

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 first 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 were

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

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.”

Joshua’s shoulders sag slightly. He’s been trying to pair me off with another she-wolf since my own 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.*”

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, even 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, Whore, 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.

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 mates. A reason to celebrate.

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.