

Keegan's Sweater

Sleeping in the woods was not all it was cracked up to be. Every time I moved, I snapped a twig, rumbled a leaf, or moved onto a rock, and each time, I woke up.

I sat up and shivered, my skin prickling from the chill of the air.

The fire had died down to just the coals and the heat was no longer touching me.

I reached up and touched my hair, frowning at the amount of debris that was tangled within it. I pulled out a few bits of dried leaf but decided to abandon the endeavor.

I looked around, spotting Colton curled up across the fire and Keegan a little to my right. I yawned and then shivered, biting on my lip as a gust of wind blew cold air down my shirt.

“Lux?” I snapped my head over to Keegan quickly, my neck creaking in the process. How was it that him calling my name made my heart pick up and my cheeks warm?

“Yes?”

“Are you all right?” he asked. “I’ve heard you get up over ten times.”

I smiled weakly, wishing I could see his face better. “I’m fine, just cold.” A part of me couldn’t help but wonder why he was talking to me at all.

Was it out of duty to the side of him that told him I was his mate? Did being mates entail this kind of behavior? Or was he just guilty that he had gotten us into this situation?

He sat up too, his figure hulking in the dim light. My heart sped up as I watched his every move, completely oblivious to what he was going to do next.

Surprising me, he stood up and removed the sweater from his body.

He walked toward me slowly, watching me as intensely as I was him.

When he was a step away, he stopped and held out his sweater to me, leaving him in a t-shirt and nothing else. He waited for my reaction.

“You’ll freeze,” I told him with a shake of my head. “I’m fine.”

“I can hear your teeth clicking together,” Keegan told me, sending a shiver down my spine for two reasons: he had the ability to hear that well; and that he cared enough to do so.

Despite his insistence, I was stubborn. “I’ll feel guilty if I wake up and you’re nothing more than a popsicle.”

If I had to guess, I’d say he rolled his eyes at that moment. “Just take the sweater, Lux, there’s a better chance you’ll freeze than me.”

When I remained silent, Keegan sighed and threw the sweater into my lap before returning to his area and laying down.

I watched him, waiting for him to jump back up and claim his clothing but he didn’t. He just curled up on his side and stuck his hand under his head.

Gingerly, I picked up his sweater, feeling the heat rolling off it in waves.

How was it that it was so warm?

“Thank you,” I whispered in his direction. He grunted in response. I swallowed hard and slipped the sweater over my body, freeing my hair and pulling it down over my thighs.

I closed my eyes and laid down on my side, bringing as much of my body into his sweater as I could.

His scent attacked me. I breathed in deeply, wondering if it was the genes my mother passed down to me that made me react this way to his smell or the bond that tied us together.

Whatever the reason, I knew I was addicted in a strange way to his heavy scent.

I fell asleep not long after.

I woke up when I began to feel extremely and uncomfortably hot. I opened my eyes, noticing how the sky was starting to lighten.

My neck felt slick with sweat as did my forehead. My hair stuck to my skin and my hands felt sticky with the heat.

I blew out a long breath and wriggled around, trying to figure out why I felt so smothered by heat.

As I moved around, I heard a soft exhale of air that made my heart leap into my throat. Lowering my eyes to my waist, I noticed a hand draped over my body.

Upon moving my shoulder blades, I realized that someone’s chest was pressed to my back.

I closed my eyes as my skin started to prickle and his scent engulfed me. Keegan.

I tucked my head into my chest and smiled, wishing this moment could stretch on for hours.

His proximity soothed my nerves, which had been fraying for weeks, calmed my heart, which had been afraid since I was taken, and erased my worries, which had been spiraling out of control since my abduction.

One thought wrecked everything.

I wrenched myself away from Keegan, my heart pounding frantically in my chest as my eyes searched for Colton.

I was able to breathe a little easier when I noticed he was still asleep. He hadn’t seen us. He wasn’t going to tell his father. He wasn’t going to get us killed.

I looked back to Keegan, wishing I hadn’t broken the moment, and felt startled when I noticed him staring back at me.

He looked worried, and when I didn’t move, he stood up, dusting himself off and offering a hand to me.

I felt my eyebrows pull together as I accepted his hand and allowed myself to be pulled to my feet.

Keegan dropped my hand and started walking into the woods, using the little light the early morning provided him.

I brushed myself off and ripped my fingers through my hair a few times before I followed him, not sure what to expect.

He moved at a steady pace and I couldn’t help but admire how close he was to the forest. It was one of the many things about werewolves that intrigued me.

When Keegan continued to walk but didn’t begin a conversation, my stomach started to twist with worry.

Eventually, he came to a stop and crouched down, his face smoothing over in perfect concentration as he surveyed the woods around him.

I hung back a few steps and watched as the muscles of his back tensed and then he sprang to his feet and jumped.

His whole body quivered as he moved through the air, when, suddenly, he seemed to explode.

The next movements were too fast for my eyes to follow, but when Keegan hit the ground, he was no longer Keegan. He was a wolf. I blinked as my heart picked up in fear and my hands started to tremble.

His wolf was light brown along his back, his fur darkening gradually to black as it reached his snout and paws. Only around his eyes and ears were there touches of white on his body.

Keegan wasted no time in letting out a long breath and then darting off into the woods, quicker than I could have imagined.

I watched him disappear and then shrunk back, my shoulders curling forward as my breath left my body.

Besides the fear and shock, there was another feeling swirling in my body. An odd longing that I couldn’t describe.

It was as though my body yearned to do the same thing Keegan did. A dormant side of myself was itching to have the chance to become familiar with the earth.

I gasped as my stomach twisted and clutched my torso as my vision blurred for a moment and then focused. I couldn’t explain why, but seeing Keegan in his natural form has ignited something in me.

Perhaps the part that my father had so adamantly tried to stamp out of me.

Before anything could escalate, Keegan was back with a large rabbit in between his jaws.

He dropped his catch onto the ground and whined at me, his ears pressed flat to his head and his tail tucked between his hind legs.

He dropped his snout to the ground and whined again as his entire face tilted. I let out a breath and swallowed hard as I felt the same feeling again. It was as though my mind was splitting in two.

I let out a sharp breath as icy pain pierced the base of my skull, causing me to clutch my hair and pull. I hadn’t realized I had closed my eyes until Keegan whined and forced them open again.

I drew in a quivering breath and tried to smile, but my teeth felt loose. I ran my tongue over them and winced as my gums began to throb. Keegan took a step closer, and everything intensified.

My head began to hurt so badly, I was having trouble standing. My eyes felt dry, my mouth was on fire, my hands were aching, and my knees trembled.

I took a knee as my stomach rolled and closed my eyes as light streaked across my vision, burning my retinas.

Keegan kept whining and came closer, only making everything so much worse. A part of my mind was reaching out for him, needing him to come closer, to take everything to the peak.

But the larger part of me fought against him; years of conditioning telling me to keep my mind purely human.

I cried out, making a sound halfway between a plea and a sob. My head hurt so badly, I was sure it was splitting in two, the right hemisphere detaching from the left.

I clutched my hair and moaned, hoping, praying, that something would give and end it all.

And then it all stopped.

One moment, I was writhing in pain, and the next, it was like nothing had happened. I opened my eyes and swallowed, releasing my hair and shaking my head slightly.

My teeth felt secure in my mouth, my hands were fine, my knees were strong.

I looked up and jumped backward, taking in Keegan’s bloodstained face and frantic eyes.

His hand hung in the air between us, halfway between helping and frightened. His chest rose and fell rapidly. The rest of him was naked.

“Lux?” he breathed, his voice painted with relief and shock.

“I’m okay,” I told him, trying to smooth the lines of fear on his face. “I’m fine.”

“What...?” He swallowed hard and blinked. “What happened to you?”

I shook my head. “I don’t know. I just saw you do..., change, and I lost it.”

His face was covered in guilt. “I must’ve put you into shock,” he declared. “I-I’m sorry. I was mad at myself and took it out on you. I wanted to scare you because I—”

“Mad?” I echoed, my mind still reeling. “Why were you mad?”

“Last night,” he said, reaching up to scratch his neck. “I shouldn’t have done what I did.”

I blinked. “You mean giving me your sweater?”

He cringed. “I should have left it at that but you got cold again and—”

“Why are you apologizing?”

“Because I’m messing it all up,” he cried. “I’m making everything more complicated than it should be.” He put his face in his hands, either ignorant that he was naked or comfortable that way.

“Didn’t fate or the god of the moon make it hard?”

“Goddess,” Keegan corrected, sounding miserable. “Moon Goddess.”

I shrugged. “Thank you for what you did. I was freezing and it was kind.”

Keegan looked at me bitterly. “You wouldn’t have thanked me if Colton had woken up in the middle of the night and seen us.

“He would’ve kicked up a fuss, told his dad, had me executed and had you...had you...” he cringed and stopped speaking, face going pale.

I sensed his discomfort and wished I could take it all away, adopt his worries and hold them close to me so he wouldn’t have to see them anymore.

I smiled softly. “You were beautiful,” I told him. “Frightening but beautiful.”

He seemed confused. “What are you talking about?”

“As a wolf,” I said quietly. “It was extraordinary.”

The guilt didn’t leave his face. “It was a dumb thing to do, shifting in enemy territory, in front of you. I’m sorry. When I’m with you, I feel as though my head isn’t on right.”

My heart thumped painfully. “Why did you refuse me?”

Keegan’s cheeks flushed. “I don’t want to talk about it, Lux.”

“We could still leave,” I pleaded. I hated to sound desperate, but he made me that way. He made me feel like I was only barely hanging on. “We could still make something of what your goddess gave us.”

Keegan looked me in the eye. “You said you admired our loyalty yesterday. You said you admired the respect we have for each other.

“Don’t you understand that it’s that loyalty that stops me from abandoning my brother and sisters and disappearing with you?”

I felt as though the breath had been stolen from my lungs. “I won’t ask again,” I mumbled numbly. I moved past him, feeling his eyes on my head as I reached down and picked up the rabbit he’d caught.

With the meal in hand, I turned around and started to head back toward camp. I tripped a few times, my feet distracted by the war inside my mind. The war that had multiple sides.

One side wanted to return to my father, my life, my sanity. Another wished Keegan would disappear forever; that I could disappear forever.

There was the part of me that wanted the war to end, and the part that didn’t because I would no longer have the excuse to stay with *him*.

And there was the side of me that was human and the part of me that had been born today.

The part of me that was unescapably wolf.

I took a deep breath and cringed as her words came back to me.

“I guess I’ll find a husband... We could separate ourselves from them, disregard human and werewolf... In every situation, you die... You were beautiful... I won’t ask again.”

Regret. I’d known her for such a short time but already my time with her was riddled with regret, swallowed by it, destroyed by it.

Everything I did made me feel guilty. Saving her, ignoring her, leaving her, speaking with her, protecting her, refusing her, her.

I couldn’t win. When I wasn’t with her, my body was on fire. When I was, I felt as though I was juggling knives. I messed up, treated her too harshly, or didn’t pay her enough attention.

I couldn’t make up my mind either. I knew I was going to screw both of us up. I was going to get us both so deeply involved, we’d draw blood and hurt each other when we inevitably untangled.

The kind of hurt you didn’t get over.

If I didn’t stop now, I’d kill us both.

But last night, when she disrupted my dreams, took me away from the nightmares of ice and snow, and brought me back to reality, I couldn’t help but cringe at the sound of her teeth hitting each other.

Today, when I woke up, I felt guilty for putting my arms around her as I listened to her heart soar when she woke up to feel me there.

I knew I was planting seeds of hope; seeds that needed to be removed before it was too late and they sprouted roots that would bury through her mind.

But when I saw her a moment ago, her eyes wild and in so much pain she’d crumpled, my whole body had stopped and my life seemed to flicker with hers.

I knew, if she bled, then I would too; if she died, then I would too.

I watched her as she disappeared into the trees, her hair swinging behind her in time with her hips.

I looked at her and felt my wolf stir; felt him grow restless at the thought of her walking around unclaimed.

I looked at her and couldn’t help but wonder if I could save her.

I looked at her and knew that even if I couldn’t, I’d die trying.