

The Edge Of Reason - by Michelle Torlot

Chapter 3 - Damon

Damon

I stare at the list in front of me. A list of wolves that are part of the tribute I demand from the weaker packs for maintaining the treaties I have with them. In truth, I don't need warriors or females. But this keeps them under my thumb and fearful. I no longer need to demand the tributes now. The pathetic Alphas just send them. Most wolves that arrive are keen to be here. They know my warrior training is 2nd only to that of the Royal Guard. There are occasionally wolves that arrive that don't want to be here. They are usually the ones that have been given an ultimatum by their alphas. Transfer or go rogue. If they cause too much trouble, their time here is short. I will accept nothing but full submission. Usually, a few swift punishments see to that or the threat of an untimely death.

It gives me a reputation with other packs that I'm only too happy to foster. It means I receive wolves that have the greatest potential, which makes my pack even stronger.

Most of the packs that are sending wolves already train their warriors to a good standard, females and males alike, but I frown at the last name on the list.

A wolf coming from the Cravan Moon Pack.

The name suits the pack well. At least with the current Alpha at the helm. His pack is probably the weakest. The only pack that doesn't train their she-wolves. Then why is the Alpha sending me one?

I never turn a she-wolf away. Sometimes, with the right guiding hand, they can be as strong as a male wolf. Sometimes stronger.

But Alpha Conrad Stone likes to keep his females weak and submissive. Whilst I demand full submission it's in a different way. I want my wolves to be the best version of themselves that they can be, male or female.

Granted, sometimes I have to be harsh to do it, but that is the way of a true and strong alpha.

I look up from the list when I hear my phone ping. A text message from my beta, Joshua.

6 Tributes were collected. 1 may be an issue. Now heading back.

I look at the list and sigh. It doesn't take Einstein to guess which one is going to be a problem.

I stare at the name on the sheet. Ember James. I wonder what she had done because Conrad Stone never sends me any females.

I spend the rest of the afternoon watching my wolves training.

Every wolf in my pack trains. From the pups when they start school, to the older wolves.

For the pups, it's mostly improving fitness and stamina with games and sports. For the older wolves, it's making sure they remain fit and supple.

Proper warrior training starts when the pups turn thirteen. We split them into age and ability.

All of them try hard to impress me when they know I'm watching. A word of praise or encouragement from me makes all the difference. The same as a harsh word for any infraction puts them in their place. Sometimes it's more than a word, but this rarely happens. They all know the penalty for disobedience.

After spending time watching my wolves, I shift and go for a run. I insist that every person in my pack lets their wolf run at least every other day if not every day.

It keeps the human and wolf sides in balance.

Most of my punishments involve keeping the offenders in wolf form or human form. It means that I keep the more severe punishments for the more severe infractions.

Currently, there are no such punishments in effect, but when new pack members join, I usually find that some are required to ensure that the new members follow my pack law. I do not tolerate disobedience. They need to learn this early on.

I've been running for about an hour when Joshua contacts me via the pack-link. It means he's close.

"We'll be arriving in around an hour."

I acknowledge him and head back to the pack house to shower and change.

I always receive all new tributes when they arrive.

I'll look them over and decide their best placement in the pack. I also need to see their wolves. You can tell a lot about a person from seeing their wolf.

I'm standing outside the pack house when the minibus arrives. I stand at the top of the steps dressed in combat trousers and heavy black boots. My chest is bare, showing off my tattoos and scars.

I wear my scars proudly. They show that unlike some Alphas; I am happy to fight beside my warriors. A good Alpha always leads from the front. Those that don't are cowards. Like the cowards that send me tributes each year. If they stood up to me and said no, I would respect them more, but they don't.

I fold my arms across my chest as my beta steps out of the bus. The tributes follow close behind.

"Present yourselves to your new Alpha," he demands.

They line up in front of me. Three males and three females.

I see immediately which one is from the Cravan Moon pack.

All the others stand straight looking at me, but avoiding eye contact. Proud but nonchallenging. Both males and females have toned muscles. Not to the standard of my own warriors, but that will come.

The female, Ember James, is tiny compared to the others. She's supposed to be twenty years old but looks more like a juvenile. She stands with her shoulders sagging, as she stares at the floor. She is skin and bone, carrying barely any muscle. The dress she wears does nothing to hide the fact that she looks half-starved. Her blonde hair hangs limply at her shoulders. She looks broken. This female is no troublemaker. It doesn't look like she has a rebellious bone in her body. She's no warrior either. One of my young juvenile pups could take her down. The scent of fear is coming off of her in waves.

I scan the tributes, ready for the next stage of my inspection. I can make no exceptions. Wolves who join my pack must be brave, strong and fearless.

“Strip and shift,” I command.

Only then does the young waif look up. Shock is evident on her face. She wasn't expecting this.

Her eyes are a stunning shade of blue, like the ocean. If she took some pride in her appearance, she would look beautiful, even with her tiny stature.

I don't understand why she is surprised at my command. The Alphas know what I expect and should inform the tributes which they send. It appears that her Alpha was remiss in this duty, but I'm hardly surprised, especially if he wants rid of her.

The other tributes strip off quickly. Begin to shift. I can tell they let their wolves out regularly. I can see from their eyes that although they are in wolf form, their human side still maintains a certain amount of control. When a wolf takes full control, the eyes are pitch black, but the eyes remain the same colour, perhaps a shade or two darker if the human side is in control.

By the time the other five have shifted, the small female has only just shed her clothes.

I sigh and glare at her. Showing my impatience.

When she begins to shift, it's painful to watch. The shift isn't fluid bones crack and reshape slowly. This only usually occurs the first few times we shift. The more we shift, the easier it becomes, which makes me think she has barely shifted since the first time. It would certainly explain her reticence to remove her clothes in front of others.

She whimpers in pain until the shift is complete. Then all I can do is stare at her wolf form, a little shocked.

Not only because the wolf is small, but because its honey-coloured coat is dull and lifeless.

The wolf raises its head and glares at me. Staring me straight in the eye. A challenge.

“Ember James, control your wolf,” I growl.

The small wolf's eyes are pitch black. There is no sign of the blue eyes of Ember James at all.

It opens its mouth and curls back its top lip in a snarl.

Is this mutt really challenging me?

My bones realign as I shift. It takes seconds. Annoyingly, my clothes get shredded, but I need to deal with this inconvenience now.

My wolf is about four times the size of the little runt in front of me. Like its human counterpart, it has very little mass. That doesn't stop it from snapping its teeth and growling at me. If it wasn't so disrespectful, I would find it amusing.

My wolf surges forward, and I let him. Normally he would rip the challenger's throat out, but he doesn't.

He grabs it by the scruff and shakes it. Like a mother wolf would do when she teaches her pups respect. Then he tosses the tiny wolf onto the ground.

She lands with a thud on the ground. Dazed from the impact and the fact that her brain is probably still rattling around in her skull from the shaking she just received.

“Get a silver collar and restrain this mutt.”

I growl through the mind-link.

Two of my seasoned warriors come running with the required item and a length of chain.

I shift back. I'm not sure if I'm more annoyed that the mutt dared to challenge me, or because my wolf chose to let it live.

I stare at the rest of the tributes, still in wolf form and baring their necks in submission.

“Shift,” I command.

They all shift fluidly and dress.

“My gamma will show you to your rooms, then you may go to the dining room and eat.”

I nod to the warriors.

“Chain it up. I’ll decide what to do with it in the morning,” I growl.

I grab a pair of shorts from the cubby by the front entrance. Spares are always kept there for just this eventuality.

Joshua runs to my side.

“Do you think that’s wise?” he asks, glancing back at the mutt that is being dragged to the punishment pole.

I glare at him.

“Are you questioning me, Beta?”

I never address Joshua this way unless I’m pissed, and right now, I’m more than pissed.

Joshua quickly shows me his throat.

“No Alpha, it’s just she hasn’t eaten at all since we picked her up. I’m not sure when she ate last.”

I clench my jaw. This shouldn’t be my problem. She shouldn’t be my problem, but until I speak to her Alpha and arrange for her return, it is.

Since my wolf isn’t baying for her blood, I need to do something.

“Toss the wolf some meat. She’ll stay there until I speak with her Alpha,” I growl before storming into the pack house.