put down,” Eric said darkly.

I snapped and shifted, running toward him with my teeth bared. My canines sunk into his forearm before he managed to fling me away, shifting into his wolf and growling.

I stood tall once I was back on my feet, my fury burning in me. I wanted to fight my uncle. I wanted to kill him.

My wolf felt the same way. He was prepared to kill to protect Lux, our mate. He was going to eliminate whatever threatened her.

The rain pelted the ground around us and the sun was completely gone.

The only light that illuminated the clearing came from the various gas lamps and makeshift torches that lined the pathways of the temporary village.

Eric started to walk, forcing us into a sort of dance where we sized one another up. The wound I had left on his forearm was bleeding, soaking into his gray fur red.

I watched him as he moved, trying to find vulnerable points while he did the same to me.

He lowered his head, raised his hackles, and swished his tail back and forth. He was getting ready to lunge, his aggression clear.

I took a step forward, ready to attack, when suddenly, all the gaslights went out and the piercing sound of a howl broke through the quiet.

Within seconds, people were scrambling to extinguish the torches and make it back to their homes.

An attack was coming.

A human attack.

–

I felt permanently cold.

Maybe it was all I had been through. Maybe it was my poor decision to sit in the rain on the side of a highway. Maybe it was the loss of a friend. Maybe it was the trauma of the attack.

But whatever it was, I couldn’t seem to get warm.

It had been a few hours since Keegan had left me to sort things out with the pack and say his goodbyes. I busied myself with packing and tidying up his tent.

When I finished, I crawled onto his bed, pulling the blankets to my chin as I shivered.

I dreamed reruns of the last few days. I dreamed about Alpha Vex and his kindness. The beauty of the other pack’s way of life.

The smell of smoke. The horror of wolves burning. The pressure on the back of my skull—

I hadn't realized I was sleeping until I jolted awake. I felt pressure on my leg and looked up. A hand was pressed to my mouth before I could scream.

Doug Lott hovered over me, his shaved head gleaming in the low light, his red face repulsive.

My heart quickened as my hands and feet went numb from fear. One hand was pressed to my mouth; the other was traveling the length of my leg.

He smiled at me; his teeth were like gravestones. "Sorry to startle you," he whispered, his voice rough despite its low volume. I breathed heavily into his hand.

Lott grinned. "I'm going to take my hand off your mouth and you're not going to scream."

Slowly, he removed his hand. As soon as he did, I sucked in a breath, ready to scream for my life, but he slapped me before I could.

He grabbed my face between his hands, squishing my cheeks together until they dug into my teeth.

"What did I just say?" Lott let me go by tossing my head to the side.

I scrambled upward, pulling my legs into my chest and trying to get as far away from him as I could. Lott watched me, his small eyes smiling.

"Get away from me," I hissed.

"Stone sent me to get you."

"Keegan wouldn't."

"His uncle," Lott informed me, smiling again. His hand reached for my leg and I kicked out at his wrist. I heard a snap and paled as Lott's entire face went red. "You little bitch."

I scrambled out of the bed, running for the exit and for my life. Lott grabbed my hair, pulling me back and slamming me to the ground. I blinked and groaned as my head collided with the hard earth.

I lashed out by clawing at his face as I kicked out my legs, trying to get a hit in. A rumble of a laugh rolled off Lott's tongue, infuriating me further.

I yelled and received a punch across the face as a consequence.

I twisted my body and slammed my elbow into his throat, feeling a sick satisfaction as he made a strangled gurgling sound and clutched his skin. Lott rolled off me, coughing and spluttering.

I jumped up, aiming a kick at his ribs, hoping to hear a crunch of bone. Instead, Lott grabbed my ankle and yanked. I stumbled, falling to my knee. Lott growled as his eyes turned dark.

I got up as fast as I could, grabbing a chair and swinging it around, hoping to catch Lott in the face.

But he was already standing and I only caught his midriff. The chair splinted and fell apart, leaving me weaponless as Lott lunged at me.

He caught my shoulders and spun me so that my back was pressed against the front of him. His hands were greedy. "Stop fighting," he cooed in my ear. "You're a weak little bitch."

I stomped hard on his foot and brought the back of my head against his face, smashing my skull into his nose.

He roared and took a hold of my hair, smashing my face against the wooden table in front of me.

I gasped as pain exploded across my face. Blood gushed from my nose, coating my face and blossoming against my tongue.

I spat it out and drew in a breath just before Lott gave my hair another yank and threw me to the ground.

“Did Stone not teach you to protect yourself?” he questioned, laughing a little. “He must really think nothing of you. Here I was, foolishly thinking he meant more to you than a servant.

“Tsk, I guess he only kept you around to fold the laundry.”

I looked for a weapon, finding nothing that was going to help. I screamed for help, praying someone would hear. Praying Keegan would come. Lott’s face twisted with dislike and he reached for me.

Instinct ravished me, driving me to bite the hand that came toward my face.

Lott swore as his eyes sparked to life. “You have fight left, don’t you?”

I forced myself up and hit my shoulder against his, hoping to catch him off guard in his half-squatted position. He was as solid as a rock.

He wrapped his hands around me, and this time, there was no escaping. He held me firmly, his eyes bright and excited. My stomach rolled as I realized how much he loved to fight, loved to win.

“What do you want?” I all but sobbed.

“I want to know why you smell different,” he pressed his nose to my cheek and I flinched. “Why you smell better.”

He dragged his nose across my face, his hands knotting in my hair. “You smell more like him, more like the brat.”

I started to shake—half in anger and half in fear. “Get your hands off me.”

Lott froze unexpectedly, his eyes growing wide. “You can’t be—”

The wolf in my mind was growling. “Get off.”

Lott laughed. “Just when you think you’ve seen everything—”

I shifted, exploding outward with force. Teeth and claws extended from me, catching Lott across the chest as I changed forms. I heard him swear as he was forced off me.

I rolled to my feet, instinct taking over as my hackles rose and a growl ripped itself from my throat. Lott stared at me for a moment, and then he started to laugh hysterically.

“You’re challenging me, little wolf? What are you going to do? You’re untrained and inexperienced. Look at you, you’re practically shaking.”

Unfortunately, Lott was right. I had no idea how to attack in this body. I just knew that I would do whatever it took to defend myself.

My first instinct was to throw him off using my voice, so I growled at Lott. Of course, this pursuit was pointless.

Lott laughed at me and lumbered closer. His entire body started to shake and my wolf whined, realizing he was close to shifting as well.

I knew that as soon as he was in his shifted form, I was as good as dead.

But then the lights went out.

Lott raised an eyebrow as he inhaled sharply. My body tensed as I planned to take advantage of the distraction. But just as I was about to lunge, a sharp howl filled the silence.

Lott’s grin widened as he looked back at me. “I guess it’s time to choose, girly. The humans are coming. You either kill them, or they kill you.”