

## Chapter 15

Damon

I rub my chin slowly and gaze at Ember. She's trying to put up a determined front, but I **can** smell the fear seeping **out** of her pores.

I shake my head.

“Not going to happen, little wolf. You won't just be my **luna** in name. Both my wolf and I choose you as our mate.”

My wolf chose her first, admittedly. But I trust him. If he and Ember's wolf both feel a mate bond, then it's time for me to commit to that. I smile at her. “I'm sure you know what that means?”

Her face flushes pink, and her eyes, which were firmly locked on mine while she stated her conditions, immediately find something more interesting on the floor.

I walk slowly toward her, and gently cup her cheek in my hand as I tilt her head up toward mine.

I won't agree with her demands, but I can make a small concession. “I will give you a few days before I mark you,” I offer.

She gasps. “Mark me?”

I can't help but chuckle. “That's what mates do. I know you are a little naïve, but surely even you know about the mating process?”

Her jaw clenches, and she narrows her eyes, but she doesn't say anything.

She might be small, but she's extremely feisty or is that her wolf taking charge?

I don't think it is, because her eyes remain the same vibrant blue. That's one of the things I like about Ember. She may be small, but when she isn't half scared to death, I can see the luna in her struggling to emerge.

Once she realizes she is safe, I hope that her fear will disappear so she can become the person she is. meant to be.

My wolf huffs.  
“*Finally, you're beginning to see what I saw when I first saw her*.”

I ignore him. There's nothing worse than a gloating wolf.

“I need to freshen **up**,” Ember states.

She's not very subtle **in** ignoring the conversation we were just having, but I let it slide. It's a lot for her to take in.

If she had been a normal wolf, she would have had more time. But then, if she'd been a normal wolf, she would have jumped at the opportunity to be mated with an alpha like **me**.

The bond between our wolves is probably at least half of why I'm attracted to her, but I do also appreciate how different she is from any other she-wolf. She's not trying to claw her way into my bed but that is where she is going to end up.

I take a step back to give her some room, though I'm still ready to give her a helping hand if she needs it. Knowing Ember, she won't ask even if she does.

I gesture toward a door with my hand. "Bathroom's in there."

She gives me a cursory nod before throwing back the duvet. I'm about to scold her, or come out with some sarcastic comment alluding that a thank you would be nice, but I stop myself when I see a look of consternation cross her face.

I follow her gaze, but I can see nothing amiss apart from the fact that she's struggling to swing her legs over the side of the bed. Not really surprising; she's been out for five days.

Her small legs dangle over the side of the bed and she takes an unsteady breath, shaking her head **as** she pushes herself from the bed.

As her feet touch the floor, she lets out a distressed cry and her legs buckle underneath her.

She collapses, but I'm able to catch her before she hits the floor. Wrapping my **arms** around her, I sink to the floor, gathering her into my lap.

Her face has lost all its color as she stares at me. "M...my legs," she sobs, "I can't feel my legs." Tears flow down her cheeks as I rub her back.

"It's going to be all right," I whisper.

Her face morphs into a grimace as her distress turns into anger. "You," she accuses, "You did this to

me.”

Her small hands ball into fists. “I hate you,” she screams through the sobs.

She punches me, **and** I let her **because** what she says is true to a point. I had no idea she couldn’t heal herself when I branded her with the silver, but the lingering wolfsbane in her system surely didn’t help either.

I should **have** waited until she was reunited with her wolf before I performed the ceremony. I should have let her know in advance what the ceremony would entail; maybe then she could’ve let me know **it** wouldn’t be possible for her.

I should have done a lot of things. But now, all I can do is let her punch me.

It doesn’t look very satisfying for her, though. Each punch that makes contact with my body causes her to **wince as** if it’s hurting her **as** well. I don’t understand why; maybe her muscles **are** so stiff **that** it hurts to move her **arms**?

I mind-link Joshua, growling, “*Get the healer back here now.*”

My wolf is going crazy. He wants to know what’s going on. If I’m honest, so do I.

“*What’s happened?*” Joshua quickly replies,

“*I don’t fucking have time for this,*” I counter. “*Get that bastard back here, stat!*”

Wrapping my arms around Ember more firmly, I hold her arms against her body, I don't want to restrain her, but her punches still seem to be hurting her a lot more than she is hurting me.

I slowly stand from the floor, sitting back down on the edge of the bed and scooping Ember up to cradle her in my lap there instead.

It's only been minutes since I mind-linked Joshua when the door crashes open, although it feels like a lot longer.

The healer comes rushing in, followed by Joshua. No doubt Joshua relayed the urgency. Good man.

Ember is still sobbing. It seemed to get worse when I stopped her from hitting me, but that was for her own good.

She's in no state to tell the healer what's wrong, so I just relay what she said to me, excluding the "I hate you" part.

"She can't feel her legs, and when she tried to stand, she just collapsed."

The healer **hums** and begins to examine Ember's legs. My wolf growls. He still doesn't like the idea **of** another male touching her, healer or not.

"I believe this is a symptom of her not being able to heal herself," the healer states.

I shake my head. "Explain?" **I** growl.

He swallows nervously. He isn't exactly filling me with confidence, but this is unfamiliar territory for us both.

“The celestial silver that you use when you **mark** new pack members marks the skin. Once the brand is removed, the wolf will immediately start to heal its host.”

He sighs. “In Ember’s case, this didn’t happen. Because she didn’t heal, and because she still isn’t healing, it is possible that small particles **of** the celestial silver may have entered her bloodstream.”

I frown. “What can we do?”

The healer bites his bottom lip and narrows his eyes. “I’m not sure there is anything we can do, Alpha. Her body is slowly being poisoned. There is no cure, as far as **I** am aware.”

I clench my jaw. “There must be something?”

The healer looks between me and Ember. “I said this once before, but the mark of her mate will **help**. Mates have the ability to heal each other. The mark of an alpha would be even better.”

He lowers his eyes, hoping to avoid my wrath. He saw my reaction when he first proposed that I should mate with Ember.

But that was then and this is now. Things change. And he knows that—after all, just a few minutes ago I called Ember my luna.

I stare at the healer, then at Joshua. I’m met with stony silence.

I offered Ember the opportunity to wait a few days before I marked her. A few days where I could try to win her over. To make her realize that I wasn’t her enemy, and that I wasn’t claiming her for her gift but for her.

Now it seems I won’t have that chance.

“Mark *her*. Mark *her* now. We need to save our mute!” my wolf growls.

I close my eyes and sigh. A few days ago, both Ember and her wolf were craving death. Without my mark, it appears their wish will be granted.

Was this the Moon Goddess’s plan? That I should be the only one who could save Ember? I wouldn’t let her die when she first arrived and tried to bait me into killing her, and I’m not about to.

## **EMBER**

I sit on the edge of the bathroom counter, my legs hanging uselessly over the edge. Damon carried me in here after the healer and the beta left for the second time. He stands in between my useless legs, his hands pressed flat against the counter.

**All** I can think of is my impending death. It wasn’t that long ago that my wolf was craving it- begging me to jump off a cliff and challenging an alpha to end our miserable life.

**But** now that we’re sitting on the precipice, she’s decided that she wants to live. Stupid wolf. Now isn’t the time to get cold feet.

It doesn’t take Einstein to realize that if the celestial silver does its work, we’re going to die, and **not** quickly either. It’s likely to be a painful and protracted death.

It’s like being caught between a rock and a hard place. I can choose death, or I can be mated to a ruthless alpha who craves

power above all else, who only decided he wants **me** once he learned I was a conduit.

It's a shame for him that the conduit he has is cursed with an entirely useless gift.

"He loves us," my wolf whines, "he wants to *claim* us. You are *the only one stopping* us from all being *happy*."

I try to block her out, but it feels like when I was staring at that wounded bird, trying not to heal it. Virtually impossible. So instead, I have to listen to her extol the virtues of her mate. Hers, not **mine**. At least not yet.

I don't have long to decide. The longer I wait, the less chance we have of recovering, if that is even possible.

"I want to *feel* my *paws* on the grass. To run *with my mate*. Please, *Ember...*"

She's never begged me for anything before. Hell, she's barely even asked me. She usually just does what she wants while I struggle to maintain control.

The hurt in her voice is enough to make my tears start flowing again. Damon's large hand gently rubs my back in an attempt to soothe me.

Both my wolf and Damon's think we are second-chance mates. They both feel something, but it seems neither Damon nor I do.

There have been no sparks or electricity. The closest I came to feeling anything was when Damon sucked the place on my neck where his mark would **go**.

Perhaps it's part of my curse that I'll never get to feel the full force of a mating bond.

I never got to touch Noah. He rejected me before I had the opportunity. But my wolf sensed him, even while I was in human form. She smelled his overpowering scent, and she sent me rushing out to find him.

Is that my doom? To have to rely on my wolf. My wolf and I have never seen eye to eye. We've always had an uneasy relationship with me suppressing her and her trying to throw me into reckless situations. And now I **have** to trust her, somehow.

I'm pulled out of my depressing thoughts by Damon's voice, deep and sultry, murmuring comforting nothings. That voice is one thing about him **that** seems to affect me. Is that part of the mate bond, or is **it** just because he's an alpha?

I've **given** up trying to work it out.

His large hand gently cups my cheek. Although there are no sparks, there's a warmth to it, and I find myself leaning into it rather than trying to pull away.

"You have to accept this, Ember. Don't make me force a bond on you."

I look up into his dark-brown eyes, searching for something, anything, that will tell me that we have a bond. I want to feel what my wolf is feeling, but I'm not even sure what I'm looking for.

All I realize is that I don't want to die. I never really wanted to. It was all my wolf.

I tilt my head to the side, exposing my neck to him, and breathe out a heavy sigh. "Do it," I whisper.

If nothing else, at least this will make my wolf happy.

She deserves to be happy. After all, she's hardly ever shifted since she's been with me, and being stuck in my head twenty-four-seven can't be much fun.

I expect Damon to immediately sink his canines into my neck, and I tense, ready for the pain. But a few seconds pass, and nothing happens.

I glance up at him, and he shakes his head, cupping both my cheeks gently in his large hands. "Not like that, Ember. Do you really think I'm that cold?"

I swallow nervously. Now probably isn't a good time to anger him. He might change his mind.

Despite **what** my wolf says, I still can't help wondering if Damon wants this as much as his wolf does or if he just wants me for what I can give him.

I shrug. "I don't know. I know nothing about you, apart from what I've heard."

He sighs. "And exactly what have you heard?" He asks.

I look at his face and see his jaw twitch. Why did I have to open my big mouth? I shake my head. "It doesn't matter."

Damon raises an eyebrow and keeps looking at me, keeping eye contact.

I want to lower my gaze, but I can't because his hands are holding my head in place. Not harshly, though. I'm actually surprised how gentle his touch can be.

I realize that he wants an answer from me, and he'll know if I lie. He's already told me once that he hates liars.

I swallow nervously. "They say you're ruthless, that you always get what you want." I hesitate, then add, "And **that** you killed your mate."

I expect him to be angry, but he isn't. He just sighs. "The first two things are probably true," he accedes. "But the third..." He shakes his head, and sadness masks his face.

"I didn't kill my mate. Perhaps one day I will tell you what happened. I don't like talking about it." Slowly, giving me the chance to pull away, he leans toward me and presses his lips to mine.

**My** hands touch his chest, not to push him away but to try to ground myself. I can feel his hard muscles under the material of his shirt. He oozes power and strength.

His **lips** are soft, and the kiss is gentle, not what I was expecting at all.

*"Kiss him back,"* my wolf urges.

I'm about to do just that when he breaks the kiss. "I don't want you for what you are, Ember James. I want you for who you are," he whispers softly.

His **hands** leave my cheeks, and I suddenly feel a little empty at the loss of his touch. I don't feel the emptiness for long, though, as his hand comes up to cup the back of my head.

He leans in once again, and I feel his breath tickle my neck. Goose bumps erupt across my **skin**, and his deep voice whispers in my ear, "I'm sorry, this will hurt a little."

He begins to place gentle kisses down the column of my neck until he reaches the place where he will mark me.

I tense, but he just carries on kissing, making me moan. I don't know why I'm so sensitive there- it's like his tongue is caressing something much more intimate. I could feel this forever.

At some point, the sensation makes me forget what is about to happen as **my** arousal peaks **and** my core starts to throb with need.

Then **I** scream as I feel a scaring pain. Damon's canines penetrate my skin, and I feel blood trickle down my skin.

I try to push him **away**, but it's a fruitless venture. The strength and power I felt from him before come to bear as he wraps his other arm tightly around my waist, pulling me tightly into his hard chest.

Then my scream turns into a moan, pain edging into the most intense pleasure I've ever felt. Instead of trying to push him away, my fists grip the material of his shirt as **I** try to pull him closer.

The sensation of his **lips** on my skin sends thousands of little shock waves through my body, leaving me not just wanting more contact but needing it.

As if he can read my mind, Damon's hand slides up the back of my shirt, his fingertips softly grazing my spine.

An explosion of ecstasy pulses through my body. Even as I throw my head back, his lips don't leave the mark he has made.

"Damon," I moan his name like a prayer.

"Mate," Damon growls lowly in response.