The Mouthpiece Taunts

I was left to pace the tiny space of my cell. Stan's henchmen had dropped me off shortly after Stan delivered his headache-inducing speech on national television with me on my knees beside him.

I closed my eyes, letting my hands fall over my face. To think of my pack watching, to imagine them seeing my face, was something I couldn't allow myself to dwell over.

I tried my best to push the thought from my head.

I knew Stan was right. If my pack had been watching Stan's broadcast, then they would come for me.

It didn't matter how far or how long they had to run; they would show up and blood would be spilled to protect me.

A shiver passed over me. I had never thought twice about the brutality our loyalty brought about as a species, not until I was the one whom wolves were ready to die for.

My mind's eye conjured an image of Colton; his soft face frozen with fear as he was rushed by human soldiers.

I sat up sharply. If I didn't distract myself, I would go crazy before Stan had the chance to put a bullet in my skull.

It didn't seem to matter though. No amount of songs or brain puzzles could push out the images of my pack getting slaughtered in my name.

I swore, standing and lacing my fingers behind my head.

Looking back, I couldn't believe how foolish I had been. What made me think I could take Lux and run north? What made me believe I could ever get away from the war?

Stan was dragging me back into the epicenter. Suddenly, I was right back in the position I had wished to abandon.

I'd thought my days of sending wolves to their deaths were over. But here I was, doing the same thing, no speech needed on my part.

I wasn't sure how much time had passed since I'd stood on the stage where my execution was to be held.

Stan hadn't bothered to put a clock in my cell, and my thoughts were too jumbled for me to make an accurate estimate.

Stan's bodyguard came with food, refusing to give me the time when I asked. Instead, the man waddled in, the tray of food dwarfed by his large hands.

I stood on my bed as he dropped the tray onto my nightstand.

I sized him up, wondering how long it would take me to attack the human and bring him to the ground.

The man was considerably large. But I was faster, stronger, more agile, despite my size. Besides, this man was human and I was more.

My hearing was something to consider. I wouldn't hear a weapon being unsheathed until it would be too late to react.

The man read the look in my eyes and laughed. "Thinking about taking me down, wolf?"

I flashed my teeth. “It’s a fabulous picture.”

“Fantasy,” the man rumbled. “I have more ammo strapped to me than you can imagine. Everything from wolfsbane to the bomb that took out your hearing.” He said something else I couldn’t pick up.

I scowled. If there was anything I liked less than having a handicap, it was my enemies knowing it existed in the first place. “I could kill you faster than you could draw a weapon.”

The man smiled, confident, calm. I wasn’t fooling him. “I’ve been told you weren’t trained in combat. Don’t you have special wolves for that? Enforcers or whatever?

“Well, I know for a fact you aren’t one, you’re just a mouthpiece.” The man flipped the tray of food over, no longer happy to be my server.

“I, on the other hand, have been killing wolves since this war started.”

My top lip twitched slightly, giving more away than I wanted. “All wolves are killers. Don’t let your informants fool you. Enforcers may do the heavy lifting but it takes a pack to kill a stag.”

The man lifted his arms out to the side. “Where’s your pack?”

I stood, moving as close as I could with as much speed as I had. The man staggered back, a flash of fear crossing his face before his expression returned to stone.

I laughed, hoping the sound unnerved him further. “They’re coming,” I warned him. “And I hope you’re the first stag they take down.”

The man bristled, pushing me with enough force to send a human flying through the nearest wall.

I, on the other hand, took only a couple of steps back, letting a crooked grin grace my face. It felt good to taunt the guard. It felt better than going crazy.

I looked down at the potatoes that the guard had covered the ground with.

“That was a stupid move,” I told him, enjoying the way his nostrils flared. “They’ll probably send you back in here with a rag to clean it up. Is that what your training consists of?”

The man nearly snarled. If I hadn’t known better, I’d have said he could’ve been part animal.

“Shut up,” he rumbled, his eyes clouding over as he realized his edge against me had been lost. I may have been the one locked up, but I was valuable to Stan Freeman, and he knew it.

I laughed, placing a hand on my stomach. “You’ve been training to kill werewolves since before the war began but they have you serving me dinner like a lunchroom lady.

“All that training must’ve paid off, seems like you’re really high in the ranks.”

The man snapped, grabbing the front of my shirt and slamming me against the wall hard enough for my teeth to slam together. He moved close to my good ear, snarling.

“Let me say this clearly; clear enough for a person who’s near deaf to hear. I don’t care how hard Freeman gets over you, I will kill you—”

“Come on, Hank, that’s enough.”

I flicked my eyes over Hank’s shoulder, counting the men who had entered my room. At least four more had been posted outside of my cell. Useful to know.

I smiled at Hank, patting his shoulder condescendingly. “That’s enough now, Hanky.”

Hank’s face turned a shade darker.

The guard behind him rolled his eyes at me, shaking his head slightly. “Hank, just leave the prick. He’s dead by morning anyways. There’s no point. He’s just trying to get one last kick out of you.”

Hank shook his head, releasing the hold he had on me and taking a step back. I could see the anger leaving his face as his skin returned to a more normal pallor.

I don't know what made me do it. Maybe I had realized Hank was going to cool off and live out the rest of his life while I was going to die.

Maybe it was the thought of Lux coming here, only to be hauled off by her insane father.

Or maybe it was because I was afraid to be shot in the head.

But I attacked.

I knocked Hank to the ground, smashing my foot into his face before swinging out and catching the more reasonable guard across the chest, making him stumble.

I heard shouts then, loud enough to reach my fickle ears.

But I didn't hear the sound of crunching bone as I punched the oncoming guard across the face, dislocating his jaw with one hit.

The next guard was smarter and he dodged my blow and tackled me around the waist.

I twisted out of his grip before I hit the ground, saving myself from having the air knocked out of my lungs.

Despite my maneuvering, my breakout attempt didn't last long. I wasn't an enforcer. I had never been trained in combat beyond the basics. I wasn't a fighter.

I felt something sharp pierce the meaty flesh of my upper thigh. My throat closed when I realized a dart filled with wolfsbane was buried deep in my skin.

It didn't take long until my vision started to cut in and out, and I was on my back, too far gone to worry about the dosage.

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Waking up was bizarre. Growing up in the middle of a war zone meant that I had suffered my fair share of blows to the head, but I had never come to in any way that compared to this.

I had been propped up in a stiff chair, and my arms and legs were strapped down.

I was strangely aware that an intravenous tube had been inserted into one of the veins on the back of my hand, and a fluid I had never seen before was being pumped into my veins.

A pretty woman with white teeth was buzzing around me, dabbing my face and adjusting the clothes on my body.

I made a sound of displeasure, and she smiled, placing her fingers on my cheeks as she leaned down in front of me.

Bright lights illuminated the fuzzy hairs that rebelled against the rest of her head, sticking up in this direction and that. The woman smiled at me, and I saw her eyes were large and lemur-like.

The closer I looked, the more I realized her beauty was mostly fabricated. I wasn't sure if I had ever seen someone with so much makeup.

"Welcome back," she said to me in a low voice. "I wasn't sure if this stuff was going to work." The woman flicked the bag of liquid that was slowly filtering through my body.

I pulled at my hand, testing the restraints around my wrists and ankles at the same time. The woman didn't seem bothered by my protests.

"It's this stuff called Moon Path," she told me. "In case you were wondering. It combats the effects of wolfsbane poisoning.

"It was really popular among your kind back before… Well, before everything went to shit. Freeman's men made sure it was eradicated before the war started."

My tongue felt fuzzy in my mouth, and the woman's voice kept cutting in and out.

Every time she spoke to me, I had to improvise certain words, adding what I thought made sense with the overall message of what she was saying.

The woman frowned as she stepped back to pick up a compact container with blush in it and a brush. “I’m not sure if this is your shade. Too pinky. You’ll look flushed on camera.”

I recoiled as far as I could into the chair. This woman was prepping me for my execution. That’s how much time I had lost. All of it.

I closed my eyes, silently cursing myself for provoking that guard. I had been drugged and as a consequence, I had lost my final hours.

I wasn’t going to stage an elaborate break-out. I had acted too rashly, and now, I was left with no options.

The woman looked at me quizzically. “Are you more of a bronzer guy?”

I cut her a cold glare. “I wouldn’t know. I’ve never had to get ready for this sort of occasion before.”

The woman put her hands to her ears, and I noticed the extensive piercings that covered them.

“Ah, dude! I’m just going to pretend you didn’t say that. I totally can’t make you beautiful if I think about the why.”

More details were coming to me now that the Moon Path was starting to take effect.

The woman in front of me was young, with dark hair that was striped with green. I was in some sort of studio and the bright lights framed a large mirror.

I felt a sudden surge of panic. “How much time?”

The girl bit her lip. Her lipstick was a very dark purple. “I’m not supposed to tell you that. *Stan the Man* wants you to be on your toes, I guess.”

“Please,” I begged, hoping the girl would budge.

“I need to know. What does it matter now anyways? I’m going to have a bullet in my temple soon. I just want to know how soon, so I can think, you know?”

The woman’s skin went pale and tears welled in her eyes. For a moment, she didn’t respond. Instead, she turned to her table of makeup and selected a powder to apply to my cheeks.

“So much better,” she acknowledged. When she was satisfied with my face, she checked her watch, looking at me with a gloomy expression. “They’re coming for you in ten minutes.”

My entire body clenched. Ten minutes. That was it. Maybe half an hour depending on how long Freeman took to get around to it.

I stared at myself in the illuminated mirror, wishing I could look like myself in my final moments.

The human girl looked sympathetic. “I’m really sorry,” she whispered to me, her eyes flickering to the camera mounted above the door. “For what it’s worth, you don’t seem like a psycho killer to me.”

Without another word to me, the woman plugged neon pink headphones into her ears and sat on a nearby chair, tapping the music out on her thighs.

I tried one last time to free myself, pulling at my arms and kicking out my legs. The bindings were reinforced; too strong for me in my weakened state.

My only break was coming from the IV. The longer I received the Moon Path, the more my head started to clear.

Ten minutes passed far too quickly. In all my panic, I hadn’t been able to use the time wisely, to think through what was pressing on my mind.

The only thing I had thought about was how much time I had left and worrying with every passing second.

The makeup artist stood when Henley and Perks came for me. It was like she thought standing while I was unstrapped, unhooked, and ushered to my death was some sort of goodbye salute.

The drug had given me a clear head but I was still too weak to fight Henley and Perks. I knew they had wolfsbane on them anyways, so there wouldn't have been any point, even if I'd had the strength.

The longer we walked, the louder the roar in my ears became. I winced at the sound. It was the loudest noise I had heard since the explosion.

I looked up at the guards, wondering how they were handling the sound with fully equipped hearing.

Seconds later, I realized the roar was the audience. They were yelling for blood. And more specifically, they were yelling for mine.

The humans chanted together, throwing their fists into the air and grinning crazily.

Henley and Perks ushered me onto the stage and the sound exploded in my good ear, making me thankful for the first time that I had lost my hearing completely in my left.

The crowd yelled and screamed, whipping themselves into a frenzy that exuded a heavy stench.

Henley and Perks took turns attaching heavy chains to my wrists. They extended to the floor of the stage, where they were mounted. One tug told me there was no getting away.

Henley hesitated before locking me in. His eyes were practically mournful. I tried to catch his gaze but he righted himself before I could, moving stiffly after his partner.

I swore to myself when they disappeared, and I was left with the crowd.

I was sure they were going to start throwing stones at me, right up until the moment Stan Freeman appeared on stage, waving his hands around to silence the crowd.

I looked at the cameras as five tiny red lights turned on.

Stan jogged over to me, placed a hand on my shoulder, and leaned toward my good ear. "I'm so excited about this," he told me. "Try to smile."

Stan jumped up as soon as the producer gave him the thumbs-up. Immediately, the audience was quiet and the only sound I heard was my labored breathing. This was it.

"Thank you for tuning in," Stan began. "This is a very special program meant to send a very clear message.

"Before me is one of the werewolves in charge of their war effort.

"Don't let his looks deceive you. He might look like a child but he's responsible for deploying the monsters that ended the lives of your sons, daughters, mothers, fathers, aunts, and uncles."

The crowd jeered, forgetting any sympathy my young face had earned from them.

A part of me admired Stan; he was good at what he did. He knew how to use words, how to manipulate. It was true what they said. He was my equal.

"What you witness next could be classified as an act of violence. I assure you, it is not. What I am about to do is an act of justice and dedication to the human cause.

"This werewolf, this abomination, has killed humans, plotted against humans, terrorized humans. And even more. He took my daughter."

There was a gasp from the crowd. Stan had given them a twist they hadn't expected and they were livid.

Suddenly, there was a personal quality to their hate for me. Now, they had true justification for their cheers.

I started to sweat as two high beams were focused on my face.

I was sure the makeup that the woman had applied was sliding down my cheeks. I hoped it was, at least. I hoped the face America saw die was my own.

Stan moved from my side. I twisted to follow his movements, and my stomach sank into my gut when he picked up a silver gun on a pedestal.

He worked his fingers over the weapon, appraising it before checking the chamber for bullets and clicking the safety off.

I scanned the crowd frantically, looking for a familiar face. I never doubted my pack wouldn't come, but I was starting to doubt their timing.

Stan walked over to me slowly, requesting silence from the audience.

The back of my neck was slick with sweat. It didn't matter because the flesh there turned cold the instant I felt the barrel of the gun pressed there.

"You are being executed for your crimes against humanity." Stan's voice was like an echo down a long tunnel. I barely heard it.

"The death penalty has been decided as the aptest punishment for your crimes. You have—"

"Eric!" The name bounced off the walls. Stan stopped mid-sentence, his entire body freezing over as his hold on the gun loosened. My heart beat frantically as I looked for the woman who had spoken.

Stan whipped around, glowering at someone off stage. "What the hell is going on?"

"Eric," the voice chimed, all bells. "Put the gun down."

The pressure on my chest would have been enough to make me keel over had I not been held in place by the chains.

Stan took a step forward, his forehead glistening with sweat. The audience shuffled, looking more and more unsure as Stan's confidence began to waver.

"What the hell is this?" Stan all but screamed, waving the gun around.

A few audience members shrieked, standing up in their seats. I watched as Stan looked around frantically, ignoring the cameras.

I spotted her before he did. At first, I thought I was looking at Lux. But this woman was taller and fuller around the hips.

She was lovely to look at, with long silver hair and eyes so light, they reflected the colors that touched them. Her skin was pale and her face delightful.

When Stan saw her, he dropped to his knees, his gun coming to rest in between his legs. I rocketed to my feet, straining against the chains.

There was only one woman on this planet who could make Stan Freeman fall: his mate.

The woman smiled, although her expression was too complicated to read. I strained to hear her, growling at the audience members who distracted my ears.

"Eric, my love, what are you doing?"

For a moment, Stan stopped breathing. I frowned, staring at the back of his head. Who, exactly, was Eric?

I realized, then, that Stan wasn't Freeman's real name. I wondered if Freeman really belonged to him as well.

I thought of my uncle. Perhaps it was a common name among psychopaths.

All the thoughts were stolen from my head when I saw Lux. She strode forward, flanking her mother and scanning the area. When she caught my eyes, the ferocious expression on her face disappeared.

Stan moved to rest on one knee. His voice was dark and twisted. "What are you doing here, Natalie?"

Lux's mother smiled. Her eyebrows pulled together, as though she were in pain. Another boy came to stand on her other side and the resemblance was obvious. Somehow, this boy was also connected to Lux.

"My sweet darling," Natalie cooed, "I'm here to kill you."

The previous day

Almost as soon as the television program ended, the packs exploded into a frenzy of organized chaos.

Enforcers assembled teams, lookouts started running, peacemakers guided the elderly and young to places of safety, and the alphas barked orders at anyone who stood still.

I was frozen in place, rooted to the spot. I stared at the black television screen, my mind replaying Keegan's expression over and over and over until I couldn't see anything else.

"Lux." I felt Colton's hesitant touch. "Lux, we have a lot to do if we're going to get to him."

I looked up and met his gaze. Colton looked so relieved and so sad at the same time. I understood. Someone had come back from the dead, and it was the person I loved.

Grant was beside me too; his words were more urgent. "You need to come with me. Now." I didn't argue as my brother grabbed my arm and started marching.

I barely heard anything he said to Alpha Cole, never mind what he said to me.

Grant dragged me away from the chaos, moving deep into the forest and shifting. I followed his lead, not knowing what else to do.

We ran as fast as my wolf would allow. Grant was used to running long distances at a fast pace; I wasn't. I didn't know where we were going, only that we were moving further north.

I couldn't help but wonder if this was as far as Keegan and I would get. I almost tripped when I realized I'd still have that chance.

When Grant slowed down, it was because he had spotted a squat-looking building that best resembled an outhouse. He shifted in front of the little hut and rushed inside before I could see much.

He came out fully clothed. "Your turn," he said to me, moving to the side.

I shifted, moving into the outhouse and coming face to face with a closet. I moved through the clothes as quickly as I could, picking out what I thought would fit me best.

The jeans I chose dragged along the ground as I walked beside Grant. I tried to roll the waist but the material was stiff and stubborn. I was glad for the distraction; it kept me from losing my mind.

I heard the sound of pots clattering and smelled smoke before I saw the people through the trees.

Grant had brought me to a small pack. It seemed as though this one had stayed far enough north to stay out of the war.

My brother turned to me, his eyes a reflection of my own. "Lux, we're here to get our mother."

I blinked. "Okay." There wasn't anything else to be said. I walked forward on instinct, like I was in a dream, watching my body move from afar.

My mother. I was going to meet my mother.

How much time had I spent imagining this moment? And now, that it was suddenly real. Yet, I couldn't help but think it was, sort of…, anti-climactic.

I peeked up at Grant. He wasn't sharing any of the nerves I was feeling. He looked strained, but not nervous.

Somehow, I had always imagined my father would be with me when I finally met her.

The people greeted us warmly. They didn't seem like the sort of pack who was bothered by newcomers —at least, not the werewolf kind—and we walked through the camp freely.

Grant picked up our mother's scent straight away; to me, it was lost among the rest.

"She's close," Grant murmured to me, his pale skin even lighter in the black ensemble he had chosen.

My nerves finally ate away at my numbness when Grant stopped in front of a beige tent that had been slung lazily between an oak and an aspen.

We didn't need to knock or call for her. Natalie, my mother, emerged from her tent all on her own.

My resemblance to her was striking and obvious. Even more so than the first time I had seen Grant.

My mother was taller than me by a few inches, and her hair was slightly longer.

Her features looked as though they belonged on one of those white marble busts in museums. She was beautiful in a strange, enchanting way.

Her eyes were like the surface of the moon: shining silver flecked with dark gray. Everything about the woman was achingly familiar and, at the same time, strangely foreign.

She looked at me; her face seizing and the muscles in her neck strained. She tried to swallow but her throat wouldn't move.

I watched as tears pooled in her eyes and color rose to the tops of her cheeks, making her look more human.

"Lux," she cooed, her voice as soft as a bird's. I closed my eyes, letting the sound of my name wash over me. My mother's voice was everything I had imagined it to be: feminine and nurturing.

I didn't jump when I felt her hands on my face. I did open my eyes. "I thought… I heard on the news…"

"I'm not dead," I said, my fingers shaking at my sides. "I shifted."

My mother's face shined. "You… Oh…"

Grant shifted his weight beside me. I felt the tension rolling off him. How long had it been since he had seen our mother? Or his father for that matter?

He scratched the back of his neck, clearly unsure of what to do.

Natalie reacted instantly and she took one hand from my face so she could touch his. Grant pulled back slightly, but Natalie was resilient.

"Grant…" Her voice caught on his name. "It's been so long… And to see you together… Both of my children." Natalie closed her eyes and drew in a deep breath. "I never thought I would see it."

I didn't know what to do. I wasn't sure if I even knew how to speak anymore. Every thought had left my brain, every intention had left my body, every feeling from my heart.

This was her. This was me. My mother. *Mother.*

Grant pulled his face away from her touch and Natalie flinched. He pretended not to notice. "We aren't here for cookies and hugs. We don't need *that* from you."

Natalie's eyes shifted to me, now uncertain.

When her hand left my face, I glared at Grant. I didn't want her to look at me like that. I wanted that love back. I wanted her to touch me. I didn't want Grant to call the shots.

Natalie righted herself and she distracted her hands by smoothing over her plain clothes. "What is it, Grant? What do you need from me?"

"We're going to kill your mate," Grant told her unflinchingly. Natalie didn't react very strongly, or if she did, she hid it well. Her eyes slid over to me and then back to my brother.

"You're going to kill Eric. Are you sure that's wise?"

My entire body jolted. Eric? Who the hell was Eric?

Natalie must have read the distress on my face. "Your father's been using a fake name since he fled his home, years ago."

Grant ignored that last part. "I don't care if it's wise, the packs are moving in for the kill. Lux's mate, Keegan Stone, has been captured and is going to be executed. The alphas need your help."

Natalie seemed to think this over. I wasn't sure what she thought about the news of me having a mate;

her face gave none of her thoughts away.

After a while, her eyes met mine. “You love him?”

I nodded. “Yes.”

Natalie nodded, taking my hand and kissing it gently. I looked at her in awe, watching her white hair fall over her shoulder, following the line of her jaw as she kissed me.

She looked exactly how I had imagined.

Natalie dropped my hand and retreated into her tent. Grant and I followed, standing awkwardly at the entrance.

Natalie’s tent was pleasant and well-lived in. The more I looked at it, the more resentment blossomed in my chest.

From the looks of it, my mother had been living comfortably for quite some time while I had been left with my father and Grant with nobody.

What had she been doing my entire life? Hiding here while her mate raged a war against her kind?

As though he had read her mind, Grant grabbed my hand and squeezed it. Once the motion was over, he exited the tent, acting as though he hadn’t paid me any mind at all.

Natalie looked over her shoulder at me, smiling sadly.

“You have that look on your face. The same one your father used to get when he was thinking real hard.”

I immediately scrambled my expression, and Natalie laughed. “He used to do that when I called him out on it too.”

I crossed my arms, realizing my awe for her was slowly fading. “Have you been here a long time?”

Natalie nodded, packing things into a bag. “Fourteen years.”

My eyebrows shot up. She had been here my entire life. Here, in this tent, in this peaceful community, safe.

Natalie crossed the room to kneel in front of her nightstand. “I know what you’re thinking, Lux,” she said, without looking at me. “And it’s not that simple.”

I felt violated but I was determined not to show it.

“You never came back for me,” I said it like it was a fact because it was. “You left me with him, even when he took over in the war, knowing the danger his position put me in.”

Natalie sighed. “I always hoped you wouldn’t shift so long as you stayed with your father and away from others of our kind.

“In theory, you were safe, Lux. The safest werewolf in the country, in fact. You were in the best hiding place I could’ve imagined. You were with the humans.”

Tears burned in the corners of my eyes, surprising me. “Why didn’t you take me with you when you left? Why did you leave me behind?”

Natalie stood and her face suddenly looked a thousand years old. “I couldn’t, Lux. I couldn’t. Your father wouldn’t let you go, and…and I wasn’t sure if where I was going was safe.”

I felt like I was a child again, arguing with my father over eating my vegetables. “Yeah, but you could’ve come back when you realized it was safe here. You could have come back for me.”

Never in my life had I felt so abandoned. In all the years I was growing up, I never resented my mother, never questioned why she wasn’t around.

I had missed her, but in an empty way, because I had never known her.

Natalie threw her arms out. “What do you want me to tell you, Lux? I didn’t come back. You’re right.

“Because by the time I found this place, it wasn’t safe for *me* to do so. I couldn’t risk sneaking into a city, not in the early days of the Feral War.”

I sniffled, suddenly embarrassed and raw. “But you’re my mom.”

Natalie’s neck and ears became red. “And I wish I was a better one.”

That answer wasn’t enough. Tears burned and fell. I wiped them away as I turned and stalked out of the tent, finding Grant a few feet away, leaning on a tree.

He perked up when he saw me and his expression clouded when he saw I was crying.

“Get used to the disappointment,” he told me. The way he spoke wasn’t malicious. He was telling me this because he truly thought I needed to know it. “It’s her way.”

Natalie joined us a moment later, wearing a backpack that dangled all the way to her knees. She caught me looking and laughed, flipping her hair over her shoulder.

“It’s kind of my own invention. I wear the backpack baggy, so when I shift, it stays on.” Obviously, our resemblances went beyond our appearances.

We all shifted, running in complete silence as we made our way back to the packs.

By the time we arrived, almost everyone was gone. The only people left beside the elders and younglings were Alpha Cole and his few trusted advisers.

Colton came toward me, rubbing his side against mine and flicking his tail. I was glad he was still here. I had a feeling that I was going to need a friend for the next leg of our journey.

Alpha Cole stood in front of us. He seemed a hundred years older since the death of his daughter.

“We’re going to run as close to the city as possible but then we’ll have to switch to driving. Follow my lead.” He shifted and we were off, leaving no time to argue.

I didn’t let my mind wander too much as I ran. I focused on the surrounding trees, the ground under my feet, and little else.

Colton nipped at my heels every time I slowed, keeping me in check with the others.

There weren’t many problems on the trip down. We had to skirt around a human cabin, more as a precaution than anything else.

Not many humans lived in the forests of North America anymore, but Cole thought it best to avoid the possibility of an unwanted completely.

When we reached the cars, they were loaded with clothing, courtesy of the lookouts that had left hours before the rest of us to scout a safe route.

I pulled on tight, black athletic wear, feeling self-conscious until I noticed everyone in similar getups.

Grant drove our car, Natalie sat in the passenger seat, and Colton and I sat in the back. Alpha Cole and his enforcers were in the car ahead of us, ready to take any hit, if necessary.

Instead of going through the regular checkpoints, we veered off the highway, off-roading until we reached the fence that surrounded the city.

Someone, presumably the lookouts, had cut the fence in a large enough arc for our vehicles to slide through.

The simplicity of our infiltration made me uneasy.

My fellow werewolves had come up with this plan in only a few hours, and it was working. Something told me humans were underestimating us, and werewolves were holding back.

It made sense, really. Werewolves knew everything about humans. They had the advantage. So why hadn’t they used it?

“What were you saying before?” Grant prompted, glancing at our mother. “When you called Stan

Freeman Eric?"

Natalie shifted in her seat, sighing. "Your father. He's more invested in this war than I think anyone knows."

Her eyes met mine in the rearview mirror. "He was there at the very beginning, and I mean the *beginning*."

I frowned. "You mean all that equation stuff?"

Natalie nodded. She had the attention of the entire car.

"Your father got drawn into human—werewolf politics very early on. He was there when the equation was first found. He worked closely with the son of the man who started everything."

Grant stiffened. "Eric." This time, when he said the name, there was a meaning behind it. "Are you talking about the worm that befriended that teenage sociopath? Lance Bay or whatever."

Natalie sighed, nodding. I thought I was going to throw up. "It was a dark start from the beginning." Had there ever been a time when my father hadn't been fighting werewolves?

"Well," Colton pressed, "what happened?"

Natalie went on. "The wolves closest to the predicament attacked. Obviously, they wanted the equation gone. Grant was there." She looked at her son proudly.

"Eric told me that he was shot early on in the attack, knocked out, and left in the forest. By the time he woke up, the fighting was over and his side had lost. He and a few others ran."

Grant swore. "I never caught up to them, me and Luke, we looked but…"

Natalie shrugged. "I met him a few years later. Convinced him he'd been brainwashed.

"He loved me, learned to trust me, Lux came into our lives, and then everything…" Natalie's eyes slipped into the past. "Everything changed."

"The war started?" I guessed.

Natalie nodded, sucking in a breath. "The war started and your dad became more invested. He recognized the guys he used to fight with and started to believe their message."

Natalie pressed her fingers to her forehead. "It was horrible. He started believing I had brainwashed him. He became…violent.

"It was all propaganda but it struck home with your father. After all, he had seen pack wolves tear his only comrades apart."

I could see it all too clearly.

"He told me to leave," Natalie continued. "I didn't want to. A few months later, I realized I had no choice. I tried to take you, Lux, but he wanted you.

"I don't know. It was all so messed up. Goddess, it was a mess."

"And you've been up north ever since?" I asked, my voice brittle. Colton pressed his shoulder to mine.

A look of guilt crossed her face but it brought me no satisfaction. "Yes."

"And Grant?" I pressed.

"Lux," Grant warned, shaking his head.

Natalie's eyes cut between us. "I wanted Grant to be with me. He was a White Wolf for a while but they disbanded. I pleaded for him to come, sent him letters and pictures. He never responded to me."

Grant growled. "Can you blame me?"

Natalie recoiled. "I didn't plan on finding Eric, Grant. You know that. You're the one that chose your father over me. I wanted you to come with me. He would have loved you; accepted you."

“Like how he accepted you?” Grant bit. “Kicked you out as soon as the shit storm started?”

Natalie bit her lip. “Your dad finding his mate wasn’t my fault either, Grant.”

Grant rolled his eyes. “That’s such fucking bullshit. You two found your other halves and left me behind. I’m just a relic of your impatience.”

Natalie’s eyes went wide. “Grant!” Her voice was stern but still wavered. “You know that isn’t true. Your father and I both loved you, but life got in the way.”

Grant exploded, causing the car to swerve slightly. “It wasn’t life! It was your own shitty personalities! You did no better with Lux than you did with me, and Dad probably fucked up his sons too!”

Natalie looked out of her window with shining eyes. A heavy silence followed that pressed down on all of us.

I closed my eyes, wishing I could rewind. I shouldn’t have brought up Grant. We needed to focus. Keegan was depending on us.

Just thinking about him seemed to readjust everything. Keegan was my family and he was all I needed to worry about.

My mother had kept me waiting my entire life. Her problems could wait a little longer. As for Grant, he was inclined only to open up on his own, so I would wait until he did.

We stashed the car a few blocks from the TV studio building my father was in. The place was crawling with overexcited humans. They gave off a distinct smell of anticipation and sweat.

Colton stayed close, hovering just behind me. Grant had located Livy and was speaking with her in hushed tones while Natalie stood to the side by herself, quiet and withdrawn.

I wanted to talk to her but it would have to wait until I knew Keegan was safe.

We camped outside of the building for two hours. My legs grew stiff and cramped as the night’s cool air froze my muscles. I rubbed my thighs, and the anticipation of it all made me shudder.

When the crowd grew loud enough for us to hear them from across the street, the alphas moved in.

The first wave of wolves took out the guards surrounding the building. The next took out any humans who were in the wrong place at the wrong time. The last took out the stragglers.

Finally, Alpha Cole ushered our small group forward with my mother at the center of the attack.

I stepped over bodies and discarded weapons as we navigated the dim halls. We seemed to be moving to the center of the building, where the jeers and screams were loudest.

The sound was almost enough to make me feel nostalgic for all the rallies I had gone to with my father.

Eventually, only Natalie stood in front of me, and her figure illuminated when she pulled the doors open to enter the hall, the bright lights blacking out everything but her outline.

I threw a hand up, squinting at the intense lights lighting up the stage, and walked forward blindly, blinking rapidly as my sight readjusted.

I heard my father’s voice but could barely make out his words over the hum of the crowd. My mother’s pace increased at the sound of him, her body humming with the same familiarity as my own.

For what felt like a long moment, I debated my motives. Was I going to be the one to kill him? Would I stand by and let the man that raised me bleed?

I felt Grant’s hand on my back. “It’s go-time.”

I nodded, moving forward again. Natalie called out my father’s real name, silencing both him and the crowd.

My father responded in a tone he reserved for when he was most severely displeased. “What the hell is going on?”

“Eric,” Natalie cooed, “put the gun down.” I was almost beside her; just a few steps back.

I felt the tension growing in the room. Obviously, the audience had been unsettled by my father’s drop in confidence.

“What the hell is this?” my father yelled. A few audience members shrieked and a frenzy of movement started. I knew it wouldn’t be long before they were trampling each other.

They’d only be more horrified when they saw the bodies of the discarded security guards.

“Eric, my love, what are you doing?”

I heard my father’s heavy breathing in the microphone as Natalie spoke to him. I wasn’t sure if he was reacting to the sound of his real name or the presence of my mother.

I stepped forward, sucking in a deep breath and holding it in. I flanked my mother’s right side, marking myself as her second. My eyes scanned the area, my heart refusing to beat until I found him.

It didn’t take long. He was in the very center of the stage. Keegan’s arms were twisted and chained, his hair tussled, his face strangely colored.

His eyes grew when he saw me, and his chest started heaving. He strained against his constraints and his mouth formed words I couldn’t hear.

My knees started to shake. He was there and he was alive.

The last time I had seen him in person, he had been lying in the dirt, icy to the touch. He had been broken and bleeding and completely unresponsive.

Now, here he was, virtually undamaged.

My father picked himself up so he was resting on one knee. His voice was dark and twisted, a tone I had never heard before.

My father seldom lapsed in emotion. He considered it a weakness.

“What are you doing here, Natalie?”

Natalie smiled. Grant moved forward, coming to stand on her other side.

She didn’t acknowledge her son but I knew it meant a lot to her. My father was her mate, and she was here to end him. She needed our strength.

“My sweet darling,” Natalie cooed, “I’m here to kill you.”