

## Learning to Love... Book 1: Shade |

### Mixed Emotions

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##### SHADE

I hadn't slept very well at all last night.

Dinner had been a disaster. I had made everyone feel uncomfortable, ruining the meal along with Sunny's dress. Alpha Caelan had been so furious that he'd left and not come back.

*It probably didn't help Sunny's chances with him when she reprimanded me in public, but I deserved it. I made a mistake.*

I reached into the nightstand and pulled out the crumpled photo of my mother.

*I'm sorry, Mom. I'm letting you down. I'm letting the whole pack down. I know we need this mating between Sunny and Caelan if we're ever going to stop Dark Moon. I promise to do better today. I promise to help Sunny so I can keep everyone safe.*

I kissed the picture and tucked it back into the drawer, lying back as I stared at the ceiling.

That was my purpose. I had to protect the pack and Sunny, even though there were days when I wished I could be anyone else. Not Shade the bodyguard, but just Shade.

A soft knock on the door called me from the warm comfort of my bed.

I trudged over and opened it carefully, smiling when I saw Taffy waiting on the other side. I gestured for her to enter, stepping aside as she came through with a large, covered platter.

"Good morning," she offered cheerfully, breezing into the room and setting the tray on the small coffee table. "I brought breakfast! Come on, let's eat."

She took off the lid, revealing two heavily laden plates. The heavenly smell of bacon made my stomach growl, and I hurried to join her.

We ate in silence for a few minutes, which was unusual for Taffy. I wiped my mouth, eyeing her anxiously.

"I'm sorry if Sunny and I made you uncomfortable last night," I apologized as Taffy glanced up from her plate. "I saw how upset you were when she corrected me. I'm sorry you had to see it. She doesn't normally do that in public."

"Does she do that sort of thing often?" she pressed. "Correct you like that?"

"Sometimes." I shrugged. "She isn't doing it to be cruel or anything. I have to learn from my mistakes so I don't repeat them. My training master always encouraged swift and severe reprimands."

"Well, he was wrong," she huffed. "You shouldn't slap or degrade anyone, no matter what they did or what their rank is. Even an omega deserves to be treated with respect."

"But I'm beneath Sunny, Taffy. It's my duty to serve her and my pack in whatever way they need," I argued.

"Maybe, but you don't have to be her doormat, Shade," she asserted. "You can't be serving Sunny while you're here. You're both equal participants in the choosing. Your status as an omega doesn't count."

"But Alpha Butch—"

"Shade, let's not get into this right now," she sighed in frustration. "Like I said, your alpha's rules don't apply while you're at Harvest Moon. As a final candidate, you're technically considered a temporary member of this pack. Can you just agree to that for now? Please?"

"Okay," I answered.

"Great, so no more serving Sunny?"

"I'll try," I conceded, not certain how I would manage to protect my sister if I wasn't allowed to serve her.

*At the very least, we can keep any further punishments private, not that I want there to be any more. There's a whole different set of rules to follow here, and countless ways to screw this up. I can't afford to let Sunny down.*

“Perfect,” she cheered, flipping back to her perky personality in the blink of an eye. “Now finish your breakfast so you can try on one of your new bikinis.”

I groaned. I wasn’t excited about this. The bikinis Taffy had chosen were far too revealing for my taste, but then again, I’d never felt comfortable showing that much skin.

“Okay, so today is a group outing to the waterfalls,” she said as she set aside her plate.

“The waterfalls?” I replied excitedly.

“Yes,” she chuckled. “I forget you didn’t go on the pack tour. There are two waterfalls on our territory. One has two really high falls, which are beautiful but a bit too loud for a casual hangout like this.”

I leaned forward, eager to hear more.

“The second set has a bunch of falls,” she continued. “But they’re much shorter and slant downward almost like a slide. We call them the Sloping Falls. We have inner tubes stored up there so we can go up on hot days and play in the water. It’s a blast, so hurry up and get changed.”

I ate my last piece of bacon and grabbed the black bikini off the bed and hurried into the bathroom.

“You’d better come out and show me what it looks like!” Taffy called as I shut the door.

I rolled my eyes. I knew she’d never forgive me if I didn’t, but once I had it on, I was suddenly nervous.

*This is too much right? I guess I can keep on my T-shirt or something. Why couldn’t we have gotten a one piece?*

I took a deep breath and opened the bathroom door.

“Oh my Goddess, Shade!” she squealed as she glanced up. “You look killer in that!”

“You really think so?” I asked, walking over to check for myself in the mirror.

"Yes, girl! You have an amazing figure!" she exclaimed. "I don't know why you're so shy about showing it off."

"What about my scars?" I asked, turning as I stared at my reflection.

A few of the more prominent ones were on full display, and I felt conscientious about them.

"What about then?" Taffy replied. "We're wolves. Scars are sexy. It shows that you're a strong, proud warrior. A defender of your pack."

I smiled at her over my shoulder. I'd never been proud of being a warrior. It was just what I was. What I'd been trained to be.

"Where'd you get this one," she asked, pointing at a jagged scar that ran from my hip around to my back. "I bet you got it in a real badass way."

"Not really," I said hesitantly. "It was an attack from Dark Moon when I was fifteen." I shrugged. "I was still in training then, so they got a lot closer than they should've."

"Fifteen?" she whispered softly, like she didn't want to believe it. "That's so young. What about the one on your leg?"

I looked down at my thigh. "An attempt on Sunny's life a year later."

"And the marks across your back? Are those whip marks?"

"Yeah. Training master." I winced as the memory came rushing back.

It had been just after the Dark Moon attack when I was a teenager. I'd made a mistake letting them get too close, and my master had made sure I wouldn't soon forget that lesson.

"What about this one?" she asked, pointing to my cheek. "I've been wondering about that one."

I shifted on my feet. That particular scar had been given to me by my father the day he took my last name from me. The day he made me Shade the servant. Shade the weapon.

It wasn't the only scar he'd given me over the years, but it was the one that had done the most damage to my soul.

"It's nothing," I lied. "An accident."

I could tell Taffy didn't believe me, but she didn't press any further, nodding and passing me a small backpack.

"Here. Use this to carry your bikini and towel. You can just wear a T-shirt and some shorts for now."

"Why wouldn't I just keep the bikini on underneath?" I asked.

"You can only get to the falls in wolf form," she said. "You'll need to carry whatever you want to bring."

"W-wolf form?" I stuttered.

I knew Taffy was aware of my curse, but I had begged her not to tell anyone else. If I shifted, everyone would know.

"Yes." She nodded. "Is that a problem?"

"I-I can't go as a wolf," I muttered, my panic starting to rise.

"It's the only way to get there, Shade," she reasoned. "And you are not turning down an invitation from Caelan. You have to go."

*She's right. I've been invited by the alpha. I can't turn him down.*

I smiled and went to change, my hands shaking as I shoved my bikini and towel into the bag. I would have to go against my father's orders. I would have to reveal my wolf.

Next Chapter

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