

Chapter 19

Ember

When did I become so bold and so confident? Is this because I'm now mated to an alpha, or was it always in me? Was my true nature always suppressed?

I've never stood up and spoken to a crowd like that before. And I've never used the mind-link, either. It's not something that my old pack encouraged, especially not for females.

Thinking about it, they did not encourage the females to do anything except cook, clean, and have pups.

Alpha Stone didn't even have a luna, although he summoned a different, she-wolf to his chambers almost every night. I dodged a bullet there.

I watch as they bring the food out, filling the room with the delicious smell of a feast like I've never seen before.

The females of Craven Moon Pack were never invited to pack dinners, either. We just prepared the food and served it to the male wolves.

I can feel my stomach complaining as the smell of tender, juicy roast beef wafts under my nose. I watch as the pack waits for their alpha to take the first bite. That will be their signal to dig in—and mine too.

Instead, though, Damon picks up some meat from the plate in front of him with his fingers and brings it toward my mouth, offering it to me first.

My eyes go wide. This is more than him just giving me a bite of his food. He's feeding me. It's symbolic. A gesture of dominance, from the alpha to his mate. The pack gazes at us, rapt.

I do the only thing I can do. I open my mouth and allow Damon to place the morsel of meat on my tongue.

At the same time, I hear his voice in my mind for the first time. "*Lick them clean, little wolf,*" he demands.

I stare at his fingers for a moment, then take them in my mouth, sucking off the residual juices from the meat. My face flushes as a roar of approval goes up from the pack.

This is the closest thing to having a public marking, which I know some packs still do. I'm grateful that part, at least, happened in private, just for me and Damon.

As soon as I have licked Damon's fingers clean, he cups my cheek and his lips smash into mine, taking my breath away.

Perhaps this is part of the ceremony as well, because the pack is cheering and banging on the table.

I block out the sound and savor the taste of him, opening my mouth to let him fully claim me. When he breaks the kiss, he's smiling.

"Eat up," he whispers. "The sooner we eat, the sooner we can get back to the bedroom."

If my face was pink before, it must be bright red now. I want to clench my thighs together, capturing the flutter through my core. But I still can't move my legs so instead I inhale a shaky breath.

My heart beats rapidly in my chest. I want this as much as Damon does, but it still doesn't stop the butterflies from once again multiplying in my stomach.

Before I know it, the meal has almost come to an end, and my nervousness is starting to morph into excitement at what the rest of the night will hold.

I want to broach the subject of me marking Damon. I don't have a great amount of control over my wolf, and we don't agree on much, but as far as this is concerned, we're on the same page.

I hope that with our shared motivation to claim Damon as our own, we'll be able to do a partial shift, at least enough for me to mark Damon as he has marked me.

Then suddenly, a growl from Joshua rouses me from my thoughts. I look toward him, seeing that his eyes have glazed over and are almost black.

Damon's eyes snap toward his beta at the same time as mine do. When Joshua's eyes clear, he swallows nervously.

"Alpha, we have a problem," he states. He glances at me, then back at Damon. It doesn't take Einstein to realize that the problem is something to do with me.

"Speak," Damon growls.

Joshua takes a deep breath. “Alpha Stone is at the border with one of his warriors. The warrior says that Ember is his mate, and he’s here to claim her.”

Any color I have in my cheeks immediately pales. “H-he rejected me. I can’t go back.”

Damon takes my hand in his and squeezes it tightly. “No one is going back anywhere,” he growls.

He glares at Joshua, although none of this is Joshua’s fault. “Get that damn contraption—wheelchair—whatever you call it. Meet us outside, and have Ember’s brother taken to the dungeon.”

I don’t argue with him. The only other person who knows about my gift is my brother, and Alpha Stone would only want me back if he’s found out somehow. My brother must have told Stone for some reason, after Stone sent me away.

Joshua stares back at Damon and swallows nervously. “You’re taking her to the border?”

Damon narrows his eyes. “Ember is mine, and it’s about time that pathetic excuse of an alpha and his so-called warrior knew it.”

He stands and pushes the chair back abruptly. The pack goes silent as the chair clatters to the floor.

“There has been an incident at the border,” he says in a carrying voice. “Remain here and continue your meal. I will send word if more warriors are needed, or if any of you need to head to the bunkers.”

There are low mumblings from the rest of the pack, but Damon ignores them, scooping me into his arms to carry me from the dining hall.

“You’re mine, Ember, never forget that,” he growls lowly in my ear.

How could I possibly forget it when his every touch ignites sparks that set my whole body alight?

I feel a little guilty when we exit the pack house and I see a car parked in front. If it weren’t for my useless legs, we could have shifted and run to the border together.

Or if Damon were willing to leave me behind and deal with this by himself, he and Joshua could shift and be there in minutes.

“He won’t leave us alone. Not when we might be in danger,” my wolf chides me. I wonder if this is really the best way to keep me safe, though.

Surely bringing me to the person who wants to steal me away is more likely to put me in danger than leaving me behind at a well-guarded pack house. But I don’t say anything.

I do feel better being close to Damon, and I’ve trusted him so far. Perhaps this is a further test by the Moon Goddess, to see if I can be brave in the face of my past. Though in my opinion, the Goddess has tested me enough already.

It’s about an hour’s drive to reach the border. Joshua drives, and Damon and I sit side-by-side in the back.

Damon doesn't say much, but his whole demeanor has become dark. If I didn't know better, I would think he was pissed with me, but I know that's not the case.

His arm is wrapped around me tightly, pulling me flush against his side. Perhaps he is hoping the contact will calm his wolf. It doesn't appear to be working, if his grimace is anything to go by.

When the car pulls to a halt, Joshua turns to face us. "It's about five minutes from here. I suggest we go the rest of the way on foot."

Damon nods and opens one of the back doors. He gets out, then leans back into the car, scooping me into his arms.

Joshua has already pulled my wheelchair out of the boot of the car, and Damon gently places me in it. Joshua offers to push me, but Damon waves him away, navigating me carefully over the uneven ground.

I'm relieved he waved Joshua away. I have nothing against Joshua, but Damon makes me feel safe. His strong arms give the wheelchair much-needed stability over the rough terrain.

As we reach the border, bile rises in my throat as I see my former alpha standing there with Noah at his side, flanked by two of Damon's warriors who must've arrived much earlier to keep an eye on them.

Any feeling I once had for Noah is gone. Our mate bond is severed, and for that I'm grateful. I reach behind me and touch Damon's hand, savoring the sparks that ripple through me from my true, second-chance mate.

As we approach, Alpha Stone steps forward. “I’ve come for Ember. Her mate has realized the error of his ways,” he states.

He narrows his eyes as he looks at me, looking surprised at the wheelchair. “And none too soon, as it appears she has already been hurt.”

Damon growls. He knows as well as I do that the veneer of concern is a ruse. Alpha Stone doesn’t care if I’m hurt. He only cares about what I can give him.

“I would leave while you both still can. Ember is my mate, and my luna.” Damon gently pulls my hair to one side, revealing his mark.

Noah steps forward. I’m not sure what Alpha Stone has promised him, but it must be something. He’s just a pawn, being used to get me back to Craven Moon Pack.

“Ember is my fated mate. You have no right to mark her,” Noah hisses.

Damon steps out from behind the wheelchair and stands beside me. “Foolish pup,” he growls, “you rejected her. She will never leave my side. She carries not only my mark, but also the mark of my pack.”

He takes my wrist and pulls off the bandage to reveal the pack mark from the celestial silver. My arm still stings a little when it’s exposed to the air, but I’m proud to be able to display my allegiance to my new pack.

I hear Joshua gasp. “It’s healed,” he exclaims.

I glance at my arm. How is that possible? I've never been able to heal this fast—unless the healer is correct, and it's Damon who is healing me.

Alpha Stone growls. "I couldn't fucking care less. She's coming back with me." He raises his hand, and I hear the whoosh of arrows as they fly through the air. Stone must have hidden archers in the surrounding woods.

It seems like everything happens then in slow motion. The arrows find their marks. Damon, Joshua, and the two warriors slump to the ground.

One arrow apiece shouldn't be enough to incapacitate the fearsome warriors of Dark Moon Pack. But as I blink at them, they're not getting up. Then I smell it. Blood, and wolfsbane.

"Grab her," Alpha Stone growls.

Noah storms toward me, a smirk on his face, but before he reaches me, something inside me snaps. All my pent-up frustration breaks free.

I will not be a victim, not anymore.

I clench my jaw. "Do. Not. Touch. Me!" I grit out, my voice barely recognizable.

As the words leave my mouth, the sky darkens and the wind gusts strongly, shaking the trees that surround us.

A crack of lightning hits one of the trees and splits it down the middle. One side fall, knocking Noah to the ground and pinning him there.

He struggles, looking terrified. “Help me,” he croaks.

Alpha Stone stares at me in horror, then shakes his head, telling Noah, “Stupid pup, you’re on your own.”

I hear the sound of bones breaking as he shifts and runs into the trees and across the border.

“*Coward,*” my wolf growls.

I fling myself from the wheelchair and crawl toward Damon. My hand reaches out to him, and as my skin makes contact with his, I feel a jolt.

He groans. Finally, my gift will be of some use. I feel my wolf fading slightly as I absorb the poison that runs through Damon’s body, but it’s worth it, so worth it to be able to help.

His eyes flick open, and he looks at me in dismay. “Stop. That’s enough,” he growls.

I shake my head. If not for me he wouldn’t be injured. I need to do this. It’s the least I can do.

As the last of the wolfsbane leaves Damon’s body and enters my own, I feel my wolf fade entirely.

I watch as Damon pulls the arrow from his shoulder and tosses it to the side. He will be able to heal now. Then I feel him pull me into his lap as the edges of my vision begin to blur.

The last thing I see before losing consciousness is more warriors running toward us. Thankfully, they are Damon’s.

As my vision goes dark, I hear Damon’s panicked voice. “No... Ember... Why?”