

## Chapter 26

Ember

I feel strange. But if I'm feeling anything, I have to assume I'm not dead. The Moon Goddess hasn't showed up to claim me, Zeus and Ares haven't showed up to berate me, so I guess the serum worked.

Something is still a little off, though. My breath isn't moving the way I'm used to; my limbs don't feel like they're in the right places.

Damon's scent is powerful—stronger than it was before the healer injected that foul green liquid into my veins. I can feel the thrum of our mate bond, stronger than ever.

It's a struggle, but I force my eyes open.

That explains why I have this strange feeling. I stare down at two furry paws.

I panic slightly when I realize I'm still in my wolf form. I don't have anything against this body, but normally whenever my wolf takes control, she is angry.

But what's stranger than the unaccustomed configuration of limbs—my wolf is calm. Dare I say it? Even content.

I know I could force a shift back to my human body now if I wanted to, but I don't. I want to savor this moment. My wolf and I are finally working together—and I think I know why.

Curled up on the bed next to her is Damon's wolf, so huge that he makes my wolf look like nothing more than a pup.

*"Just a few minutes more,"* she huffs in my mind. I can't believe this. She's actually asking me rather than demanding.

I don't mind giving her more time; I'm still feeling exhausted. I wonder if she is too. I hope she didn't attack anyone when we shifted. All I can remember is the intense pain. She probably felt it, too.

I don't have a chance to find out, though, because the door tentatively opens.

My wolf immediately takes full control, and I'm too weak to stop her. Her lip curls back in a snarl as Joshua enters and immediately bares his throat. Is the pack's beta really submitting to us?

Damon's wolf opens one eye languidly and stares at Joshua.

He bows a little deeper, still in his submissive posture. "Alpha, Luna, apologies, but there is a delegation at the border."

Damon's wolf uncurls himself from mine and jumps from the bed, shifting back before his feet touch the floor. Joshua barely blinks; apparently, it's normal for him to see his alpha in a state of undress after a shift.

My wolf stretches, lifting her hindquarters as she does. Wait a minute...she's standing! How did that happen? How long have I been out?

I focus and slowly shift back into my human form, half afraid that it's going to hurt as much as it did when the serum forced the shift.

I'm more than a little relieved when it doesn't—in fact, it might be the smoothest shift I've ever done. I barely feel my bones break and re-form.

I feel my face heat up once the shift is complete. I've never been completely happy being naked, either before or after a shift. Today is no exception. Joshua averts his eyes before Damon has a chance to chastise him.

"I...I'll wait outside," Joshua quickly offers before fleeing the room.

Damon glances at me and chuckles. "Come on, little mate, let's find you some clothes." He pulls on his trousers, which are lying on a chair near the bed, and offers me his shirt.

I gratefully accept. The shirt reaches mid-thigh, so it covers most of me. I do hope that we will return to the pack house to get dressed properly before meeting with the delegation, whoever they are.

I have a horrible feeling that Alpha Stone may be behind this. I hope Damon has learned his lesson after what happened the last time, and will be more cautious of hidden traps.

Once I'm covered up, I slide off the bed, allowing my feet to touch the floor. Before I even have a chance to bear any weight, Damon is there at my side, his arm wrapped around my waist, steadying me.

"Take it easy," he whispers. "Your wolf looked a little like Bambi the first time she tried to stand."

*"I did not,"* she grumbles.

I can't help but smirk at her denial. I have no reason to disbelieve Damon, and I know how much my wolf hates to be perceived as weak. If I feel unsteady on two legs, then she must have been a sight to see on four.

My wolf has always tried to maintain a tough act, all through our time with Craven Moon Pack, and even more so when we first arrived here. It's probably what helped us to survive.

Now, though, we have our mate. She doesn't always need to be the tough one anymore. She's allowed to show weakness—and so am I. I've always been ashamed of being weak, but now, maybe it's okay.

I walk slowly across the floor. It must be slightly annoying for Damon how much time I'm taking, but he doesn't say anything. He just gives me small smiles of encouragement every so often.

When we reach the door he opens it, but before I have a chance to step across the threshold, he scoops me into his arms.

"Hey!" I exclaim. I've only just gotten the use of my legs back, and now he wants to carry me again.

"Let me just carry you back to the pack house so we can find you some clothes. Then we'll drive to the border. You need to save your strength for whatever 'delegation,'" he air quotes with his fingers, "we find there."

I sigh, but nod. He's right, of course. I have no idea who or what will be waiting for us, and I have no idea if I've unlocked any special gifts given to me by my father, now that my mate bond is complete.

I may be heading out there like a lamb to the slaughter.

Besides, it'll take some time for me to regain all my strength, even if I can heal myself now. So, I let Damon carry me into the bedroom and place me on the bed. He heads straight into the closet, and returns to hand me a pile of clothes.

I unfold the dense material of the jumpsuit, and frown slightly. I was half-expecting him to bring out a dress. After all, I would have expected that the alpha and luna meeting someone at the border would require a degree of formality.

He seems to sense my confusion. "I'm expecting the worst, Ember. I doubt that whoever is at our border is here for a social call, and this time I intend to be prepared."

I swallow nervously at the thought of Conrad Stone returning, but I can see that after last time, Damon is taking no chances.

Of course, this delegation could be someone completely different, but I suspect that is a naïve hope.

I remove Damon's shirt and dress in what I can only describe as military garb. At least this time I won't have to worry too much about getting hurt. My only regret is that now I won't be able to heal Damon if something happens to him.

Damon pulls on a similar-looking jumpsuit in a larger size. I guess he isn't taking any chances either.

I feel the front of my shirt. It's thick, and quite harsh to the touch.

"No silver-laced arrows will penetrate that." Damon smirks. "I learned my lesson last time."

I nod and force a smile, feeling a little more confident now that I'm protected this way. Damon holds out his hand, and I accept it without hesitation.

He gently squeezes my hand, and leads me from the alpha quarters toward the car, to find out what waits for us at the border.

I'm not surprised when we get there and find Conrad Stone waiting with a smirk on his face. He hasn't come alone, though. The man beside him exudes a strong alpha presence.

I don't know who this new man is, but Damon seems to know—and from what I can sense through the mate bond, he doesn't like him. In fact, I can feel anger seeping out of Damon's every pore.

Damon growls under his breath. "What do you want?"

The man glances at me, then looks back at Damon. "You should kneel before your king, Damon."

I gasp. I can't believe I didn't recognize our Alpha King—but then, I've never been important enough to see him in person. I'm about to kneel, as is the protocol, but Damon holds tightly onto me, keeping me on my feet.

To be fair, the king is disrespecting Damon too. Rightfully, he should be calling him "Alpha Scopus," not his first name. But he may be choosing the more casual form of address pointedly because Damon refuses to kneel, or even bow.

"Just because you wear the crown, Marcus, doesn't make you the rightful king."

My heart hammers loudly in my chest, and I can barely breathe. Not only did Damon disrespect the king by calling him by his name, but his words were tantamount to a challenge.

The king narrows his eyes, but he surprisingly lets the insult pass. His next words shock me to the core. “I believe you have one of my chosen in your dungeon, little brother.”

I stare at Damon in disbelief. Damon is a royal wolf? Not just any royal, either. He’s the king’s brother, and it appears there is no love lost between them.

Damon scoffs. “If that mutt is an example of one of your chosen, then I’m surprised you can hold on to your power.”

He glances next at Conrad Stone. “And consorting with cowards, is that how a true king would behave? I somehow doubt it. But let’s face it, you’re not really any better than cowardly Conrad, are you?”

The king lets out a growl, and Conrad Stone takes a step back, proving how much of a coward he truly is.

“Our father was weak, so I destroyed him,” the king pronounces. “Just as I will destroy you when I take the conduit from you.”

Damon steps in front of me. “You will do no such thing. She is my mate, and you will take her over my dead body!”

The king smirks. “The pleasure will be all mine.”