

## 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?"

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? 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 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.