Keegan's Cold Hand

I had the entire car ride back to my father's house to agonize over the loss of Keegan.

It never got easier.

With every passing highway sign, every roadblock, every police check, the weight in my heart only got heavier.

I cycled through not being able to breathe and convulsing in sobs periodically, unable to control myself.

My father didn't seem worried. He was shuffling through his phone, sorting emails as he sat up next to Perks, who was driving.

Henley sat beside me. Every few hours, his facade would break as he looked at me, probably worried I was going to lose my mind.

It was already lost.

My wolf had gone radio silent. Her presence, which had been with me since Keegan provoked my shift, was gone.

I called out to her in the depths of my mind, but she had retreated, and I wasn't sure if she was going to come back now the person who'd brought her out in the first place had vanished.

At some point, my body demanded sleep and my mind was all too happy to get a break from the agony.

I drifted off, my head bumping slightly against the window of the SUV. After all the time I spent with Colton and Keegan driving, the hum of the engine was comforting.

I didn't dream of much; mostly darkness interrupted by the occasional jarring images of Keegan's body, and some softer visions of his face.

I felt the ache of his loss in my sleep, tossing and turning as the frequency of Keegan in my dreams increased.

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I watched as Keegan smiled, his entire face lifting before the image disappeared and I was back in Cole's territory, only it was eerily empty.

I looked around, holding my breath, and realized I was alone.

"Hello?" I called out, wanting to be certain. I was met with absolute silence.

I started walking. A shiver passed through me as the wind swelled around me, making the torches flicker and the tents waver.

My eyes searched the ground as I couldn't help but wonder who had moved the bodies.

I felt the breath leave my lungs as I remembered Keegan. He was gone. I clutched my chest and felt my knees knock together.

For a brief moment, I wondered if I was going to collapse before my attention was drawn elsewhere.

The wind had picked up and now my hair was being whipped around me. My clothes, too, were rippling over my body.

I held my hands in front of my face, watching as the leaves on the trees started to curl and darken before falling off completely, only to be swept away by the wind.

The grass around the trees started to die, too, turning from a bright green to a sickly yellow.

I looked around, watching as Cole's tent crumpled under the wind and folded in on itself before it was dragged along the ground and swept out of sight.

The torches along the paths went out, and the wind nearly knocked me off my feet. I hunched over, trying to become more resilient against the sheer force of the gale.

In front of me, a figure walked calmly out of the trees, clearly unaffected by the wind. I raised my arm, attempting to flag them down before I realized who the stranger was. My hand froze in the air.

"Keegan!" I shouted, my heart hammering. "Keegan! It's Lux! Keegan!"

Keegan kept on walking, his face stoic and shattered. He looked confused as he walked. I kept shouting, but it was like he couldn't hear me.

Suddenly, Keegan stopped walking and reached for his left ear. When he removed it, the tips of his fingers were stained red.

He looked at his hand, and his eyes grew large just before he fell to the ground.

I screamed and started running toward him, ignoring the pull of the wind. I dropped to his side, scratching my knees in the process.

I reached out to him, already knowing what I was going to feel before I felt it.

He was cold.

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I jolted awake at the sound of someone screaming. I was screaming. As soon as I realized this, I snapped my mouth shut and reached for my throat, feeling as though it had been scrubbed raw.

"Lux!" my father shouted, looking at me frantically. I wasn't sure if he was worried or concerned that I had created a scene.

I realized at that point that we had pulled over and I was lying down in the back seat. Henley was outside the car.

"What?" I whispered. "What happened?"

My father's eyes were burning. "You were dreaming about something."

I groaned. *Keegan.*

My head started to spin and I grabbed the seat in front of me, using it to pull myself up.

The movement worsened my nausea and I hurtled forward; my father moved out of the way just as I leaned out of the car and vomited.

I dragged the back of my hand across my mouth and flopped back onto the car seat. The roof of the car appeared blurry as my eyes filled with tears.

A sudden feeling of loneliness overwhelmed me.

"Are you all right now?" my father asked, fidgeting with his tie. I chose not to answer, afraid that if I did, I would start screaming or crying.

When it was clear I wasn't going to do either of those things, everyone piled back into the car and we were moving again. This time, I wasn't drowsy in the slightest.

The sun broke through the clouds just as we reached somewhere familiar to me.

I sat up a little straighter as the car pulled into my hometown. It wasn't long before I could picture each street before we turned onto it.

"We're home, Lux," my father told me, noticing my interest. "Where you belong."

Except, it wasn't. There were no trees here. Just cement and neat gardens and signs with my father's face on them planted in the front of everyone's yard.

This wasn't my home anymore because I wasn't the same person I was when I lived here.

My home was in the trees. My home was makeshift camps, tents, flimsy sleeping cots, cold nights. This wasn't home; it was a lie.

When the SUV passed the sign reading *Freeman Manor*, I recalled the accident that changed my life.

I watched in my mind's eyes as the car was thrown through the air; the driver slid through the front windshield, and I flipped, later to be pulled from the wreckage.

"Lux," my father called, "it's time to get out."

I blinked and looked around, noticing that the car was parked neatly in front of the main doors. Staff, including guards and maids, were waiting at the front entrance, wearing their fake plastic smiles.

I sighed and undid my seatbelt before slipping out of the car.

Immediately, Perks was beside me. I was then reminded that I wasn't trusted. My father knew I wasn't the same person I once was. Perhaps he understood that better than I did.

I looked around, taking in the manicured lawns and elaborate gardens, and I was struck by how I didn't feel any inkling of nostalgia as I entered the house.

Nothing was different. The same pictures hung on the walls and the same trinkets covered the tables and shelves, but I didn't feel like I was home.

I felt a shiver run up my spine instead.

I was directed upstairs by Perks, my father following close behind. He didn't seem to mind that our muddied shoes were ruining the white carpet.

He had enough money to have it replaced thousands of times anyways.

"Your room," my father said, oddly tender as he pushed the door open in front of me.

My room was exactly how I remembered. Green walls with a double bed in the center covered in yellow and white sheets.

I moved forward, feeling as though I was invading someone else's personal space. My fingers skimmed the white dresser, my eyes scanning over the multitude of perfumes and lotions covering the top of it.

Laid out on my bed was one of my favorite dresses. It was lavender and feminine, cut in a way that was conservative but not so much that I felt unattractive in it.

I had wanted to wear it the day of my father's rally, but I had opted for the skirt suit instead. Would my life have turned out differently if I had chosen that dress?

"Lux?" My father was still waiting at the door.

"Yes?"

"Would you like to rest?" he asked, sounding the most parental since we had found each other again. I looked around, realizing why. We were alone.

I wrapped my arms around myself, remembering the dream I had in the car. "Not particularly."

He sighed and loosened his tie before walking into my room. His foot knocked over a stack of books, revealing a pink nail polish stain. He smiled at me and stuck his hands in his pockets.

"I could've had your carpet replaced," he said.

I was stubborn. "I like this carpet."

"It would have been better if you had let me get you a new one, Lux."

"Not everything can be replaced," I snapped, balling my hands into fists. My father watched me for a moment, tilting his head to the side. I knew exactly what he was assessing in me.

"You weren't always this quick to anger," he commented.

"I wasn't always a werewolf."

He flinched. "You aren't. You *aren't* one of them."

"Of course I am!" I exploded. "I've always been one! My mother was a werewolf and the gene is dominant, always." I stared at him, wishing he would meet my eyes and knowing he couldn't.

"But you're so much like me," he said lowly, desperately.

I recoiled. "I'm not." My heartbeat spiked. "I'm nothing like you."

He snapped his face up to mine. "Of course, you are, you have my eyes and you believed in the cause before they took you away from me and brainwashed you!"

"*Believed in the cause?*" I echoed warily. "Believed in your thirst for bloodshed and revenge on my mother?"

"Lux, that's not—"

"You can't pretend," I yelled. "Not with me. You can't pretend that your hate for them, for us, isn't because of her leaving you behind. Because she was your mate, wasn't she?"

My father stilled completely, his skin pale and sickly looking. "How dare you?" he hissed. "*How dare you?*"

"I know she was your mate!" I yelled. "Because no other bond would have driven you this insane!" I backpedaled quickly as he wheeled toward me with a raised hand.

"Your mother was a mutt that deserved nothing but a bullet."

I stared at him, making sure he was focused before I spoke. "I never believed what you believe. I never wanted to support your cause. I've never felt the way you do about werewolves."

"You're lying," he mumbled.

"No," I insisted. "I was lying back then, but not now."

"You came to all the rallies," my father said. "You came and you smiled and you cheered for me. You believed, Lux. You can't convince me otherwise."

"I was afraid!" I yelled. "Afraid that if I didn't play the role of the perfect daughter, then I would be executed or abandoned or—or—"

My father grabbed my arms and shook me roughly. "You can still be my daughter," he gasped, desperate again.

"You can still be my little girl. I'm going to find a cure for you, I'm going to help you. You're mostly human. I just need to kill whatever animal is possessing you."

I recoiled, struggling to get myself out of his grasp. "I am your daughter. Even like this.

"There isn't anything possessing me, I've always been this way. It just took being around my own kind to bring out my true nature."

"Don't say that," my father said sharply. "I don't want to hear that kind of talk."

"It's the truth," I insisted.

"It's propaganda."

I glared. "You'd know all about that, wouldn't you, Dad?"

My father released me before taking a step back and removing his tie. His eyes were sharp now, all the parental softness gone. He threw the tie onto my bed, right over my lavender dress.

His hands were on his hips as he spoke. "I'm not asking for your permission to treat you, Lux. I'm informing you of what's coming. I will fix you and we will be happy again, all right?"

"You can't cure me," I told him. "Not without killing me."

"Then that's what I'll do," he replied, his voice absent of emotion.

I was jarred. "You'd kill your own daughter for taking after her mother?"

"For taking after a monster," he corrected, looking dangerously angry. "Your mother was a monster who tricked me into thinking she was something she wasn't."

I was confused. "You didn't know she was a werewolf?"

My father swallowed. "I knew she was a werewolf.

"I just didn't know what that meant at the time. She told me stories of loyalty and trust and harmony, but behind her lies, there were wars and killings and kidnappings."

"Humans do all those things too, Dad."

He didn't have an answer for me. My father sighed and let his hands drop to his sides before leaving my room and closing the door.

After a moment, I heard a click. I had been wrong before; my room wasn't exactly the same as it had been before.

It never used to lock from the outside.

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I spent hours alone in my room. I traced the marks on my walls with my eyes, smiling at the holes left behind from when I'd used thumbtacks to place a poster on my wall.

I looked around at the books scattered around my room, struggling to remember their plots, characters, and meanings. Why had I loved those novels? What about them had spoken to me?

The sad part was, I didn't know that anymore. Before I was taken, this room was my safe haven. It was where I escaped to so I could drown out my father's words with words and melodies.

It was where I would curl up at night, shivering and afraid that if I let the moon's light touch me, then I wouldn't be my father's daughter anymore.

I would pull the curtains tightly closed when the moon was full. They were my armor against silly superstitions and my worry that they might be true.

How many times had I curled under my blankets, praying for sunlight?

I gritted my teeth as I started to understand what this room was. It had never been a safe haven; it was always a prison. A trap to keep me from embracing myself.

And now, it was even more prison-like for it locked. And my father was the warden carrying the keys.

I sighed and rolled over on my bed, frowning when I spotted my father's tie. I guess he didn't care much for it, especially as he had many others to replace it.

At first, I wanted to tear it apart, but for some reason, I started to sympathize with the fabric. Were we really that different?

I heard the click of a lock and shot to my feet. My eyes were glued to the door when it opened and Henley strode through, carrying a set of keys.

Behind him was a mousy-looking maid who was balancing a tray of food on her hands.

The maid rushed forward and placed the tray on the ground before scurrying away and disappearing from sight.

I kept my gaze on Henley, waiting for him to deliver a message. I knew my father had something to say.

"Eat," Henley ordered. "Your father wants you to be strong enough to endure treatment."

Henley's eyes were an odd brown. They were dark enough to hide his emotion but somehow they also portrayed a sense of vulnerability.

"They'll kill me by trying to take my wolf away," I told him bluntly.

"Your father just wants to help," he answered.

I felt my lip twitch. "He doesn't help anyone. He's incapable of helping."

Henley hesitated at the door as he fiddled with the keys, picking out the right one. Before he pulled the door shut, he looked up and met my eye. "Then help yourself."

I blinked as the lock clicked in place. *Help yourself.*

I looked around, wondering what I was waiting for. Keegan wasn't coming back this time. He wasn't going to whisk me away or chase off the people who wanted to harm me. I had to help myself.

I had to save myself.

I sprang into action, heading for my closet first. I pushed past all of my frilly rally clothes and made my way to the back of the space, to my workout equipment.

I grabbed a pair of jogging pants, knowing they kept me warm, and then a long-sleeve thermal-control top.

After, I grabbed a pair of running shoes and then a backpack before throwing everything I had gathered onto the bed.

I grabbed the backpack and started pulling at the straps, forcing them to go as long as they could.

I threw a hasty look over my shoulder, afraid that with my newfound courage, my father would somehow know what I was planning.

I turned back to my task and started jamming the clothes into the backpack before grabbing the tray of food and wrapping its contents in napkins.

I threw the food in the bag and grabbed some other essentials, including basic toiletries and a few trinkets that I was sentimental toward.

Once I had everything, I zipped the bag up and looped it over and around my shoulders, laughing as the bottom of the bag hit my knees.

I could only hope that the straps would fit around a wolf.

I grabbed my desk chair next, ramming it underneath the doorknob, then turned to face my window.

I took a deep breath before pushing the curtains back, my fingers lingering on the fabric for a heartbeat too long.

I grasped the bottom ledge of the window, trying to force it upward to no avail. I squinted in the oncoming darkness, spotting a latch on the outside.

My father really had put me in a prison.

I backed away from the window, feeling frustrated. I looked around my room as I felt my eyes start to sting with unshed tears.

How was I supposed to save myself? How was I supposed to contend with my father?

The first tear that dropped only angered me further. I wouldn't cry. I wouldn't cry when Keegan was dead and I was going to die too.

I wouldn't die. I wouldn't let myself be killed when Keegan had sacrificed himself trying to protect me and his pack.

I looked around the room again, this time trying to find something that I could use.

I almost laughed when I saw my father's tie. I grabbed it off the bed and laughed as I started to wrap it around my right hand, covering my knuckles.

My father had underestimated me my entire life. He never thought I understood what his words meant, or the malice hidden behind them.

He never imagined that I could take a stand without him there to hold my hand. He never thought I could be strong on my own.

And as a result of his doubts, I started to form my own. I had been underestimating myself my entire life. I thought that if I changed and became a new person, I would be weaker and worse off.

But I had been wrong, and so had my father.

I crossed the room, focusing on the window as I lunged toward it, bringing my covered fist right to the glass and hitting it with all the force I had in my body.

The impact shocked me. My teeth rattled in my mouth, and pain flared up my arm to my shoulder.

I gasped, letting my hand drop in astonishment.

I looked up, still clutching my hand while watching as the glass started to crack. Tiny fracture lines started inching outward from where I'd hit the glass.

I laughed and covered my mouth with my hand, careful not to be too loud. I wasn't sure how far away Perks or Henley were.

I unwrapped my hand to find it bruised and slightly bloodied, but I didn't care. I would heal.

I stepped forward and placed my hand on the glass, feeling the cracks under the lines of my palm.

With a deep breath, I pushed forward. The glass exploded outward at my force and fell to the ground below, shattering with a far-off tinkle.

I was jolted as cold air swept over me. I had done it. I had freed myself.

I grabbed my father's tie and hung it from the window ledge, impaling the end of it on a shard of glass so it wouldn't fly away.

I wanted my father to see it. I wanted him to know what I had just done.

I poked my head out of the window, peering at the drop below me and wondering about the best way to descend. My bedroom was on the second story, and below was a cement path that led into the garden.

The fall was going to be hard and I wasn't sure where my abilities started and ended.

I realized, then, who I needed. I closed my eyes and focused, calling to my wolf again, begging her to come to me.

At first, she was hesitant. I could feel that. But the prospect of freedom overwhelmed her grief.

Power rippled through me as my wolf joined me fully, her consciousness once again joining mine.

I felt better then, knowing I wasn't alone, as I balanced on the edge of the window, using my hands to brace myself along the sides.

Before I could think too hard about it, I jumped. The wind pulled at my face for the split second I was falling, and then I hit the ground hard, the impact rolling my ankle slightly.

I gasped and sat on my butt, bringing my ankle to me.

It was already starting to bruise, which I took as a good sign. My healing was rapid.

Without further hesitation, I pulled myself to my feet, clutching my backpack, and looked up at my window.

The curtains had been pulled out of my room by the wind and were now billowing around. I squinted in the dark, a smile pulling along my face as I spotted the tie in between them.

I turned away and didn't look back.

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I shifted at the first sign of the forest, running in glee as my backpack stayed with me while my clothes shredded and flew away. My plan had worked and now it was time for my wolf to take over.

When I was far enough away that the panic no longer made me look backward, I stopped and closed my eyes as I let my wolf take over completely.

The first thing she did when she had control was to throw her head back and howl, letting her position be known.

It took three more howls to get a response, but when the packs howled back, they howled together and with strength.

I took off running then, more or less allowing my wolf to steer us. Because of this, I wasn't sure how long it took me to find them.

The area was completely unfamiliar to me, and as I slunk into it, I became increasingly nervous that I was crossing a boundary that I was unaware of.

Sensing I was close to something, I ducked behind a tree and shifted, pulling my clothes out of my bag and changing into my human form that was better for negotiating.

I tightened the straps on my backpack and threaded it back over my arms, happy to be in clean clothes after running through mud and trees for hours.

I shook out my limbs, hoping to expel any nerves before I continued forward.

It wasn't long before I came across unlit torches, and from there, I followed them into a village. The camp was a flurry of activity, despite it being the middle of the night.

No one seemed to notice me as I walked forward. Perhaps it was because I smelled strongly of wolf after being in my shifted form for so long.

Whatever the reason, I found my way to the alpha tent without any trouble.

It was easy to distinguish the tent as the alpha's as it was in the center of the village and it was by far the largest.

Of course, two enforcers were stationed outside of the main entrance. I approached them with shaky confidence. "I need to see the alpha," I requested.

The enforcer closest to me raised an eyebrow. "Which one?"

I felt my mouth pop open but didn't have time to respond as the tent door was pushed open and an intimidating man was suddenly standing in front of me.

He was incredibly tall, with wide shoulders and a mess of dark hair. His eyes were similar to mine, just a darker sort of gray.

"Who's this?" the man grunted, asking the enforcers.

"A stranger," the enforcer replied. "She came asking for an audience, Alpha Evers."

Alpha Evers lifted an eyebrow. "With me?"

I shook my head. "I… Your enforcer said there was more than one alpha here."

Alpha Evers grinned in an odd way. "If you include me, there's five."

I tried to hide my shock and play it cool. "Is Alpha Cole Emerson with you?"

Alpha Evers inclined his head, then opened the tent door for me, inviting me inside.

I swallowed nervously and entered the tent, feeling the tension as soon as I entered. There was a lot of power here.

"Who's—?"

"Lux?"

I looked up and met Colton's eyes. "Colton!"

He rushed forward and embraced me. I held him tightly to me, glad to find a familiar face.

Colton pulled back and I looked into his large eyes. "How did you—?"

"Colton!" We both jumped as Livy called her son. "What are you doing? Do you have any idea who she is?" Livy stared at me, her eyes rimmed with red and shadowed with darkness.

I had never seen the luna so defeated. I looked around and realized why. Deelia was gone.

Colton positioned his shoulder in front of mine. "She's one of us, Mom."

I moved around him, no longer needing his protection. Instead, I walked across the tent, approaching Livy as she stared at me openly.

Without pausing, I held out my hand to her and introduced myself. "I'm Lux Stone," I said. "It's nice to meet you."

Livy didn't move, she only stared.

Eventually, Cole stepped forward. "You were mated to him?"

I nodded. "Yes."

Cole's eyes searched mine before he nodded. "Okay, welcome."

I smiled tightly and allowed myself to look around. I spotted the familiar faces first: Cole and his family; Doug Lott; and Jude Lockheart, who had a pretty woman standing next to him.

After, I spotted Alpha Evers from before. Beside him was a small blonde woman with a large dark streak going through the front of her bangs, and I assumed she was the luna.

Beside the luna was a girl who looked similar and with the same hair coloring, although her hair was a curly mess.

Next to her was another tall boy who appeared to be more intimidating than the alpha.

The girl with curly hair smiled at me. "I'm Ebony." She elbowed the menacing boy beside her.

"Axel."

I winced when I realized they were mates. The loss of Keegan hit me all over again.

"You're Stan Freeman's daughter."

I twisted at the sound of the voice, meeting the gaze of a slender man who seemed to hold the most power in the room.

His eyes were a brilliant green, and beside him was a beautiful blonde woman clutching a young boy to her chest.

"~Was," I corrected.

The blonde woman raised an eyebrow. I couldn't help but notice the diadem on top of her head. Was I staring at the royals? "Was?"

"I shifted and, in his eyes, I became a monster," I said coolly. "So yes, *was*."

The man I assumed to be the king opened his mouth to speak but shut it again, his eyes moving to something behind me. I waited for him to continue speaking but he kept staring, so I turned.

Behind Livy's right shoulder was a group of wolves who didn't seem to fit in with the rest. I remembered then what Colton had told me about his mother and the White Wolves.

I shivered as I realized just how much power was in this tent.

A figure was pushing people aside, fighting its way until they were in front of Livy. The boy was pale and thin, his hair so blond, it was almost white.

I stared at him, open-mouthed. Looking at his eyes was like looking at my own.

"Lux?" he called, his voice oddly strangled. Something about this boy was drawing me to him.

I nodded my head and took a step in his direction. "Yes?"

The boy looked around wildly, almost choking on what he wanted to say next. Everyone in the room was staring at us, but I wouldn't have noticed if I hadn't noticed the boy looking around.

"Who are you?" I asked, tilting my head to the side. Surely, the similarities between us were just a coincidence.

The boy stared. His entire face appeared slack.

"Your brother."