

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.

“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.

“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 as far as I am concerned.

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.

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 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.