

Colton's Offer

"Will you need anything for the trip to New Jersey later this week? Keegan? Keegan?"

I turned and smiled, my face feeling as though it were plastic. "Yes?"

Cole leaned back in his chair, his green eyes watchful. His son was sitting beside him, his eyes on his father.

"Are you all right?"

I blinked back the image of pale hair and eyes, bleeding wrists, and a sleeping face I'd been unable to ignore. "Fine."

Cole's eyes lingered on me for a moment more before he turned to the rest of the men at the table. "King Sebastian has ordered Keegan's departure to a rally in New Jersey.

"Is anyone here interested in traveling with him?"

My uncle bowed his head. "I wish I could, Alpha. But unfortunately, I have other engagements."

My uncle's cold eyes met mine, and his gaze was curious. I suspect he wanted to know how his gift had been received.

I cleared my throat and sat up in my chair. "I only need someone to run with me, that's all. I will have everything else arranged."

I looked around the table, noticing how everyone seemed to turn their heads away from me.

Alpha Cole sighed and he rested his cheek on the palm of his hand. "Come on. If no one goes with Keegan, then he can't fulfill the king's request and that will shame us all."

For another minute, it was silent.

"I'll go," Colton volunteered, his voice cracking slightly. "I'll go with him, Dad."

Cole hid his look of displeasure by turning his face away from his son. "Anyone else?"

Colton's face blossomed red and I couldn't help but take pity on him. All he wanted was to make his father proud.

I gritted my teeth and hoped what I was about to do wouldn't make things worse.

"Alpha, perhaps Colton coming with me would be a good thing. He's young but this is a low-risk situation that could help him gain some confidence."

Colton stared at me dimly, unsure why I was helping him. I wasn't too sure either.

Cole's eyes traveled from mine to one of his closest advisers, a wolf by the name of Sam.

I didn't know much about Sam. He didn't have any rank that I was aware of and he walked with a limp and used crutches a lot of the time but Cole trusted him, and Luna Livy trusted him even more.

Sam's blue eyes were steady. "Livy won't like it."

Cole's eyes sparked. "She doesn't like much, does she?" A few of the wolves around the table laughed. Only Colton and I refrained from commenting.

"Alpha, you can't be considering sending a kid into a war zone?" I stilled at Doug Lott's voice. It was gruff and coarse, just like the man himself. "No offense to your boy but he's no fighter."

Cole's eyes met mine and I shook my head slightly, pleading with him to disregard everything Lott had to say.

"Thank you for the concern, Doug, but I think Colton can handle a trip with Keegan. Keegan's experienced and has made trips like this multiple times."

Doug rolled his eyes. "Keegan's no better than a peacemaker. What good would he do if they were attacked?"

I pushed down a growl and glared at the repugnant man.

Doug Lott was huge, with a grizzly beard and shaved head. His skin was burned from exposure and scarred in various places.

I was convinced that out of every werewolf, Doug Lott was enjoying the Feral War the most.

"Come now, Doug, my nephew isn't a weakling. He's big enough."

Doug spat into the tiny bowl beside him and cleared his throat. "He might not be a fawn but he's not a stag either."

"So, he's a doe?" Jude, the part-time peacemaker said. "Shut up before you cause a fight, Doug."

Jude had been with our pack since I was a kid. He breezed between our pack and a neighboring one, offering kind advice and pitiful looks to anyone who needed them.

As the head enforcer, Doug Lott was his natural rival.

"Sir."

We all turned to see a small girl in raggedy apparel standing nervously at the door. She was holding a small package and water bottle with a weary expression on her face.

I could instantly tell she was human. Looking at her made me think of Lux. Of those large pale eyes that seemed to—

"Come on in, girl."

I felt my hand form a fist under the table as the young woman walked toward Doug, holding out what she had brought to him. He took the package, gazed over her figure, and then sent her on her way.

Cole sent Doug a disapproving look. "I permitted servants, but please, not during meetings."

Doug nodded and unwrapped the package, revealing cigarettes. He didn't hesitate to light up.

Jude snorted. "Where's the beer and heavy metal music?" I stifled a laugh as Doug's outfit of dark jeans and a leather vest often conjured the same image in my mind that Jude was hinting at.

Doug's smile was sinister. "I cut the beer out of my diet. Didn't like how it was making me look around the middle. I'm more of a water guy now."

Cole hit his fist on the table, his eyes darkening. "I don't give a shit. We're in a war here, and you have a smile on your face, Doug.

"Every day, our brothers and sisters are dying, and here we are, cracking jokes and debating things that don't matter."

Everyone was silent.

"My son will travel with Keegan later this week. Meeting over."

He got up and left the tent, and Colton followed him quickly. Sam limped out next, followed by Doug and the others. Finally, it was only me and Jude left in the meeting room.

I sighed and rubbed my hands over my face, reluctant to return to my tent.

"Something wrong?"

I looked at Jude and shook my head. "Travel weary."

I knew he was aware that I was lying. "Your uncle had interesting company last night. Perhaps that's what is making you weary."

I struggled to contain my surprise. "Do you know who she is?"

Jude's face was grave. "I have a rough idea, though I had hoped I was wrong."

When I didn't respond, Jude got up and clapped me on the back. "Don't worry, you're no Doug Lott."

He made moves to leave but hesitated in the doorway. "Take care of Colton. Livy—sorry, the luna—would never forgive you if something happened to him."

I paced in front of the entrance to my tent, waiting for someone to call me away for business.

But the morning was quiet and no one seemed to need me, so I was left playing chicken with my front door.

I lost, of course.

"Shit," I said. How could I go back in there? Look at her face, her eyes, her hair, and hate her?

Moving her from the floor to the couch had been a mistake. Now she was going to look at me and expect pity.

I swore again and dropped to the ground, pressing my back lightly to the side of my tent and placing my face in my hands. I was so focused on my thoughts that I hadn't heard anyone approach me.

"Keegan?"

I was on my feet in a matter of seconds. "Uncle, hi, hello, uh, hi."

"How are things?" he asked, his mouth taut.

I smiled. "Perfect, fine."

"Why are you sitting here?"

I swallowed hard. "I uh, I was kinda stressed after the meeting and I guess I didn't—"

My uncle placed his hand on my shoulder and smiled. Both were bad signs.

"Keegan, I understand. Doug Lott got under your skin, but you're doing more for the cause than he is. I am sure you know this, so what else is the matter? What is the real problem?"

I steeled myself. "You have to take back your gift."

My uncle's smile widened. "The truth is out." He patted me again, then let his hand drop and his smiling expression changed to one of pure fury.

"If you can't handle this, I'll accompany you on your trip instead of Colton. Halfway to New Jersey, the Sun Warriors will catch up with us, and only I will survive. Do you understand?"

"I—"

"I won't have my blood be tainted by a sympathizer."

Without offering me a chance to respond, my uncle grabbed my arm and threw me into my tent, sending me a nasty look before the material swung shut.

"You're back."

I spun around instantly, my entire body on edge. Her voice was light, timid, surprised, but it reached right into my chest and took a hold of my heart.

I nodded. "I had a meeting."

Her eyes traveled the length of my body, making my wolf hum. "You left before I—"

"You found a change of clothes," I noted, trying to stop her from thanking me. She was no longer wearing her ripped skirt suit.

Now, she was dressed plainly in pants and a plain gray long sleeve. The dark colors only made her skin more translucent.

"One of Master Lott's servants brought them to me."

I felt my eyes close on their own accord. "Please, don't call him that."

Lux frowned, her bottom lip turning over slightly. "His servants told me—"

"Disregard what they said," I told her hurriedly, not wanting to hear her speak of him like that again. It flipped my stomach.

"Sorry, sir."

I nearly vomited. "Don't," I begged. "Don't call me that, Lux."

She seemed startled, then her expression became guarded, as did her body language.

Obviously, Doug Lott's servants had told her what to expect from me, so I was already going against the normal expectations.

Lux dropped her eyes. "I'm trying to make you happy—"

I grimaced. "I know. I'm sorry. It's just that you're not... I can't..." I took a long breath. "None of this is right. You being here, my uncle bringing you here. I can't be a part of it."

"I don't understand," Lux mumbled.

I wanted to rip all my hair out because of the way she was making me feel.

My wolf was screaming at me to protect her, love her, mark her, claim her. He wanted to embrace her and show her off to the world.

I knew that wasn't possible, but my wolf didn't care about social politics. He acted on instinct.

"My body is telling me something that my mind can't agree with and it's making this situation harder, and I just—"

"You called me your mate," Lux recalled, making my heart pick up. Hearing her say the word gave me hope I couldn't afford to host.

"I know what that is. My mother..." She broke off by sealing her lips together and averting her gaze.

"It's a mistake."

"I felt something."

"It won't work."

"I know you felt something too."

"It *can't* work."

Lux nodded. "I know." I was silent so she continued. "I know how impossible it is. I have listened to my father speak about these sorts of...situations."

Her emotional distance from the subject was breaking my heart.

"Which is why I agree that we can't be together. I'll continue my role as servant to you and your pack until I can figure a way to get myself out of here and back to my father."

"You want to go back there?" I recoiled.

She blushed. "He's my *father*."

I felt stupid for expecting anything else. What wouldn't I have done for my parents when they were alive?

"My uncle brought me to you because he believes I sympathize with the humans," I stated, wanting to be honest with her.

I thought she deserved that much, especially knowing all the hardships she'd have to face in the coming months.

"Do you?"

I paused. "No."

Too late.

Lux's eyes were knowing. "I sympathize with werewolves sometimes, it's understandable."

"It's not acceptable," I blurted out harshly, my resentment for my feelings rising.

"It's war," she reasoned. "Lines are crossed, things aren't black and white, nothing is simple."

I stared at her, wishing things were different, wishing she was like me. "We can make things simple. Werewolves and humans hate each other. Simple."

"We can fool ourselves into thinking we've made things simple, but nothing is," she fired back. "Take me for example, I'm..." But she stopped herself.

I knew how she was feeling. Like she could share any secret, any truth about herself that she normally kept locked up.

When I looked at her, all I wanted to do was open up and share every secret I'd ever kept.

"I heard your uncle speaking with you," she said quietly. "There's nothing simple about your relationship with him."

Right on the money.

"And there's nothing easy about the bond between you and your father. I expected you to be begging for him, crying out for him to come and save you, but you haven't. Do you like being away from him?"

Her mouth twisted slightly and she crossed her arms. "I love my father."

"I never said otherwise."

She tucked her white-blond hair behind her ear. "Will you find a different mate?"

My heart stopped. "What? No."

Her face was thoughtful. "I guess, I'll find a husband."

I couldn't stop the growl that surfaced. I felt dumb afterward, wishing I could control myself as well as she was managing her emotions.

It couldn't have been easy for her to imagine myself with someone else. Then again, I didn't know how humans experienced emotions.

Her eyes were steady. "We could leave together, Keegan. We could run, right now. I'd follow you. I'd hold your hand and watch your back.

"We could create a life for ourselves away from family and politics. We could separate ourselves from them, disregard human and werewolf, and just live, together and happy."

I shook my head involuntarily. What she was suggesting was not only out of left field but also treasonous.

"We could be mates, raise a family, survive on our own. We could grow old, watch our children grow old, love their children.

"There has to be someplace out there where the Feral War hasn't touched. We can go there together. We just have to be brave enough to start looking."

She smiled and reached out a hand to me, her eyes looking right through me.

I felt my face and palms heat up and started to look anywhere but at her. I couldn't. I couldn't leave my uncle, my pack, my life. I couldn't abandon the king and my people during this time.

My contribution was needed. I couldn't run.

"No," I mumbled. "No, no, I'm sorry." I caught the look on her face, and in that split second, I wished for my death. The crushed look of disappointment, pity, and hurt was overwhelming.

I turned on my heel and hightailed it out of my tent, gasping for air and leaning against the nearest tree.

I couldn't run. My place was here. I knew that.

So why did I feel as though I had just made the biggest mistake of my life?