

Latent by Queasy

Chapter 6

It felt like it'd been mere seconds ago when we'd walked in through the airport's glass doors and into the wide, tiled halls bustling with humans, seconds ago when my bewildered eyes had soaked in every single detail like a sponge.

Now we sat on the leather seats of the plane, boarding a first class flight. Behind me, father sat typing on his laptop. Beside him sat three pack warriors— their size had initially given the flight attendants a scare. Now they quietly sat on the chairs, looking bored out of their minds.

After a while I looked out the windows. My heart jumped into my mouth. The view was as exciting as it was frightening; at this moment I thought the two words could mean one and the same thing. To be this high up....

Frightening!

Exciting.

Tufts and strips of clouds obscured the view below once in a while, but I didn't mind as the clouds themselves were rightfully astounding. My gaze rapt on them, I wondered how they'd feel in my hands. Like vapour? Or like cotton candy...?

My stomach growled, reminding me I hadn't eaten anything since boarding the plane.

The thud of something landing on the floor beside me reached my ears. I turned around and was met with stoic faces that revealed nothing. For all I knew the bag could've grown wings and flown to land at my feet.

Snagging the ziplock bag off the floor, I opened it and saw it contained cookies. Thankful, I dug in.

I reclined in my seat, allowing my thoughts to consume me, and soon I drifted out of consciousness.

Australia,

Cairns.

10:23pm

I was jarred into consciousness by the nauseous feel in my stomach. I soon realized it was as a result of the plane making circular motions before touching down on the runway. Blinking past the grogginess clouding my senses, I stretched long then parted my lips to a yawn, and suddenly stifled it, shocked.

It was dark out. I couldn't have slept through the whole fourteen hour flight, could I?

Although it was understandable considering I hadn't had any sleep for the past seventy two hours.

When finally the plane came to a stop, a voice behind ordered, "Up."

Didn't father's men just have a marvelous way with words? Sighing with a roll of my eyes, I rose up to my feet. Father proceeded to go out through the side of the plane and down the boarding stairs after having his passes cleared. I followed after him, the pack warriors bringing up the rear.

On coming out into the open, I was startled at the blast of humid air that hit my face. Here was relatively warmer than Alaska. All around me, mortals legged it down to the terminal; the burning smell of jet fuel filled my nose.

Father close behind me, I walked down the stretch of concrete, starting to get hot in the heavy jacket I

was bundled in. A mixture of easy ambience and sheer delight made up the scene around me. Against

drop of excited chattering and careless laughter, couples reuniting hugged and kissed, children ran up squealing into their grandparents' arms and friends exchanged fist bumps and stories from the travel.

I wasn't aware I'd stopped to watch the magic, until I felt father come to stand beside me. And just like that, his dark presence seemed to suck in the lightness of the whole affair.

After getting our bags, we arrived at a black van parked off to the side. The windows were all rolled up, save for the one by the driver's seat. Through it peeked a stony faced man wearing a pair of dark shades. At night? I thought, incredulous.

On spotting us approaching, he came down, then bowed before us, saying, "Welcome." Then to father, "Welcome, Alpha Timothy."

He nodded.

When we all got in, he proceeded to drive us to the Beastclaw pack.

The windows were all wound up, depriving me of feeling the delicious subtropical air I'd felt at the airport. Tall coconut trees lined either side of the long road we drove on; the smell of riverine emanated from behind the forestry.

Snatches of evergreen landscape and colourful stores and boutiques dominated my vision every once in a while. I rested my forehead against the window and watched the vibrant world as it passed by.

Staring into a close cluster of trees, I spotted a quick movement within the bushes and tensed. It could've been a rogue. They'd always made me, hell every werewolf out there, nervous.

And there were only two ways a werewolf could turn rogue. One, by losing a loved one. Two, by killing a loved one-or a shitload of undeserving people. The moon goddess's curse. It was said that before the creation of mystical creatures, each primordial of a species came to court to discuss how to contain a predicted inter-species killing. And it was told that a curse would befall a person who killed several, and I mean several, undeserving creatures belonging to another species.

Only five people in the record of werewolf history had ever been besieged with the moon goddess's curse. One of the five being Alpha Vaughan.

It was told that a person with this curse would gradually surrender control to their wolves, behaving in a way particular to an animal, or getting stuck in a half-state when they tried to shift back into their mortal forms.

A half-state; when you were neither human nor werewolf.

I snorted self-deprecatingly, one could say I was stuck in a half-state.

Hours dragged by and evening thickened into midnight before, finally, we slowed into a hidden trail charting a path through a thick forest. I watched on as the car maneuvered its way through interconnecting routes and finally got into an open clearing, driving freely now. We soon stopped before the largest set of gates I've ever seen. Stretching into oblivion on either side of it were monumental earthen walls, and carved into them were exotic symbols and drawings depicting the developmental stages of werewolves through time.

The arching black gates were pulled open, and the security I spotted on the other side was the largest I'd ever seen.

We drove into the pack.

My eyes widened in wonder. Beyond a large, clear space, a long, winding road laid nestled between numerous rows of cottages flanking it on both sides.

The rows of houses extended at width to a point that met vast lawns and rolling mountains. At the far end of the road, a large fountain sputtered and rained down in magical showers. Tall trees and well tended gardens stood interspersed between the houses, and all around them, tanned werewolves walked to and fro.

Up above, colourful banners and balloons hung high, and at every doorstep, a bright yellow lantern dangled down a door handle.

Today, we celebrated the Carnival of lanterns.

On this day, the moongoddess had given the first ever werewolves she'd created lanterns to go find their way in the dark, gloomy world. The werewolves had ventured to modern day Australia and built a pack, naming it the Beastclaw pack. A pack which grew to become the main seat of the werewolf demographic. One could say it was the royal seat, with Alpha Vaughan being the king. The mad king, they whispered he was.

We drove up a hill and down into a sparse field, across it stood a giant building. My mouth hung open; the pack-house was a bloody castle! Light seeped out through the numerous glass windows lining the huge four-storey structure. I fancied I spotted a dark figure at one of the windows above, watching. But it was gone the next moment I blinked.

The garage was overflowing with cars of different colours and models. After the driver pulled into a spot between a chevrolet and a mustang, we all alighted. We hadn't taken a step further before a plump woman came rushing out the doors, and hastily made her way over to us.

She bowed before us. "Welcome Alpha Timothy. Welcome Miss..." The woman trailed off, looking at me curiously

"Hilda," I supplied, then after a beat added, "Alpha Timothy's last daughter."

Muttering more to herself, the woman said, "I wasn't aware Alpha Timothy had more than two daughters."

At the uncomfortable silence in the air, she straightened and cleared her throat, saying, "Ah, my name's Greta, and you all must be famished. I'll show you rooms so you can freshen up, and I'll have something sent up to you immediately.

Then she turned and proceeded to lead us into the house. We all followed after her. As I walked on, couldn't shake off the unnerving suspicion that I was being watched.