

Chapter 16

Damon

I always thought my fearsome reputation would stand me in good stead—and it did, up until today.

I also knew that everyone outside my pack assumed I had killed my own mate. No one knew the true story, and I thought it wouldn't hurt if I let the stories spread.

Fear is a useful weapon, one that makes it a lot easier to get what I wanted. No pack has ever wanted to stand against me, which is why they send tributes without me even asking.

But that reputation almost cost me dearly today. If she hadn't literally needed me to save her life, I doubt I would now be holding Ember in my arms. She was afraid of me. She assumed I was exactly the monster I pretend to be.

Feeling her soft skin under my fingertips makes me realize just how lucky I am. The Moon Goddess has given me the gift of a second mate. I will be sure to cherish and protect her.

The Moon Goddess always likes to test her strongest children, and I suspect that's why neither Ember nor I felt the full impact of the bond until now. I'm sure we both felt something, but it took a mate's mark to bring it into focus.

As soon as I marked her, though, the mate bond kicked in, and I feel exactly what my wolf has been feeling all along. Ember is my other half. Nothing can pull us apart. I would die to protect her.

My only hope now is that the healer was right, and our mate bond will help Ember to heal. I'm happy to share my healing ability if it means curing her of the traces of celestial silver that run through her veins.

The Dark Moon Pack has always used that brand for a reason. Not only because it marks each wolf for life, but also because it weeds out the weak wolves.

The tradition started with my grandfather. A warrior pack needs the strongest warriors, he always said, and the tradition always stuck.

These days, though, there are rarely any wars between the packs. After what happened to Ember, I wonder if now is the time to dispense with this archaic practice.

That's not to say that our pack shouldn't carry a mark, but there are other less painful, and less dangerous, ways for the pack to be marked.

Perhaps this is why the Moon Goddess chose Ember for me, to challenge me to see value in something beyond warrior strength. Perhaps she chose that dickhead from Craven Moon Pack for Ember as a test as well.

Whether that test was for him or for Ember remains to be seen, but Ember is mine now, and I have no intention of surrendering her to anyone.

I reluctantly remove my hand from underneath her shirt, and my lips from the newly created mark on her neck.

I chuckle when her hands don't move from my shirt in turn.

“We have to bathe, little wolf,” I whisper in her ear, seizing the opportunity to deeply inhale her scent.

She sighs, but she does release her grip and let me move away.

I leave her sitting on the counter. She can't move from there without my help, which makes me wonder how soon the healing process will begin and how long it might take.

I turn on the bath taps. While I'm waiting for the tub to fill, I mind-link the healer. “*How long?*” I demand.

I've never been the most patient of alphas, and the healer knows this. His answer comes quickly, but it's not necessarily the answer I want.

“It's not a definitive science—especially where your mate is concerned, as she has no ability to heal herself.”

I growl. The only thing that bolsters my patience is the fact that the healer referred to Ember as my mate. I liked hearing that. I want to hear it more.

I want to present her to the pack as their luna, I realize. But that might prove difficult if she is unable to walk.

Normally, once the introduction ceremony is completed, the pack's alpha and the new luna will shift and lead a pack run. I imagine if Ember is unable to walk, her wolf won't be able to either.

I grind my teeth in frustration.

“*Don’t fuck this up,*” my wolf growls in my head. “~None of this is her fault. ~”

The bastard is right, of course—again!

I take a deep breath and roll my shoulders before turning off the taps, the bath full and steaming. I know my frustration will ease as soon as I’m holding Ember again. It will ease even more once she marks me, completing the mating process.

It won’t be easy for her. For a wolf to mark their mate, a partial shift is needed, which means the wolf side needs to be united with its human counterpart.

As much as my wolf and I disagree at times, we do have a strong bond. I didn’t even have to think when I let him take my body for the mating bite. But I fear that Ember and her wolf may have a more strained bond.

I try to push the thought from my mind as I turn from the bath and head back to the counter, where Ember is still sitting patiently. The sight of her immediately calms me.

I quickly remove my clothes. Her face flushes, and she looks at the floor.

These days, most wolves will sleep with a few people before settling down with their mates. The chance of finding your mate as soon as you come of age is remote, so it’s not a big deal to experiment in the meantime.

But I can tell immediately that my little mate is as pure as the driven snow. I should have realized that as soon as I saw her so hesitant to remove her clothes and shift when she first arrived.

I don't understand why she's so self-conscious. She's beautiful, and that isn't just me feeling it through the mate bond.

I stride toward her and gently put my fingers under her chin, even that slight touch causing electricity to pulse across my skin.

I brush the pad of my thumb across her plump lips, and hum with satisfaction as she opens them slightly. Then I gently press my lips to hers—and this time, she responds.

While she's preoccupied with the kiss, I unbutton the shirt she's wearing and slip it from her shoulders.

She gasps, and I take the opportunity to fully taste her as my tongue invades her mouth.

Ember doesn't resist as our tongues collide. Is this the mate bond, or is she finally starting to accept me? To realize I'm not the complete bastard that everyone makes me out to be?

She moans against my mouth as I scoop her into my arms and carry her toward the large bathtub, never breaking the kiss.

Her small hands wrap around my neck, sending shock waves down my spine and straight to my cock, which is now standing rigidly to attention.

I desperately want to claim her, to mate her, but I don't know how far her paralysis goes. I want her to enjoy our first time together, and if that means I have to be patient, then patient I will be.

I step into the bath and finally break the kiss. Ember's brows furrow at the loss of contact, and I can't help but smile as I realize she wants this as much as I do.

As I sit down in the bath, I position her between my legs, pulling her back into my chest. She lets out a small gasp and tenses slightly. No doubt she can feel my hardness against her back.

"Relax, angel," I whisper in her ear. "Nothing will happen until you want it to." I gently caress her newly-made mark with my lips, knowing it will be sensitive for her.

She moans, and it's like music to my ears. As she relaxes into me, I know it won't be long before she'll want to complete the claiming. I can't wait for her sweet voice to beg me to be inside of her.

My wolf purrs in the back of my mind.

I silently pray that Ember's legs will heal so that our wolves can run together. Ember's wolf needs it just as much as mine.

The opportunity to run freely, without male wolves trying to keep her in check. The opportunity for Ember's wolf and mine to mark each other.

I realize now that every time one of those Craven Moon mutts tried to tame Ember's wolf—every time a wolf who wasn't their mate touched her, let alone tried to subdue her—it must have hurt them both.

The thought of any other wolf touching what is ours angers both me and my wolf. We won't let that happen again.

I let myself look at my mate's sweet, naked body in my arms, but then furrow my brows when I see the purple marks on her chest. Why didn't I notice these earlier?

My fingertips gently touch the discolored skin. "Who did this to you?" I growl lowly, barely managing to hold back my wolf's rage, and mine.

"I... It was me," she stutters, "when I hit you. If I try to cause harm, it's reflected back on me."

I've never heard of anything like this. I clench my jaw. How could the Moon Goddess be so cruel? Not only can my little mate not heal herself, but she can't defend herself either. Not without causing herself injury and pain.

She must sense my rage, which isn't aimed at her, but at the unfairness of her situation. No one deserves a fate like that.

"I'm sorry," she mumbles, her voice barely above a whisper.

I press my lips to her temple.

"You have nothing to be sorry for, my angel," I whisper. "I will always protect you. No harm will come to you while I still have breath in my body."

As soon as the words leave my mouth, I decide that I won't wait to present her to the pack as my luna. I'm proud of my mate, without regard for weakness or injury, and I want to show her off.

We can delay the pack run, and when it happens, it will be a celebration not only of Ember being my mate and my luna, but also of her recovery.