The Toad And The Tall

It didn't take long for Lott to flee from Keegan's tent. Immediately after the warning howl cut through the air, he was gone, eager to fight the humans. I watched him go, burning with anger.

I heard a shout and a sharp growl and was suddenly jolted out of my thoughts.

I had to do something. My first instinct was to find Keegan, but I knew that I'd be a target in this form and little help to the wolves around me.

I paced around the tiny space. I closed my eyes and tried to concentrate. Finding peace in my mind was hard when I kept catching screams and the sporadic firing of guns.

I growled under my breath and sunk my head low to the ground, trying to shut down my most carnal sense.

Forcing my wolf not to tune into what she was hearing was hard as her hearing was what she relied on the most after her sense of smell.

After a minute of intense concentration, I was able to shift back into my human form. I took a few moments to catch my breath before I stumbled to my feet and scrambled for clothing.

I froze as nausea overcame me and was forced to swallow back rising bile in my throat. I had to find Keegan. And we had to get out of here.

I heard a scream and jumped as blood sprayed against the outside of the tent.

My hands shook as I scrambled backward, watching as the blood started to run down the side of the tent, the rain pushing it toward the earth. A dark shape was huddled against the base of the wall.

I closed my eyes and pressed my palms to my thighs, trying to rein in my thoughts.

I couldn't let my mind wander back to Vex's pack. I couldn't let images of their village burning worm their way into my head or else I would think about Sophie…

I stopped and swallowed hard, digging my nails into my skin. *Enough!*

I grabbed shoes and slipped them on as I tried to gather my courage to leave the safe haven of Keegan's tent. Unfortunately, I didn't have as much time as I'd hoped.

As soon as my shoes were secure, two humans entered the tent with their guns hitched on their shoulders. They scanned the space, their eyes not yet landing on me.

I jumped in surprise and started to backpedal toward the back of the tent, heading for the deep corners where the darkest shadows lingered.

"It reeks in here," one of the men said. The tall man kicked over Keegan's nightstand. A picture frame tumbled and cracked on the floor.

"Fucking mutts," the other agreed. "They live in complete filth." I bit into my hand as the man swung his gun around carelessly, the end of it passing my hiding place more than once.

"Of course, we're the ones sent into the trenches," the tall one complained. "Not like Stan Freeman would ever get his suit dirty here." My heart stilled.

“Apparently, his daughter didn’t mind getting dirty,” the second man said.

He was an awful-looking man with thick limbs and a head that rested on his shoulders like a boulder. He looked like a toad. “Rumor is she was passed around the dogs, serving as a good f—”

“Come on, man, the girl’s dead,” the tall one said.

He was rifling through Keegan’s belongings now, picking up his valuables and then discarding them without a thought after he was no longer interested.

“It’s a bloody shame too,” the toad-like man said. “I would’ve liked to have had my way with her.” I shivered.

The tall man shook his head and started walking around again, his steps getting closer and closer to where I was hiding in the shadows.

“I don’t think there’s anything in here,” the tall man said. “It’s empty.”

The toad squatted on Keegan’s bed, making my stomach turn. “We may as well take our time in here. I don’t like the sound of what’s going on outside that tent.”

The toad was right. The whole time they had been in the tent, the sounds outside were getting more ferocious.

Gunfire was constant. Wolves growled and snarled. The sound of snapping and gurgling was regular.

The rain was picking up too, somehow serving to intensify all the other sounds rather than subdue them.

The tall guy was pale. “I have no idea why I ever decided to enlist.”

The toad cackled. “It’s either kill the damn wolves or have them in bed with your sister.”

The tall guy opened his mouth to respond but all I could hear was a huge explosion and then a high-pitched whine in my ears.

The sudden burst of light from the bomb was all it took for both of the humans to spot me.

Panic rippled through me as I launched to my feet, the whining in my ears growing stronger. I cried out and placed my hands over my ears, blinking hard to try to dismantle the pain in my head.

What was happening?

I watched as the toad man stood and laughed, though I couldn’t hear him. He sauntered over to me and grabbed my hair, bringing my face to his.

He squinted a little when he met my eyes, my face probably seeming familiar.

I managed to read his lips. “The bombs disorientate the fuckers,” he said. “Messes with their sensitive hearing.” I groaned as the ringing in my head continued. How long was this going to last?

The tall guy hovered over the toad’s shoulder, scrunching his face as he looked at mine. After a moment, I watched as the light bulb went off in his head. I watched his lips form my name.

The toad started and looked closer at me, moving to grip my shoulders. His rancid breath fanned over my face and I recoiled, squirming in his grasp.

The toad looked me up and down; the words *my lucky day* rolling off his lips.

The same panic I’d felt when Doug Lott had been here was running through me again. My limbs froze for a brief moment before my head cleared.

At last, the ringing dulled until it was easy to ignore in the back of my brain.

I looked the toad man right in the eye as I spat on his face. “Fuck you.”

The toad barely flinched, but his partner laughed. “Are you stupid, girly?” he asked me, leaning in close. “We’re going to take you back to your daddy.”

The toad glared at me. “I should teach her a lesson first.”

“Do you want Stan Freeman to chop your balls off?” the tall guy asked the toad.

The toad looked at me warily. “You’re right.” As soon as he started to drag me, I rammed my knee into his crotch.

The toad released me immediately and I started running, making it to the entrance of the tent as the tall man wrapped his arms around my chest.

“You don’t want to go out there,” he promised me.

I blinked hard, unable to believe what it was I was seeing.

Wolves and humans were scattered all over the place. Humans staggered around, clutching their wounds. Wolves growled, the fur around their muzzles stained red.

Shifters lay naked on the ground riddled with holes. Kids were crying in the mud, only to be silenced by a bullet a moment later. Humans lay on their backs, clutching at their ripped-open stomachs.

It was chaos.

I felt myself being jerked backward and slammed my elbow into the tall man’s gut, hoping he would release me. He didn’t. I fought him desperately, now more than ever wanting to find Keegan.

What if he was lying out in the rain like those other wolves? What if he was bleeding and alone? What if he was already gone?

“What is your problem, girl?” the toad asked. “We’re taking you to your father.”

“No,” I screamed violently. “Let me go.”

The toad looked at his partner and made a confused face. “What—?”

“Let me go.” I started to shake; my whole body felt ready to explode.

“Is she—?” Without another word, the toad reached into the pockets of his military-style pants, grabbing a syringe and ripping the cap off with his teeth.

He moved until he was standing directly in front of me, his eyes gleaming. “Low-grade wolfsbane,” he told me. “Stops the shift without killing the shifter.”

He swung his hand down, jabbing the needle into my thigh and pushing the end of the syringe down until the amber liquid was completely gone.

I screamed and thrashed, already feeling my wolf slipping from the foreground of my mind.

It only took seconds for my entire body to feel numb and for my limbs to feel heavy.

My knees gave out a few seconds later, and before I knew it, the tall man was supporting my weight by hooking his arms underneath mine.

The toad looked down at me and swore. “So, Stan Freeman’s daughter is a mutt? No wonder he told everyone she was dead.” Even in my drugged form, I flinched.

“That’s some skeleton in the closet,” the tall man agreed, dragging me over to the bed where he deposited me carelessly.

With my last bit of strength, I rolled myself over so my cheek was pressed against Keegan’s pillow and my nose was buried in his scent.

The tall man sat on Keegan’s armchair across the room, flinging his gun to the ground and parking his muddy boots onto the ottoman in front of him.

“It’ll be over soon,” he told the toad. “Freeman had thousands of men shipped here today.”

The toad laughed. “I don’t care how freakishly strong those wolves are. There’s no way a pack of a hundred is taking out that many soldiers.”

My heart constricted as I thought of Keegan, Colton, and kind-hearted Jude. What was happening to them?

“We’ll wait it out here,” the tall man said. “And then we’ll take the girl to her father.”

“What do you reckon we will get for her safe return?”

The tall guy laughed. “Stripes of honor and a fuck load of money.”

They shared a laugh that made me nauseous again, only this time, I didn’t have the strength to stop myself from vomiting. I heard one of the men swear and felt a sick sort of satisfaction.

I felt like I laid there for hours, trapped in my own body, forced to listen to the two most brain-dead cowards on the face of the earth.

The tall man and the toad were right about one thing though: the fighting outside didn’t last long.

A half-hour later, the last few bullets rang out, followed by the sound of gurgling growls, desperate whines, and pitied whimpers.

I closed my eyes after a while, wishing I couldn’t hear anything but the light rain.

After another hour passed, the tall man poked his head out of the tent, bringing his gun with him. He returned with a triumphant smile.

“They got the bastards,” he told the toad. “A lot of our guys are dead but there are an awful lot of wolf pelts waiting to be collected too.”

I would have vomited again if I had anything left.

The toad laughed and grabbed my arm, yanking me upward and wrapping an arm around my waist.

I was draped around him, uncomfortably close. The smell of Keegan was gone, replaced by rancid sweat and the smell of smoke.

The two men lugged me out of the tent and into the rain.

I tipped my face back and let the water cover me, wishing it would rejuvenate me to my full strength, but knowing that all my silly hopes were in vain.

The air was thick and hard to swallow but it was the stench that made it hard to breathe. All around me was the smell of blood and decay.

I looked around in a daze as I watched faceless soldiers pick up their dead and throw them onto stretchers.

The wolves were left to rot.

We passed by a tiny wolf, just a child, folded in on itself. The pup’s tan pelt was stained with blood, its eyes were open, its tongue lolling over its teeth. The toad spat on it as we passed by.

After a few more minutes of walking, I began to understand where they were taking me: Cole’s tent.

It made sense that my father would take the place of the alpha. What better way was there to spit on the culture of the defeated than to disgrace its leader?

My dad had posted two guards at the front of the tent that the toad and the tall man reasoned with before they were granted access, then they dragged me inside.

My father’s voice drifted out of the tent. “The small group that escaped were seen fleeing north—”

As soon as we breached the threshold, all conversations in the tent stopped. I looked up tiredly, my head lolling slightly. I caught sight of my father first.

He looked the same as the last time I'd seen him. His hair was neat and styled, his face was clean-shaven, and he was dressed in a pressed suit and wore nice shoes.

And of course, his eyes, so much like mine, were as gray and cold as steel.

Beside him were two burly-looking men, his wartime advisers. Both were highly trained soldiers with years and years of experience fighting pointless human wars.

I tried my best to remember their names but I'd never bothered to get involved in my father's affairs.

The toad cleared his throat, breaking the silence. For the first time, my father's eyes left me. The toad was direct. "Mr. Freeman, we found your daughter."

My father's entire body was stiff with tension. "I can see that."

The tall man shifted behind me. "She was in one of the tents. We found her there, hiding."

My father walked around the grand table slowly, one hand grazing the top of it as he moved. His eyes were back on me, but I no longer found any comfort in his gaze. I was too different.

I wondered if he knew this too.

He hesitated when he was directly in front of me. "Is she hurt?"

"Neutralized."

My father's hands hovered just over my arms. "Elaborate," he demanded.

Beside me, the tall man grinned goofily. "She's a mutt, Mr. Freeman. We stuck her with wolfsbane when she tried to shift on us."

The room went quieter than it had been before. My father flexed his fingers before letting his hands drop to his sides.

He turned away from us swiftly and planted his hands on the table, his back tensing under his suit. I stared at him, wondering what he was going to do next.

I eyed the two men behind the table, waiting for my father to give them the order that would end my life.

My body was cold.

But I was wrong. It only took a moment for my father to collect himself. He turned around and smiled. "Thank you, both of you. This is very much appreciated."

One of my father's advisers stepped forward and took me from the toad. His touch was surprisingly gentle as he lowered me into a seat.

I shook my head slightly, feeling the drug starting to ebb for the first time since I had been dosed.

My father smiled at the two men. "I guess you are expecting a reward for your efforts."

The toad couldn't conceal a grin as he elbowed his buddy. "Yes, sir."

A cruel sort of smile graced my father's lips. "Of course. Henley? Perks? Can you please give these men their reward for returning my daughter to me?"

Without saying anything, my father's advisers strode forward and each of them took a turn snapping the necks of the men who had found me.

The toad and the tall man dropped without blinking.

Once they were gone, my father turned to me, smoothing down his tie as he perched himself on the table. "Is the drug started to wear off yet?"

“Are they going to snap my neck too?” My words slurred together and the end of my sentence trailed off a little but I was sure that my father had understood.

My father didn’t miss a beat. “They won’t if you don’t give them a reason to.”

I blinked heavily. “You said I was dead.”

His lips twitched. A crack in the facade. “You were.”

I shook my head pathetically. “I was missing, not dead.”

“Is there a difference when your country is ravished by war? The dead are missing from the living and the missing are as good as dead.”

My head throbbed as it started to clear. “Did you look for me?” I asked, my tongue still garbled.

“I had a war to win,” he replied.

“Did you wonder where I was?”

“Yes.”

I frowned. “But you didn’t look?”

His eyes looked downward for a brief moment. “No.”

“They took your only daughter and you didn’t try to find me?”

My father stood up suddenly, either out of agitation or guilt. “Be real, Lux! What was I supposed to do? Have men risk their lives to look for my half-breed daughter?

“I knew that if you were around your mother’s kind, then there would be no getting you back. Because you wouldn’t be you anymore. And I was right.”

I flinched. I couldn’t have kept a straight face even if I’d had full control over my body. “Why don’t you have Henley kill me then? Won’t it be easier?”

“You’re my daughter,” he said plainly.

“I’m a mutt.”

“I can fix you,” he said with a dark, twisted determination. “You’re mostly human, after all.”

Before I could respond, my father was moving around the table again and starting to collect his papers and trinkets.

Henley turned to my father. “Would you like me to start the car, sir?”

“Yes,” my father answered. “And if you could, tell the squad leaders to finish collecting our dead and to start making their way back East.

“Also, tell them to take the equipment. We don’t have enough resources to waste artillery on dead men.”

Henley nodded once before leaving.

My father walked back toward me, his hand outstretched with a jacket clutched between his fingers. When I didn’t move to take it, he sighed and draped it around my shoulders.

“You might be bitter now, Lux. But when I come out of this war the victor, you are going to be glad I showed you mercy. You’re going to be glad you were on the winning side.”

Each of his words repulsed me more than the one before it.

Perks lifted me out of my chair and helped me out of the tent, my father leading the way. Henley was parked across the clearing. The black jeep was already rumbling and ready to go.

I looked around one last time as I was being hauled off. I watched soldiers strip dead bodies and throw any clothes and guns into a bin, ready to give them to the next man.

The wolves were kicked aside, their bodies left in the mud.

I looked around, trying to spot any familiar faces when one caught my eye right away.

Without any sort of warning, I was on my knees and out of Perks's hold.

My hands were covered in the wet mud as were my knees and feet, but I didn't care; I couldn't bring myself to notice the cold in my body or the numbness of my mind.

I crawled forward slowly, moving through space like I was making my way through hardening concrete.

I wasn't breathing; I was sure of that. My chest was burning and my head swam but I couldn't worry about that.

He was incredibly pale and still and his eyes were closed, lost from me.

I was vaguely aware that I was whimpering and that tears were splashing down my face, but the burning in my chest was all I could focus on.

I was breathing. I knew that now. Because the burning in my chest wasn't coming from a lack of oxygen.

The burning I felt was because my mate was lying still in the mud, his face tilted toward the sky, but his features were devoid of any sign of life.

Blood dribbled from his ear and into his hair, and there was a wide gash along the side of the forehead. I sobbed when I got closer to him, my entire body convulsing as my skin started to crawl.

I reached out for him with dirty, shaking fingers. I needed to know if he was gone, needed to know if it was over, if *I* was over.

The tips of my fingers touched his cheek. He was cold. Unbearably cold.

The boy, who had spent winter nights on the floor of a forest and still given up his sweater for me, was cold.

The boy who lit my entire body on fire with his kisses had no warmth in his body.

I tried to say his name but I couldn't get the sound out of my throat.

Before I had time to try again, Perks had his hands on me and was trying to drag me away. My response was instantaneous. I growled and spun, swinging a fist at Perks in a blind fit of fury.

I screamed when Henley moved to help pull me away. I screamed a guttural plea before I started saying his name over and over, as if it would make him open his eyes.

I stared at Keegan, waiting for him to move, waiting for him to respond. But he was still and unmoving.

My father's face suddenly obstructed my vision and I lashed out at him. He caught my hands with ease. "Lux," he hissed. "Lux, stop it right now."

"No," I wailed. "No, no, no." This wasn't supposed to be the way our story ended. We were supposed to go north. We were supposed to make a life for ourselves there. We were supposed to be free.

My father reached out and struck me across the face. But it didn't matter. I didn't feel it. "Control yourself," he screamed. "You're acting like an animal. He's just a mutt."

I saw red.

"He's not a mutt," I seethed, my tears moving in a continuous stream down my face. "They're not mutts. They're not monsters.

"You want to know who the monsters are? The men you employ. The ones who spit on dead children and—" *And who kill boys with hearts of gold.* I sobbed.

My father looked over his shoulder and gestured toward Keegan's lifeless form. "Perks, grab that thing." Perks nodded and I jolted to my feet, fighting against my father and Henley.

"Don't you touch him!" I screamed hoarsely. *"Don't you dare touch him!"*

My father nodded at Henley, who jerked me around, cutting off my view of Keegan and forcing my entire body to swivel.

I fought as hard as I could for as long as my resolve stood up, but without Keegan to fuel my hate, all I could feel was pain.

And it was crushing me.