She Is A Werewolf

My ears were ringing. I couldn't hear anything through the sound. I couldn't feel anything under my feet.

And I couldn't see anything but Lux. I could only watch as she withered on the ground, suffering.

My body wasn't sure what to do. My wolf was panicking, and as a result, she willed me to stay in my shifted form.

My mind was rational, trying to reason with the instinctive part of myself that Lux needed human hands to help her through whatever it was that held her captive.

I whined through my nose and took a step forward, watching as her face twisted and her eyes closed. Something about losing sight of those gray eyes made me shift.

Within moments, I was bent beside her, my heart hammering in my chest. My ribs felt broken.

My hands went to the side of her head and I pushed my fingertips into her hair.

If my mate wasn't in terrible pain, my wolf would have rejoiced at the intimacy of the moment—at the sparks and shocks that ran the length of my body.

Lux's eyes opened, taking on a dazed expression. Hope flourished in my chest, healing the broken ribs and slowing my heart.

Was she all right? What had happened? Was it over? Her eyes spun in circles until they landed on her hand, and then on my face. "What happened?"

I shook my head slightly, not having an answer for her. I stared at every inch of her, hoping she wasn't hurting anymore.

I was so engrossed, I couldn't bring myself to care that my alpha's son was standing just behind me, bearing witness to my sympathy.

I watched as Lux's eyes drifted from my face and lower. She blushed and tilted her face up, so her eyes met the sky and her pale skin took on a new hue.

I would've shied away if I hadn't been so relieved. It was hard to remember that she wasn't used to nudity the same way wolves are.

However, no matter how comfortable I was in my own skin, I still tensed at the thought of my mate seeing me this way. Did she like what she saw? Or was she disappointed?

An odd feeling took a hold of me for a brief moment: insecurity.

My voice was strained when I spoke. "Are you… Are you okay?"

Lux's voice was slow. "I'm okay." I hadn't expected anybody to laugh.

I glanced over my shoulder at Alpha Vex who had an odd expression on his face. It was somewhere between his usual stern glare and amusement.

My wolf growled in my mind as he believed the alpha thought our mate's suffering was humorous.

“Keegan Stone,” he said, “I think there’s something your mate isn’t telling you.”

There it was. It was out of the bag. Alpha Vex knew that Lux and I were mates. I had failed her. I hadn’t protected her as well as I should have. My acting hadn’t been good enough.

By extension, everyone who was standing in this clearing now knew the extent of my treason. I was a sympathizer. Oh, Goddess, I was beyond a sympathizer. I was in love with a human.

I looked toward Lux and met her eyes, my regret and guilt consuming me.

I should have sent her back the moment I saw her. I shouldn’t have tricked myself into believing I could pretend we didn’t share a bond. I shouldn’t have been so selfish.

I stood and turned to Alpha Vex, my body tense as I sized him up.

What were the chances of my being able to take him in a battle? I wasn’t exactly a fighter, but I was fast and I was sure that would be an advantage.

I couldn’t protect Lux by pretending anymore. Now, I’d have to fight to keep her in my life. My jaw tensed. “She’s not—”

Alpha Vex locked eyes with Lux and laughed, setting my nerves on edge. “She’s a werewolf.”

My ears started ringing again. I heard Colton swear and felt my lungs expand until they almost burst. What did he say?

“No way!” Colton exclaimed. “There is no way that’s true.”

Vex smiled patiently. “You just witnessed a partial shift. It happens to those who have dormant genes within them. The gene is almost always triggered by the presence of one’s mate.”

My eyes cut to his. “Shut up.”

Vex continued. “I’ve only heard a few cases. Daryn Reynolds’s original mate went through it.

“So did the mate of that guy who killed his sister years ago. What were their names again? Axel, no, Alex Thorn,” Vex smiled. “That’s it. Alex, and his brother, Alpha Nathan.”

I growled, the sound cutting through the whispers of everyone present. “What are you talking about? Lux isn’t a werewolf.

“She’s a human. Raised by a human. Born from a human. She *smells* human. My wolf does not recognize a wolf in her.”

I turned and caught Lux’s gaze for a fleeting moment. I looked at her just long enough to watch her press her lips together.

“Are you sure that is all true?” Alpha Vex asked quietly, his eyes meeting Lux’s.

For whatever reason, my wolf chose that moment to remind me that both Vex and I were stark naked and my mate was present.

I growled again, my eyes darkening. “For the love of the Goddess, put some clothes on.”

Vex’s muscles popped proudly. “Evasion.”

I snarled and turned to Lux with anger boiling in me. How dare he pretend to know my mate better than I? I had spent weeks with her. I had watched her, observed her. She was human.

“Lux, is your father human?”

Her voice was small. “He is.”

I turned to Vex. “See? You’re mistaken. She’s just sick.”

Vex laughed and looked down at Lux. “What about your mother, Lux? Where does she come into play?” My body grew cold, my heart hammered, my ears rang. My mate was a human. I had accepted that.

“I’ve never met her,” Lux mumbled. Everyone was silent. “I never met her because my father hated her. My father hated her because she was a werewolf.”

Everything in me wanted to shift.

“Don’t,” Vex warned me. “Not unless you want her to shift here. It will be painful and she should prepare herself.”

I reined in my wolf. I was furious with Lux for withholding information. I was upset at myself for not asking. I was excited about the new possibilities.

And I was saddened by the time we had wasted pretending she was something she wasn’t. She was like me. Something in me hummed.

I watched as Sophie helped Lux to her feet, her eyes kind and movements gentle. “Congratulations,” she murmured to my mate.

Lux looked green. Her eyes stayed far away from me, enraging my wolf further.

“I wouldn’t be congratulating her, Soph,” Beta Paul muttered. “Now, she’s a target. And the shooters have guns that can kill her quicker than she can shift.

“Life’s dangerous for her now; humans are crueler than wolves.”

My wolf howled.

Up until moments ago, my biggest worry had been Colton finding out about Lux’s bond with me and him telling his father.

I worried that she would be sent away, traded, auctioned. I had worried about being shamed or being killed for sympathizing.

Now, there was a different, all-consuming worry in the forefront of my mind. I recalled the family of four having a picnic on their front lawn and the wolf hanging from their oak tree.

I couldn’t stop the growl that rumbled from my chest. The sound made Lux jump and I immediately regretted it.

But it was a sound I couldn’t stop. Not when the only thing I saw was the Lux from my dream; of her dead.

Vex shrugged at his beta. “She was already a target for being mated to a werewolf. She would have been executed for sympathizing regardless.”

My nerves snapped and I snarled at the alpha, my wolf engaging in a challenge I had no hope of winning. Luckily, Vex took no offense. To my surprise, it was Paul who stepped in to help calm me down.

He crossed the clearing, placed a hand just in front of my chest, and brought his eyes to mine.

“You can’t shift, not with your mate in danger of shifting as well. You need to control yourself and follow me, let’s go.”

My head spun as Paul mentioned the possibility of Lux shifting. I was sure it would be beautiful.

His hand clamped around my upper arm and tugged, leaving no room for resistance. I gritted my teeth. “I can’t leave her.”

Paul looked me in the eye. “Yes, you can.” He tugged again, the scars along his arms prominent and threatening. What happened to wolves who disobeyed him?

My feet started moving without my brain’s permission as my wolf gave over to his dominance.

Lux whimpered and I nearly shifted again, my wolf wishing to protect my mate. I fought the shift, knowing it would only hurt Lux.

I tried to wrap my mind around what was happening as I walked and began to feel colder as I realized the implications.

Lux was going to turn. It was going to be incredibly painful. Her mother was a werewolf. Where was her mother? Who was her mother? Which pack did she belong to by birth?

Her father was Stan Freeman, the anti-werewolf activist. How had Lux survived with a father who hated what his daughter was? Why did Stan Freeman hate werewolves when he once loved one?

What was my uncle going to say if I brought back Lux as a shifted wolf? What would the world say if the daughter of their leader suddenly shifted? What did this mean for the Feral War?

The further I got from Lux, the easier it was for my mind to process what was happening. I took a few deep breaths and accepted the shorts Paul handed me as we passed a safe house.

I pulled them on and rubbed the back of my neck, astonished at the information that had been revealed to me.

I turned to Paul, suddenly grateful. “Thanks for pulling me away.”

He shrugged me off. “It was no big deal. Vex was being a dick and I didn’t like it.”

I frowned, noticing how the alpha seemed to provoke the situation. “Is there any reason *why* Alpha Vex behaved the way he did? He wasn’t exactly reassuring.”

Paul wore an odd expression. It seemed to be halfway between annoyance and pity. “Vex has been a great alpha, and he’s been a great alpha for many years.

“The only thing he’s missing is his luna. He’s jealous, that’s all. Jealous that you have a mate and he doesn’t.”

“Why is it you think he’s mateless still?”

Paul stopped walking and looked me in the eye. “She’s probably dead.”

He didn’t give me a chance to think about his response before he expanded on his thought. “Mating rates are at an all-time low. Wolves are dying before they get the chance to meet their mates.

“Humans are no longer interacting with wolves, so there’s less human-to-werewolf bonding. It’s becoming harder to find a true mate now wolves are just choosing mates for themselves.”

“Artificial bonding?” I repeated. “That’s illegal.”

Paul shrugged. “It’s war and wolves are desperate. It’s in our nature to ensure that our genes carry on. You can only do that with pups, and you can only have pups if you have a partner.

“If your true mate is dead, murdered, or captured, how are you supposed to have pups?”

My skin pricked as I realized how lucky I was to have found Lux.

“The entire time I had known her, I’d seen our relationship as a burden. I suddenly saw it as something to cherish and protect. My wolf whined, wanting to return to her.

“What happens if they find their true mates after they take another?” I asked.

That was the whole reason artificial bonding was made illegal by our previous king. There were too many fights over mates.

Paul laughed. “Then there’s a seriously screwed up situation; one I’ll never have to worry about.”

His eyes softened for the briefest moment as he thought about his mate. I wondered if I looked the same when I thought about Lux.

“What’s it like?” I asked timidly, not sure if it was my place to ask. “What’s it like being mated to a human?”

Paul looked at me from the side of his eye and grinned crookedly. “Are you asking what it’s like to be *mated* or mated to a *human?* Because you don’t have to worry about the second anymore.”

I felt the air leave my lungs as I recalled Lux’s transformation. Was I ever going to become used to the idea that my mate was a werewolf? My head spun. “Both I guess.”

Paul chuckled and rubbed his chin, thinking about how to phrase whatever it was he was going to say next. “Being mated is an odd feeling. I’m not sure why you want me to explain, you have a mate?”

I looked down. “Lux and I… It’s complicated.”

Paul barked out a laugh. “I’m sure I can keep up.”

“Lux’s father is Stan Freeman,” I told him, watching for a negative reaction.

Paul’s face was stoic. “I thought she looked familiar, but not for that reason.”

“What reason then?”

Paul was cautious. “I’ve met another person who looks similar to her. He was a White Wolf… Forget it. It’s really not important. They just look alike.”

Paul brushed the conversation off with a simple hand gesture. “So, her dad is some crazy human, what’s the holdup?”

I took my time and explained Lux’s experiences with werewolves and my uncle’s idea of proving I wasn’t a sympathizer.

I explained how I found out she was my mate and how difficult it had been to keep up the act of indifference.

“So, we’ve never really done anything remotely mate-like,” I explained to him. “Except for a few isolated moments, we’ve tried to avoid each other.”

Paul was sympathetic. “I can’t imagine trying to stay away from Sophie. Kudos to you.”

My jaw tensed. “It wasn’t easy.”

Paul shrugged and cracked his fingers absently. “Being mated is like being tethered. Not in a bad way, but in a way that makes you wish the tether was tighter.

“I don’t know. All I know is that when I’m not with Sophie, I’m thinking about her. When I am with Sophie, I think of ways to get closer.”

“How do you control the possessiveness? I heard it can be a problem.”

I had felt flashes of it. When Doug Lott had touched her, when she smiled at Colton, when she saw Vex naked. The feelings were supposed to intensify after the marking and skyrocket after the mating.

Paul’s laugh was harsh. “You don’t.” Paul clapped me on the shoulder and kept walking, relaxed and content.

He was comfortable in his relationship with Sophie. Hopefully, Lux shifting would allow for us to be the same.

It wasn’t until Keegan left that I was able to get a grasp on what was happening. I had nearly shifted. *Shifted.* Everyone knew that Keegan and I were mates. I was a werewolf.

My head spun and I had to close my eyes for a moment.

“Lux? Are you all right?”

I almost wanted to laugh at Sophie’s question. Was I all right? Was I ever going to be?

When I looked up at the sky, all I could see were my father’s disapproving eyes, his heated scowl, his hurt gaze.

It was absurd to think that by nearly shifting today, I was betraying him. So why did I feel like seeing that wolf in my head was like taking a knife and jamming it between his ribs.

Why did every time I recalled how enthralled I was when Vex said I was shifting that I also felt cold dread and shame?

How was it right to be ashamed of the things about me that I couldn't change?

How did it make sense for me to fear or loathe parts of myself that were coded into my DNA? Especially when without these parts, I wouldn't be me at all.

I shook my head slightly and tried to sit up, wobbling a bit but finding Sophie's hand. Her eyes were large and steady.

I took a deep breath and looked at her. "Where's Keegan?"

Sophie smiled patiently. "Paul took him for a walk so that your body had the chance to settle down. It's not a good idea to shift without knowing something about it first."

I pressed my lips together. "Okay." Sophie and Vex each grabbed one of my arms and helped me to my feet. I smiled and thanked each of them, feeling better each moment I was vertical.

Alpha Vex seemed perplexed. "Your scent hasn't changed," he informed me. "You still smell human. Perhaps it won't change until you shift fully."

I snaked a hand up to my neck, feeling vulnerable. "Is that a good thing?"

"Depends on what you want to accomplish," Vex told me slowly. "If you wish to hide among the humans, then it's a good thing. If you want to remain here, with my pack, it wouldn't matter.

"However, if you wish to travel back to Emerson's pack in Oregon, you will still have to tread carefully."

My mouth popped open. "We could stay here?"

Alpha Vex nodded. "It's dangerous here, less stable than the West, but I have a feeling Emerson's pack wouldn't take too kindly to the mating of you and Keegan."

I didn't miss the way his eyes flickered to Colton at the edge of the path. "At least here you wouldn't have to worry about danger from your own pack."

I smiled at Vex as my whole body started to itch uncomfortably. "I'll speak to Keegan about it."

"In case he refuses," Vex began. "Just know that you have options too. Not all wolves stay with their mates. Destiny doesn't always work out."

His hand touched my shoulder and lingered there as his eyes searched my face.

I smiled and pulled away, heading for Colton, who had begun to walk away from the area. He walked quickly and stiffly, either aware that I was following or beyond caring.

I tripped over sticks and loose stones as I hurried, fumbling until I could get a solid grip on his arm. "Colton—"

"You guys lied to me," he snapped, turning around.

I released him and rocked back on my heels. I wasn't sure how to go about talking to this side of Colton. I had never seen him angry. "It was necessary," I told him softly. "We lied to everyone."

He swallowed, eyes shining. "But I opened up to you, Lux. I told you about my family and how I felt. I trusted you with that. It was private but I trusted you with it. Why didn't you trust me?"

My shoulders sagged, my cheeks felt heavy, and my head thumped. I was tired. Tired from the partial shift and tired of the lying, pretending, fighting. When would it all end? "Colton, that's not fair."

"Why?" he asked hotly. "Why isn't it fair? Do you think I'm just a kid or something? I'm sixteen!"

If I hadn't been so worn out, I would have felt sorry for Colton. In reality, he was just a kid. And it didn't have anything to do with age.

But at that moment, I was angry. My body was sore, my head was spinning, and my mind only cared about speaking with Keegan. The last thing I wanted to deal with was Colton's feelings.

"Being a wimp isn't going to get you killed, Colton. No one is going to put a bullet in your brain because you aren't as good as the rest of your family, okay?

"The bond between Keegan and me, the truth about my mother, those things will get me *killed.* So, no, I didn't trust you with my secrets because your father's an alpha and quite capable of killing me."

Colton's face cooled, the harsh red settling until he was ghostly pale. "You think I would tell my father? You think I would betray you guys?"

I pinched the bridge of my nose. "Colton, that's not—"

"I wouldn't," he told me sternly. "I wouldn't betray you or Keegan. You guys… You're the only friends I've ever really had."

He looked down; his face drawn. "It's hard enough making friends in a war where everyone is paranoid. It's harder when you're the alpha's kid.

"And Deelia… She never has time for me and my parents are always so busy…" Colton trailed off, his eyes slipping into his mind and out of my reach.

It didn't take long for guilt to shred the inside of my stomach. "Colton, I—"

"It's okay," he muttered. "It's fine, you don't have to apologize. I'd hate to think I'm burdening you with problems that have no importance."

Colton turned and left, his footsteps uncannily quiet as he disappeared into the woods.

I stood in the center of the forest for a while, my mind churning as my ears processed the sound of life around me.

It took a while for the anger to come, but when it did, I grabbed a rock and threw it as hard as I could at the nearest tree.

It ricocheted off the tree with a low clank and hit the ground some distance away, gradually rolling to a stop.

After the anger left me, the shock came, numbing my entire body until I couldn't feel my toes.

Breathing was odd then. I could hear the sound of air entering and exiting my lungs but I couldn't feel my lungs move nor my ribs expand.

Once the anger and shock had flown from my body, all I felt was tired. I sat on the ground, ignoring the sticks that dug into the backs of my thighs and the dirt that rubbed against my ankles.

After some time, I lay down. My pale hair fanned out around me and my body curled in on itself.

I closed my eyes and tucked my arm underneath my head, waiting for sleep while knowing that it would never come. I may be part wolf, but I'd never know the forest as my home.

My home was miles away, across the country. It was green walls and a double bed with white and yellow sheets.

Home was the pink nail polish stain on my carpet that I hid with a pile of books.

Home was cups of hot chocolate and Sunday morning breakfast with my dad.

The first sob surprised me, the second was painful, and the third was uncontrollable.

I wasn't ever going back to that home. I'd never know that feeling of waking up on Sunday and rushing downstairs to see my dad in his ridiculous *Kiss the Chef* apron.

I'd never fall asleep with a book on my lap in my bed again.

I'd never get to go back because I wasn't the same girl who lived there anymore. I wasn't the Lux who stood beside her father on stage and waved, smiling even though she wanted to cry.

I wasn’t the Lux who gloated in the fame of her father, even though his words killed her on the inside.

I wasn’t the Lux who could look her father in the eye over pancakes anymore.

So, who was I?

I wasn’t a werewolf. Not yet. Not fully.

I wasn’t a mate. Keegan would never have me, not as long as we spoke different languages.

I wasn’t a friend. Colton had made that clear today.

I wasn’t a leader. Who would follow me? And I wasn’t a follower. Who would I follow?

I wasn’t much of anything.

I cried until the dirt underneath me became mud, and the back of my nose stung. I was Lux, the lonely girl. Not human, not werewolf, not mate, not friend, not strong, not weak.

I sniffled as a disruption in the quiet made me jump.

I looked up, pushing myself onto my elbow and using the other hand to wipe my cheeks dry.

Keegan stood just in front of a clump of thick foliage. His chest was bare, his lower body covered in a pair of loose shorts.

His eyes found mine. They were dark underneath heavy brows that were drawn together in worry. His mouth puckered as he stepped forward and his hands reached for me.

Before I could stop him, Keegan scooped me up in the way I’d always secretly wished to be picked up.

He held me close and tucked my head into his shoulder so that my eyes could see nothing but his face.

He started walking, keeping his eyes forward and strong. He didn’t say anything as he carried me, and for a brief moment, I didn’t feel like Lux, the lonely girl.

I felt hope.