

## Chapter 9

Ember

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.

me 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.

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“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.”

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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 dungeon.

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 Damon 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 Damon's dungeon. I guess that's my fault too.

Alpha Damon 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 Damon 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.

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 mark on her arm.

"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 Damon 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.