Stan Freeman's Cell

Waking up was a subtle thing. I didn't lash out or jump; I simply opened my eyes. The first thing I noticed was a picture of Stan Freeman kneeling beside a dead wolf and giving a thumbs-up.

I groaned and tried to sit up, but my entire body ached and I wasn't able to muster the strength to lift my head.

I closed my eyes and took a few deep breaths, feeling more unsettled the longer I was awake.

When I opened my eyes again, I looked around, noticing I was in a small room. I prepared myself and then sat up, clutching the thin cot as my head whirled.

When the room stopped spinning, I studied it, finding nothing familiar to orient myself. I had no idea where I was.

Standing up was another challenge. My balance was skewed, and without stable feet, I became dizzy. I knelt slowly, touching the ground as my eyes slipped closed.

How had I gotten here? What had happened?

At that moment, I remembered the blast. I put my hand to my ear, finding my face clean. There was no blood. I looked at my hands, noticing that the dirt had been scrubbed from my skin.

Panic closed my throat as I walked over to the picture of Stan Freeman on the wall and took it down. I sent a quick prayer up to the Goddess before I threw the picture on the ground.

I nearly lost my legs when I realized my hearing was still impaired. It wasn't going to improve, not more than it already had.

I estimated that I had about half of my hearing in my right ear, but I knew for certain that I had none at all in my left. I swore and almost laughed when I barely heard it.

My previous fears resurfaced. How was I supposed to function without my hearing?

Switching gears, I turned and circled the room in an attempt to catch a scent. I smelled a woman, but one I was not acquainted with.

Another scent lingered around the door. I pinned the smell to a middle-aged man and determined he was someone who ran off testosterone.

I winced as I stepped on a piece of glass, limping over to the bed and taking a seat on the edge.

I brought my bloodied foot toward me just as the door creaked open, revealing a huge human with bulging muscles. Definitely the same testosterone-filled scent from before.

The man entered my room without a word and then stepped to the side, making room to allow Stan Freeman's passage into what I was starting to believe was my cell. I tried not to let my panic show.

"Looks sore," Stan said, pointing to my foot. I strained to hear him, my right ear trying to compensate for the loss of the left.

I grimaced and pulled the shard out of my foot, flicking it away effortlessly. "It will heal."

Silently, we both watched as the wound puckered and closed until all that was left was a faint line and dried blood.

Stan's smile was acidic and striking. "I must say, that is a handy talent."

"Perks of being a monster, I suppose."

Stan chuckled, although the sound was dull and hard for me to pick up. "You're lucky you're here." All I wanted to do was punch him. For me. For Lux.

I could barely contain a growl. "Luck isn't the word I'd use to describe being hijacked and locked in a room." I rubbed my palm over the base of my foot, removing the flecks of dried blood.

"Would you use the word luck to describe me saving your life?" Stan's eyes were so much like Lux's but so devoid of her emotion.

I felt frigid suddenly and I tucked my arms over my chest to combat the cold. I shivered slightly as my last few moments before losing consciousness came back to me. I never wanted to be cold again.

"Sorry if I don't quite believe you, Stan," I said slowly. "But I've heard your speeches, so maybe you can try to understand why I have a hard time believing you."

Stan nodded. "Fair."

"All you do is rally people to kill anything with a tail and claws, so why would you save me?"

Stan fidgeted with his tie. "I watched my daughter cry over your body."

The cold took over, and I looked down, clenching my teeth as I thought of Lux hovering over my unconscious body. Was she destroyed? "Is she—?"

"She's fine," Stan assured me, tilting his head to the side. "I just want to know why you care for her as she obviously cares for you." Stan was like a scientist observing a guinea pig.

"I want to see her," I demanded.

Stan laughed. "You think just because I saved your life that I will hesitate to end it? Let me make this clear—Keegan, isn't it?—You will never see my daughter again.

"I have her now and I'm going to cure her of your disease, find out the truth behind her disappearance, and when you can no longer play a part in that, I will end you."

I barely heard anything he said, and it had nothing to do with the explosion. I couldn't focus on any word that left his mouth. All I could think about was Lux.

Was she close? Was she truly all right? Had she been hurt in the raid?

Stan suddenly grabbed my face, catching me off guard. "Can you not hear me, mutt? I asked you a simple question. My doctors assured me you weren't fully deaf, not yet."

I snarled. "I want to see Lux."

Stan clicked his tongue. "Careful now," he told me. "If I think you're getting too close to your wild side, I'll sedate you."

I looked at Stan's henchmen as the burly man pulled out a needle filled with amber liquid. Wolfsbane.

"How did you save me?" I asked, changing the subject. The last thing I needed was to be dosed with wolfsbane. I was already weak; I didn't need to be paralyzed.

Stan leaned back, releasing me. I worked out my jaw as he spoke. "Two of my men found Lux during the raid and she was brought to me—"

"Was she harmed?"

Stan's lip curled. "Your concern is admirable but not appreciated."

I was desperate. "Please," I begged. "Please, I just need to know that she's unharmed."

Stan stared for a long moment before continuing. "We were leaving the premises when she spotted you. Of course, as soon as she did, she was ruined."

Stan looked pale. “I’ve never seen my daughter in such a state. So, I took you in, brought you with us in a separate vehicle, one equipped for medical emergencies.”

“Why?” I barked. “You just told me that you won’t let me see her again, so why bother?”

“To understand,” Stan spat. “To understand why she’s turned against me.”

“To understand that, you’ll need to spend a lot of time looking in a mirror, Mr. Freeman.”

Stan sighed and started pacing around the small room, frowning when he spotted the photograph of his I’d smashed.

He knelt beside the picture, carefully picking it up and brushing the glass off it.

“I’ve seen wounded wolves before, Keegan.” Stan frowned. “I’ve seen dead ones too; even killed a few.

“But you… You were a near hopeless cause. The doctors told me to abandon the hope you’d ever open your eyes. So, I had new doctors brought in; one’s more suited to your particular case.”

“A pack doctor?” I asked, horrified.

Stan laughed. “Keep your enemies close.”

“Is it not enough to kill us?”

“Not always,” Stan said. “Not when information is needed and a wolf is too wounded to heal alone. I must admit, the doctor I acquired is quite skilled in what he does.”

“Well,” I grumbled. “Amuse me a little further. How did the pack doctor save me?”

Stan folded the photograph and stuck it in his pocket.

“You were so injured that your body didn’t have the energy to keep your temperature up. It was diverting all its resources to healing you, but its attempts were futile.

“Your heart started to beat slower as you got colder. Your head was severely injured, hence your loss of hearing. It took a lot of time to revive you. The doctor worked the entire ride here.”

I frowned. “Does Lux—?”

“Think you’re dead? Yes.”

I swore under my breath. “You said you wanted to understand why Lux cared for me so much? Well, it’s in her nature to be loyal, especially to those she considers to be pack mates.”

Stan raised an eyebrow. “The kind of sorrow she exhibited was not the friendly type.”

I felt my jaw jump. “What do you want me to tell you, Freeman? That your daughter was tied to a chair and brainwashed for days on end?

“That she was forced to sing songs of werewolf origin until she couldn’t sing anything else? That Lux was forced to accept what was already in her?”

Stan’s glare grew colder. “How did you turn her against me?”

“I didn’t,” I snapped. “I didn’t want anything to do with her for the longest time because she was human and she was *your daughter*.”

I looked down, my guilt and regret squeezing my throat. Why had I wasted that time with her?

“Then who did it?” Stan asked. “Was it that alpha? The one who escaped.” I jerked my head upward, thanking the Goddess for Cole’s escape. Hopefully, Colton had fled too.

“You want to know what changed Lux? It was the truth,” I told him. “She saw our culture, saw what we believed, witnessed the unfair cruelty committed against us.

“And more importantly, she recognized everything she admired in werewolves in herself.”

Stan took a moment, placing his hands on his hips as he bent forward. He took a few deep breaths and I pushed myself to my feet, assessing my chances of getting past the guard in my weakened state.

“Lux takes after me,” Stan said, almost desperately. “Not her mother.”

“Werewolf blood is almost always dominant,” I told him. “Even if it takes a few generations for it to kick in, it’s there. I just didn’t know it took being around your mate for the process to—”

“Mate?” Stan spat, eyes flashing. “You’re her *mate*.”

I swallowed. “No, I—”

Stan held up a finger, his face flushing red. He closed his eyes for a moment, swallowing most of his anger. When he resurfaced, he was like still water.

“This has become more complicated than I’d previously imagined. Please excuse me.”

Stan didn’t spare me another glance as he and his bodyguard exited my room briskly, closing the door behind them. If my hearing had healed, I’m sure I would have heard a lock click into place.

As soon as I was alone, I headed for the door, trying the doorknob but finding it locked from the outside and too strong for me to break with just my hands.

I surveyed my room again, this time strategically opposed to curiously. The walls were windowless and the floors and ceilings had no vent wide enough to slip through.

Essentially, I was in a nicely decorated prison.

With a heavy heart, I grabbed the pillow off the bed and started using it as a sort of broom, sweeping all the glass shards into the far corner.

After, I picked up the cracked wooden frame and threw it with the rest of the garbage.

I started in the glass-filled corner, careful not to re-pierce my foot, and counted my footsteps as I walked the perimeter of the room.

After I had finished, I worked on the length and width and then stood back to inspect the space once more.

If I shifted, I would have minimal room to move around. I knew the doorway was not wide enough for my wolf’s shoulders and realized that any fight would have to take place outside of my quarters.

After my nervous energy had dissipated a little, I laid down on the bed with my arms tucked behind my head. I gazed up at the ceiling, my mind wandering to Lux.

Was she in the same building as me? And if she was, how was I going to get to her?

I winced as I thought about Stan’s words. Had she cried over me? Did she really believe that I was dead? Was she going out of her mind with worry?

Or was she already moving past the loss?

I sat up, running my hands over my face as my worry increased.

I recalled what Stan had said, about curing Lux. What was he planning to do to her? My stomach twisted as I remembered the stories my father used to tell me, about how the Feral War started.

I froze when I just about detected the sound of heavy footsteps echoing overhead.

I stood slowly and felt nervous energy beginning to swirl within me. I heard multiple shouts and the sound of people running. Something big was happening.

I moved to the door and pressed my good ear to it, straining. I didn’t hear anything until the sounds were just outside the door, and by then, it was too late for me to move.

I was pushed back as the door swung open to reveal Stan Freeman and his men again.

I smiled, regaining my footing. “So lovely to see you again so soon, Stan.”

Stan's entire face was boiling. "She's gone."

Ice formed over my vital organs. "What?"

"Lux," Stan informed me, but of course, I already knew, "she's disappeared."

My brain was miles ahead. "She was *here*. In the same building as me?"

Stan didn't bother answering. Instead, he strode forward and grabbed my shoulder with his hand while pressing the rest of his forearm against my neck.

He pushed me against the wall, and I didn't fight him. Even though I knew I was stronger, I wasn't faster than the guns at the bodyguards' hips.

"Where is she?" Stan demanded. "Where would she have gone?"

I scrunched my face up. "Are you serious?" I spat. "How do you expect me to know Lux better than you? She's *your daughter*."

Stan's lip curled. "Don't play me, mutt. I know what it's like to have a mate. I know what that bond is. I know how you werewolves come to know your significant other better than yourselves."

My mouth was dry. "How could you understand that?"

Stan yanked me forward and then slammed me against the wall. "Where would Lux go?"

"I don't know," I told him. "She doesn't know how to track, as far as I know. She can't fight in her wolf form. She doesn't understand how to hunt or how to cross territories without provoking packs.

"If I had to guess, I'd say she would travel by human means."

The lies glided over my tongue with surprising ease. I somehow knew that Stan would lap up every word, so long as I put Lux down, spoke about what she couldn't do.

And I was right. Stan let me go with a look of satisfaction.

If I had told Stan the truth, I would have told him that the first thing Lux would have done after shifting would have been to let her wolf take over. Lux knew she could keep herself alive.

I would have told Mr. Freeman that his daughter would have sent out a locating howl to let other wolves know where she was.

I would have told him that the packs would have called back and she would've gone in the one direction she knew was safe: north.

Stan turned around to face his bodyguards. "Henley," he addressed. "I want you to put out some sort of APB. I want her found as quickly and as quietly as possible.

"The general public is still unaware that she is alive. Also, take some men and head to the nearest transit stations. Take a photo of her and speak to all the clerks. Check the cameras as well."

"Yes, Mr. Freeman," the bodyguard grunted before leaving.

Stan turned back to me with his hands on his hips. "As for you, Keegan, I'm in need of your help."

I held back my aggression. "I can't help you track Lux," I told him. "My lack of hearing puts my wolf on edge constantly, enough so that he wouldn't be able to follow a scent straight."

Stan wasn't sure what to make of my confession, but he didn't seem rattled by it either.

"If Lux escaped how you say she has, we'll find her within the hour. What I need from you is entirely different. You will be the backup plan."

I frowned, missing a few words. I had to focus if I wanted to hear everything. "I don't understand," I told him.

Stan smiled. "I'm so pleased you aren't shy in front of large audiences, Keegan. That is just wonderful news."

“I don’t—”

“The humans are winning this war,” Stan informed me. “We have the tactical advantage and the numbers to support our plans.

“The wolves presented us with problems in the early days, but now, it’s too easy to run you out of your forests.”

“Wolves are resilient,” I barked.

Stan held up his hands. “Oh, of course. But you cannot deny that humans are the most resilient creatures. We have endured centuries of suffering, natural disasters, plagues, wars, famine.

“Now, the world faces a different challenge, but in the end, we will be victorious.”

“Why are you telling me this?” I asked.

“We may be winning,” Stan said slowly, “but not fast enough.

“You see, I’m interested in winning this war while I’m still the face of it. What’s the best way to win a war, Keegan? You and I both know. It’s our job to know.”

“Motivation,” I offered.

Stan grinned. “Yes, motivation. And if you could motivate your allies while breaking your enemies, wouldn’t you?”

I looked down. “You’re going to kill me.” The realization made my belly feel like it was full of lead.

“Execute you,” Stan amended. “Publicly.”

I closed my eyes. “You want to enrage my old pack.”

“Don’t sell yourself short, Keegan,” Stan cooed. “My informants have told me that you’ve traveled all over this fine country, sneaking past borders and checkpoints.

“Apparently, you’re my equivalent in werewolf politics, as if such a thing were possible. Your death will break the spirits of thousands of wolves and strike fear and anger into my enemies.

“Both emotions cause missteps that I can take advantage of with a cool head.”

“Why did you save me?” I growled. “Why go through all the trouble when you were planning to kill me anyways?”

Stan shrugged. “You have to die the right way. The most demeaning way.

“You won’t die protecting your pack or your mate. You won’t die taking down a human or while rallying your wolves.

“No. You will die by my hand, in chains, on your knees. You will die with a studio audience watching, on live television.”

I tried to swallow and failed. “And when Lux sees?”

“Oh,” Stan said. “She’ll be back in my care before then. She will never know.”

“She’ll feel my loss,” I told him bitterly. “The bond will break and she will feel it.”

“She already believes she’s felt it,” Stan said, his patience wearing thin. “What does Lux know about werewolf emotions? Lux was raised as a human.

“The pain she will feel when you die will be chalked off as a stomachache, nothing more.”

“You’ll kill her,” I yelled, almost desperately. “Wolves don’t last long without their mates.”

“She already thinks you’re gone!” Stan retorted. “And look how well she’s doing for herself. Lux escaped. I don’t believe grief is killing her, wouldn’t you agree?”

I tried not to let his words hurt me. I tried to let them roll off me like rain.

I tried a different angle. “My pack won’t come for me, they’re not that stupid. And despite what your informants have told you, they don’t care enough.”

Stan laughed like I was a small child who couldn’t grasp a grown-up concept.

“Have you forgotten I once cared for a werewolf? That I had a child with one? Do you really think I don’t understand how your species works?

“Werewolves don’t understand the sacrifice of one to benefit the masses. Your loyalty to one another will always be your weakness.”

“That’s not true,” I lied.

“It is,” Stan said adamantly. “What’s left of your pack will come for you. And if they don’t do it to save *you*, then it will be to save face.

“Think about it, what will it look like to the werewolf community if the face of its war effort is sacrificed without a rescue attempt? It will ruin everything you’ve worked for.”

I couldn’t argue. He was right.

“Your pack will come and it will be slaughtered for the enjoyment of humankind. The act will inspire young men everywhere to enlist for our cause while enraging werewolves.

“I know about the flaw in your species, how anger clouds your judgment. Well, I’d like to see that in action.”

“And if Lux finds out about all of this?” I asked.

Stan’s eyes were impossible to read. “I’ve given Lux a choice. She either comes back to me to be cured or she can put down with the dogs she loves so dearly.”

I held his gaze with as much ferocity as I could manage. “What broke your heart so severely that you became incapable of feeling?”

“A werewolf.”