

My Last Speech

No one came after me. I didn't hear anyone shout my name or feel any hands on me. They let me go without a fight. Their attention was elsewhere, and I had to focus mine on anything else.

I walked the halls, keeping one hand on the wall as I stumbled down the dimly lit passages.

My feet kept crossing, and my knees caught on one another, but I kept moving forward, propelled by my task. My final one.

There were still a few stagehands lingering around. They covered as I walked past them, dropping their eyes nervously and biting down on their lips. I barely spared them a glance.

I didn't hear the roaring crowd until I was on stage, and even then, the noise only registered as a dull thumping in my shattered ears.

I surveyed the space first, watching wolves snap at oncoming humans and their alphas snap at them in turn. The packs wanted a fight; the alphas didn't.

The audience moved as far back as they could to get away from the wolves. Most were crying, a few were hysterical, and I could see at least one had fainted.

I couldn't blame them for their fear. After all, the man they had trusted for the duration of the war had just shot his own daughter, center stage.

They had come to watch an execution; now, hundreds of shifted werewolves surrounded them.

I caught a few familiar faces among the wolves. Livy had shifted into her shining white wolf and was positioned beside her mate, growling at any wolves who were getting out of line.

I felt a pang when I realized Deelia should have been beside her.

Jude was among the wolves keeping the packs in line as well. I had only seen him shift a handful of times. Despite his calm demeanor as a peacemaker, his wolf was just as threatening as Livy's.

It took me a while to find Stan's gun and then longer to find his microphone. I held on to both so tightly; the blood left my hand, turning the skin white.

I found Cole's eyes in the crowd and read the message in them.

Hurry up.

I raised the microphone to my mouth and called for attention. No one turned or lifted their head, so I raised my hand and fired off a shot.

Bits of plaster fell from the ceiling as the sound in the theater ceased.

Now, I had everyone's attention.

I swallowed thickly before speaking. My last speech.

"I want to talk to you about my life," I began. My heart started to pound, taking me away from my train of thought. It took a few deep breaths to remember what I was planning to say.

"My parents loved each other, a lot. They tried for a child before me but they had a miscarriage.

"They fought over baby names before I was born, arguing between a family name and one that my mother loved. My mother won."

A few people chuckled and my heart rate calmed somewhat. I was focused enough to notice the red lights were still on the cameras.

I gripped the microphone, keeping it steady. "We were a pretty happy family for a while. I was a goofy kid, real chatty too. My mother loved my stories, I made my father snore.

"I was an only child but I wasn't bothered by it. I made friends in school easily, had friends in my neighborhood.

"My mom used to make banana muffins for the parent council meetings and my father coached my house league soccer team when I was five.

"I loved my parents and they loved me, but then the war started, and we were forced out of hiding. Suddenly, what had always been natural to me was an abomination to most of the world.

"I was pulled out of school, friends I had made no longer spoke to me, my home was lost.

"Before the war, I knew what humans thought of us. We were myths to them, creatures warped by Hollywood and twisted in stories. I understood that.

"But I didn't understand the hate and fear that bombarded my life when the truth was revealed.

"I mean, to a kid, it just doesn't make sense. Werewolves aren't as scary as they were portrayed in old films, nor as weak as they are shown to be in more recent ones.

"We don't eat children, attack young women, pillage towns. Werewolves don't grow claws and fur on full moons, and we don't tear apart herds of deer or third for blood.

"I could shift, yes, but I was so much more than that. I was class president, a straight-B-plus student, defender on my school's soccer team.

"I held the record for most worms eaten without vomiting and I was the fastest runner after Jeremy Small. I was a werewolf, but I was human too. The war changed my outlook.

"My parents started to fight more. Sometimes my dad would yell at me and then apologize right after. I was too young to understand much. Too young to realize who my parents really were.

"My father didn't want to fight in the war and neither did my mother. Eventually, they decided to go north. Most humans see the North as dangerous. To us, it's a haven.

"Well, my parents never made it because my father was killed and my mother died shortly after." There was a low murmur from the crowd. My throat became thick and I had to clear it before I continued.

"My father was killed because he wouldn't harm humans. He was a sympathizer.

"My father didn't care that humans called him a monster because he refused to be one. He was killed protecting a human; killed for believing in peace.

"Most people would be ashamed of that, but I'm proud. And I'm proud to be a sympathizer. In fact, any werewolf who tells you they aren't one is a goddamn liar because we are human.

"For a long time, I thought I wasn't. I thought I was different, better maybe. My thoughts had been twisted and convoluted after a childhood of fear and oppression, propaganda and hate.

"I figured I had to be better than humans. After all, they only kill, right?"

"But then I met my mate. Lux Freeman." The audience gasped and a few wolves growled.

I held up my hands. "Lux was kidnapped and sold through a disgusting trade made possible by the war. One in which both werewolves and humans have been both victims and proponents.

"As soon as I met her, I knew that I had been wrong. Lux was human. And even more, Lux had been raised by a human with so much hatred for his kind.

"And yet, Lux didn't hate werewolves. She was able to put aside the ingrained prejudice long enough to love one.

"I've always thought the war was inevitable. Werewolves and humans were just too different to coexist in peace. Humans hated us and we hated them and that was the end of it.

"But Lux, she didn't see it that way. She saw the similarities, sympathized with the same problems.

"For so long, I fought her, tested her, dismissed her claims. After all, how could a human tell me she admired my culture?"

I stopped and placed my hands on my hips. I tried not to think about Lux bleeding out behind the stage. Tried but failed.

"In my mind, werewolves had the better morals. We're loyal, trusting, protective. We take care of our pack, teach our young, comfort our old. Wolves thrive off our connections. Depend on them.

"Humans, well, they're cold, solitary, business-driven beings. At least, that's what I thought.

"But I just watched that human care for a werewolf who needed care. And Lux, well, she surpassed every expectation I had for the human race.

"I've always had one foot in this war. Until today. Until Lux, who shifted shortly after we met, shifted one more to protect her father from her own kind.

"Can you believe that? A werewolf protecting the man who wants the entire species eradicated?"

"Lux may be able to shift, but she's as human as they come, and she has shown loyalty and trust to protect someone she loves."

"Until today, we've been the monsters, but I just watched a father shoot the daughter who stood in front of danger for him. Is that not monstrous?"

The audience was hooked on every word I said. The cameras were rolling. It was up to me to bring it home.

"The mating bond is the most cherished aspect of werewolf culture. And believe me when I say, I never anticipated to be mated to the enemy. It made my claim as an anti-human activist a joke...

"At least, I thought it did. As it turns out, I was wrong when I told myself the war was inevitable.

"Lux has shown me what I had in me the entire time. My humanity. Werewolves and humans have lived together for centuries. Coexisting. Peacefully.

"We've protected you from threats you weren't aware were there. We've loved you, mated with you, cared for you.

"We've laughed with you, become friends and enemies with you. We've trusted you with our secrets, kept your secrets, and laughed together over other people's secrets.

"Humans and werewolves, well, we've been through everything together. We've all fought over baby names, settled to please our partners, fainted at the sight of our first-born child.

"We all faced that first day of school, overcame the challenge of making friends, tried out for a team only to be cut later.

"We've all been embarrassed by our parents, loved by our parents, disappointed by our parents.

"We've all loved and have been loved. Humans and werewolves have stayed up speaking to their loves, making love, and crying for lost love.

"And sometimes, humans and werewolves have loved each other.

"In the face of all these similarities, how can you condemn one another for a few insignificant differences?"

"The problem with humanity has never been the irrational actions made by the threat of danger, but humanity's inability to look past the small stuff.

"To look at the person beside you and accept them, to protect them, to love them.

"And why wouldn't you accept that person? Because they look different, speak different, are different? What is different when we are all the same?"

I took a deep breath to try to stay in control of the boiling passion in my stomach.

"I know what I'm saying isn't going to stop the war. I know it won't bring back the human sons who have fought and died or the werewolf daughters who have done the same.

"I know one speech isn't going to make you forget what you've been programmed to believe. I know it won't change the way you look at each other.

"But I hope it changes the way you look at me.

"You all came here today to see Stan Freeman put a hole in my skull. Instead, you saw him shoot his own daughter.

"After what I've said, I ask that you look at me not as a werewolf but as a being who loved to tell stories to his mother, was proud when he made his father laugh, and has only ever loved one woman.

"Look at the way you'd look at anyone else. Forget what prejudice you have against me and my kind, and instead, look at me the way I've learned to look at myself. As a human being."

I paused and winked right into the camera. "With a little extra."

I took a step back from the microphone and let the gun in my hand fall to the ground.

The audience blinked at me and then looked at each other. Slowly, the wolves in front of the stage tipped their heads back and howled, signaling respect.

A few humans jumped at the howls, but just like humans had for centuries, they soon became entranced by the intrinsic melody.

One by one, the wolves shifted back to their human forms, smiling sheepishly at one another and watching the humans closely.

A few brave members of the audience descended from the bleachers and approached the packs with their hands outstretched in greeting.

I was reluctant to turn my back on history, but I had to face my future.

Lux.

As soon as the bullet tore through my flesh, I fell to the ground and convulsed for a few seconds before I shifted back into my human form.

My wolf recoiled almost as soon as the fluids lacing the bullet entered my bloodstream. From what I had been told, I had been poisoned with wolfsbane.

I lost control of my body long before I lost control of my mind. I could hear myself whimpering but I had no way to stop the cries from slipping my mouth.

I folded into myself, amplifying the pain for a brief second before it dulled slightly.

I felt my mother's hands on me. Her fingers were shaking as she touched my face. For some reason, her scent was all I could focus on. It was as if my brain refused to process the stench of my blood.

My father was there too. I felt his cool hands on my side, soothing the torn skin around the wound. Strangely, I didn't process his betrayal. All I felt was the comfort he gave me.

I heard Keegan fall to my side the moment my father spoke. "What...? Is she...? Did I...?" I heard the words but my brain scrambled their meaning.

I wanted to answer him, but I could only moan as my skin caught fire.

Keegan's growl calmed me somewhat. If he was growling, it meant he was protecting me, and if Keegan was protecting me, then I knew I'd be all right. I was safe if he was looking out for me.

The fire was spreading, growing from the side of my abdomen and slipping over the rest of my body, drawing out heat I had never felt before.

My skin was slick with sweat, the insides of my eyes were burning, and my fingers curled with the pain of the flames.

"Lux? Lux?" Natalie was crying for me. Her panic sparked the same feeling in me, which was only heightened when I felt Keegan's hand on my stomach.

My eyes flew open reflexively and my throat closed as I lifted my head slightly.

Images came at me with smudged lines: Keegan's face without the definition of his bones; the stage lights without their symmetrical outlines; Natalie's hair but only as broad, shimmering lines.

The pressure that had been building in the back of my throat was relieved as a strangled cry escaped. The sound was part wolf, part human. And despite its eeriness, Keegan kept his hand on my side.

My eyes were closed by the time I heard Grant introducing himself to Keegan and he began checking my vitals.

When he touched me, I felt a ferocity for life. I needed to live. Keegan was my obvious reason to fight, but it was Grant who drew the power out of me.

"Grant, what's wrong? Is she going to...? Will she be all right?"

I struggled to stay conscious. I had to hear his answer. The wolfsbane was working against me, shutting me down, piece by piece. I'd already lost feeling in my feet and hands.

I heard Alpha Cole yelling for control over his pack and my father wailing. I felt Grant's fingers leave my neck and heard him inhale sharply. I could feel his tension, despite my state.

"Why don't you go get a doctor? Do something useful!"

But I had been dismissed enough, I wouldn't reprimand my brother for fighting. It wasn't the time.

If their argument drifted over me, I could've peeped me as the pain flared and the flames grew. Blood was starting to collect in the back of my throat, and I wasn't able to clear it.

I wasn't sure how long I blacked out, but when I came to, Grant was speaking.

"...could leave her totally immobile. Not to mention, she's in serious danger of bleeding out. I've seen it..."

Pain and fear danced together over my body, wreaking havoc on my nervous system.

The pain that tore through me when I was moved was unreal. I had never experienced anything like it.

I felt as though I was being pulled apart, my skin slowly peeling off my body, my muscles shredding, my blood rising in temperature, my bones being crushed.

Human shouts, feral growls, and my mother's murmurs mixed together as I rode out the pain.

I felt Keegan's hand push down harder on my stomach and I moaned, reaching for his hand but blacking out the moment I grabbed it.

I came to on a couch and made a sound of protest. Somehow, I knew something was wrong.

I couldn't understand why my father wasn't taking me to a hospital, why Keegan was letting me stay away from help for so long.

The confusion was enough to propel me upward.

"We need that Moon Path, whatever's left. I need some sort of gauze too...Shit."

I tried to sit up and even managed to open my eyes, although I saw nothing aside from the occasional blur of light.

I felt a light pressure on my shoulders and yielded, letting myself be pushed downward. The effort it had taken to sit up had exhausted me.

"I've got her," Natalie said. "I've got her."

"Sadie, it's now or never."

The next few things came to me in pieces. I felt a needle slip under my skin, felt something soft pressing against my stomach, fell into a long stretch of silence, felt the fire rise, then nothing.

In that moment of peace, I saw Keegan. I thought back to the first time I laid eyes on him, standing next to that striking girl and speaking with his uncle.

I thought of the way he looked at me; the way I knew he loved me, even though he pretended otherwise.

I pictured him laughing, the bobbing Adam's apple in his throat. I saw him punching Colton in the arm, placing his hands on his hips, sighing.

I felt his presence as he curved over me, cradled the underside of my jaw, letting his fingertips follow my spine.

And then lightning struck.

I was thrown back into reality. The fog that the wolfsbane had created was lifted and I felt everything. My stomach was suddenly bare and cold and my mind was screaming.

Someone was peeling away my skin, picking at the pieces that had healed, and submitting me to hell.

My muscles were twitching but I fought to keep control of them. I couldn't move or cry out or struggle. If I did, then it would be over.

"That bullet could already be at her spine."

The fear of becoming paralyzed gripped me so intensely that I lost all feeling completely. For a time, I didn't feel as Grant dug his way through my skin and muscle.

I was frightened to the point of oblivion.

And then, like any rollercoaster, I curved over the peak, and time raced past me again.

"Work quickly, get it out of her."

My breath was coming in too rapidly for my body to absorb.

"What do you think I'm doing?"

I felt the cool sting of metal as Grant cut away at the muscle and sinew that was covering the bullet. I felt the intrusion of his fingers as he searched for the metal shell.

My blood was warm as it was pumped out of my body and slid down the length of my arm.

"You need to..."

"If you're going to be a hot fucking mess, then get out!" The sound of arguing distracted me long enough to regain some control. I focused on my hearing, wishing I could dull all my other senses.

"Keegan. Keegan, you need to keep it together," my father said.

I tried to open my eyes, tried to open my mouth, tried to warn him not to talk to Keegan.

There was no way to console a werewolf when their mate was in jeopardy. I had learned this particular lesson already.

"Fuck you!" Keegan screamed. "You're the one that shot your daughter when she was trying to protect you! You're a despicable..."

It was then that the betrayal settled into the pit of my stomach. I had tried to protect my father, but he had denied my love. Soiled it.

Grant's hands faltered at the sound of physical fighting. I gasped as the tip of his knife cut deep into my muscle, sending my body into shock.

Grant swore and yelled something at Colton; something I couldn't hear, but that ended the fight.

I couldn't think about who was hurt and who wasn't.

I couldn't react to my mother's ramblings or my father's apologies.

I couldn't thank Grant for trying to save my life or Colton for trying to help Keegan.

I couldn't manage anything but to fall quietly into a piece of serenity.

I was sitting in my room, painting my nails. I was wearing my favorite dress, the blue one with the cut-outs at the side and the hemline that grazed my thigh.

It was my favorite because my father had forbidden me from wearing it to the rallies.

I bit down on the tip of my tongue and narrowed my eyes as I brought the brush along the line of my index finger, trying my best to paint my right hand with my left.

My hand shook slightly, and I covered my cuticles with polish.

"Lux?"

I jumped at the sound of my name, hitting the bottle of nail polish with my foot and knocking it over. I whispered a string of curse words as the polish bled onto my carpet.

My father was waiting behind my door patiently, but I felt like I was under the gun.

I scrambled to my feet, looking around before grabbing a chunk of paperback novels off my bookshelf and dropping them onto the stain.

I felt bad for my copy of *I Capture the Castle* but I didn't stop to fix it.

I yanked my bedroom door open and smiled at my dad, who had raised an eyebrow. "Is everything all right, hun? You look flushed."

I smoothed down the skirt of my dress and shrugged. "I'm fine."

My father grinned at me. "Your date is downstairs with your mother."

Nerves morphed my stomach into a lump of coal. My father squeezed my shoulder before heading downstairs and chuckling under his breath.

I grabbed my clutch from my bed and took a deep breath as I walked into the hallway.

Grant slipped out of his room with a smirk on his face. "Ready for your date, Lux?"

I blushed. "Go back to playing video games, Grant."

Grant laughed. "Don't do too much kissing, little sis, you don't want to get mono."

I pushed him aside and laughed shakily. He patted my back before disappearing into his room and leaving me alone.

I stood at the top of the stairs for a long moment before descending. I could hear my mother below, chatting easily in her carefree way.

She came into view a moment later, her hand on my date's shoulder and her long pale hair cascading over her own.

My father was standing beside her and had looped his arm around her waist. He had a content smile on his face.

All three of them looked up at me as I walked downstairs but the only gaze I returned was Keegan's. He had asked me out three days before and I had said yes.

It made sense seeing as I had been starting at him for the previous three months.

"You look beautiful," Keegan said. My mother looked at him in a sparkling way; a look that told me he had beaten her to what she had wanted to tell me.

I blushed deeper, my entire face was surely red, and thought a thought that only made me flush more.

"Thank you," I told him, reaching his side. Keegan touched my hand and a rush of pins and needles ran up my arm."

My mother sighed, leaning into my father. "Remember when we went out for the first time?"

My father laughed. "The joys of the mating bond. It's why I fight for werewolf—human coexistence."

Keegan smiled at his parents and then tugged me out the door. Without a word, he swept me into a kiss, and then one moment bled into another.

It was snowing, and I was standing in the middle of a white field. The sky was steel gray, and the air held that buzzing quality that accompanies a major storm.

I breathed it in, feeling the electricity pulse in my lungs.

When I looked up again, Keegan was in front of me, his skin pale, and his eyes alight with panic. He was screaming my name, yelling, and wailing.

I looked down at saw blood spilling from my abdomen, drenching the delicate snow around me.

When I looked up and Keegan for a second time, he wasn't panicking anymore. Instead, I was the one who was afraid. I clutched at my stomach, feeling no wound; just blood.

Slowly, Keegan covered his hands with mine, and when he pulled away, he was holding a rose, and I was unharmed.

I took the rose from Keegan, and he disappeared. The flower changed, the stem darkening as the thorns became larger. I saw the flower on the arm of two women: a tattoo, frightening and powerful.

Then the rose changed, and a petal fell, falling into the shape of a baseball cap; one I couldn't place but that I knew held the significance of leadership.

The rest of the flower turned golden, and the stem faded to silver before bending into a crescent moon.

The flower made one last transformation. The thorns fell from the stem and became scrambled over the snow, forming a long line of shapes that resembled an equitation.

Finally, the wind took the flower away and the snow at my feet started to swirl before it was lifted into the air.

The snow hovered for a while before taking the shape of a tall woman. With each moment, her features became more defined. She was familiar, achingly so.

Her hair and skin were the color of the snow that formed her. She was over six feet with an elegant disposition and an air of beauty.

Her eyes captivated me the most. Where I'd expected paleness, I saw the opposite: obsidian. They were large and framed by pale lashes but hollow in a way that tempted you to get lost in them.

The woman smiled at me as her hair swirled around her face. "Lux," she cooed, her voice charmed like bells. "You did so well."

I frowned at the sound of my name. "Do I know you?"

"I'm your mother," she told me patiently, her smile just about hovering under her neutral mouth.

Her answer made sense but I didn't understand immediately. "My mother doesn't have dark eyes."

The woman laughed at my logic and her subtle hands lifted out to the sides. "I'm not your mortal mother, I'm your eternal creator."

I couldn't find words to respond.

"You acted perfectly. You've set the right path in motion. It's up to your siblings to continue down it, but you made it through, just like the ones before you."

"What did I do?" I asked.

The woman reached out for me and her fingers grazed my skin. The echo of her touch rippled through my entire body. "You loved."

The wind pulled at the woman's hair and clothes, and then she dissipated into snow that was carried away by the wind. I was alone for a long moment before another figure appeared.

It was no longer snowing. It wasn't winter either.

I felt the heat in my lungs, pressing down on my chest in an intrusive manner. The summer's sun was burning low over the horizon, turning the grass golden and the sky a burning pink.

The figure moved throughout the field with understated grace and fluid confidence.

She had a shock of red hair that curled just before it met her shoulders and a dusting of freckles along the bridge of her nose and the tops of her cheeks.

Her eyes were remarkable; brown all over except for one stripe of blue in the right iris.

The girl stepped in front of the low sun and her image became fuzzy around the edges as the light blurred her form. She hummed there for a while before she was gone, and so was I.

...***...

There was something bitter in my mouth when I woke up. I grazed my teeth along the length of my tongue, trying to dislodge the awful taste.

My throat was dry and my teeth felt as though there was a layer of grime coating them.

I groined, planted a hand on my forehead, and opened my eyes. I hadn't anticipated the striking pain that would accompany the light hitting my retinas.

My lips were cracked and my thoughts were tangled.

For a while, I couldn't seem to remember anything. I couldn't recall where I was or why I was there. I had forgotten everything about the night before. The only thing I knew was that I was thirsty.

The sound of crumpling material got my attention. White streaked my vision in long lines until my eyes adjusted to the slanted sunlight that was filtering through the thin walls of the tent.

My mother was stooped at the entrance, one hand holding the tent open and the other holding a glass of water. Her pale eyes widened when she saw me watching her and her mouth tumbled open.

"Lux?" The tent fell closed as Natalie moved to my side, setting the water down and placing both palms on the sides of my face. "Are you all right?"

I cringed as my throat constricted. "Water."

Natalie passed me the glass, holding the back of my neck as I slipped from it.

When I was done, I leaned downward, blinking patches of glaring light out of my vision. It was easier to think when I was no longer focused on my throat.

Natalie seemed to sense where my thoughts were drifting to. "It's been about a day since you were last conscious," she told me calmly. "You were shot and you lost a lot of blood."

I frowned. I was shot. By my father. There had been wolfsbane.

A thought occurred to me and my chest tightened. Tentatively, I flexed my feet. My muscles and nerves responded, calming the thumping beneath my ribs.

Natalie smiled. "Grant reached the bullet in time, you're all right."

"Where are we?" I inquired, looking around. The tent wasn't totally unfamiliar. I took a deep breath, unable to place the scents around me with any sort of accuracy.

"North," Natalie informed me. "We're in the main camp. The one you found Grant in."

"Where's Keegan?"

"Safe," Natalie replied. "Grant and Colton are as well."

I filed through the questions in my head, trying to select only the most pressing. "What about the packs? What happened to them? Did the humans attack us?"

Natalie shook her head. "There was no attack, no battle. The packs are safe. A few of the alphas have gone south to converse with the human leaders. A treaty of sorts is being negotiated."

It took me a few moments to gather the courage to ask. "What about my father?"

Natalie looked down as her eyes became glassy. She twisted her bottom lip into her mouth and pressed her fingers just under her nose. "Eric is, well, he's no longer in politics."

I blanched. "Is he dead?"

Natalie shook her head. "No, the humans aren't sure what to do with him. Things have...changed since you were injured. I believe we're entering a transitional period.

"Your father is in some sort of containment center until things are more stable."

I pushed myself onto my elbows, ignoring the flare of pain in my side. "Changed?"

Natalie patted my leg, smiling empty. "I'll let Keegan tell you about it."

My mother helped me get undressed and bathe before clothing me and detangling my hair.

I was grateful for her help. I mostly watched her hands as they worked, following their rhythm as she dragged the brush through my hair.

Natalie seemed to herself as she moved only falling silent when she changed the bandage over my wound. She seemed content, but I didn't know her well enough to know if she was hiding her feelings.

"Lux," Natalie called my name softly as she met my eyes through the mirror. She placed the brush down and rested her hands on my shoulders.

"I wanted to apologize. I didn't before and I... After watching you get hurt..."

"I was so incredibly naive before. I shouldn't have left you with Eric. I should have fought harder for you and for Grant. And I'm sorry."

I held her eyes for a long while before reaching up and placing my hand over hers. "I forgive you." I had to tell Natalie was the only parent I was ever likely to have in my life again.

Natalie's smile shook. "Thank you, Lux."

I squeezed her hand. "You need to speak with Grant."

Natalie nodded, sucking on her lower lip. "I will."

We both turned when Keegan entered the tent. He stopped when he saw me awake, freezing in place.

He looked better than he had in a long time. The bags underneath his eyes had cleared somewhat and his hair had been trimmed.

He swallowed hard, and his eyes filled with tears as he took a few hesitant steps toward me. Natalie pressed her lips to my forehead before taking her leave, offering Keegan and me time alone.

I stood when she left, turning to face Keegan. There was a bubble of uncertainty in my chest that swelled when I met his eyes. It had been so long since we'd been together.

We'd been through so much individually and I wasn't sure how that affected our relationship.

Keegan's voice anchored me in the present. "Are you okay?"

I nodded. "I'm nearly healed."

Keegan sucked in a breath and closed the distance between us. It took three seconds for my hands to slip around his waist and for him to cup the back of my neck.

We kissed with the longing of separated hearts. I pressed myself closer to him, anxious to reassure myself that he was there and I was here and we were together.

When he pulled away, it wasn't far. He kept his fingers wound in my hair and his forehead tipped toward mine. "You nearly killed me," he whispered.

"I was nearly killed," I answered back.

He laughed, a low rumbling sound that sank to the bottom of my stomach. "I'm sorry I didn't get to you in time. I was on my way but I wasn't fast enough."

I knew exactly what he was talking about. The raid.

I crumpled his t-shirt in my hands, twisting the fabric slightly. The memory of the night strung out every nerve in my body, lacing it with tension.

"I thought you were dead," I confessed. "I called your name and you didn't wake up. You weren't breathing?"

Keegan's eyes held mine. "Your father saved my life."

I was right and ready to snap. "He almost took mine."

Keegan nodded, his forehead rubbing against mine. "It's messed up."

I slid one hand upward to cup his ear. "How bad?"

He shrugged. "Nothing in one. Half in the other."

"I'm sorry," I whispered. I couldn't imagine what it would be like for a wolf to lose such a critical sense.

Keegan didn't seem remorseful. "I've learned that worse things can happen to someone." I understood what he meant by his gaze. "It doesn't seem like anything bad is going to happen anymore."

"I don't understand," I told him. Foggy memories of my dream while unconscious came to me. "What's changed?"

"Everything," Keegan said. "The war is coming to an end."

I jumped out of surprise. I felt my lips part as I looked up at him, searching his eyes for any sort of farce. "Who ended it?"

Keegan smiled slowly before pressing his lips to mine and running his fingertips along the curve of my jaw. His voice was full of awe and his eyes held nothing but love.

I felt our connection then, blossoming into something larger than it had ever been before. I knew that from there on out, we'd never be apart.

He was mine and I was his and there were no boundaries left for us to hide behind. There was only love.

"We did."

The story continues in