

Chapter 21

Ember

Twigs crunch underfoot as I walk through a vast, foggy forest. I don't remember ever being here before. Come to think of it, I don't remember how I got here.

The last thing I remember was...Damon! Where is he? Did I save him?

I look down at my feet. No. Wait. This can't be right. I couldn't walk. I can't walk. The celestial silver paralyzed my legs.

“Don't overthink things, child.”

My head snaps up to see who the voice belongs to, and when I see her, I gasp. I can barely make out what she looks like. She's so bright, like she's bathed in...moonlight.

It can't be, can it? If I'm seeing the Moon Goddess, I must be dead.

I swallow nervously. “Am I...dead?”

I whisper the last word almost silently, fearing that if I say it too loud, it will be true. I don't want to die. I've barely lived.

She looks at me and shakes her head, chuckling. “No. You are just sleeping.”

I furrow my brows. Everything that’s happened to me has happened because of her.

She looks at me and hums knowingly. Does she know what I’m thinking? Can she sense my anger?

“Come, sit with me. You have every right to be angry. Not everything that has happened has been of my doing.” She sighs. “But I am partly responsible.”

I walk toward her. She’s sitting on a log, next to a shimmering lake. Everything about this place is beautiful, almost causing me to forget why I’m here. Almost, but not quite.

“What about Damon? Did I save him?”

She nods. “Your mate is quite safe.” She pats the space next to her, and I sit.

As cross as I am, I’m not stupid. I may not be dead now, but if I anger a celestial being, she could quite easily end my life, or Damon’s, with a flick of her wrist.

“Do you know what you are?” she begins.

I nod. “I’m a conduit. My mother gave me a gift, but it’s next to useless,” I sigh.

The Moon Goddess chuckles. “You mortals have a name for everything, but the gift that your mother possessed cannot be passed on to her offspring. It is hers alone. Just as yours cannot be passed on to any children that you may have.”

I frown. “I don’t understand. Isn’t that how conduits are born?”

She shakes her head and sighs. “Conduits, as you mortals call them, are the mortal offspring of the gods. But you, Ember...you are different.”

I glance at her, but I can’t keep my eyes on her for too long. The light she exudes almost blinds me.

I look back across the lake, and then the realization hits me like a bullet.

If I have a gift which only a god can bestow, then it means my father...the man who raised me, who protected me from Alpha Stone and tucked me into bed every night...wasn’t actually my father.

From the corner of my eye I see the Goddess smile, as though she knows what’s going through my mind. Perhaps she does. Perhaps she can read my mind. She is the mother of all wolves, after all.

“We don’t have much time. Time here flows more slowly than it does in the mortal world, so it’s better if I show you the past, rather than try to explain.” Her hand gently touches my head, and there’s a blinding flash of white light.

When I can see again, I’m not sitting on the log anymore, overlooking that beautiful lake. Instead, I’m in a garden, which is no less beautiful.

Flowers of every description bloom around me, and a small waterfall cascades into a rock pool. I hear the chirping of songbirds from all around. The Moon Goddess is no longer beside me.

My eyes focus on two people, seated at a stone table in the middle of the garden, who don't seem to realize I'm here. It's the Moon Goddess and another man, who I can only assume is my father, gazing into a scrying bowl.

If he is a god, I can't guess which one. I should have paid more attention in school when we were taught about the old gods, but few people venerate them now. It's only the Moon Goddess who has stood the test of time. Well, to werewolves anyway.

I step forward and look into the bowl. A small gasp escapes my lips as I see my mother, a much younger version than I remember, nursing a baby—I can only assume that's me.

Even now that I'm right next to them, neither the Moon Goddess nor the man standing next to her is aware of my presence, confirming that this is, in fact, a vision.

"She's perfect," the man gloats, "and the power she possesses will make everyone bow before her in fear."

The Moon Goddess—or Selene, as she's called in the larger pantheon of gods—rolls her eyes.

"How typical of you, Ares, to want your child to instill fear in others."

I stare at him. Ares, the god of war. My father, apparently. Was it his gift that rent the tree in half when I felt threatened?

"Besides," Selene continues, "she doesn't need your gifts to make her powerful. Her beauty will be enough. She's even more beautiful than her mother."

I almost jump out of my skin when I hear another male voice roar in rage, so filled with power that it makes me want to drop to my knees. I don't, though, because I know this is all part of what the Moon Goddess wanted me to see.

“How dare you compare the beauty of my own child to another?” the new man roars as he walks down a set of stone steps at the end of the garden. He looks older than Selene or Ares, bearded, with stormy gray eyes.

My heart hammers in my chest as I look at him.

I don't need to wonder who he is. I didn't pay close attention to my studies of the lesser gods, but this one everyone knows, even the humans. Zeus, king of all gods and ruler of the celestial plane.

He strides toward the scrying bowl and, with one sweep of his hand, smashes it to the floor, where it shatters into pieces.

“And you.” He points at Ares. “You dare put your seed into the fruit of my loins?” he growls.

Ares doesn't reply, only narrows his eyes and frowns at the broken bowl.

Zeus glares at Ares. “Your child shall suffer for your insolence. Your power will be useless to her. If she tries to hurt another, it will be reflected back on her.”

His focus switches to the Moon Goddess. “Her beauty won't save her when she is unable to heal herself. She will only be able to heal others.”

I expect Ares, who was just so proud of my potential, to stand up for me. But instead, he just turns to Zeus and scoffs. “Do what you will. She’s just another mortal. Now that you’ve taken her powers, she is of little use to me.”

A tear trickles down my cheek. How could he be so cruel? He’s supposed to be my father, yet he left me to my fate. Rejected me because he didn’t think me worthy.

The man who I always thought of as my father was far more worthy of that title than Ares ever could be.

Will Selene reject me too?

Of course, she doesn’t. She loves all her werewolf children. She drops to her knees, her hands clasped together in supplication.

“Please, Zeus. Don’t do this. You asked me once to ensure I gave your daughter a mate who wouldn’t want her just for her power. I did just that. Please show mercy to the child Miriam has borne now. She’s your granddaughter, after all.”

Zeus’s face softens slightly. “Very well,” he begins, “for Miriam’s sake. But the curse still stands. Ember will be weak. I will lift the curse only once she finds a mate and they both mark each other.

“If wolfen nature is anything to go by, I doubt that will happen. No wolf I have ever come across wants a weak mate,” he huffs. Then he turns and strides toward the steps.

Selene stays on her knees, and I watch as tears trickle down her cheeks. She looks at the broken scrying bowl on the ground.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers, almost silently.

I'm blinded by another flash of light, and this time when it fades there is no log to sit on, and no beautiful lake to see. I'm awake, lying in a hospital bed, listening to the beeping of a machine and a voice in my head.

“Remember, Ember, you must mark your mate.”