Alpha's Fail-Safe

I watched with agitation. Every muscle in my body yearned to jump up and help Lux as she struggled with luggage and supplies.

But eyes were on me and I couldn't be seen helping my servant with their duties. Nothing would earn me the title of sympathizer quicker.

Colton hesitated around the car as well, discreetly trying to help Lux when he thought no one was looking.

Her usually pale cheeks were flushed with the effort it took to load the vehicle with a week's worth of clothing, food, and toiletries.

Not to mention the extra supplies we intended to give to the receiving pack as a gesture of good faith.

I heard footsteps to my left and bowed my head upon seeing Alpha Cole. He smiled at me and set his warm, hazel-green eyes on Lux. "I hadn't figured you to be the servant type, Keegan."

I shifted uncomfortably. "She was a gift from my uncle."

Cole nodded. "I understand." He looked at me and tensed his jaw, his eyes displaying some of the worry stirring in his mind.

"Livy isn't happy with my choice to send Colton. He's our youngest and she's partial to him."

"Of course," I agreed. "Sam expressed the same idea at the meeting."

Cole sighed. "Her brother, Jay, tried to take Colton's place but I refused him."

"Wouldn't that have made the luna happy?" I questioned.

"Yes," he answered bluntly, his mouth twitching into a small smile. "But Colton needs this opportunity. He's been sheltered in this village for the entirety of the war."

I nodded slowly. "I see."

Cole pinched the bridge of his nose. "And if anything was to happen to me, I need to know he can handle himself out there. I need to know that he can take care of his mother and sister."

"Forgive me, but isn't the luna a White Wolf?"

Cole chuckled. "She won't let me forget it."

"Then why would you worry for her safety when she's stronger than virtually any wolf?"

Cole rubbed his jaw and peered at me from the corner of his eye.

"Livy prides herself on her strength and speed. She can outrun anyone in this pack with ease. She's beaten me in a foot race more often than I care to admit.

"But Livy is not faster than a bullet, and she'll be no faster than a human if wolfsbane makes its way into her system."

"Colton is your fail-safe," I noted. "Your backup plan."

Cole smiled and clapped my back. “The humans know our history. They know how to identify a White Wolf. She’ll be a target.

“Colton’s not an alpha or a White Wolf, so there’s a good chance he’d be attacked last. I need to know that he can get his sister to safety if the time ever comes.”

I swallowed thickly, my eyes ghosting toward Lux. “Do you think the humans will attack our camp anytime soon?”

Cole’s eyes followed my own. “If they ever discover who is here, they will take my head and place it on a stick.”

His smile was grim as he looked at Lux. “I don’t know what your uncle is planning with her, but I don’t like it.”

“Couldn’t we send her back?” I blurted. “Back to her family.”

Cole raised his eyebrows. “Not possible.”

I looked down, swearing mentally. But shouting out ways to save Lux in front of my alpha was no way to disprove the popular sympathizer rumor about me.

“Right,” I breathed. “Of course not.”

Cole sighed. “Sending her back would be an admission that we had her in the first place. Now that she’s here, she has to stay.”

I watched Lux as she heaved a box of canned goods into the trunk and then paused to wipe sweat from her forehead. My heart panged.

“I’ll take care of Colton,” I promised the alpha. “I will watch over him and try to teach him everything I can without hurting him.”

Cole smiled. “Get him home and I’ll be eternally grateful. I trust you, Keegan. Don’t let me down.”

Cole clapped me on the back once more before moving to talk to his son. Even from here, I could tell how nervous the kid was.

I studied Lux further, taking in the pace at which her wounds were healing. They had made more progress than I thought they would have at first. Didn’t humans heal at incredibly slow rates?

“Keegan,” my uncle said, walking up to stand close beside me, his face unshaven and his eyes fierce.

“Uncle Eric,” I greeted, “come to see me off safely?”

He grabbed my upper arm and shielded me from the view of others with his body. His head came close to mine, his lips to my ear. “You’re going to behave, aren’t you?”

I nodded. “Of course, Uncle.”

He squeezed a little tighter before letting me go completely and walking off.

When he moved, my eyes found Lux’s. She was staring at me strangely, her eyes trailing after my uncle and back to me with a confused expression.

I cleared my throat and moved into my tent, breaking our eye contact and heading for my room.

I looked to my dresser and scanned the top of it, looking for the small leather-bound book and feeling my heart thump when I didn’t see it.

I left the tent and marched over to Lux, my heart still hurting. “Master Stone,” she greeted, her eyes flitting from me to the wolves mulling around us.

“The leather book,” I hurried her. “It was on my dresser and now it’s not.”

Her brow creased in confusion; her gray eyes were heartbreakingly beautiful. “I—”

“Small, leather, old, tied with string,” I spat out harshly. “Where is it?”

Her eyes opened wide. “Top drawer.”

I felt relief and then worry instantly. “Did you read it?”

She shook her head. “No, I—”

I turned away sharply and left her standing there before reentering my room to find the book exactly where she had said it would be.

I picked it up and ran a hand over the cover, frowning when I noticed how the string had been retied.

I had never read my father’s journal; I’d never had the stomach to read what he thought about me. It hurt too much to think that the words written in the pages were his last.

I figured I was keeping his memory alive by refusing to read those words.

I slipped the book into the pocket of my jacket and zipped it up, making sure it was secure.

I hated traveling without it in fear that I would die on the road and some stranger would find it among my possessions and finger through the pages.

The book was the last connection I had to my father and I wouldn’t let anyone else in on that connection, not even my uncle. Especially not my uncle.

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“What do we do at the border patrols?” Colton asked me uncertainly, his eyes drinking in the new scenery as he awaited a reply.

I shuffled uncomfortably in my seat, not too sure. My uncle had grazed over the gist of the process, but I had traveled by car very few times.

I was more than surprised when Lux cleared her throat. “They’ll ask our purpose for entering the area and then ask for proof of our birth.”

“Do we have proof of our birth?” Colton asked, his eyes resting uncertainly on Lux.

“I placed them in the glove box,” she said. “Check.” Her eyes met mine in the rearview mirror, and I sent her a distinct *shut-up* look.

The last thing we needed was for the alpha’s kid to deduce that we were mates.

“My name is Kevin,” Colton said with a laugh. “And you’re Paul, Keegan.”

I rolled my eyes. “Put it away, Colton.”

He frowned. “Don’t you want to know who Lux is?”

I growled. “I couldn’t care less what my servant’s fake name is, Colton.”

As soon as the words were out, I regretted them. The harsh tone I used not only made Colton flinch and Lux turn her head away, but it also sparked suspicion in Colton’s eyes.

“It’s Amy,” he told me, his eyes glued to the side of my face. I tightened my fingers on the steering wheel and stared straight ahead, trying to look bored rather than bothered.

Colton sat back in his seat and looked out the window. Within seconds, he jumped and an odd noise exited his throat. I slowed the car down and rolled down the window, following his gaze.

“It’s a wolf,” Colton said, his face turning ashen. “Why would they…?”

He continued staring, not able to process why a happy family of four was playing in their front yard while a wolf hung from a noose tied to the big oak tree in front of their house.

Lux’s eyes found mine and searched my face, her entire expression conveying worry and pity.

I cleared my throat and sped up, dreading the rest of the ride. This was only the beginning of the trip and Colton was already unable to cope with what he was seeing.

My only hope was that he would become desensitized quickly.

“They hate us, Colton,” I told him gently. “They rally against us the way we do them.”

“I don’t understand,” Colton admitted. “We are them.” His eyes flashed to Lux and then back to me. “We’re half-human.”

“That’s not how they see it,” I explained. “All they see is the wolf with an extreme focus on its teeth and claws.”

I looked at Lux as I said it and I saw her features begin to taint themselves with guilt and I regretted the words. It wasn’t her fault that she was raised to hate us.

Colton turned in his seat. “Why?” He stared at Lux intently, waiting for her to answer.

After a moment, she cleared her throat. “Because humans can’t understand the food chain.

“They look at a lion and appreciate its features. It makes sense that a lion sits on top of its food chain. Same with a shark and…and a wolf.

“But why do humans sit at the top of everything? We don’t have fur or claws or sharp teeth. We’re delicate and get diseases and get old and weary. So why are we on top?”

Lux drew in a deep breath. “It’s just never made sense. It has always seemed like a temporary thing to humans.

“Whether it was werewolves, vampires, or aliens, one day, we weren’t going to be number one. That was the fear.”

I swallowed hard. “You don’t have to explain—”

“It’s fine,” she assured me, switching her focus back to Colton.

“When werewolves became common knowledge, it was hard to accept we weren’t number one in the food chain anymore. The place we had held onto so dearly.”

“Why couldn’t you have shared?”

Lux shrugged. “Distrust. Why had you remained a secret for so long if you weren’t a threat to us?”

“Because we knew you’d react like this,” Colton fired back. “The few humans who knew about us weren’t friendly. My mother knows all about it.”

I shrugged. “Then I guess the Feral War was always meant to be.”

I hit Colton hard on the shoulder and gestured toward the glove box as we stopped in a lineup of cars all heading toward the border patrol.

Colton passed me the forged papers and I ruffled through them, putting them in order and smoothing them out.

I turned to Colton and tried to smile reassuringly. “Keep calm, you’re in human form so channel your humanness.”

He nodded blankly, his face pale. I could only hope that his fear would keep him silent.

I turned around to Lux and was about to give her directions when she smiled. “I’ve been through more of these than you have,” she pointed out. “I don’t need lessons.”

I turned around in my seat just as a thought struck me. The guards up ahead had guns strapped to them, wolfsbane in spray form, and a celestial silver knife somewhere on them.

All Lux had to do was declare her humanity and Colton and I would be dead.

I tried not to project my worries, afraid that I would upset Colton. My eyes shifted toward Lux constantly as we rolled up to the guard on duty.

What was she going to do? To what extent did she feel our bond?

“Birth confirmation and reason for passing, please.”

I handed the man our papers and smiled shakily. “We’re heading into the city to see our grandparents.” The guard looked over our papers and raised an eyebrow.

“She’s your sister?”

I looked over at Lux and realized quickly that we would never pass for siblings. She was too different in complexion.

“No, my girlfriend. Our last names being the same is a freaky coincidence. But I guess the last name Mills is pretty common, no?”

The guard gave me a stern look and then left my window, walking over to consult with another guard. I gripped the steering wheel, every instinct telling me to get the hell out of there.

“Don’t move,” Lux said. “We’re not compromised yet. There’s a chance they’re discussing sports. These guards abuse their powers far too often.”

I released the wheel and tried to relax; I couldn’t run the risk of upsetting Colton who was ghostly white. Within minutes, the guard handed us back our papers and waved us on.

I gunned the gas and we sped off, my whole body tense until we could no longer see the guard station behind us. Colton let out a big breath and then smiled, smug that we had fooled humans.

Lux must’ve noticed the same look on Colton. “That was a low-security border patrol, Colton,” Lux said. “Don’t get too confident.”

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We passed three more border patrols by the time night settled in. Lux fell asleep long before and Colton kept dozing off. Each time he woke up, he would claim to never have slept.

I drove until my eyelids started to droop and then pulled over to the first hotel I saw. Lux woke up when the car stopped moving, as did Colton, and the three of us went inside the hotel.

It was fancy, with gold trimmings and modern couches in the foyer along with large flat screens displaying the news.

Lux blinked the sleep out of her eyes and yawned, looking beautiful the entire time.

Colton stretched out his back and ruffled his hair. It wasn’t until he spotted the human sitting behind the front desk that he sobered up.

Together, the three of us walked up to the front desk, with me in the lead. “Hi, there,” I said to the woman, trying not to show too much teeth. “I need three rooms.”

“Three?”

I nodded. “Uh, yeah?”

She frowned. “I’m sorry, sir. I don’t understand.” I turned around and looked behind me, noticing how Lux was pressed close to my back in an attempt to hide.

I laughed and looked down at her in wonder, not sure what she was doing.

She looked up at me and glared, shaking her head sharply. I rolled my eyes at her vanity. She looked fine. So what if her hair was slightly rumpled? She was still beautiful.

I stepped to the side and smiled at the front desk lady as I presented Lux to her.

“Three rooms, please.”

The look on the lady's face told me I had made a big mistake.

"Lux Freeman?"

I spun around to look at Lux and then caught sight of one of the many television screens on the walls. Lux's face was plastered all over them.

"Shit," I swore as I grabbed Colton's arm and began to propel the three of us toward the exit. We had to get out of there.

I heard the lady behind us scream out Lux's name and then pick up the phone to dial the authorities.

I broke out into a run with Colton behind me and Lux in front of me. She hit the car and threw open the door, hurrying us both in as well.

I threw the car into drive and started toward the highway when Lux shook her head.

"We can't," she exclaimed. "We have to go into the woods. They'll be searching every hotel for a mile."

I nodded and threw the car onto a back road, heading toward the collection of trees to our right.

Lux held onto the back of my seat, her teeth set with determination as she surveyed the road behind us.

I drove the car into the tree line and went as far as I could before shutting off the engine and dousing the lights.

"We can't drive further?" Colton panted, his eyes wide.

I shook my head. "Not without damaging the car and forest while making a huge amount of noise."

"We walk then," Lux stated. "In case they decide to check the woods, it will be better if we're not sitting beside the car."

I stared at her, surprised a human was offering to spend a night in the woods with two werewolves.

"Good idea," I mumbled as I popped the trunk. "Let's grab some supplies."

We grabbed all we could carry and headed into the woods, using the night sky as our only light source as we made our way through the trees carefully.

I worried for Lux's safety as her eyesight and instincts weren't as sharp as mine and Colton's but she proved my worry useless as she navigated herself with ease.

A little later, we found a suitable spot and set up camp.

Colton built a low fire, big enough to keep us warm but small enough that the plume of smoke wouldn't attract any unwanted attention.

Lux and I started dinner and made the beds, working together in silence as night settled in and nocturnal animals began their day.

"I'm sorry about what happened there, I didn't realize—"

"It's fine," she said curtly. "No one got hurt."

I chuckled. "No, but now we're camping in the woods."

"I don't mind the woods," she said dryly, her eyes on the sleeping bed she was unrolling. I stopped moving and watched her openly, waiting for her to sense my gaze and turn to me.

When she did, I shook my head. "I don't understand."

"What?"

"Why didn't you tell the border patrol who and what you are? Why did you play along like you were coming of your own free will? You could have been on your way back to your father."

Lux frowned. “I couldn’t then.”

“Okay, but what about at the hotel? You could have stayed with that lady while she called the police? Why did you instruct us to safety instead of letting the police get us? Why didn’t—”

“Because in every scenario, you die.” I stopped talking and stared.

Lux sighed and pushed her white-blonde hair from her face. “They would’ve shot and killed you in every situation. Werewolves don’t get a trial.”

“But you would be free,” I prompted.

“I’d be a murderer,” Lux amended, her eyes downcast. “We may not end up together, Keegan, but I’d rather you stayed alive if that’s fine by you.”

I pressed my nails hard into my palm. “I’m sorry for not helping you with the luggage this morning.”

“Are you apologizing for keeping me alive?” she asked incredulously.

I shook my head. “This is hard for me.”

“It’s hard for everyone,” she shot back. “It’s hard for me to look at you and know that you hate me and everything my father stands for.”

“Don’t you hate me?” I fired back. “Don’t you hate everything werewolves stand for?”

She hesitated before saying, “No.” My body was ice. “I don’t hate everything werewolves stand for. I don’t hate the love and loyalty you have for each other. Or the respect.

“I’m fearful of you because I know what you’re capable of physically but I don’t hate you.”

“A werewolf took you away from your father,” I argued.

“Humans kidnap other humans all the time.”

“A werewolf bought you like an object,” I shot.

She shrugged. “The same one brought me to you.” She stared me square in the eye.

“Don’t you see? This is what no one understands. Humans are terrible beings. And the only reason humans hate werewolves is that they see themselves in them.”