A Rain-Slicked Battle

For one long moment, my uncle and I stood still in the dark together, each one of us breathing heavily under the rain and smothering stillness.

My hackles raised as my wolf growled, preparing for the inevitable fight.

My uncle looked at me sharply, his eyes bright and furious. His look told me everything I needed to know: we'd fight later.

For now, we had to protect our pack, our territory, and our species.

He let out a sharp bark and then bounded away from me, disappearing into the thickest part of the woods to scout the area.

I looked around, not sure where to go. I was standing in the middle of the makeshift village. Out in the open and unprotected.

My first instinct was to head back to my tent to protect Lux, but I worried I would be spotted and followed, making my efforts to protect her futile.

I couldn't risk leading more humans to her; she wasn't able to fight yet.

I thought about following my uncle, but there was no guarantee he would have my back if we were to fight together.

Rather, I was half sure that if it came down to it, he would toss me in the line of fire to save his own skin.

I only debated for a heartbeat longer before the choice was made for me.

All around me, wolves slunk out of their tents and through the trees, their heads and tails low and somber. They growled in unison, a few tipping their heads back to howl.

Cole led his pack, his dark fur slick from the rain and gleaming. He held his head high and his chest upward with his lips pulled back over canines.

Jay flanked his alpha, taking on his role as the beta, while his sister, Livy, flanked Cole's other side.

Livy's tail swished back and forth in anticipation, her petite white form was on edge and filled with tension.

Behind her were two young wolves, Colton and Deelia. My stomach twisted with nerves as I looked at Colton's gangly wolf. He was an inexperienced fighter.

I picked out a few more familiar faces, Jude being one. His wolf wasn't overly large but I knew that he had participated in many pack wars.

The way he held his shoulders and the dull gleam in his eye told me that he had seen too much and fought for too long.

The entire pack gathered together. As they did, an odd sort of electricity hummed between us, reassuring and motivating us.

We were a unit, a family, a pack. We would survive. Being together was enough to make us feel like we were invincible.

From the left, I watched as Doug Lott ran toward us. His wolf was huge and rippled with muscle. He brushed past me as he moved to stand behind Jay, taking his place as the lead enforcer.

My stomach hardened as I realized he had come from the direction of my tent. *Lux.*

Before I could confront Lott, the electricity around me dissipated as the first bullet shot sunk itself into the chest of an older wolf.

A howl ripped through the air, filled with grief, and then the fight began.

Humans charged out of the trees, dressed in heavy military gear and holding long guns with more weapons strapped to their legs and ankles.

Their arrival sparked the pack into a panic as they moved apart and started to engage the threat.

Humans yelled as they charged, unleashing sprays of bullets into the clearing. Wolves growled and lunged, their canines catching what little light there was.

Human cries filled the air, mingling with the guttural whines of wolves.

I watched the fighting for a moment, mesmerized as bullets sunk into flesh and teeth cut into skin.

This was what I had been sending wolves into. This is what came from my speeches. This was the kind of bloodshed and hatred my words inspired.

It wasn't until a spray of blood hit my face and Colton growled at me that I was able to spring into action.

I forced my thoughts to the back of my mind and lunged for a human, planting my paws on their chest and pushing them to the ground.

The human beneath me squealed and thrashed, trying to right his gun. Before he could knock off a shot, I tore into his throat, and he was gone.

I retched as the blood hit my tongue and then shook it off. I couldn't let myself get distracted. I had to make it out of this. I had to, for Lux.

Colton was fighting off two humans to my left, growling and snapping. He had managed to disarm one, and the other was shaking so badly, I was sure he would never shoot straight.

I jumped and headbutted the one with the weapon, spooking him into dropping it.

The man stared at me, his entire body shaking as hard as mine did before a shift. But he was shaking out of fear, not power.

I watched, mortified as the man's bladder gave way, and he raised his hands into the air, his sobs and saliva falling from his mouth.

I sat back on my haunches, unsure what to do when they surrendered.

Before I could take any action, Lott interceded. The man fell, and his head rolled away from his body. Lott snarled at me and pressed his head into mine, warning me.

As quickly as he'd come, Lott was gone again, and I was left in shock, staring at the face of the man who had just begged me for his life.

I thought of Lux. I thought about her begging for her life and having a human do to her what Lott had just done to this man. Were we all so heartless?

I felt a bullet graze my fur and spun around, spooked. I had gotten lost in my head again and it had nearly cost me my life.

I growled as I spotted the human who had shot at me. She stood a few feet away, her gun in her hand and with a cold look in her eye. Unlike the man before her, she wasn't shaking.

"Come on then, mutt," she goaded. "Let's see what you can do."

I growled and sprinted at her, ducking as she raised her weapon and fired a bullet over my head. She swore and cocked her gun again, aiming with one eye closed.

I collided with her as she fired. The bullet flew high into the air, never meeting its mark.

The woman screamed in frustration as I landed on top of her, snarling. She let go of her gun and grabbed a dagger from her waist, thrusting upward and underneath my rib cage.

I whined, feeling the dagger go in.

The woman smiled and twisted the knife, trying to make the wound as deep as possible.

Fortunately, she was shredding muscle and nothing important. She was unaware that her knife was far too small to reach my internal organs.

I growled and ended her life abruptly, and the smile finally disappeared from her face.

I stumbled off her, whining as I tried to bend to get the knife out of me. I thrashed around when I discovered it was deeply lodged and tried to wriggle my body to free it.

I looked around for help but everyone was busy, and I was alone.

At least, I thought I was alone until I felt hands on my side. Hands. Human hands. I looked over my shoulder, growling a warning at whoever was touching me.

It wasn't until I spotted Deelia that I was able to relax.

She looked up at me and smiled, her hands working away at the dagger. She was bare and covered in dirt and blood. "It's pretty deep," Deelia told me, grimacing.

I whined as she pulled. It occurred to me then, just what she was risking. She was defenseless in this form but she had shifted to help me.

After half a minute of struggling, the knife came free and I cried out in pain, my whine turning into a growl.

Deelia smiled at me and threw the knife to the ground, her body shaking as she prepared to shift back.

I felt my body start to heal as another gunshot fired, far closer than the others.

I looked around, trying to spot the shooter when I noticed that Deelia was still human. She had stopped midway through the shift and was clutching her stomach.

It only took me a second to realize what had happened.

I howled.

Deelia looked up at me and grunted. "Wolfsbane." She smiled at me and took her hands away from her stomach, revealing a wound that went right through her. She was covered in blood but still standing.

I rushed to her, letting her fall against me. Her fingers worked their way through my fur as she fought to stay upright. She made an odd gurgling sound, like she was choking.

I looked at her in worry, finding blood dripping from her chin.

Deelia met my eyes and her tough facade cracked as a cry left her lips. She shook her head, her eyes alight with fear. "I wasn't supposed to die like this," she pleaded with me. "I never found him."

I whined and lowered myself gently, taking her down with me. She sighed as her body hit the ground.

"I'm alone," she whispered, her eyes searching and finding nothing. I looked up as Livy came charging toward us, her eyes wild and her white fur stained with blood that wasn't hers.

Livy was the fastest wolf I had ever seen but she took her time getting to us, almost as if her limbs were stuck in mud.

Deelia's tight grasp on my fur went slack right before Livy made it to her, and I felt her heartbeat still against my side.

When Livy got to us, she froze, staring down at Deelia's body. Without missing a step, Livy threw her head back and howled. It was low and haunting.

I shivered, careful to move slowly enough so that Deelia's body fell as softly to the ground as possible.

I moved out of the way as Livy curled her body around her daughter while letting out desperate whines and pleas.

Seconds later, Cole arrived, reacting to his mate's call. When he saw his daughter, he tripped, falling onto his belly before slowly crawling toward them.

I jumped over him, taking out a human who was eager to take advantage of the grieving alpha.

Cole didn't seem to care that he was in the middle of a battle as he moved to Livy and sat over her. He hunched over as he licked Deelia's wound out of an instinctive, yet futile, attempt to heal her.

She was gone, and he knew it.

After a few moments, Cole threw his head back and howled before jumping up and disappearing. I heard his growls and followed him into action, desperate to support my alpha.

For about ten minutes, I shadowed Cole, finishing the humans he injured and taking out the ones that tried to harm him when he wasn't looking.

In his grief, he was a sloppy fighter. He missed half the humans he passed and mostly just maimed them instead of killing them.

Cole moved on as if he didn't notice me, and after a while, he was moving too fast for me to keep up.

I looked around, finding myself in the middle of the battle without an opponent. All around me, wolves were falling and taking humans with them.

Blood was everywhere. It soaked the ground and ran with the rain. The stink of vomit hung in the air, too, as one too many humans couldn't handle the reality of what was happening.

I heard a collection of shouts and looked around, trying to pinpoint where they were coming from, so I could understand what was happening. I watched, befuddled, as humans started to clear the area.

Other members of the pack looked around, too, confused and bewildered. Were they retreating? Had we won?

I wasn't sure how that was possible. There were still a lot of humans left, and more kept coming. How could we be winning?

I had no time to react. No time to jump out of the way or find cover. One moment, I was looking around, and the next, I was on my back.

The sound of an explosion echoed in my brain. I lay on the ground for a long while, stunned and in shock.

What just happened?

I opened my eyes, looking at everything from a crooked angle. Wolves were all over the place, in pieces. Just in front of me was a large paw. My stomach rolled.

A bomb. They had used a bomb against us.

I was idly aware of a low ringing in my right ear, which was pressed to the ground. Beyond the ringing, I saw humans with shaking shoulders.

Laughing. They were laughing at us. Why were the humans laughing at us?

I looked around, feeling dizzy as I watched wolves stumble around, shaking their heads.

I realized, then, what was happening. The bomb had targeted our hearing. The ringing in my right ear wasn't isolated to me. It was happening to all the wolves.

I watched as a human walked right up to a dazed wolf and shot it in the head, at close range. Blood sprayed against the trees and the wolf fell to the ground, joining the dead and defeated.

I pushed myself onto my paws, desperately fighting the aches in my body.

I had to move. I couldn't get shot the way that wolf was. I couldn't die. I had to make it through this mess. I had to take Lux north.

I swayed on my feet but pushed myself forward, still hearing the ringing in my right ear. When I made it to the trees, I shifted, figuring I would be a smaller target.

As soon as I was a human, I leaned over and vomited onto the grass, the sudden change overwhelming me.

The ringing was starting to fade, but as it did, I began to notice something that completely horrified me. I couldn't hear anything. I fell to the ground as my hands shook uncontrollably.

I looked over my shoulder, making sure no one was pursuing me, before dragging myself behind the trunk of a tree and grabbing a twig. I brought the twig to my left ear and snapped it. Nothing.

Gritting my teeth, I did it again. Nothing.

I let go of a shaky breath and tried to quell the panic clawing at my throat.

I brought the twig to my right ear and snapped it again. This time, I heard a distant snap. Relief washed through me; I still had partial hearing, and if I was lucky, it would recover.

I put my hand to my left ear and cradled it, recoiling when I found it sticky with blood. All my hopes of my hearing repairing itself flew from my mind when I saw the blood on my fingers.

What good was a wolf that couldn't hear?

My nerves took a hold of my body as I became aware that I wasn't going to be able to hear anybody sneak up on me. I wasn't going to be able to hear any calls from my pack. I was a sitting duck.

I stood up, wobbling slightly, but steadying myself on a tree. I had no choice. I had to try to help my pack, with or without my hearing.

I started walking, finding it hard to focus on the newfound silence. The hairs along my spine were standing up, and my entire body was chock-full of tension and stress in my disabled form.

When I reached the edge of the trees, I tried to steel myself to gather courage. Quickly, I darted to the back of a tent, sneaking around it before peering over the side.

The fight had begun again, but this time, it was different. Now, the wolves were outnumbered, five to one, and they were falling faster than before.

I watched as a wolf tore into a man's stomach before he was shot at least twenty times.

Kids from our pack wandered around, crying and holding their ears. It seemed the bomb had hurt their ears more than the elders.

A small boy was stumbling around in circles, miserable. I watched him for a heartbeat before I lurched forward with my arms outstretched.

I couldn't hear his cries as I got closer, and I didn't hear the firing of the bullet that knocked him over either.

I recoiled, stumbling back a few steps as I looked around. I found the shooter staring down at the dead boy with a haunted expression.

I didn't hesitate when I charged at him, knocking him over and grabbing his gun.

I turned the cold weapon on the man and pulled the trigger. Distantly, I heard the shot in my right ear, but I couldn't have cared less. I didn't look back as I threw the weapon down and walked away.

I was about to engage another soldier when I noticed the wolves start to retreat, heading for the thicker part of the woods to the north. I jogged over to them, knocking down a human on my way.

I detected movement in my peripheral vision and turned to see the humans jumping up and down in celebration. For the first time since the bomb had gone off, I was glad that I couldn't hear.

I passed the threshold of the trees, catching up to the pack before veering left, toward my tent. Hopefully, Lux was still where I'd left her. I was going to grab her, and we were going north.

I caught Cole's eye, but he didn't hold my gaze; he just kept walking with his head low. He was limping as he led his pack away, with Livy at his side.

She had shifted and was shivering, wrapping herself in her own arms.

I spotted Colton beside his mother and felt relief. Jude caught my eye and shifted, so we could talk. He approached me slowly, and I wondered idly how distraught I looked.

"Keegan?" I saw his mouth form my name rather than heard it.

Somberly, I pointed to my ear and shook my head.

Jude stopped walking abruptly and made a point of exaggerating his words with his mouth. "Can you hear anything?"

I pointed in the direction of my tent, trying to tell him where I was going. He looked beyond me and nodded. "Be careful."

I turned and started jogging, keeping one eye on the soldiers who were still celebrating as I skirted around the camp.

I kept myself hunched over and tried to tread as carefully as I could without my hearing to guide me.

I had my tent in my line of sight when I felt someone's hand wrap around my arm. I turned in alarm, taken by surprise. The face in front of me was the last one I'd ever wanted to see again.

I stumbled, ripping my arm from my uncle's hold and teetering along the edge of the woods.

A glance over my shoulder to make sure the humans hadn't noticed me caused me to lose my focus, and suddenly, the world was blurry.

I hit the ground hard; the wind rushed out of me as my vision faded in and out.

Gingerly, I touched the place on my forehead that was throbbing. My fingers came away red. My uncle had struck me.

In a moment, his face was hovering over mine. He was dirty, covered in blood, and with scratches lining his face, including an ugly one that ran from the corner of his eye to his ear.

I noticed that his knee was turned sideways and bleeding heavily. It was healing incorrectly.

However, my uncle's injuries didn't diffuse his hatred for me. He leaned in close and started talking, but I couldn't hear anything.

After a moment or two, he seemed to catch on and grabbed my face, twisting it to the side to look at my ear.

When he saw the trickle of blood coming out of the left one, he smiled and leaned closer to the right. He spoke just loud enough that I was able to pick up his voice without the humans noticing.

"You're going to die here," he told me. "You're not going to contaminate this pack anymore, and you're not taking your bitch north. Today is penance for your betrayal to your species. Goodbye, nephew."

My vision started to blur as I watched him limp away, toward the woods. It blurred even more as I watched a bullet nestle itself into his chest. My uncle stumbled but kept going.

Humans ran forward, their shoulders shaking with laughter as they raised their guns and started firing.

My uncle fell and was still.

I rolled over, turning away and staring up at the dark sky, wishing it was daytime.

Wishing I was feeling the warmth of the sun rather than the freezing pinpricks of rain. Wishing I could see the blue of the sky instead of the nothingness of night.

I couldn't even see the moon behind the clouds. The ground was cold and sharp under my back, and for some reason, I couldn't find comfort among the trees like I had in the past.

I closed my eyes as the thumping in my head started to intensify. It was over for me. I knew it.

I was never going to make it back to Lux now, not when I was losing consciousness. Not when the humans had overrun the territory. Not when she was still so far away.

My only hope now was that whoever found her recognized her and took her to her father. I knew it was unlikely, but I hoped he would be kind to her.

Perhaps I was wrong about humans. Maybe they loved their children enough to overlook their differences. For Lux's sake, I hoped so.

My toes and fingers numbed first, and I started to go cold, which made me panic. Wolves aren't supposed to feel the cold that way. Never in my life had I felt such a feeling.

It took me a few moments to calm down. There wasn't anything I could do to stop the coldness from spreading, so I had to accept it or I would spend my last moments in misery.

My hands felt like ice.

In my final moments of consciousness, I put all my effort into conjuring an image of her.

Small but strong, built to withstand hardships. Confidence and courage forming the strong lines of her limbs, the slope of her nose, and the curve to her jaw.

Silver. She was all silver. Her eyes were so pale, they reflected light like the moon, and her skin was soft and fair. Her hair was long and so blonde as to be white.

I had fallen in love with a silver girl, a girl who shimmered like sunlight bouncing off water.

If I'd had the strength, I would have called out for her. But I was too weak to find a place for her name on my tongue.

I could only imagine her face turning toward me as I called out her name; could only dream of the way she'd smile and lift her hand to wave.

Lux had been mine for a fleeting moment. A moment that I had wasted on prejudice and misplaced hatred.

A moment that I hadn't filled with enough touches or kisses or smiles.

A moment that I could've extended, if I had only let go of old loyalties.

I was suddenly jolted back in time. Brought back to the first time I had ever seen her.

Lux had been huddled in the corner, her clothes in tatters, and her delicate face scratched and bloodied. The bond I felt with her had been instant and overpowering.

I wished I had taken advantage of those feelings sooner.

Dread filled me as the image of Lux started to slip from my mind.

Suddenly, I couldn't make out her features anymore, and then her whole form started to fade and I was left alone until everything was gone.

Until I was gone.