

My Mate, My Enemy

My Mate, My Enemy | The Gift

14-17 minutes

Lux Freeman

I sat in a dark corner for what seemed like hours.

My body shook from the cold, and every time I moved, some part of me would scream out in protest. There was not one inch of my body that didn't hurt.

I clenched my teeth together and looked around me, unable to make out anything in the tent. I wrapped my arms around my legs, cringing at the sudden flare of pain in my shoulder.

I wanted nothing more than to sleep, but knew I wouldn't be able to. I heard rowdy laughter through the thin material that made up the walls of the tent and cringed every time a howl pierced through.

I didn't know where I was. Only that this was one of the werewolf villages that populated the forests of North America. My father had spoken about how it was our duty to burn down such camps.

"Miss Freeman?" I looked up, startled. The older man who had bought me at the auction stood over me. I hadn't even heard him come into the tent.

"Yes?"

His cruel smile grew as he knelt in front of me. "Would you like to know why you're here?"

I nodded and swallowed back fear as I forced myself to look him in the eye.

"Curiosity is one of the few things werewolves and humans share," the man said. "I'm Eric, by the way."

"Lux," I whispered, feeling obliged to give my name for some reason.

He chuckled. "Trust me, I know who you are. And I know who your father is. I doubt there's a werewolf in the world who doesn't know about your family."

I swallowed, not liking where this conversation was heading. "Why did you buy me?"

He grinned. "You see, I have a nephew who is the equivalent of your father, but he's on our side. Well, he used to be. I'm not so sure now."

"He's become a problem for me and you are the answer to that problem, my dear."

"Why?"

"Some wolves think he has a softness in his heart for the humans." His hazel eyes hardened. "When they see you with him, they'll know to think otherwise. He must keep up his image."

I felt a wave of fear rush over me. "What am I supposed to do?"

"Anything he wants you to," Eric answered coldly. I pressed my lips into a thin line and looked down.

There was a giggle from outside the front of the tent and Eric stood up. He moved away from me while keeping his eyes on the entrance of the tent.

I couldn't see but I could hear a girl and a boy laughing quietly together. Eric cleared his throat and each made a startled gasp. Apparently, they didn't think they'd be interrupted.

Brief words were shared between Eric and the boy, then the girl left the tent, leaving just the three of us. There was talk of a gift and then I heard footsteps that sent my heart into overdrive.

I sucked in a breath and looked down as the footsteps got closer to me. I focused on the corner of the frayed rug in the center of the room and tried to breathe as quietly as I could manage.

"What the hell is this?" the boy growled. His voice was deep, but pleasant to listen to. It reminded me of the tone my father used when he spoke at the rallies.

Both were natural-born speakers; natural-born leaders.

"It's your gift," Eric said with a tinge of faked pleasantness in his voice. The two men argued and I cringed; their loud voices weren't helping my headache.

"Are you kidding me, Eric?" the guy said. "I don't want her." The words hurt me on some level and I scolded myself for being so petty.

Eric became furious. "People have begun to question you, Keegan. You're not as lively at your speeches, not as dedicated. Your eyes are dead whenever you get up to speak.

"Quite frankly, they're dead all the time. Wolves are talking, and they're saying that you don't believe in what you preach. This is how we're going to show them you stand with us."

The boy, Keegan, lowered his eyes. "I won't." I didn't know the boy but I knew he was lying and I wasn't the only one.

Within seconds, Eric had Keegan by the throat, and for some reason, my stomach twisted uncomfortably.

Eric spoke too quietly for me to catch everything. I caught a few words, however: "King... Sympathizer... Killed...."

Keegan's eyes closed for a moment before he choked out, "I don't."

"Then what is it?" Eric said, his voice coarse.

"I know they're going to die. And I'm sending them to their deaths. It's h-hard," Keegan winced as he was strangled.

Eric let him go, and Keegan bent over, breathing hard through his nose. Eric leaned close to his nephew and murmured a few words that Keegan nodded and agreed to.

Eric, who seemed satisfied, turned and left the tent. My heart slowed a little now that he was gone.

My eyes moved to Keegan who had collapsed in a chair and was running his hands through his hair and then slammed his fist down on the table, making me jump.

A cup rolled off the table and fell to the ground, and its contents seeped out onto the floor slowly.

“Look up,” he demanded, his jaw locked. I did so reluctantly, looking at his nose and trying to stop my whole frame from shaking.

I wasn’t afraid, I was nervous. There was something in Keegan’s voice that made me believe that he wasn’t cruel. It was an act.

He told me to stand, so I did, and I felt my knees quivering and slamming together. My entire body was still screaming at me from the crash and the brutal way the auctioneers had held me.

I teetered off-balance, wishing I could use my hands to help me keep my balance.

I kept my face turned downward and my eyes on the ground, and I was glad for the protection my hair gave me in front of my face. The strands created a sort of barrier between me and Keegan.

Still, something in me kept trying to tug my gaze upward. I fought it for as long as I could, but when the mood of the room changed from hostile to something softer, I couldn’t help but look up.

Looking into his eyes sent my nerves into a state of confusion. My entire body heated up to the point where I felt freezing again.

My heart thumped and then slowed, and for a split second, I forgot about the abrasions that covered my body, and I felt no pain.

I could see our future together. We were entangled in each other’s lives like two flies ensnared in a spider’s web. I saw us holding hands, smiling, laughing, loving.

I saw our faces wrinkle, our eyes fade, our smiles crease. I watched our children run around, then our grandchildren dance.

There was nothing but love in this version of our future. My heart pounded in my ears, drowning out the sound, so all I could sense were these images.

An odd feeling radiated throughout my body: one of belonging.

Keegan stared back at me; all the hostility in his expression had smoothed out into a look of enchantment. I knew he felt the same way I did, saw what I saw.

“Mate.” The word tumbled from his lips, and my body readily accepted it as the truth.

My body relaxed completely, knowing it was safe now.

Keegan’s did the opposite. He went rigid all over, his hands stiffened, and his fingers curled into fists. His jaw buckled and his eyes became guarded as the look of bitterness returned.

My heart started to freeze over and tiny pieces chipped off with every second that Keegan remained cold to me. I knew what he was thinking, but I refused to believe it, hoping I was wrong.

“What?” I raised an eyebrow, going out on a limb in the vain hope that Keegan would rise above his upbringing. My voice only hardened his resolve.

“Nothing,” he snapped at me. My heart chipped some more. “Why do you look like that?” I recoiled, wondering what I meant.

As the euphoria started to fade, my body started to scream in pain again, and I realized what he meant. “I was in an accident.”

“What kind of accident?” He stopped for a moment, his expression freezing. “It wasn’t my uncle, was it?” His posture changed slightly; he lifted his chin and rolled his shoulders back slightly.

I shook my head, tasting the bitterness nipping at my tongue. “No, it was other *savages*.” Keegan flinched at the term and I wished I could take it back.

It was odd for me to speak this way without my father around. Usually, I only used this language to soothe his suspicions of my alliance with my mother.

Keegan covered up the hurt quickly and slowly started to study me more. The longer he looked, the more puzzled he became.

“Are you famous or something?” I felt my eyes grow wide and my palms started to sweat. Him recognizing me would crush whatever future we could have had. “I feel like I’ve seen you before.”

Recognition crossed his face and I knew that he knew who I was. I blinked rapidly, trying not to cry.

I tried to think up a million ways to convince him I was different without sounding like I was lying to save my own ass.

“Oh,” he said, nodding, “it makes sense now. You’re perfect for his goals.” Keegan’s eyes glazed as he sunk into his thoughts for a second.

I felt my shoulders fall forward and pushed down a sob. “I-I’m not like my dad... I—” I had planned to tell him about my mother but movement ahead of me stopped the words in my throat.

“I finally got away.” A very pretty girl with sparkling eyes and dark hair ran into the tent. She was obviously well acquainted with Keegan and this realization made me green with envy.

The tall girl stopped when she saw me. Her eyes found mine and narrowed. “Who’s this?”

Keegan’s voice shook with stress. “My new servant.”

The girl was surprised. “Servant?”

“A gift,” Keegan said gruffly, his tone layered with bitterness. “From Uncle Eric.”

The girl folded her arms across her chest and continued to evaluate me. “Why is she staring at you?” I instantly looked away, my heart hammering against my ribs.

I didn’t want her to know what was between Keegan and me. I had a feeling she was territorial over him and I was in no condition to fight.

Keegan looked up at me with a mixture of pity and hate. “Go somewhere.”

I felt a flare of panic and looked around. I wasn’t familiar with this place, so I had no idea where I could go to leave them alone.

The tall, pretty girl told me to sit in the corner, so I did, trying to pacify them.

I sucked in a breath as I fell to the ground, my body protesting and fighting me the entire time. My hands were still bound in front of me and my wrists were starting to bleed.

“Maybe I should untie her hands,” Keegan mumbled, his words mirroring my thoughts. I pleaded in my mind that he would be kind to me.

The girl told him not to and tried to get him to leave, but he refused her.

They shared a look, then the girl announced her departure and left, leaving Keegan and me alone.

I stared at him, wondering why he wouldn't want the girl to stay. He stared back with a look of confusion on his face.

He walked forward slowly and raised his palms out to me. When he got halfway, he stopped and lowered his hands, seemingly debating with himself.

His face became guarded, but when he looked back at me, his expression softened and he hurried the rest of the way.

He undid the binding on my wrists and then rocked back on his heels, stood up, and ran his hands over his face.

I rubbed at my wrists, cleaned the blood onto my shirt, and held them to my chest. I fought the nausea that gripped my stomach. Blood was not a sight I was keen on.

"Was that your girlfriend?" I asked, trying to distract him from his inner battle.

Keegan looked at me with a slack jaw. "What? Who? Deelia?" He shook his head. "No." And my mind eased.

"Your uncle is a real nice guy," I said, my lips picking up at one side.

Keegan chuckled to himself. "He's my only family." It was as if he caught himself laughing and then sobered up. "You're in no position to speak that way about him, so don't."

I looked down and mumbled an apology.

Keegan was quiet for a moment and then sunk to the ground, sitting across the room from me. He looked at me carefully before asking. "What kind of accident did you say you were in again?"

"A car crash," I told him. "And then I was dragged off to some underground sale and brought here. It's been very exciting." I laughed and winced as it jostled my shoulder, which still killed me.

“I’m sorry,” he said sincerely. I didn’t respond, not knowing what to say.

Keegan covered his eyes with one of his hands and swore. “I’m sorry that you’re hurt but I’m not sorry that—” He stopped and looked up at me with tired eyes.

“So, you’re the speechmaker?” I changed the topic, not wanting him to think too hard about me in case he decided not to speak to me anymore.

My only chance of surviving was to draw out Keegan’s true nature. The one he was trying to hide with callous looks and guarded expressions.

“I am,” he answered, his head tilting to the side. “Though I can’t say I’m as good as your dad.”

I felt the verbal slap; the maliciousness hiding behind the words.

I conjured a picture of my dad playing poker with the other Sun Warriors. I saw some man walk into the room, through the smoke from their cigars, and grip my father’s shoulder.

I saw the man lean down next to my father’s ear to mumble the news of my disappearance.

I blinked and the image evaporated before I saw my father’s reaction.

Suddenly tired, I laid down on my side, squeezing my eyes shut as the ground dug into my bruises. I forced my eyes open and found Keegan watching me again, his mouth open.

He stood and ran his hands through his wavy hair again. His eyes appeared pained. “You could take the couch,” he offered, and immediately, a look of regret flashed across his features.

“No,” I declined, knowing he’d hate me if I accepted, “I’m fine.”

He nodded stiffly. We both knew that I couldn’t sleep on the couch. It would only make it harder. He turned and left to enter another room, and I closed my eyes, forcing my mind to soothe itself.

Just as I was about to fall asleep, someone howled in the next tent, making me jump. Keegan’s presence had suspended reality, but now it came crashing back, and I remembered where I was.

Tears escaped, my breath hitched, and my hands shook. I was in the most hostile place in the country: the home of the beasts an entire race feared.

In some ways, my body reckoned I was home. It knew where my blood came from, it knew where my mother originated. But my mind fought my nature; my upbringing battled my genetics.

It took me some time to fall asleep, but when I did, I slept solidly, undisturbed by dreams or anything else.

At one point, I felt my eyes open but my mind closed them quickly, my body too much in desperate need of undisturbed sleep.

I woke up when the sun forced my eyes open and my internal clock was protesting against sleeping any longer.

I made a sound in my throat and looked around, confused for the briefest moment before I realized where I was.

I had been moved to the couch.