

Learning to Love... Book 1: Shade |

A Thorn in the Side

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CAELAN

I burst into my office, slamming the door behind me as I prowled the room. I couldn't sit there and listen to that any longer. It was infuriating to hear anyone speak about my mate the way Sunny had.

And to strike her in front of everyone?!

It made me wonder how many times she'd done that before. It had been too swift a reaction for it to have been a one-off.

It'd been clear from the start that Sunny wanted to reinforce the fact that Shade was beneath her. She'd referred to her as a servant from the moment I arrived.

It almost seems like she thought we'd be impressed. But all she's really done is make me even more disgusted with her.

I still didn't know much about Shade. Taffy had tried to get past her defenses, but she kept herself tucked tightly inside her shell. However, it was becoming more apparent that others were to blame for her distant nature.

She's probably been bullied into submission. Told she doesn't matter as much to the pack. Not like Sunny. That girl is the most self-important she-wolf I've ever met. That display at dinner proved as much. I would never make someone like that my luna.

If it were up to me, I'd have Sunny dismissed first thing in the morning. She never really stood a chance anyway. Even if Shade hadn't been my mate, Sunny's energy had rubbed me the wrong way from the very moment she introduced herself. And now I knew why.

A knock at the door snapped me out of my reverie. I sniffed the air and then bid for the wolf on the other side to enter. I knew that scent well, and she wasn't the kind of female who liked to be kept waiting.

“Caelan,” my mother greeted as she entered the room and closed the door behind her.

“Mother,” I grumbled, not really wanting to speak to anyone right now.

“Would you like to explain to me what happened at dinner?” she bid as she walked over to the couch and took a seat.

“Not really,” I muttered through clenched jaws.

If I were going to trust either of my parents with the news that I’d found my mate, it would definitely have been my mother. However, I didn’t want to put her in the position of having to keep a secret from my father while I figured out how to present my fated mate to him.

Also, my mother’s opinion on who would be the next luna mattered a great deal to me. I worried she might disapprove of Shade and try to convince me to let her go.

“Well, you may not want to discuss it, but I do,” she said sharply, making her intentions clear as she casually smoothed a hand down her dress. “I don’t care for that Sunny girl.”

A low growl escaped me at the mention of her name.

“The omega from her pack though,” she continued, my ears perking up as the conversation shifted to my mate. “Now, *her* I find intriguing.”

“In what way?” I pressed, curious to see what my mother was getting at.

“Well, she’s beautiful, as I’m sure you’ve noticed,” my mother hinted, a mischievous twinkle in her eye. “The energy she exudes is calming, caring, and much more befitting of a future luna. I’m curious about her eyes though. Such a peculiar color. They’re strange, yet somehow still...”

“Breathtaking,” I offered, my voice full of longing.

My mother snapped her fingers victoriously. “Ah-ha! I knew it!”

“W-what?” I stammered.

“You couldn’t keep your eyes off her at dinner. And don’t think I didn’t notice you were waiting for her to eat,” she accused, a playful smile on her lips.

"What are you talking about?" I argued as I waved a dismissive hand at her. "After you and Father ate, I took a bite of mashed potatoes."

"You did, but you didn't eat them," she remarked, tossing her long brunette hair over her shoulder. "I saw you spit it into your napkin."

"How did you notice that from your seat?" I groaned, running my hand over my face. "You were at the other end of the table!"

"I'm your mother, Caelan! Just because you're the alpha now doesn't mean you can get one past me," she replied. "I can't believe you didn't tell me *immediately* that you had found your fated mate!"

"Huh?" I asked.

I thought she'd be upset, but she sounds thrilled.

"When do I get to meet her properly?" my mother squealed excitedly. "I'd like to have lunch with her, or maybe afternoon tea. Does she like tea? Never mind, we'll figure out the details later. The point is, I'm so excited to get to know my future daughter-in-law!"

"Hold on, Mother. I have to figure a way out of this damn choosing ritual first. That is unless you think we can get away with just ending it right now," I asked hopefully.

"You know we can't do that, Caelan," she sighed. "Once the choosing ritual has been invoked, certain traditions must be followed out of respect for the ladies participating and their families. A match resulting from a choosing ritual that isn't properly observed will be seen as disrespectful."

"Even though I've found my mate?" I pressed, hoping for a different answer.

"I'm afraid so," she confirmed with a sympathetic shrug. "There's no way to prove she's your mate outside of you claiming she is. The Elders would never accept it."

I huffed in annoyance. I knew she was right, but I didn't want her to be.

"To be honest, I'm not sure that rushing things is to your benefit anyway," she continued. "She hasn't had an easy life. That much is clear. And she seems

very dedicated to her role as servant and protector. I worry if you try to claim her too quickly, she may reject the idea.”

I paled at the thought. *Would she really reject me?*

My heart clenched tightly as the ache in my chest grew nearly unbearable. “What do you mean?”

“If I know Alpha Butch like I think I do, he’s counting on you to choose Sunny to save his pack. If that’s the case, then Sunny will be bound and determined to become your luna. Out of a sense of duty, Shade may refuse your bond in hopes that you choose Sunny instead.”

“So, what should I do?”

“Use the cover of the choosing ritual as an opportunity to get to know her. Help her discover she’s more than just Sunny’s servant.”

“That’s what Taffy said,” I mumbled.

“She’s right. You’ll have to make Shade see that she’s deserving of love and happiness. That it’s okay to be who she is and be seen as more than a tool for her pack. Because as it stands, I’m not sure she has any idea that she can be anything else.”

“I don’t even know where to begin,” I admitted, realizing I may be in over my head.

“It’ll be easier as you get to know her. Right now, it just feels daunting because you aren’t sure where to start,” she said softly. “You’re in a delicate position, but I have faith you can do this, Caelan. Just take it one day at a time.”

I nodded, staring at my hands.

“She reminds me of a girl you used to play with when you were younger,” my mother remarked thoughtfully. “The similarities are remarkable actually.”

I glanced at her, raising an eyebrow. “Who?”

“I wouldn’t expect you to remember much, but I was good friends with the previous luna of Thunder Moon. Her name was Brona, and she was part of

Harvest Moon before she met Butch. She'd visit with her twin daughters, Sunny and Shade."

"Wait, so Sunny had a twin sister with the same name as her servant?" I asked incredulously.

"Bizarre, isn't it?" she shrugged. "She even had silver hair like her guard. The eyes were different, but other than that she looks disturbingly like that little girl. Of course, it couldn't be possible. Shade Mallory died alongside her mother in a rogue attack many years ago."

Something about the way she said it led me to believe that she wasn't convinced that was the case any longer.

Why would Butch name Sunny's bodyguard after his deceased daughter?

"I didn't get to meet Shade when I went to Thunder Moon," I admitted. "When I asked Alpha Butch about it yesterday, he claimed that she was away visiting a nearby pack at the time which technically made her unavailable."

My mother scoffed derisively, and I nodded.

"I know, but given what I've learned about her, I'm not sure that's true. I think he hid her for some reason, but for the life of me, I can't imagine why," I remarked.

"Have you tried asking Shade?" my mother suggested. "I'm sure she could explain a few things."

"Taffy has been speaking with her, trying to get her to come out of her shell, so to speak," I sighed.

"Taffy has been talking to her. Hmm...and how much have *you* spoken to her, exactly?" she questioned, her tone skeptical.

"Not much," I replied honestly.

"And why not?"

"You know why, mother. It's this stupid choosing ritual," I groaned. "I can't show favoritism this early and risk angering the Elders. I have to take it slow."

“So, taking things slow means not talking to her at all?” my mother asked. “She’s your mate, Caelan. You should at least be trying to make her comfortable around you. She’s never going to get there if you keep your distance.”

“But—”

“No, you listen to me,” she interrupted. “I know you have to ‘play along’ with the choosing ritual now that it’s started, but you had better find a way to make your mate feel more important than those other she-wolves or, when the time comes, she’s not going to want anything to do with you.”

She’s right. She often is.

“I’m working on it, Mother,” I assured her as she stood. “I promise. I’m not going to let her slip away without giving it everything I’ve got.”

She nodded and left. I slumped into my chair as the door closed behind her.

The problem is how to go about it. How do I make Shade feel important and explain we’re mates short of just dropping the bomb on her and hoping she takes it well?

Then another thought crossed my mind, filling my heart with dread.

Tomorrow’s group date had already been planned. It was kind of this social event designed to give the alpha the opportunity to get to know as many females as possible in a short time. But knowing what I knew now, I wished I had elected to skip it.

I’ll be expected to spend time with each of the she-wolves individually and give them my undivided attention. Which means Shade is going to have to sit by and watch other women flirt with her mate.

The thought made me dislike myself greatly.

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