

The Edge of Reason by Michelle Torlot

Chapter 4

DAMON

I slam my study door so hard that the sound echoes around the room. Striding toward my desk, I sweep everything from the surface, including the list of tributes I was looking at earlier.

How fucking dare he? How dare Alpha Stone send me a pathetic runt with a wolf that's almost feral? Well, he can have the little shit back, and I'll force him to send me a proper tribute.

I pick the phone up from the floor. Thankfully, it's still in one piece. I start to dial the number, but then I see a flash of lightning out of the corner of my eye. There's a storm on the way.

I momentarily think of the pup chained up outside, but I push the thought away. It's not really my thought—my wolf is pushing the images into my head.

"A good alpha protects the weak," my wolf murmurs.

It's a phrase I've heard before, and my wolf knows it.

EIGHTEEN YEARS EARLIER

I watch as my father's fists rain down on the other man in front of him. Father hasn't even bothered to shift. He doesn't need to.

I stare, wide-eyed, as he keeps pummeling. This man disrespected Father in front of the pack, so I and all my packmates will be forced to watch his punishment—and perhaps even his death.

Father insisted I begin my alpha training early. I don't even have a wolf yet, but he insists I need to learn. My brother Marcus watches as well, leaning forward in eagerness at each new blow.

Marcus has been learning from my father for two years already, as he's older than me. My mother doesn't like it. She thinks eight years old is too young. But Father is the alpha and his word is law, even for my mother.

I'm glad of it. I want to learn. I want to be a good alpha like him.

The next time the man falls to the floor, he doesn't get up. Instead, he drags himself to a kneeling position in front of my father and bares his throat.

I half-expect Father to kill him, but he doesn't. He offers his hand and helps the man to his feet. He's bruised, bloody and battered, but still alive.

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"Go and see the healer," Father growls.

The man limps away, and Father walks toward me and Marcus.

I look up at him. "Why didn't you kill him?" I **ask**.

Father smiles **and goes** down **on** one knee so his face is level with mine.

"A good alpha protects the weak. Sometimes we have to make our pack members realize that they are weaker than us. But when they do, when they submit to us, then is the time to show mercy.

"Then is the time to protect them, because then they learn what it means to be led by a true alpha."

My brother rolls his eyes, but luckily for him my father doesn't notice. If he had, Marcus would have been in a world of trouble.

NOW

I shake my head. Damn wolf. That's why he didn't kill Ember James's wolf, even when she clearly deserved it. She needs protection, not just punishment. I guess I agree, but I don't have to like it.

I resume dialing the number for someone I can punish. Conrad Stone isn't fucking weak, but he is at shit alpha. It's time to put him in his place.

"Stone," he sighs when he answers the phone.

He doesn't know it's me, but he will soon enough.

“What the hell are you playing at, Stone,” I growl, “sending me a worthless runt? Did you know her wolf was feral? Is that why you sent her?”

I can almost smell his fear down the phone, and when he answers there’s a tremor in his voice. Coward!

“Feral?” he gasps. “Why did you let her shift? Females **don’t** have the strength of will to control **their** wolves. That’s why we rarely let them shift. If they do, we have our males on hand, ready to subdue them.”

I roll

my eyes. I can’t believe this piece of shit. This explains why Ember’s wolf seemed **so** aggressive, I guess. But even an aggressive wolf is not stupid enough to challenge someone four times her size and definitely not an alpha.

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“I will return her to you, and you will send me a warrior in her **stead**,” I demand.

The line goes quiet.

“No. I can’t... I **don’t** want her back. There is a situation which makes her return untenable.”

I clench my jaw. So, Stone thinks he can turn his problems over to me. “What situation?” I growl.

He hesitates, but he knows better than to lie. “She was rejected by her mate. He’s a valuable asset to this pack. She is of no use now.”

I feel my wolf pushing to come out. He wants to rip Alpha Stone to shreds. I **push** him down.

Unlike little Ember James, I have full control of my wolf, but he and I are on the same
Conrad Stone is concerned.

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My nostrils flare and I take a deep breath. “What about her family? Where are they?”

Conrad sighs. "Her parents are dead. She has one brother. I've told him this is for the best."

I grit my teeth. Perhaps it's best for Stone, but not for Ember James or her brother. "I will take the brother as my tribute," I growl.

Conrad stutters down the phone. "But... No... You... He's my gamma," he finally blurts out.

I glance toward the window. Ember is a gamma? If her brother is gamma, she is too; pack roles are shared within a family. Gamma is an important role, the third in command if anything happens to the alpha and beta.

But then why would Stone send her as a tribute? It doesn't make sense.

"Why did you send her, if she's a gamma? Why not send her mate?" I demand.

He scoffs. "A female wolf **has** no rank in this pack, and with no mate, she is of no use to me."

I can't believe what I'm hearing, but everything that happened earlier is beginning to make sense. "You will send her brother, or I will come **and** collect him personally.

"If I have to do that, when I leave there will be nothing left of you or your pack," I growl.

"But...but..." he begins to stutter.

"Have him at the pickup point tomorrow at dawn, or you won't live to regret it," I growl.

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pelts down.

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I look at the wolf below, chained to the pole. She lies motionless, the pile of meat untouched at her feet.

"*Protect the weak,*" my wolf repeats in my head. I hate him sometimes, especially when I know he's right.

I leave my office. The pack house is quiet. Most of the pack have retired except for Joshua, who sits in the living room, a glass of whiskey in his hand. He looks up as I pass through.

I stop

and glance over at him. Did he see what I couldn't when he questioned me earlier? I sigh. Of **course** he did. He's my beta. It's his job to play devil's advocate sometimes. I should have listened.

"I'm taking the little wolf to the pack doctor," I tell him. "I need you to head back to the Craven Moon Pack to collect another tribute."

Joshua looks at me and frowns. "Another?"

I nod. "That piece of shit Stone knew exactly what he was doing when he sent that little wolf here. He didn't expect her to live. Now he either sends another tribute, or he breaks the treaty, do you

understand?"

Joshua nods. "I'll let you know if there are any issues."

I head outside and walk toward the little wolf. I can already hear her labored breathing as I approach. She shows no sign of waking.

Water drips off the ends of my hair as the rain pelts down. Her coat is soaking wet. As I reach down and remove the silver collar, she whimpers, though her eyes stay closed.

"Shift," I growl, my alpha command coming through.

Her bones crack and reform. It's slightly quicker than it was when she transformed from girl to wolf earlier, but it's still painful to watch.

Once she's shifted, Ember lies there naked and shivering. Small sobs escape her lips.

I lift her up. She weighs virtually nothing.

"S-sorry," she whimpers through chattering teeth.

I hush her and press her small body tightly against my chest, hoping that my own body heat will.

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warm her a little. Dark purple bruises litter her body where she hit the ground earlier, when my wolf tossed her to the ground..

I mind-link the pack doctor. He lives on-site at our hospital, so by the time I get there, **he's** ready and waiting.

I'm sure he knows who Ember is. The whole pack knows who she is, after her little escapade earlier.

I place her on one of the beds. "You need to sedate her wolf. She has no control." I hesitate before adding, "And her mate has recently rejected her."

The doctor nods in understanding. I realize now why her wolf decided to challenge me. She craved death, but I won't let her give up quite so easily.

She starts struggling as the doctor tries to get the needle into her skin, so I grab her hands, pinning them above her head. "Be still, Ember," I warn, "this is for your own good."

I don't make it an alpha command, but still, she obeys, whimpering as the needle enters her leg. Within seconds, her eyes start to drift shut, but the expression on her face is one of pure agony,

pulling at my sympathies.

She's out of it enough that I don't need to hold her down anymore. Without thinking about it too much, I raise a hand to gently stroke her cheek where a tear is trailing down.

"Sleep, Ember," I say, working to make my voice gentle. "We will keep you safe. You're one of us

now.

"Protect the weak," my father always taught me, and that's exactly what I intend to do.

Chapter 5

EMBER

I don't need to open my eyes to know where I am. The smell of disinfectant gives it away, familiar from my long hours working at the hospital back home. At first I'm confused, but then all the memories come flooding back.

My wolf attacking the alpha. Being chained up in my wolf's form with a silver collar. The alpha releasing me and forcing me to shift. Why did he chain me up just to let me go?

Then I remember the doctor. The needle. The alpha telling me this was for my own good. **Panic** grips me **as** I reach out for my wolf.

Nothing. I can't find her. It's like she doesn't even exist.

A sob escapes my lips. How will I function with no wolf? It feels even worse than when Noah rejected us; I no longer feel whole.

Being chained in a silver collar would be better than this. At least then, we still had each other. What she felt, I felt. Now that she's gone, I feel nothing. I'm like an empty vessel. What sort of cruel bastard would take away a person's wolf?

When I open my eyes, I realize that I'm alone, the hospital room dark and quiet. **I** scoff. I'm destined to be alone, it seems.

Sitting up, I swing my legs over the side of the bed. I glance at the drip attached to my hand, then rip it out, ignoring the new sharp pain that joins the dull aches all through my body.

I should know better than to take out an IV that way—I've done plenty of work gently removing others' IVs, after all—but right now I don't care.

Lifting the hospital gown, I see the bruises that cover my body. With no wolf, I won't heal. They must have known that. Bastards.

I touch my throat and wince. I'm still sore from where the silver collar touched my wolf's skin. When she hurts, I hurt.

I have to admit now: she was right. We should have ended our miserable life before my pack sent us here. Now I'll do what I wouldn't allow my wolf to do before. I'll end our life. Not here, though. Somewhere there will be no interference.

I slide off the bed and attempt to stand. My legs are so weak that **they** collapse underneath me, and I hit the **floor** with a resounding thud.

I glance at the door, worried that someone may have heard me. But it seems that even here, no one

cares that much about me.

I push myself to **my** feet, and this time I manage **to** steady myself. Now isn't the time to be weak. **I** need to be strong. If not for me, then for my wolf.

I glance toward the door again. Despite not arousing any suspicion when I fell, I know that trying to escape that way would be foolhardy.

Instead, I head for one of the windows and slowly slide it open, cringing when it squeaks against the frame. Still, the noise doesn't rouse anyone.

I climb through the window, and my bare feet land on the damp grass below. The temperature has dropped, and I immediately feel the cold biting into **my** very bones.

Perhaps I'll die of hypothermia before I can find a cliff to throw myself off or a lake to drown in

doesn't matter. Death is death, however I find it.

It

I don't know how long I've been in the hospital, but that doesn't matter either. The drugs they pumped into me have dulled the ache from the bruises. Hopefully, by the time they wear off, I'll be

gone.

I start walking. I have no idea where **I'm** going. I just walk in the opposite direction to the pack buildings.

I wrap my arms around my body in a vain attempt to keep warm. I can barely feel my feet.

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After walking for what feels like hours, I stumble and fall over literally nothing. I wince when my hands make contact with the cold ground. The last thing I need now is to break a wrist because I'm not looking where I'm going.

How **far** away is this pack's border? If I had my wolf, she would know, but without her, I have no idea.

I don't cry at the thought of my lost wolf. It won't achieve anything. Besides, I need to be strong if I'm going to do this. My wolf was strong and resolute in her determination to end **our** existence. She failed, but I won't.

I've lost all feeling in my feet when I start to hear yells and footfalls coming after me. I try to run, but stumble and fall into the wet grass again, making me colder than ever.

I panic a little; I can't let them catch me. I scramble on all fours to try and get away, before lurching back to my feet and breaking into a run..

Emergency calls only

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I barely make it a few hundred yards before I feel strong, muscular arms wrap around me, pinning my arms to my sides and lifting me off the ground.

I scream and try to thrash. Every so often, my foot makes contact with something hard, but it probably hurts my foot more than this beast of a man who holds me.

It isn't him. Not Alpha Scopus, who I'm learning to fear and hate and trust in equal measure. His voice is different, but just as determined and low.

He chuckles lowly. "Don't waste your energy. Even if you had your wolf, you would still be too weak to fight me. Besides, the alpha commanded me to bring back his little tribute, so bring you back, I

shall."

Chapter 6

DAMON

I stare out the window, watching my warriors train. My eyes keep focusing on my newest tribute, Oliver James. The former gamma of the Craven Moon Pack, and brother of Ember James.

Joshua found him at the pickup point yesterday, just as I demanded. Alpha Stone is nothing if not a

coward.

I shouldn't have given Stone the option of sending another tribute. I should have just gone there, wiped out his misogynistic pack, and put his head on a spike **as** a warning to others.

But that would have meant killing Ember's brother. Under **normal** circumstances, one extra death wouldn't bother me, but that pack has already hurt Ember enough.

Everyone I've ever spoken to has claimed that the females of Craven Moon are happy under Stone's yoke of oppression. I don't know if I believe that, but it's not my place to interfere in how another pack operates.

According to Ember's brother, though, his sister found it much more difficult to fit in or at least,

her wolf did.

Ember's wolf was never content to be subdued by the males they forced her to run with. It's likely that asshole of an alpha was only too happy to find an excuse to get rid of her, before she caused some sort of rebellion among the females.

Unfortunately for Ember, her wolf's rebellious nature turned on itself when she lost her mate.

I can sympathize with that, as can my wolf. Perhaps that's the real reason he didn't end her when she attacked. He could no doubt sense her pain, a twin of the pain we felt over Alessia.

I study Oliver James carefully, but he looks nothing like his sister. In fact, they are polar opposites except for their strikingly blond hair.

Oliver is tall, muscular, and solidly built. As I watch him spar with one of my strongest pack members, I can tell that he fights with his brain as well as his brawn. Meanwhile Ember is small, thin, and looks like a gust of wind would blow her over.

I sigh. I'm not happy about having to drug her wolf, or her for that matter. A cocktail of wolfsbane and a human sedative knocked them both out. It had to be done, though. I can't have an out-of-control wolf attacking me or my pack members.

Normally, a pack teaches all its pups—males and females alike how to control their wolves. But the Craven Moon Pack is anything but normal.

I will take them down, one of these days. But right now I need to fix this broken little she-wolf, especially since my own wolf seems so keen to protect her.

A loud bang on the door breaks me out of my musing. I growl as the door bursts open. No one enters my study unless I bid them entry first—not unless it's an emergency.

Joshua stands there, his eyes wide. I'm not sure if it's because he just burst in and knows that annoys me, or if it really is an emergency.

"Your little tribute has done a runner," he states.

I narrow my eyes, all my annoyance gone as I process this news. "What do you mean? She's in the hospital."

Joshua shakes his head. "She was. She was either faking sleep, or she woke up and decided to make her bid for freedom while the nurse was out of the room.

“I don’t know what she was thinking. The weather has taken a turn for the worse after that storm, and she’s only wearing a flimsy hospital gown. She could freeze to death out there.”

I sigh. “That may have been her intention. How long has she been gone?”

Joshua frowns, then shakes his head. “Only about fifteen minutes. She won’t get far. I’ve already sent Samuel after her,” he says, naming one of the pack’s larger warriors.

The thought of another male touching Ember has my wolf pacing in the back of my head. I’ve been trying to ignore his sudden, unwarranted interest in her, but it only seems to be getting stronger with

time.

My wolf has shown no interest whatsoever in any female since we lost our mate. Now all of a sudden he wants to protect this **one**—maybe more, if I let him.

That isn’t going to happen. The last thing I need is another mate, and certainly not a suicidal one.

“Tell him to bring her here. And she is not to be harmed, understand?”

Joshua bows his head before leaving the room. I think he half-expected me to consign Ember to the dungeons. Perhaps I should. But my wolf growls at that thought.

How can one small female can cause **so** much trouble?

It’s only a few minutes later when Samuel returns, Ember in tow. I can hear her before they **even** approach the door to my study, yelling and cursing angrily.

In some ways, I find it quite cute. She’s so **small** that even the weakest of my warriors could crush her, but that doesn’t dissuade her from putting **up a** fight.

My door crashes **open** again, and Samuel walks through. His arms are wrapped around her tightly, pinning her arms to her sides. It doesn’t stop her from trying to struggle, though, or from trying to kick him.

She looks livid. As soon as Samuel crosses the threshold, her angry eyes turn *to*

1. me.

“Release her,” I growl, and he does. Ember’s eyes haven’t left mine, and I fight the urge to smirk.

“I hate

you,

,” she screams. “You evil, vile piece of shit, how could you?” Then she rushes toward me, her small hands balling into fists.

She wants to punch me. I consider letting her for a moment, but Samuel is still standing there, staring at her. He won’t touch her unless I tell him to, but it certainly wouldn’t look good if I allowed Ember to hit me.

It was bad enough sparing her life when her wolf attacked—although, to onlookers, her wolf was so small they probably thought it was a pup.

With that in mind, I grab her wrists before she has a chance to throw a punch, spin her around, and pin her against the wall, her hands held above her head.

She tries to kick me, but I move forward. My body presses against hers, stopping all movement.

It doesn’t stop her from struggling, though, and I can’t help but smirk at her efforts. This seems to rile her up even more.

“You think this is funny?” Her voice cracks, and I can see tears pooling in her eye eyes.

“You’re all the same. You think I’m worthless, well, I am now that you’ve taken my wolf. I’m less than worthless. You should have killed me or left me to die. My wolf was right; we’d be better off

dead.”

Her head drops, and she looks at the floor. A single tear trickles down her cheek.

I look over my shoulder toward Samuel, who is staring at her. I don’t want anyone seeing her like **this**, in despair. “Leave us,” I growl.

Once I hear the door close, I hold her wrists in one hand and stroke her cheek with the back of my other hand. She tries to pull away, but she has nowhere to go.

“I know what happened to you, Ember,” I say softly. “I know your mate rejected you, and I know

your wolf wanted to throw the pair of you off Lovers’ Leap.”

Her eyes snap

snap upward. She's not as angry as she was, but there is still a look of rebellion in her eyes.

She's still feisty, despite everything that has happened.

"You have no control over your wolf, sweetheart," I continue, "and I'm not about to let her, or you, end your life."

Ember narrows her eyes. "You can't decide that. It's

my

life and my choice," she snaps.

I shake my head and smirk. "Not anymore, it's not. You belong to me now. Your alpha gifted you to

me as a tribute.

"If you or your wolf try to harm yourself, then the treaty that I hold with your pack will be forfeit. Do you know what happens then?"

She swallows nervously and shakes her head.

I hate that. All my pack know to respond to my questions with words, no matter how difficult they find it. For now, though, I will let it pass.

"If the treaty is forfeit, then I will wipe out your former pack, and everyone in it," I threaten.

She lets out a small gasp. "N...no! You can't. I have a family. Friends." Something in this smells like a lie, oddly, but I don't pursue it for now.

I gently brush a hair from her face. "Then, little tribute, I advise you not to try to harm yourself, or

run away."

She opens her mouth to say something, but then apparently thinks better of it. Instead, she bows her head, submitting to my command. "Yes, Alpha," she whispers.

I nod. She learns quickly, and puts others before herself. She's loyal, although I will never know why she is loyal to that shitty pack.

I can probably use that to my advantage. She has no idea that her brother is here, but even if she did, I doubt she would want her former pack coming to harm—nor will she wish to see anyone else hurt

on her account.

I mind-link with Joshua. If my instincts are right, then Ember's empathy toward others will work in my favor.

"Send for the girl. The one who tried to befriend Ember. Crystal, you said her name was? I have a

I don't have to wait long before I hear a knock at the door.

I release my grip on Ember. **If** my warning about her pack didn't sink in, then the next one undoubtedly will. "Come," I growl.

Joshua enters with the female tribute in tow.

When I first saw this female, I knew she had already trained as a warrior. She's here because she wants to be. She has a golden opportunity to rise up the ranks in my pack; that's why I chose her for

this **task**.

Gripping Ember by the shoulders, I gently guide her toward where Joshua and Crystal are standing.

"Crystal," I begin, "I am putting Ember in your care. It is your responsibility to keep her safe. If anything happens to her if she comes to harm, or attempts to harm herself you will be severely punished. Do you understand?"

Crystal bows. "Yes, Alpha," she whispers.

Ember glances between me and Crystal, a look of horror on her face.

"You understand, Ember? What will happen if you attempt to harm yourself?"

I watch her jaw clench. Her eyes snap to mine, but then she lowers them. "Yes, Alpha," she grits out.

"Good," I respond. "You may go. The pack mother should have some clothes that will fit you. The ones you brought are **not** appropriate."

Ember crosses her arms over her chest as she follows Crystal from the room, glancing behind to give me one final glare.

Joshua stays in the office. "Very clever, Alpha. I hope it works."

I smirk. "Don't worry, Joshua. It'll work."