

One Community

The crowd shifted before me uncomfortably. These wolves were used to living a rough life, scavenging for their food, and patrolling and protecting their lands in the same way their natural cousins did.

Unlike the West Coast, the East Coast was used to frequent attacks by humans and this made them uneasy.

The only person who seemed to be relaxed was the pack's alpha. Vex stood off to the side, his wide face almost bored as he waited for me to organize my thoughts and begin speaking.

Strangely, the calm facade of Alpha Vex only made me more nervous.

I cleared my throat and got half of the crowd's attention. Finally, I forced myself to speak.

"Hello, everyone, thank you for putting some time aside to listen to me. My name is Keegan Stone and I hail from the Silver Forest pack in Astoria, Oregon. I was sent by the king to speak with you."

When there was no response, I simply licked my lips and continued. "Whereas the wilderness of Canada and the West Coast is patrolled mostly by our kind, the humans have the upper hand here.

"The recent raids and burnings have destroyed the homes of countless packs and left hundreds of wolves without a place to belong or an alpha to follow."

"Not our problem!" one man yelled out.

Another agreed. "This is war. Every man for himself."

"Every man," I agreed. "Every *human*. We aren't human. We're wolves. We're loyal creatures, we work together, we're stronger in a pack, we help one another.

"Despite what the humans believe, there is no such thing as a lone wolf."

"What about rogues?" some burly guy laughed. "Aren't they alone?"

My smile was cold. "Abandoned, ridiculed, feared, attacked, unsafe, burdened. Rogues are despised because they go against our fundamental beliefs as werewolves. That's unity.

"War has changed us," I continued. "It's made us cold, impartial, divided. If we continue this way, we will lose. We will lose because humans are so much better at being alone than we are.

"The only chance we have of winning is to remain one community, to find our strength among our numbers, to fight together so we can win together."

"You want us to take in more pack members?" a woman asked from the back.

I nodded gravely. "The king has asked me to come here to plead with you to take in more of your brothers and sisters.

"The king acknowledges the troubles you face already but wishes you to consider the struggles of your fellow kind."

"There isn't enough food!"

"There isn't enough room either!"

I made eye contact with Alpha Vex, who looked interested in what I had to say.

"You're right, there isn't enough food or water or space. There's barely enough to go around here.

"But think about all those wolves without a pack. They have *nothing* to go around. Nothing. How could you condemn your fellow wolves to such a life when you were able to help them?"

"Why isn't your pack taking in any wolves?"

I kept my face neutral. "We take wolves in occasionally but the human involvement in Oregon is not as large as here; the population of humans is smaller.

"Ideally, the displaced wolves would move to the West Coast but we fear that they would be stopped at the various checkpoints."

"You made it here all right," one wolf said aggressively.

I nodded. "It's my job to sneak past humans and travel around the country. I'm used to pretending and lying to humans. But would large numbers of traumatized wolves be able to do the same?"

The crowd broke out into low murmurs and I had a feeling I was beginning to win them over. Before they had the chance to cool off, I started talking once more.

"You're needed. Maybe some of you have fought humans, maybe some of you have yet to.

"But your service is needed now. King Sebastian needs you to serve your kind, your king, and your goddess. Your open arms, open home, and open hearts are needed to help your brothers and sisters."

I watched as people began to clap and nod and shrug. I looked up at Alpha Vex nervously to see him surveying his pack with an interested expression on his face.

"Alpha Vex?" I prompted. All at once, the crowd was quiet.

Alpha Vex turned and joined me on the makeshift stage at the back of someone's truck and stood to address his pack.

"You all know there is nothing I wouldn't do for my pack. By extension, there is nothing I would not do for my kind or my goddess.

"I am willing to forgo my personal comfort to save lives and strengthen our side of this war.

"But as your alpha, it would be wrong to force you to do the same. So, I come before you now as a simple pack member, willing to help others and wondering if you, too, are willing."

Everyone was silent, and I waited with nerves twisting my stomach.

I had never failed in swaying an audience to fall my way before. Words came to me easily, especially words designed to motivate and inspire.

But what I was asking would place this pack in desperate standards of living.

One man stood, his head balding and his eyes nervous. "I will give up some of my food and share my tent with whoever needs nourishment and shelter."

The people around him stood as well.

A wispy young girl with short, red hair stood at the back of the gathering. Her jaw was set in a hard line. "I want to help too, Alpha."

Alpha Vex smiled. "Thank you, Caroline Ryder."

The girl's smile was brisk, her face was covered in freckles, her eyes were serious. "I speak for my friends and family." As she spoke, the people around her stood, all looking determined as well.

After that, the rest of the crowd seemed to fall into line, with only a few stubborn people staying in their seats. I smiled at the pack, thankful for their cooperation and feeling a sense of pride.

This was the first time I had used my talent for a good cause rather than encouraging wolves to die for a cause I didn't fully believe in.

Alpha Vex addressed his pack once more. "Thank you," he said with his head inclined. "You have all made me a very proud alpha today." He turned to me and clapped me on the back.

Vex leaned in and thanked me quietly so only I could hear.

"Thank you for your time," I said to the crowd and jumped off the back of the truck as Alpha Vex gave directions for the afternoon's chores and routines.

Before I could make my way back to Colton and Lux, Alpha Vex placed a hand on my shoulder. "You're a very well-spoken young man," he said, his eyes sincere.

I was humbled. "Thank you, Alpha Vex. It's the reason King Sebastian sends me around the country." I didn't mention that the message I usually delivered was one calling for bloodshed.

Alpha Vex nodded. "About before, with your servant, I want to apologize. I realize that customs are different in different packs. Paul is very sensitive as he's mated to a human himself."

I swallowed hard. "Thank you, but your apology is not needed. There is nothing to forgive. I wasn't offended and neither was my party. We were merely shocked to hear of a different way of life."

Alpha Vex looked over his shoulder at the small group of wolves behind him.

"I'd like to invite you on a simple patrol run so you can better understand what we're working with and what we're willing to share with the wolves you wish us to inherit."

Everything in me wanted to return to Lux but I couldn't disrespect Alpha Vex by refusing his offer.

I inclined my head and smiled. "I'd love to. Thank you, Alpha."

His hard facade cracked as he grinned and he slapped my shoulder. "Let's see how fast you West Coast wolves can run."

"With all due respect, Alpha, us West Coast wolves run very fast."

"We're faster." Alpha Vex shifted, with the rest of his group following suit. They took off running and I threw one last longing look toward Lux's tent before shifting and running after them.

I straightened the tent Colton, Keegan, and I were sharing and mulled over my thoughts as I mindlessly made our beds and neatened our things.

I had been on my own all morning as Colton went to get the supplies we'd brought for the pack from the car and Keegan left to take to Alpha Vex's pack.

When I had been over the entire tent three times, I sat down on Keegan's cot and laid down hesitantly.

I waited until my heart calmed before turning over and sinking my nose into his pillow and consuming his scent.

There was something about his smell that drove me completely insane, comforting and setting me on edge at the same time.

I balled his blanket into my fists and let myself feel the shame that had been rolling around my head since I'd seen my father speak on television.

"If you've sympathized, don't bother returning."

Of course, I had sympathized. I was running my face over a werewolf's pillow, trying to make sure his scent stayed with me.

I had more than sympathized. I was falling in love with the enemy I had been conditioned to fear.

I heard wolves howling and closed my eyes, letting the sound roll through my mind. The first time I heard a wolf howl, I covered in fear. Now, I appreciated the beauty of the sound.

"Don't bother returning."

Throughout all that had happened, I never imagined not seeing my father again. Seeing his slicked-back hair, gray eyes, and stern expression was a given.

But now? Now, I wasn't sure if I'd ever see my father again. A feeling of cold washed through me.

Did I want to see him again? Yes. Why? I wasn't sure.

I knew he would hate me. I was doing everything he'd always told me never to do. I had done the exact thing he did in his youth; the thing he regretted the most: fallen for a werewolf.

My father rarely spoke of my mother unless it was to spite her and her kind.

Someone cleared their throat outside the tent's entrance and I stood up as fast as I could, my cheeks burning at the thought of someone catching me in Keegan's bed.

I grimaced then and closed my eyes, realizing that as soon as he returned, he'd know I'd been lying there. Damn werewolves and their advanced senses.

"Lux?"

I turned just as Sophie entered the tent. She was barefoot again and her long, dark hair hung down her back, wavy and unkempt.

Sophie smiled at me as she entered, her green eyes as kind as her heart-shaped face.

There was something different about her. She looked the same, just a little less pristine perhaps.

But the change in my friend wasn't physical. When I had known Sophie, she had been timid, quiet, nervous. Now she was relaxed, comfortable, secure in her own skin.

"Hi," I mumbled to her, feeling my self-esteem ebb away.

I always thought it was funny how confident people made other people feel uncomfortable with themselves. It was like they sucked away your confidence to feed theirs.

Up until a few weeks ago, I had been the confident one. Now, I was unsure of everything in my life.

"I was hoping you'd join me on a walk," she said softly. Her voice hadn't changed.

Sophie had always been a very soft speaker. I remembered having to strain to hear her, ask her to repeat herself, or pretend to have understood what it was she was saying.

I looked around, not sure if I was allowed to leave. "I'm not so sure that's a good idea."

Sophie frowned, her green eyes relentlessly trying to capture mine. "Is it because of the two wolves you arrived with? Do they keep you prisoner? I could ask Alpha Vex if he would consider—"

"I'm not their prisoner," I told her harshly. I bit my tongue after. Wasn't I though? Maybe I wasn't Keegan's real prisoner but I had to pretend to be? So, wasn't I really captured in the end?

I knew that even if I wasn't forced to be his servant, I'd still be held captive by the bond we shared. Leaving him was unthinkable.

"Then why can't you leave?"

I was edgy around her. "I'm Kee... Master Stone's servant. I'm not supposed to do things without his permission."

"So, you are a prisoner? Bound by his words?" I almost laughed at how close she was to the truth. Keegan was the king's official speaker, so who wasn't bound by his words?

"In a way," I relented. "I don't want to make him angry."

Her eyes were hard. "Does he hurt you?"

"No." My reaction was instant. "He would never hurt me."

"But he keeps you with him against your will?"

I shifted from foot to foot, not sure how to make her believe I was here because I wanted to be while keeping her in the dark about the bond Keegan and I shared.

"It's complicated." I winced at how lame my answer was. Keegan would have lied better than that.

She nodded her head. "I sense that it is." She moved her head and exposed the crescent-shaped mark on her neck. My eyes were attracted there immediately.

Sophie smiled. "I also sense that you're curious about me. Come with me and I'll tell you anything you want to know. I promise to have you back before you're... Before your friend knows you're gone."

I bit my lip as she left my tent, confident that I would follow. After a brief moment of debate, I decided to follow her.

We walked silently for a while. She led me through the forest with ease, her bare feet crushing dead leaves and dodging sticks.

I kept pace with her, my stomach tightening at the idea of Colton realizing I had left.

Would he believe me to be a disobedient servant and tell Keegan? Or his father? Would Colton insist that Keegan get rid of me?

"Their way of life is beautiful," Sophie said quietly, eyes on the forest. "They work together, value one another, protect their family. Everyone has a job and a purpose, no one is excluded.

"And the respect they have for each other and their surroundings... Lux, it's beautiful."

I knew what she was talking about because I had seen it too. "Everything our parents told us..."

She looked at me with a heavy expression. "I know, Lux. Believe me, it wasn't easy for me to see the beauty in them. It took time.

I licked my lips. "I don't know how to forget everything I was told."

Sophie was patient. "You don't forget it, Lux. You just realize that we were misinformed and you move on."

She sucked in a breath. "When I met Paul, I was still living with my family, still in high school, still afraid of werewolves.

"I felt like I was being torn into two people. The person that attended your father's rallies with my family, and the person that snuck out afterward to see Paul on the edge of town."

"You knew Paul when you knew me?" I asked, floored. I would have never guessed that Sophie had been with a werewolf when I knew her. She was also so quiet. Maybe Paul was the reason why.

Sophie nodded, her eyes following a squirrel as it jumped from branch to branch. "For a short while, yes.

"It was painful to realize that everything my parents told me, everything I believed was a complete lie. They weren't monsters, Lux, Paul was proof.

"I knew that I wouldn't be able to change anyone's mind. Who would be open enough to have dinner with a werewolf? So, I left."

I sucked in a breath. "Your brother was so devastated. Your parents used to come to the rallies looking like zombies." Sophie winced but said nothing.

"My father always mentioned you when he spoke. We all thought you had been stolen away. If your family knew you left them willingly, they would be broken."

Sophie rubbed her neck, covering her scar with her hand. "I know it would. But the moment I met Paul, something changed in me forever."

I didn't respond as my mind slipped back into the memory of seeing Keegan for the first time. My breath hitched.

"The sparks I felt when he touched me, the ease at which we spoke to one another, the love he held for me in his eyes, the clarity of our future together..."

"Everything told me that he was mine and I was his. It was simple."

"Didn't you ever think about your family?"

She smiled. "Of course, I did, Lux. They were all I thought about. But I knew that they were toxic. They had fed me the lies they were fed without checking the facts.

"I had to get out, I had to find happiness. Paul was that for me."

"Didn't you ever feel trapped?"

Sophie laughed. "The mate bond is a hard thing to describe unless you've felt it.

"You don't feel like you're stuck with the person; you feel like it was the place you were supposed to have been your entire life. I couldn't imagine being with anyone but Paul."

I thought about it, remembering when I mentioned to Keegan that he would have to find another mate and I would find a husband.

I knew even then that what I was saying was a lie. I would never be with anybody else.

"Were you afraid of them?"

Sophie shrugged and picked a leaf off a nearby branch. She twisted the leaf in her hands. "At first maybe."

She put a hand to her head. "It's hard to remember what I was like back then. The first time I saw Paul shift, I nearly died of a heart attack, but every time since, I've felt nothing but jealousy."

Her words made my throat close up. My father would have left her then if he were me. "Jealous of her ability to shift?" It was the exact thought I'd had when I realized how beautiful Keegan was as a wolf.

Despite my criticism, Sophie was patient. "Yes, I know how that must sound to someone so used to the hate and lies, but they are so beautiful, Lux. Really."

"Did it hurt when Paul marked you?" My eyes slipped down to her scar before I looked away, my cheeks flaming. That wasn't the best question to ask to keep my bond with Keegan a secret.

Sophie seemed confused. "I wasn't expecting you to ask that."

"Curious," I mumbled to the ground.

"Yes and no," she said. "It hurt but in a nice way. After it happened, I was a little off for a few days."

"What do you mean?" I inquired, my heart pounding.

Sophie watched me for a moment before speaking. "My emotions weren't always appropriate. I'd cry at funny things or get angry when Paul was sweet to me.

"When marked, the male werewolf injects his hormones into his mate. They flow throughout your body, mingling his scent with yours, so others know you're mated.

"But they also change your hormone balance, which causes the mood swings."

"Strange," I mumbled, reaching up to touch my neck, wondering what it would feel like for Keegan to...

I blinked and dropped my hand. I couldn't think about that. Not after establishing that there was no chance for us. I was going to drive myself insane.

"I was protective of him too," Sophie told me. "Fiercely so." She grew quiet as her eyes became distant. I guessed she was remembering something.

"Are you part of his pack now?"

She shrugged. "As an honorary member, I suppose." We kept walking in silence, but after a few moments, she grabbed my wrist and stopped me.

"I'm so sorry, Lux. For everything that happened when I left. I didn't want to hurt anyone."

I thought it over. "To be honest, it would have stung more to know you'd left us willingly. At least when we thought you'd been abducted, we had someone to blame, someone to despise.

"Your parents would never have recovered if they'd known you left of your own accord."

Her eyebrows drew together. "Are they better now?"

I thought about how tired my father looked on television and then thought back to Sophie's family. "Better, not healed."

She released a long breath. "I guess I can't ask for much more." I watched the forest as we walked, deep in thought. I heard howling and felt a small smile grace my lips.

"How did you get here, Lux?" Sophie asked softly. For whatever reason, the howling made my stomach roll.

I shrugged. "I was kidnapped, sold, brought to Keegan." When I saw the worry on her face, I elaborated. "Keegan's kind though, he's just... He's—"

"Your mate," she guessed. I kept my face stiff and stared straight ahead as my stomach twisted in panic.

"I knew it the moment I saw the two of you. The way he looks at you, how he positions his body around you, how he listens every time you speak. It's obvious."

I almost lost my breath. "I—"

"I won't tell anyone," Sophie promised. "Though, I know Paul knows and I think Alpha Vex has noticed as well."

I suddenly wished I had never left the tent.

"Why don't you stay here with this pack? You'd all be welcome."

I turned to her, almost ready to accept the offer when the howling we heard from before became incredibly loud.

"What the...?" But before she could finish, the wolves crashed through the trees, making Sophie laugh in admiration.

I locked eyes with Keegan immediately, picking out his wolf with ease. He met my gaze and tilted his head to the side, his eyes inquisitive. He was probably wondering why I wasn't back in the tent.

He looked at Sophie, then seemed to understand.

Like before, seeing Keegan as a wolf drew out the primal side of me. My body felt like it had been slammed by a truck as my stomach rolled and rolled and my mind tumbled along with it.

I gasped as pain raced through my mind, splitting my head in two and forcing my eyes shut. I bucked forward, falling onto my knees while keeping one hand buried in my hair.

I heard a wolf whine and a sharp bark and I moaned as I fell to the ground, my entire frame shaking from the pain.

"Lux?" Sophie's voice, which was usually so soft, pierced my ears.

Her hands touched my burning skin, skimmed over my aching bones, ran over my stinging muscles. I sobbed as her touch only made me hurt.

She rolled away from me as Keegan ran toward me, intensifying the pain. I screamed as my gums ached and my teeth began to wiggle.

I opened my eyes and found Keegan still in wolf form standing over me. His ears were pulled back and he was whining through his teeth, looking anxious.

I tried to swat him away but I couldn't lift my arm. I curled up on my side and tucked my chin to my chest, trying not to scream as the pain pulled me apart.

My hand started to burn and I opened my eyes to watch as the skin started to move and the bones started to crack. I screamed as pain exploded in my mind and my hand broke on its own.

"No, no, no," I chanted as pain stabbed my brain. What was happening?

Sophie was calling my name and Keegan was whining as though he were in pain and I was dying. Was I dying? It felt like it.

I heard a snap and then suddenly my mind went numb as an image of a tiny gray wolf took over my vision.

The wolf stood proudly, her gray eyes as pale as my own. It was almost like she noticed me watching and bent her head back to cry out a howl I couldn't hear.

My eyes opened and I found Keegan staring at me with human eyes. His hands clamped down on the sides of my face, his chest heaved like he had run a marathon.

I choked out a sound of horror and looked at my hand, only to find it perfectly fine.

"What happened?" I mumbled, my head spinning but no longer hurting. Keegan shook his head slightly, his eyes full of panic and wonder and hope.

I was confused, I looked at Sophie, who was staring at Colton beside her, who looked astonished. When had he come?

I looked back at Keegan, noticing he was completely naked and trying not to stare at his abs or anything below them.

I felt my cheeks heat up and tilted my head back, finding the sky above the trees.

Keegan tensed when he dug his fingers into my hair. His voice nearly broke. "Are you... Are you okay?"

My tongue felt heavy. "I'm okay." I heard a low rumbling sound and saw Alpha Vex behind Keegan, naked from the shift as well. He crossed his arms over his chest and stared at me in wonder.

"Keegan Stone," he said, "I think there's something your mate isn't telling you."

Keegan's entire body went rigid. His eyes met mine in apology as he released me slowly and stood, turning toward the alpha. "She's not—"

Alpha Vex didn't let him finish. Instead, he stared directly at me and laughed. "She's a werewolf."