

My Mate, My Enemy

Confession And Doubts

I was awakened by the light that crept through the tiny spaces in between the tent's walls, right where the fabric slipped from its position.

The warm sun streaked across my face, blinding my eyes and washing out the world. I blinked a few times and threw a hand up to cover my face as I tried to regulate my vision.

I sat up as my eyes adjusted, pushing aside my covers as I looked around the room. My breath caught in my throat as I saw Keegan watching me from the bed across the room.

He smiled at me when he noticed me looking and put a hand up to the back of his neck, making my cheeks warm.

"Morning," he mumbled. I smiled tentatively at him, my stomach twisting.

Before now, our interaction had been limited. I still had no idea what he was like in the morning or if he liked to wake up early or go to sleep late.

"Morning."

Silence buzzed in the space between us along with a mutual curiosity for each other.

I felt as though his eyes were pulling me apart. Peeling back every one of my layers in an attempt to see what was at my center.

The invasion wasn't intrusive; it was nice. No one had ever taken such an interest in me.

"Your cheeks are red in the morning," he noted. "I don't think I've ever seen you so flushed."

Naturally, I blushed harder. He grinned and I rubbed at my cheeks, drawing my arms around my waist.

"Have you been awake long?" I asked, trying to force my voice to be casual. It was hard as my eyes were constantly being drawn to the tiny details of him.

I couldn't stop looking at the collarbone peeking out from underneath his shirt, the dimple in his chin, the curl of hair behind his ears.

He shook his head. "No, I was up a few minutes before you."

I pressed my lips together and remained silent, afraid to embarrass myself. He looked down, sneaking glances at me when he thought I wasn't looking.

"Where's Colton?"

Keegan looked up and shrugged. "I haven't seen him since yesterday. Listen, I—"

"We should find him," I said, interrupting. I scolded myself for speaking as I watched the sentence Keegan had prepared fall off his lips. Now curiosity was eating me.

"Yeah," he agreed. "That's probably a good idea."

The silence prompted me. "About yesterday—"

His eyes sparked to life. "That's what I wanted to talk about."

I licked my lips and pulled my knees to my chest. "You can go first."

Keegan flashed a smile for a few seconds before standing and pressing his hands to his hips.

"I wanted to first apologize for not being able to handle, uh, everything. I guess. My head was clouded with impulses from my wolf."

I swallowed hard. "You don't have to apologize."

Keegan grimaced. "I do. I should have been there to support you, I'm your mate and—"

I spoke like it was a reflex. "But you're not. Not really anyway. I thought we agreed that we weren't going to do that sort of thing."

Nerves clamped my stomach and supercharged my heart. I listened to the sound of my blood pulse as I waited for him to challenge my words.

For a second, his mouth hung open before he shook his head slightly. "Right, of course, it's just that—"

"I want to be your mate," I blurted, words rushing out of me before they had my consent. The thought hadn't even crossed my mind before it crossed my lips.

The realization of what I just said made my heart roar in my ears.

Keegan's face scrunched up and then became smooth, untroubled. "You stole the words right out of my mouth." And then he was grinning and so was I.

After a moment, we were laughing. Another minute later, we had lapsed into silence.

I cleared my throat, my face still hot. "It'll work, right? Now that I'm going to be a... Like you?" For some reason or another, it was still hard to admit my true nature. Some habits are hard to break.

The untroubled look on Keegan's face disappeared, and I wished I could take every word back. I didn't want him to be unhappy. I felt an odd drive to make him smile and laugh; to make him carefree.

"I don't know," he said honestly. "I'm not sure about anything. I've never been."

I stood and took a hesitant step forward, watching his face as I did. He remained passive.

"Neither am I. But now there isn't a barrier between us, we're the same." The words burned in my mouth. All I could taste was the lie.

Unfortunately, Keegan couldn't let us live in naivete. "I wish you were right, Lux. But you're not, you know that."

He took a few steps toward us so we were no longer speaking to each other from across the room.

I sucked in a breath, suddenly struggling to fill my lungs. "No one is going to object to two werewolves being together. We belong."

His smile was sad and weighed on my heart.

"Nature doesn't erase nurture. You can't even call yourself a werewolf, never mind claim it as your identity. Your body might be different, but your mind is the same."

"I'm trying to change," I told him.

That was the truth. I was trying to change, but change happened at the pace of a crawl and met an obstacle every time I thought of my father.

Every time I thought of the way his eyes would pierce me if he could see me now.

"I know," Keegan said compassionately. "I know you are." He closed the distance between us, sparking the air with electricity that crackled and popped.

Maybe I couldn't stop overanalyzing everything, but when everything I'd been told to believe was stripped away, there was no denying the basic connection between Keegan and me.

It was like our bodies knew one another despite their lack of real connection.

When I looked into his eyes, I could feel his thoughts moving at the same speed as mine. He spoke in a language I understood.

It was as simple as that.

"It's hard," I told him honestly, my eyes falling from his face to his chest. "It's hard not to hear my father's voice every time a wolf howls."

"It's hard not to feel fear when you shift. It's hard not to cringe at the idea of losing this form too, the idea of shifting scares me."

"It doesn't hurt," Keegan volunteered. "Not after the first time."

"I'm not afraid of the pain," I explained. "I'm afraid of how it will change me. I'm afraid of sharing my mind with an animal."

"How afraid of what my father would say, what he would do, if he discovered I had an 'impure mind.' How will people look at me once I'm no longer...me?"

Keegan moved slowly and took my hand, raising goosebumps along my arm. He took a deep breath and smiled shakily at me, closing his fingers tighter around my own.

"You'll be more you than you've ever been in your life. Your wolf has been with you this entire time, just silent. Now, you'll know a part of yourself that's never gotten the chance to speak."

Fear and excitement chased each other through my veins. "Your culture is beautiful and I do not doubt that, before the Feral War, life as...as one of you was an incredible thing."

"But as soon as I think I'm okay with it, I blink and see a wolf hanging from a tree, pelts of fur draped over floors, teeth and claws in jars being passed around science class to warn human kids."

Keegan looked a little lost. "You're afraid of being killed for your fur?"

This time, I gripped his hand. "Don't you understand? It's not about the act of dying. It's about the shame and fear being...being a werewolf comes with."

"Before I could read, I knew what dangers wolves posed to us. I had never been in a forest until your uncle brought me to you."

"You might hate my father, but I don't. I love him and I respect him, and sometimes, I think I will die if he ever looks at me the way I know he will if he knew what was happening to me."

Keegan looked as though he had been hit by a truck but I couldn't regret these words. I couldn't take back what I had been thinking and feeling for months.

He had to know or else my confession would have chewed me up from the inside out.

"You don't want to be like me?"

This was the hardest part. "But that's the thing: I do. I want to be like you because that means I can be *with* you. It's coded in my DNA to be like you."

"Like you said, it's a part of who I am. And—and I feel like it will bring me closer to my mother."

"I'm confused," Keegan said slowly. "I thought you just said you didn't want to change?"

"It's these conflicting ideas in my head that are confusing me. They are what I'm trying to fight against in order to change. I just need you to understand."

Keegan gnawed on his lip for a moment before speaking. "My uncle has taken care of me for a really long time."

"Sometimes, I can't even remember a time when I knew my parents, when they asked about my day, or told me about theirs. Most days, I can't even form a clear picture of their faces in my mind."

I wasn't sure what caused the sudden change in the subject but I didn't object to him opening up to me. Every time he spoke, it was an opportunity to learn, to connect with him, to understand.

"My father was killed by a human, my mother died shortly after... Some wolves can't go on after the passing of a mate. My uncle killed the human who murdered my father and never let me forget it."

"So, when you talk about disappointing your father, I get it. Shaming my family was the second thought that came to my mind when I first saw you."

My whole being ached for him. I saw the grief in his eyes and felt so much closer to him.

My parents might not have been dead but my mother was a living ghost and my father was a daunting and disconnected figure.

"I'm sorry about your parents," I told him, even though my apologies were useless. No amount of condolences could fill the hole left by his parents. My only hope was that my love could.

His mouth picked up on one side. "Like I said, sometimes it's hard to remember them."

I let my fingers move up his arm, exploring the strength it possessed. "Do you think your father would be upset that you are mated to me?"

Keegan paused for a moment, mulling my question over in his head, turning it over and twisting it.

"No," he said after a moment. "My father didn't hate humans. He understood their fear."

"I think he would be more disappointed if I let my life be ruled by the thoughts and beliefs of others rather than following what I believed to be right."

"And your mother?" I asked. "What was she like?"

Keegan's eyes lit up in a way I'd never seen them. They conveyed a message in between love and admiration. "My mother was too good for this world. I think she would have loved you."

His words made my cheeks warm as well as my heart. For a moment, my eyes stung before I cleared my throat and took a deep breath. "I wish I could meet her."

Keegan's expression remained the same. "I wish for the same."

A sudden thought occurred to me as his face started to move closer to my own.

"You said disappointing your family was the second thing you thought about when you first saw me? What was the first?"

Keegan's mouth twists into a shy smile, his eyes a little wider than before. "I thought you were incredibly beautiful."

At that moment, I developed a newfound appreciation for words. How was it possible that one word could move my stomach and make my ribs feel like they were squeezing my lungs? *Beautiful*.

"I was scratched up and dirty," I reminded him, my mouth dry. My eyes roamed his face, flickering to his lips, and then away again as my mind stirred wildly.

Keegan didn't miss the movement. "I had never seen anyone like you."

He reached forward and tucked a strand of hair behind my ear, stopping to twirl the white-blonde strand between his fingers for a moment. "I haven't met anyone like you since."

A strike of hot courage made me move my hand to the back of his neck. "I thought you hated me," I whispered to him. My voice felt like it was weakening, dying, the longer he looked at me.

He shook his head slightly and lowered his eyelids. "I didn't hate you when I first looked at you. I loved you."

Before insecurity or modesty stopped me, I brought my lips to his, straining on the tops of my toes to reach his face.

The kiss was awkward and sloppy for the first few seconds before instincts kicked in and we both relaxed.

Waves of energy surged through me, igniting my body and melting my inhibitions. Why had I been worrying about my future with Keegan when our connection was so obvious?

When the kiss ended, my entire body was buzzing and my head swam with giddiness.

Keegan stared down at me, half dazed, half startled. I squeezed his hair between my fingers and he pecked my cheek and then my nose.

"What did you think of me when you first saw me?" he asked, his voice low.

I moved my hands from the nape of his neck to his lower back and linked my fingers together. I shrugged and said, in a playful tone, "I thought you had a big nose."

Keegan's face darkened as his fingers squeezed my side, sending a thrill through my body and ripping a laugh from my throat.

The ease between us was natural but foreign. Perhaps we would have kissed again if not for Colton walking into the tent.

His presence in the room forced Keegan and me apart like we were magnets with the same charge.

"Relax," Colton said, a tiny smile playing on the edge of his lips. "I'm not going to tell my father you two were laughing." The way he said it makes me bite my lip out of guilt.

I stepped forward, and the words came tumbling out of my mouth. "Colton, I'm sorry about—"

He shook his head. "I don't want you to apologize, Lux. You didn't do anything wrong. I was more surprised than hurt yesterday. I'm sorry for what I said."

Keegan looked confused. "What happened?"

I swallowed hard and didn't answer. My eyes closed as I remembered Colton's defeated expression.

"Why didn't you trust me? You're the only friends I've really ever had. I'd hate to think I'm burdening you with problems that have no importance."

Colton waved a hand in dismissal. "It doesn't matter. It wasn't like I had any right to know your secret, Lux. I'm sorry. Behaving the way I did doesn't warrant trust either."

"I understand why you kept it from me and would've done the same if I were in your position." Colton cleared his throat and looked down, kicking the floor of the room with the toe of his sneaker.

I smiled wide as another weight lifted from my shoulders.

"You don't have to apologize either, Colton. There was never anything to forgive. I'm just glad everything's out in the open and there's no more hiding."

Colton looked between the two of us, and his curiosity took over now that the air was clear. "How long have you guys known you were mates?"

Keegan's eyes met mine sideways. "Since we first met."

Colton's mouth popped open. "But you were his servant!" he said to me. "You lugged all his stuff around and he bossed you around all the time. Didn't that kill you?"

I laughed, somehow finding humor now that I was free. "It was necessary at the time."

Colton raised an eyebrow. "At the time?"

I smiled at Keegan and grabbed his hand spontaneously. The action caught both of us off guard. He couldn't seem to stop himself from smiling as my cheeks warmed.

Was this what it was going to be like for the rest of our lives? Touching his skin and feeling a thrill? Or did that feeling go away? I hoped it didn't.

I held Keegan's gaze, and hope flourished in my chest, finding a home there beside my beating heart.

Hope was like a vine, growing and twisting, slithering between my ribs and affecting my breathing, clutching my heart and spiking my pulse, slithering into my mind and rooting in my thoughts.

It was infectious.

Keegan smiled back at me, patient and just as hopeful.

"We're trying," I told Colton, echoing our earlier conversation. I smiled wider, unable to stop myself.

But as I nearly exploded with happiness, Keegan's expression faltered for one moment.

One moment of bliss turned to worry.

One moment was enough to wither the vine of hope inside me.

I couldn't avoid the dreams.

It didn't matter how long I ran during the day; I was never tired enough to avoid them.

I scrounged up sleeping pills and tried, but failed, to skip the dreams; to cruise by them like they were flashing trees outside a car window.

But the dreams plagued my mind, keeping me locked in sleep until the same awful part and then releasing me to a sleepless night.

Once the dream was over, I'd lay awake on my bed for hours until the first touches of light skimmed the sky and I was free from my prison.

Lux was breathing deeply through her mouth, her hands splayed over the edge of her mattress as she slept. I closed my eyes, trying to focus on her breathing rather than on the dream I knew would come.

Once I stopped fighting my drooping eyelids, I fell asleep with ease, my breaths slipping into a slower rhythm and my body becoming heavy.

There was a brief stretch of nothing before my vision returned, slightly blurred, but there.

In the dream, it snowed. It always snowed.

The ground was covered in white, as were the tree branches around me. The sky above me was the same piercing gray as Lux's eyes, just devoid of warmth.

The wind whipped my face and clothing; at times, my eyes watered so badly, it was hard to see.

No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't get close to the trees. I'd be a few feet away and then they would skirt back, taunting and teasing me.

I gritted my teeth in frustration, running after the trees in an effort to catch them.

I ran and tripped, the trees then stood looking the bare skin of my arms. I sat up and brushed the snow off me, glancing at the frowning, then cold. Nipped back was a mistake.

A dark shape was a few steps behind me. The shape was small and unmoving and instantly turned the blood in my veins to ice when I looked at it.

Unconsciously, I shuffled toward the shape. I needed to know what it was, but at the same time, I wanted to return to chasing the trees.

When I reached the shape, I fell to my knees and a guttural sob pried its way out of my chest.

I fell forward, my hands sinking into the snow on either side of Lux's face. Her skin and hair were so pale, she seemed to be a part of the landscape.

The blood soaking her midriff was what stood out.

My hands shook as I applied pressure to the gaping wound across her stomach.

Somewhere in my mind, I knew it was a dream and it wasn't my mate dying and my world wasn't unraveling, but I also knew I needed to save Lux.

No response came from her lips as I leaned on the wound, hoping to staunch the blood flow.

I watched as the tiny movement in her chest stopped, and suddenly, I felt as though my stomach had been wrenched out of my body and discarded.

I sobbed again, touching her cheek with my soiled hands and staining her white skin red. My fingers shook as I stood, I stepped back, and I shivered.

She was gone, and I was gone, and there was nothing left in the frozen wasteland for me.

As I watched Lux's spine twist, a scream tore from her throat, half-animal, half-desperate.

I placed my hands over my ears and watched in horror as her corpse warped and became the mangled body of a dying wolf.

The wolf was tiny and gray, with tiny streaks of white around her face. The wolf lifted its head and silver eyes flashed before it let out a long, distressed howl, then collapsed once more.

It snowed heavier until her body was swallowed up by the ground, and then I was awake.

I gasped for breath, my clothes were drenched in sweat, and my hands gripped my sheets. When I sat up, my head spun as my stomach heaved and tensed.

I looked around the room, nearly jumping out of my skin when I noticed Lux watching me.

Her face was scrunched up and her hair and eyes were made silver by the moonlight that touched it. "Are you all right?" she asked. "You were thrashing around."

How much had she noticed? "I'm fine." She just stared at me, waiting for a better answer. "It was a nightmare," I explained, pushing back my damp hair from my forehead.

Lux's gaze was soft. "You said my name."

I bristled. "Don't worry about it."

The longer I looked at her, the more I began to worry that the day's events were a mistake. After speaking to Colton, we'd spent the day together, getting familiar.

A part of me knew the risk that still existed. It wouldn't matter if Lux was a werewolf now; it was her name that condemned her, not her DNA.

There was no way the king would approve of me mating a Freeman. Any suspicions of me being a sympathizer would be confirmed and I would lose my importance.

And if Lux was ever going to return to the safety of her father's care, she wouldn't be able to bear the mark of a werewolf's mate. She'd be more than shunned. Lux would be executed.

"Can we stay here?" she whispered to me hesitantly. The way she watched me made me think that she had been saving the question for a while and was worried I would shoot it down.

"I don't know." Her face fell. "I have a duty to my pack and king."

Lux frowned. "Alpha Vex said we could stay here. He said that he'd offer us protection and that he wouldn't care if we were together and—"

I shook my head. "I have to get Colton home to his family, Lux."

"Maybe we can come back," Lux said.

"I have a job to do," I told her. "We can't pretend there isn't a war going on."

She twisted her fingers together in her lap. "I want to stay here. It's safe and I-I like it. I don't have to pretend to be what I'm not."

"And Alpha Vex knows about people like me, who only half shift. He can help and—"

"You don't understand," I interrupted. "I can't stay here. I have direct orders from my alpha. I can't disobey those orders."

Lux's hope crumpled. "But if we go back, then I'll have to pretend to be a servant again and everyone will look at me like I'm carrying a disease."

I pinched my nose. "It will only be for a little while."

Even from here, I could see her eyes were watering.

"How do you know that? How can you even say that? No one knows if this war will even end! Alpha Vex has offered me a nice thing here and I can't ignore that!"

"Offered you?" I echoed. What did that mean?

She gnawed on her lip. "He said I could stay on my own."

I was too numb to respond. I bit my tongue to stop myself from yelling. I was angry but had no right to be.

How could I expect her to volunteer to be treated like scum? How could I blame her when she wanted something more?

I couldn't.

"Oh," I said lamely, unable to say more.

"I want you to stay with me." Her tone was like a knife, cutting away my vital organs until I couldn't breathe or see or hear or feel.

She was going to stay. I was going to leave. Everything we'd said before was meaningless.

I tried to tell myself it was for the best. I knew this would be the only way to save her from the start. Us being together was too complicated, too risky, and too dangerous. We couldn't be together.

"Will you stay with me?" The words were spoken in a whisper but I felt like they were screamed into my ear.

I didn't look at her when I spoke. "I can't."

I watched her turn away and lie down. It was silent as she pretended to fall asleep and I pretended to do the same.

She must've thought I'd fallen asleep as she started to cry softly, hiccuping and sniffing under her blanket.

I pretended not to hear.