

# The Edge of Reason by Michelle Torlot

## Chapter 7

### EMBER

Once the door to the alpha's office closes, Crystal glares at me. If looks could kill, I would be dropping dead on the **spot**.

"If you so much as stub your toe, I'm going to beat you within an inch of your life," she growls. "If I'm going to get punished, I may as well do the crime. If I hadn't tried to help you, he would have gotten some other poor sap to nursemaid

you.

Any thoughts that I might have an ally in Crystal fly right out of the window. She's going to hate me unless I can convince her I won't do anything to make her feel the alpha's wrath.

I almost have to run to keep up with her long strides. She's almost as tall as my brother, and I'm tiny in comparison. It's been the same story my whole life. I'm smaller than almost all the werewolves

**my** age.

When I touch her arm, she slows down but glares at me.

"I'm sorry," I say. "I didn't want to drag you into this, but I swear I won't do anything to make the alpha punish you on my account."

Her face softens slightly **as** she looks me up and down. "Come on, we better go **and** see if the den

mother **has** some clothes that will fit

you.

I feel

my face heat

up

with the realization that I'm still only wearing a hospital gown.

It would have been fine if stupid Alpha Scopus had just left me to my fate. But no, he had to

interfere.

Crystal looks at me and smirks. "If you ask me, I think the alpha has a soft spot for you. If it had been anyone else challenging him last night, they would be dead by now."

I narrow my eyes. "I hate him," I grumble.

Crystal stops dead in her tracks, staring at me with a look of horror on her face. Then she shushes me and grabs me by the shoulders.

"You can't say that. **It's...** It's like treason," she stutters, "and I'm the one who'll be punished for it,

remember?"

My shoulders sag, and I hold my face in my hands. "I don't want you to be punished. Why doesn't

he kill me and be done with it?"

4%

I feel a tear trickle down my cheek, which I hastily wipe away.

When I look up at Crystal, she's staring at me. She probably realizes that my wolf attacked the alpha with one thought in her mind. To end our miserable life.

When she opens her mouth to speak, I know for sure that this is the case.

"You wanted to die," she gasps. "Not just you, but your wolf as well." She shakes her head in disbelief. "And today, running away with hardly any clothes on..."

She doesn't finish the sentence. I can tell by the look on her face that she's horrified.

**Instead**, she wraps an arm around my shoulder, gripping it tightly at first, until I wince. Then she loosens her grip. "Sorry," she whispers. "But honestly, Ember, this isn't such a bad place."

That's easy for her to say. She's a warrior. Her pack probably respected her, and now that she's here, she sees it as an opportunity.

Like most of the tributes, she chose to be here. She isn't being forced to stay, either. I don't see anyone trailing after her to make sure she doesn't hurt herself or run away.

All the other tributes are warriors. Tall, muscular, and ready to serve their new alpha. Me, I'm just a liability. I'm small and weedy, and I can't even kill myself without mucking it up.

Now I won't be able to attempt suicide again because if I try, Crystal will be punished, maybe

killed.

I couldn't bear it if she were to get hurt on my account. I hate the thought of hurting anyone. Hell, I can't even bring myself to stomp on a spider.

**I shake**

**my** head. "I'm not a warrior like you. I can't be. I don't have it in me," I mumble.

Crystal chuckles.

"Everyone has it in them, given the right incentive. Just because you've never trained doesn't mean you can't be taught."

Crystal is wrong, but I don't want to start an argument and potentially lose the only friend I have right now.

As we venture deeper into the **pack** house, I see groups of people laughing and talking, looking happy. They all stop their chatter momentarily as we pass by. I keep **my** head down.

**If** it weren't for the alpha's threat toward Crystal, and toward my old pack, I would leave. Run as far

**away** from this place as I could. Not to kill myself necessarily I realized out there that I still don't really want to die.

But still, I wish I could be somewhere else, somewhere away from all the expectations here and in Craven Moon both. I'll never fit in. The sooner stupid Alpha Scopus realizes that, the better off everyone will be.

Ignoring the stares, Crystal leads me toward a woman who seems to be barking orders at several other females. They run to do her bidding without question.

If I didn't know better, I would assume she was this pack's luna, but I know that's not possible. Everyone knows that Alpha Scopus doesn't have a mate anymore.

I've heard that he did find his fated mate, but rumors abound that he killed her because she was weak. A ruthless alpha like Damon would never tolerate weakness, which is why I can't understand why he doesn't just kill me or release me.

The woman stops her chiding and turns her gaze to me and Crystal. I realize all at once: **this** is the

den mother.

It's strange; I always thought that den mothers were soft and nurturing—because the one I grew **up** with was. I liked her. She used to let me cuddle up beside her while she handed out rations and bandaged wounds.

This woman, though, seems anything but soft. She looks me up and down disparagingly.

Crystal speaks before she has an opportunity to say anything derogatory.

"The alpha has requested that you provide appropriate clothing for Ember. Is this something you can do?"

The woman raises an eyebrow. I suspect all the latest **gossip** around the pack is about me. Or rather, not specifically me, but the fact that the alpha didn't kill me when I challenged him.

"The alpha, ch? You're very small," she sneers, "but I should have some of the old pups' clothes **that** will fit."

She opens a cupboard, **pulls** out a pile of clothing, and shoves it into my arms. "There's nightclothes, day clothes, **and** something to train in."

She scoffs at the latter, like she knows that **any** attempt to train me will be a dismal failure. She's right. I'm pretty pathetic for a werewolf. Or at least, my human side is.

My wolf has always been strong. She would probably fight if I let her, but the few times I've actually

Chapter 7 of 30: Chapter 7  
60%

let her out, I've tried to keep her from hurting anyone. Which sucks, because I don't have that much control over her.

Once, when I was thirteen and the lower-ranking Craven Moon males set out to supervise the females for a full-moon shift, I decided to give my wolf **a** chance for once.

The other females mostly lay down together in a puppy pile. A few tried to run around, nipping playfully at each other, but our male chaperones quickly put a stop to that.

My wolf, meanwhile, immediately tried to take off toward the woods to join the older males in their hunt. Eric's wolf, bigger and stronger, caught up with her easily and batted warningly at her front

paws.

My wolf went berserk, thrashing and snapping and briefly getting her jaws around his right leg hard enough to draw blood. Afterward, I couldn't stop apologizing to Eric, but he scoffed and told me it was nothing.

I felt something like a sympathy pain in my own leg for hours afterward, even after Eric's wound completely closed up. That was the last time I let my wolf out for a long time.

Before I can get any more lost in self-recrimination, Crystal shepherds me away and up a set of

stairs.

On this floor is a corridor filled with endless doors. I'm guessing this is where most of the pack

lives.

None of the doors have locks, which I find a little disconcerting. But then, I find the whole idea of living in a pack house disconcerting.

In my old pack, I was lucky enough to live with my brother in our parents' house. I had a room of my own. I'm pretty sure that won't be the case here.

When Crystal pushes one of the doors open, I'm relieved to find just two twin beds, one on either side of the room. I guess that means I'm sharing with Crystal.

If I had to share with complete strangers, I probably would have gotten my wish and died...of embarrassment. It's bad enough having to share at all.

Crystal points to two other doors in the room. "Bathroom and closet." Then she gestures toward one of the beds. "That one's yours. Have a shower and get dressed. Then I'll take you down to the pack dining room."

I stare at her, horrified. I liked the idea of hiding in **this** room, just grabbing **food** and eating it in here. Eating with the rest of the pack, who probably all hate me already, **is** a complete nightmare.

Crystal looks at me and rolls her eyes.

“Alpha’s orders. The whole pack is dining together so he can welcome all the new pack members. That includes you.”

Butterflies begin to do somersaults in my stomach. This won’t be good.

## Chapter 8

### DAMON

As Joshua closes my office door, blocking my final view of the little she wolf, my wolf grows at me. He’s annoyed that I’ve let her wander through the pack house with hardly any clothes on.

“She’s not ours,” I chide him.

He retreats to the back of my mind, sulking.

My focus returns to Joshua, who is still lurking by the door. “Something on your mind? I question.

I already know there is. He’s curious about Ember, and why I’m treading her differently. To be honest, I wish I knew.

“What are your intentions for the little she-wolf, Damon?” he asks, doing little to hide his smirk.

I’ve known Joshua since we were small children. He’s my best friend, and the only one who away with calling me by my first name.

He would never do it in front of the pack, but behind closed doors, we are friends fint and foremost,

unless I’m in a foul mood.

I shrug. “I have no intentions,” I huff.

I’m hoping he’ll drop the subject, but I should know better.

“What happens when her wolf *re*-emerges? Or do you intend to keep her wolf suppressed forever!

I sigh heavily. “We’ll teach Ember to control her wolf. Something her previous pack neglected to

do.”

Joshua walks over to the desk, shaking his head. “Her wolf tried to end their life. Even with the precaution of Crystal’s oversight, what makes **you** sure she won’t try again? What she needs is a mate.”

I fold my arms across my chest. I know exactly where he’s going with this, but I don’t need a mate. I had one, and she’s gone. The last thing I need is another one.

“Are you offering, Joshua? Do you want the little she-wolf for yourself?”

My wolf growls at me. He knows I’m not serious about offering Ember to Joshua, but still, he doesn’t like the idea of anyone else claiming her. Usually, we are on the same page, but not where

Chapter 8 **of 30**: Charter 8.

32

Emergency calls only

“**Her** wolf probably *hates* you,” I tell him.

084% **13:03**

That shuts him up, and I focus back on Joshua, who rolls his eyes. “I don’t want her. I have my own mate out there somewhere, but you-”

“No,” I snap before he has a chance to finish. “Now, go make yourself useful and tell the pack I want them all in the dining room tonight while I welcome the new tributes.”

Joshua sighs, but heads toward the door anyway. He knows better than to keep this line of conversation going.

“Oh, and Joshua?”

He stops in his tracks. Hope lingers on his face as he turns toward me.

“Tell the new guy, Oliver James? Tell him not to come to the dining room until you call for him. **I’ll** let you know when.”

my own

Joshua's shoulders sag slightly. He's been trying to pair me off with another she-wolf since mate met her end. But I have no interest in taking another mate, just so that she can betray me.

"This one's different," my wolf mumbles.

I roll my eyes and block him from my mind. The last thing I need right now is a wolf that's acting

like a love-struck fool.

I leave the preparations for the pack dinner to my delta. He knows exactly what will happen, **and** how I like things done.

Tonight, though, **will** be slightly different. I'll introduce all the new tributes, and then I will send for Oliver James. I've already decided to give him the place of second gamma in the pack.

I've seen him train, and besides, after how his sister was treated, I doubt he has much allegiance to his former **pack**. If he does, then I can use his sister as leverage.

I know from all the questions that he asked Joshua on the journey here that he cares for her. He

won't want to see her hurt.

"We won't hurt her, she's *ours*," **my** wolf grumbles.

I roll my eyes and sigh. He's like a dog with a bone, pun intended.

"I know **we** won't hurt her," I placate him. For now, I let **his** claim on Ember slide, just to keep him quiet. "*But her brother* doesn't know *that*."

Chapter 8 of **30**: Chapter 8

26%

He grunts, seemingly satisfied.

Joshua mind-links me to let me know that the pack, including the new tributes, are seated. As **alpha** of the pack, I like to make **an** entrance, and events like this give me ample opportunity.

As it's only an internal function, the dress code is smart casual. The idea of this event is to welcome our tributes to the pack, not to make them feel awkward about navigating formalwear and multiple forks.



Not all the packs are as well off as mine, which means that tributes often arrive without many suitable clothes. Ember James is a prime example, but at least she will have something half-decent to wear, rather than the rags that she turned up in.

After dressing in my own jacket and tie, I open the velvet-lined mahogany box on my desk **and** stare

at the contents.

Inside is a brand made from celestial silver. The symbol is of two intersecting circles, with a wolf's head inside each one, facing each other.

Lying next to it is another brand, in the shape of an X. This second one rarely gets used.

The first is what I use **to** mark all new members of my pack. My pack has employed the brand since my grandfather's time. Usually, it doesn't bother me, but the thought of doing this to Ember gives

me pause.

She isn't as strong as many of the wolves who come into my pack. But we all carry the mark, event me, so she must carry it too. It shows every other pack who we are, and what it means to be a Dark

Moon Pack member.

The second brand is only ever used when a member of the pack is banished. If someone carries this mark, **no** other pack will accept them. They will be rogue until they die. It's a traitor's mark, and those who carry it might as well be marked for death.

The X is branded right over the Dark Moon Pack brand. Neither can be erased, not even by magic.

Every time I bring a new wolf into the pack, and I look at the two brands, I'm reminded why I never again want a mate.

"Traitor Whom Monster.

\*\*\*

FIVE YEARS EARLIER

Traitor..

Whore... Monster..."

The jeers of the rest of the pack cry out as **the** she-wolf is dragged before me in silver chains.

My mate. Alessia Northwood. The one who was supposed to be my everything. The one who tried to kill me while I slept. If it hadn't been for my wolf, she would have succeeded.

I hold up my hands to quiet the crowd. I don't want to do this, but I have

no choice.

No, that's a lie; I do have a choice. I could order her put to death, but I won't. The Moon Goddess paired us for a reason, and I won't sully my goddess's name by killing the one she chose for me. Not even if Alessia tried to kill me.

"Do you

have anything **to** say," I demand of her, "before I carry out the sentence?"

She glares at me.

"I hate you," she hisses. "I've always hated you, and I reject you as my mate."

This rejection has no impact. As a prime alpha, I cannot be rejected. I could reject Alessia; I probably should, given her betrayal, but I choose to honor the Moon Goddess.

Instead, I open the ancient box and pull out the silver brand which will place an X against her pack mark.

She struggles, but my warriors hold her tightly.

"I, Alpha Damon Scopus, find you guilty of the attempted murder of your Alpha. I banish you mark you as a rogue."

She screams as the brand burns into her skin. It's done.

\*\*\*

and

NOW

I close the lid of the box and place it in my pocket. My wolf whines in the back of my head. He feels the loss of his mate like it was yesterday and not years ago. Each time I open this box, the X brand is a permanent reminder of what we lost.

That's why it surprises me that he has forged such an attachment to the little she-wolf. Especially since she tried to attack us.

Perhaps it's because she lost a mate as well. They have that in common.

I push the thought out of my mind. It won't do me any good to dwell on it. My wolf might want Ember's wolf, but I do not want Ember.

Two of my warriors stand on either side of the double doors that lead into the dining hall. They bow their heads with respect and pull the doors open, and I enter the room, glancing from side to side.

Long tables line either side of the room, leaving a corridor along the middle. A raised platform sits at the end of the room, with a table and four seats.

Joshua is there, already standing. The seat next to him is mine. The two other seats remain empty. The one to the right of mine is reserved for my mate, the pack's luna. The one to the left of Joshua is

reserved for his mate.

I hope one day the empty seat next to Joshua will be filled, but I swore after losing Alessia that the one next to me would forever remain empty.

As I approach the stage, I glance to the left and right. Six of my seven new tributes are seated close to the stage, ready for their induction into the pack. I can't help but focus on Ember James.

She's wearing a pale blue sundress, and her blonde hair hangs loose to her shoulders. Her soft skin is pale and unblemished. How is she so small and timid when her wolf is so strong and feisty?

I shake the thought off and focus on the task at hand.

Climbing the steps of the stage, I walk to my chair and stand in front of it, placing the small **box on**

the table.

"Today we welcome our new tributes to the pack. Before I begin, I would also like to welcome another new pack member...Oliver James from the Craven Moon Pack."

The doors swing open, and Oliver James walks in. He smiles as his gaze finds his sister. Ember squeals, jumps from her seat, and begins to run toward him.

Before she reaches him, though, his gaze snaps from his sister to Crystal. His eyes flash black and he growls, "Mine."

**His** wolf is close to the surface. He has found his mate. He brushes past Ember as though she is nothing to him, knocking her to the floor in his haste to reach Crystal.

Crystal runs to **him** and jumps into **his** arms, wrapping her legs around his waist.

Cheers **arise** from the rest of the pack. It's always a good moment when wolves find their fated

reston un pan na mays mates. A reason to celebrate.

a gunu numen when wopes me then rawa

I applaud with the rest of them, but then glance down at Ember and see tears trickling down *her* face as she slowly crawls away from the couple.

This was supposed to be a moment to help boost her morale. It's turned out to be *the* exact opposite. She has to watch the only two people who she really cares about, enjoying a moment that she knows

she can never have.

## Chapter 9

### MBER

My joy at seeing my brother shatters into sadness **as** he knocks me out of the way like trash.

.

Crystal, my new friend and sworn protector, ignores me too. They only have eyes for each other. The hug I wanted—no, the hug I needed from my brother—is hers now.

Their joy at finding one another tugs at painful memories. When I mated with Noah, he should have embraced me like Oliver is embracing Crystal, but he didn't. He discarded me like trash as well.

I should be happy for him, probably. I love my brother. I'm glad he's found his mate, and that it's someone as strong and capable as Crystal. But I can't bring myself to celebrate when it means losing them both.

I crawl away on my hands and knees like the worthless trash that I am, scrambling through all the legs and feet that are surging toward the newly paired couple. No one even notices me.

I crawl under one of the large tables, and out toward a door on the other side. This is probably where the omegas bring in the food for the feast.

I stand and quickly go through, closing the door behind me. Then I wrap my arms around myself in a vain attempt to hold myself together.

When Alpha Scopus realizes I'm gone, he'll probably think **that** I'm running away. Crystal will too, and she'll blame me for setting her up to get punished.

I'm not running, though, because I have nowhere to go. I just need to **find** some solitude.

Back at the other pack, I would always find myself at Lovers' Leap when I needed to be alone or to gather my thoughts. The sounds of the water would soothe me.

I don't have that here, though, so instead I search for a storage cupboard or somewhere dark where I

can be **alone**.

I spot a door slightly ahead. The corridor is dark, but I hope it will be a bolt-hole. My fingers wrap around the doorknob, but before I have a chance to turn it someone grabs hold of my hair and yanks.

mc back.

I squeal as I hit the floor. When I look up, I expect to see Alpha Scopus, or perhaps Beta Vance, but it's not either of them.

My heart begins to beat wildly in my chest as three men close in on me. I know them. They're the three males from the bus that brought me here. The new tributes.

"Look what we have here, the little runt who thinks she can challenge the alpha," one of them

sneers.

I squeal again as he yanks me up **by** my hair. It feels like a million needles are being jabbed into my scalp.

He pushes me toward one of the others, who grabs my arms, pinning them behind my back.

“Please...” I whimper.

Pain blooms on my cheek as my first tormentor backhands me across the face. A metallic taste invades my mouth as blood trickles from my lip.

This guy must be the ringleader. “You don’t speak unless I tell you,” he snarls.

I lower my head. If this is my end, I’ll accept it, but I’m sure that’s not what these men want. They want me to fight back, but I won’t.

Another one grabs my hair and wrenches my head back so I have to look at all three of their leering

faces.

“You’re probably a spy. It’s how the weakest packs always get a foothold. Spies **and** assassins. Or perhaps you’re a witch. That must be it. No werewolf could be as small as you are. Do you know what my pack does with witches?”

I

gasp as a deep voice resonates through the corridor. “No, tribute. Why don’t you tell me?” Alpha Scopus growls.

The two men who are holding me up suddenly release me and take a step back. I drop to the floor, wincing as my knees impact the hard floor.

I look **up** to see Alpha Scopus looking down at me. He looks pissed, so I quickly avert my eyes.

I know I’m in trouble, but I don’t want to make it any worse for myself, or for Crystal.

He grabs hold of the ringleader by the throat and pins him against the wall. I think for a moment that he might kill him, and I can’t help the whimper that escapes my lips.

“You think I’m incapable of meting out punishment if it’s deserved, do you?” he growls at the ringleader. His hand is gripping the man’s neck so tightly that he can barely breathe, let alone talk.

“You’re about to find out,” the alpha hisses.

Then I hear the sound of heavy footfalls, and see several heavily built warriors running toward us.

Chapter 9 of 30: Chapter 9

28%

“Take these tributes and lock them in the dungeon,” Alpha Scopus commands. He releases his grip on the ringleader, who falls to the floor clutching his throat and gasping for breath.

The warriors grab hold of the three men. Then I feel one of the warriors roughly grabbing my arm as well.

“Not her,” Alpha Scopus growls. “No one, I repeat, no one touches her without my authority.”

The warrior bows and follows the others as they drag the three tributes off to the dungeon.

Alpha Scopus crouches down in front of me. Even in this position, he is huge, looming over me.

His hand touches the underside of my chin as he tilts my head up so that I’m looking at him. “Running again, little wolf?” He wipes the blood **from** the corner of my mouth with his thumb.

I swallow nervously. “N...no. I just needed...”

I stop talking as the realization hits me. If he thinks I was running, then he’ll punish Crystal. Maybe even slaughter my old pack. “Please don’t hurt them,” I beg.

**He** frowns. “Who?” He probably thinks I mean the men who were just about to beat me or kill me.

“Crystal. My old pack. I wasn’t running away, I swear,” I blurt out.

Alpha Damon looks at me and smirks. “You’ve just been attacked and hurt. Disrespected by your friend and your brother. And still, you put everyone else before yourself.”

11

He sighs and shakes his head. “Your mate was a fool, Ember James. A stupid fool.”

I blink, a little confused. But I don't get a chance to ask him what he means before he gently grabs my arm and helps me to my feet, leading me back toward the dining room.

"What happens now?" I whisper.

Alpha Damon looks down at me and smiles. "I bring you into my pack, as I had intended to do before you disappeared, and then I will decide on your punishment."

I let out a gasp.

"Punishment?"

He nods. "You left an official function without permission. Once I bring you into the pack, I will mete out an appropriate punishment. You must learn to **do your** alpha's bidding. Do **you** understand,

Ember James?"

I lower **my** head. "**Yes**, Alpha," I whisper. I'm just grateful that he didn't send me down to the

When we return to the dining room, everything has calmed down, and my brother is standing **in** front of the stage with his arm wrapped around Crystal. It seems that they are now inseparable.

I wonder **if** my brother will have a house of his own now. It's rare for mated pairs to live in the pack house. If he does, I doubt there will be space there for me. I don't want to play the third wheel.

It seems like as soon as I was starting to make a new friend, she is going to be ripped away from me. I doubt I'll make another friend so easily. I don't even understand why Crystal tried to befriend me in the first place.

Alpha Scopus leads me to the front of the stage, where I stand next to my brother and Crystal. There's another she-wolf standing on the other side.

It seems like the other tributes won't be joining the pack today, as they are festering in Alpha Scopus's dungeon. I guess that's my fault too.

Alpha Scopus goes to stand behind the table, with the beta, Joshua, standing next to him.

The other she-wolf is the first to go up. I don't really take much notice; I'm too busy hoping that Oliver will notice me, but he doesn't. Then it's Oliver's turn to go up and present himself for whatever initiation ritual our new alpha has in mind.



The alpha pulls something from a box. I can't really see what it is, as my brother's body is blocking my view.

Then I hear a growl escape from my brother's lips. I gasp. Surely he'll be punished for growling at the alpha.

But Alpha Scopus just smiles.

"I welcome Oliver James to the Dark Moon Pack."

When my brother turns to face everyone, I see it. The raised, painful-looking brand on his arm. Suddenly I feel sick. Is he going to do that to Crystal and then to me?

I've heard about these marks before, but I thought it was just a myth. An urban legend. I didn't believe people actually stood by and allowed their alphas to burn marks into their skin.

My brother's pale skin now has a black symbol of the Dark Moon Pack, two wolf heads **in** two circles. Burned into his skin by celestial silver.

Now I wish I had run away for real, rather than just looking for a dark closet. And this isn't even my punishment; if anything, it's supposed to be a reward.

Chapter 9 of **30**: Chapter 9

Crystal is next. My brother stands to the side as she approaches the table and holds out her **arm**, ready to accept the brand.

I can't understand why they are doing this willingly. I wince for Crystal as the alpha presses the brand to her arm. She clenches her jaw and hisses as it makes contact with her skin, and I can **see** dark wisps of smoke rise as it burns.

But then she turns to face the room, just as my brother had done, proudly displaying the new

on her arm.

v mark

"I welcome Crystal Northwood to the Dark Moon Pack," Alpha Damon says, giving no sign that he feels anything about inflicting such pain. This is a common occurrence for him, but not for me.

My brother wraps his arm around his mate proudly, then whispers something in her ear. Crystal smiles.

It's my turn now, but I can't do this. I take a step backward, only to hit something hard. I glance behind me to see one of the alpha's guards.

I look toward Alpha Scopus pleadingly, but he just nods to the guard, who escorts me up onto the stage.

"Please," I beg as I face the alpha.

He looks back at me. Is that regret I see on his face?

"Be brave, little wolf," he murmurs, just loud enough for me to hear. Then the guard holds me in place as Alpha Scopus presses the brand to my arm.

I'm not brave. I never have been. All I wanted to do was to live quietly and tend to the sick. So unlike my brother and his mate, I don't stand there stoically. I don't hold in the pain as my flesh

burns.

**The** last thing I hear before the darkness consumes me is the sound of my own screams.

## Chapter 10

### DAMON

The scream that comes from Ember's lips pierces me like a silver dagger. Then, her eyes flutter and she

goes completely limp. If not for the guard holding her up, she would have fallen to the floor.

My wolf growls. "*It* should be *us* holding her, not him."

For the first time since her brother arrived, both he and Crystal give Ember their full attention, staring at her in horror. When Oliver takes a step toward her, I growl.

"Leave her," I command.

He wasn't prepared to acknowledge her before, too busy cuddling up to his new mate to spare a thought for his sister, so he has lost that privilege now,

I rush around the table and take her from the guard. “Serve the meal,” I mind-link Joshua as I carry her bridal style from the dining hall.

The warriors at the double doors open them swiftly to let me pass through. They bow, but I don’t acknowledge it. I only have one thought on my mind, and that is to make sure that my little wolf

recovers.

When did I start calling her mine? My wolf chuckles. It must be him putting those ideas into my mind. I shrug it off as I head to my quarters.

The alpha quarters are on the third floor of the pack house, and that’s where I head.

Normally, the only person who ever comes to my private quarters’ is Joshua. I certainly never allow any female visitors into my domain. I haven’t done since my mate betrayed me, **so** why now?

“You want *her* as much as I do,” my wolf scoffs. “You just refuse to admit it.”

I ignore him **as** I enter my private apartment. He certainly doesn’t need any encouragement.

I walk through the entryway, head to the bedroom and close the door behind me before gently placing the frail little she-wolf on the bed.

I don’t understand why is this happening. I’ve used that brand on every wolf I’ve ever welcomed into my pack. Some have been braver about it than others, but no one has ever passed out before. Why her? Why now?

“Because we suppressed *her wolf*,” my wolf growls.

I sigh and shake my head. He’s supposed to work with me, not against me.

“Now you know how *she feels*,” he snaps.

For once, my wolf is wrong. Neither of us has any idea how Ember feels. We were betrayed but not rejected, not officially. We *were* never kicked out of our **pack** because of that betrayal, nor were we spurned by our family.

My wolf and I weren’t separated from each other, or abandoned by someone we trusted, or bullied by some low-lives in our most vulnerable moments.

I have to claim some responsibility for how bad Ember is feeling. I was the one who chained her. I was the one who ordered her wolf subdued. But how was I to know that her mate had rejected her?

“Now you’re going to *reject* her too,” my wolf huffs.

I roll my eyes. “*She’s* not ours to *reject*. Besides, she’s a member of *the pack now, and we look after* our own, mate or not.”

He

grunts and retreats to the back of my mind. This is an argument neither of us is going to win.

I sit on the edge of the bed and run my thumb across Ember’s brand. She doesn’t even stir, despite **how** painful it looks.

By now, it should look just like a human tattoo. The surrounding skin should be smooth, the mark healed to become part of her within minutes.

Ember’s mark looks nothing like that. The skin is red and inflamed, and the mark is swollen too. If her wolf had been present, that would not have occurred, and the pain would have been **less**.

I gently stroke her cheek, trying to soothe away the soreness that arsehole of a tribute made when he struck her. Her lip is swollen too.

I somehow have to make this right.

I mind-link Joshua. “*I need you to bring the puck doctor to my apartment to tend to Ember.*”

He doesn’t respond for a moment. When he does, it’s with another question, which irks me slightly. “*She’s in your apartment?*”

I clench my jaw. I don’t have time for his shit. “Just bring *the fucking* doctor,” I hiss through the link.

I sit on the edge of the bed, my fingers teasing Ember’s golden locks. They are soft. In fact,

everything about her is soft, from her tiny stature to her delicate skin. That’s another reason why she could never be our mate, I think.

The Dark Moon Park are warriors, and if there’s one thing I’m almost certain of, it’s that Ember is no warrior. Her wolf might be, but if her slow, painful transformation yesterday was anything to go by, Ember isn’t very attuned with her wolf.

I wonder if they have always been this way. I try not to think too hard about it, since my annoyed with me enough as it is.

wolf is

Being close to her seems to calm him, I realize. Since Ember arrived, he's been calmer than I've ever known him, at least in the years since our mate betrayed us.

When I hear the knock on the door, I pull my hand away from Ember's skin like it's been burned. The last thing I need is for Joshua to see my gentle touches and get the wrong idea about my feelings. toward Ember.

Besides, the touching isn't for me; it's for my wolf. Joshua wouldn't understand that.

I stand up and walk toward the door, stealing one more glance back at Ember before I open it.

Joshua stands there with the pack doctor, who is holding a small black bag in his hand. "She reacted badly to the pack mark," I state blandly, stepping aside to let them both enter.

The doctor walks over to the bed, tutting and shaking his head. "You shouldn't have gone ahead with the ceremony without her wolf present," he chides.

I roll my eyes. Tell me something I don't know.

"I

guess

we'll just have to heal her the old-fashioned way until her wolf returns."

I frown. "Old-fashioned?\*"

The doctor looks at me and chuckles. "The way doctors heal humans, with time and rest **and** medicines. It's our wolves that heal us so quickly in normal circumstances."

My wolf paces in my head. "*You made our mate human! No wonder you think she's weak.*"

I hate when he uses **my** own thoughts against me like that. We **are** one and the same, though, so it's not really a surprise that we each know what the other is thinking. It's only awkward when we want different things, like now.

I watch as the doctor bandages Ember's arm. Then he lifts one **of** her eyelids and shines a torch in her eyes. She still doesn't move. He pulls a syringe from his bag and lifts the hem of her dress to

My wolf growls. "No one *should touch her except for us.*"

I ignore him and instead, look toward the doctor. “What was that?” I ask.

“Just

a painkiller, just in case she comes around. It would probably be better to do this back in the hospital, where I can monitor her,” he adds.

My wolf growls an emphatic “no,” and this time, I agree with him. I want Ember here. She’ll be safe here.

“No,” I state, more calmly than I feel. “When do you expect her wolf to return?” I add.

The doctor sighs and stands up. “It depends. Wolfsbane isn’t an exact science. A mark from her mate, even a non-fated one, would help kickstart the healing process.”

“Let’s mark her. *Mark her* now,” my wolf yips excitedly.

I ignore him. That is never going to happen. Then I glance over at Joshua, who is smirking. He raises an eyebrow.

I know exactly what he’s thinking. He thinks Ember means something to me. He’s wrong.

“No,” I growl, out loud so that it’s an answer for the doctor as well as my wolf. “I will not allow her to be marked without her permission.”

Marking a she-wolf without permission is the equivalent of a forced marriage or rape in the human world. I will not tolerate it in my pack, and I certainly won’t commit the act myself.

Other alphas will quite happily force a mating between two unmated wolves if they think it will benefit their pack. I wouldn’t be surprised if this happens in the Craven Moon Pack sometimes.

It may even have been that pathetic alpha’s idea to have Ember’s mate paired with a stronger she-wolf, leaving Ember spurned and mateless.

No one in my pack will ever be forced to mate with someone, though, and my wolf should know better than to suggest it.

My wolf grumbles something unintelligible and sulks again.

I pull the bedroom door open and stand there, saying nothing, giving the doctor and Joshua **at** significant look. Both men recognize this as their cue to leave.

They know better than to try and continue this conversation, either with me or with each other. I have the final word.

I close the door with a slam behind them. I should have told Joshua to retrieve Ember's clothes from the room she shared with Crystal, so that she can spend the night here till she wakes, but I really don't need his sarcasm or innuendo right now.

Instead, I remove my shirt. Ember can wear that for now.

My wolf purrs. He likes the idea of her wearing our clothes. At least it may keep him quiet for a while.