

Learning to Love... Book 1: Shade |

Time Alone with the Alpha Time Alone with the Alpha

SHADE

Alpha Caelan moved so quickly that I didn't even see him. He caught me just before I slammed into the slippery rocks, pulling me firmly against his chest.

I gasped at the shock of his touch, overwhelmed by its sudden intensity.

His breathing was heavy, and he squeezed me tighter, almost as though he were afraid that I would disappear if he let me go.

"Thank you," I whispered, unsure of myself.

Something about being in his arms felt right. It felt like somewhere I belonged. I was surprised by how much I liked being there.

I pulled away, reminding myself what was at stake. He didn't fight me, but I thought I heard him sigh as I stepped back.

"It's just over here," he said, carefully navigating around the rocks.

I followed him up the river for another minute or two before we came to a large open cavern in the side of the mountain.

"I figured you might be more comfortable if we got away from the others for a bit while we got to know each other," he remarked as we reached the entrance. "It doesn't seem like you're a real fan of crowds."

"How did you know?" I asked.

"I've noticed you clenching and unclenching your fists when you're around a big group. Your shoulders tense, and your eyes dart around like you're looking for a way out," he observed. "Just doesn't seem like you're able to relax."

I nodded in surprise. Not many were aware of my issue with large crowds. He'd been paying a lot more attention to me than I would have suspected.

I gasped as we entered the cavern.

Massive stalactites dripped down from overhead, reaching for their counterparts as water gently trickled down their surfaces and fell into the small pools below. It made the whole place shimmer as the dim light danced off the ripples.

On one side of the cave, carefully carved out by time, sat a window into the mountainside. Water flowed in tiny streams across its opening, falling like rain from the sky.

"It's beautiful," I sighed, forgetting I wasn't alone for a moment.

"It is," he agreed, his hand brushing against mine.

He took it, leading me along the river's edge as we wandered farther into the cave. He guided me up a gentle slope to a drier spot.

"I wanted this to be something special," he explained with another dazzling smile. "Sorry it isn't much. I had wanted to do a candlelight lunch or something, but with this being a group thing, I didn't get the chance. I promise to do better on our next date."

Next date? He wants to go out with me again? Like just me?

Sensing my surprise, he chuckled. "You're not used to this kind of thing, are you?"

Despite myself a small, unexpected smile formed on my lips. I liked the sound of his laugh. It made me feel...content.

Wait. That can't be right. Is that how I'm feeling right now?

"Uh, no," I replied, honestly. "I'm not allowed to date, you know, as an omega and pack warrior. My responsibilities are supposed to come first."

"That's ridiculous," he scoffed. "Everyone should be allowed a little time for themselves. What about when you find your mate?"

I shrugged, trying to avoid the conversation. What was I supposed to say? I couldn't reveal that I couldn't have a mate because I was cursed, even though he probably already suspected as much after he saw my eyes.

We stood there silently for a few moments, taking in the sights and sounds.

"I've always liked this place," he said softly, finally breaking the silence. "Like it's never quite done growing, constantly reshaping itself into something new as time marches on."

I turned to him as he sighed happily.

"I've always thought of the stalactites and stalagmites like two lovers," he continued. "Forever reaching out for each other."

I stared at the pair to our left, mere inches separating them from becoming one. *Never quite able to touch no matter how hard they try. No matter how desperately they yearn for one another.*

"That's kind of sad," I admitted, sorrow filling my heart at his words.

"It is, but it isn't," he admitted, turning me toward a column to my right. "They grow and learn on their own before they finally get to come together, and then they get to spend the rest of eternity locked in each other's embrace."

I marveled at the seamless way the two parts had joined to form one smooth surface.

Suddenly, an unexpected flicker of hope ignited in my chest. If they could reach each other, maybe one day I too could find my other half.

Without warning, Alpha Caelan reached forward and wrapped his arms around me, pulling me tight against his hard torso.

I stiffened instantly, unsure of how I was supposed to react as I placed my hands on his bare chest. Everywhere our bodies touched sent thrilling sparks rippling across my skin.

I sighed, relaxing a little and willing the feeling to seep into my bones. Goddess help me, but it felt right.

He buried his face in my hair and inhaled deeply, taking in my scent. I could feel the tension in his body ease as he took another breath.

After several silent moments, Alpha Caelan finally loosened his hold on me and took a small step back.

Confused, I glanced up. He was looking down at the space between us, staring at where my fingers were splayed out against his bare skin.

“Oh! Uh, I’m s-sorry. I didn’t mean to,” I mumbled, snatching my hand away.

But before I could react, he grabbed my wrist and slowly brought it back to his chest.

I gulped, staring at the spot where my hand touched him. Worry prickled beneath my skin.

What do I do now? I shouldn’t be touching him at all, but he clearly wants me to. I don’t hate it either. I can feel his heartbeat beneath my palm. It’s comforting. Goddess, I need to stop. This isn’t supposed to be about me. Remember the mission. How do I get his attention back on Sunny?

“If I didn’t think it would freak you out, I’d kiss you right now,” he groaned, his voice unusually strained.

I jumped, blindsided by his confession. *Kiss me?! He wants to kiss me?! Me?!*

I pulled out of his grasp slowly, and he didn’t try to force me to stay. I stepped away, running a shaking hand through my hair.

I have to get a grip on myself. He’s supposed to want Sunny, not me. I need to get him back on track.

“I’m sorry,” he sighed. “I shouldn’t have said that. I know you’re probably not ready for physical contact like that. I just couldn’t help myself. I’m trying to be patient, but it’s hard.”

Patient for what? This is getting out of hand. Sunny. Talk up Sunny. I chewed on my lip as I fidgeted.

“If you don’t want me to think about kissing you, Shade, then you need to stop bringing my attention to those luscious lips of yours,” he teased.

I instantly released it, turning so he wouldn’t see the desire on my face. Goddess, I wanted to tempt him. I wanted him to press his lips to mine as he pulled me close like he had a moment ago.

I put a hand to my head trying to clear my thoughts.

“Um...so...uh, Sunny... She’s really g-great. I think you two would...um...would get along really well,” I stuttered, trying to get his attention back on her.

Thunder Moon was counting on me. No matter what I wanted, the pack’s safety had to come first. We needed this alliance more than anything.

“Really?” he said in surprise. “I admit that I want to kiss you, and your first reaction is to talk up another woman? Are you really trying to push me toward Sunny?”

“It’s what’s best for everyone,” I admitted quietly. “Thunder Moon needs this union.”

“Why?” he pressed, his tone warming with frustration. “We’re already allies. Why is it so important that I choose Sunny? Wouldn’t it be the same result if I were to pick you? You’re still part of Thunder Moon.”

“It’s not the same. Sunny is the daughter of the alpha. I’m an omega. Why would you ever...” I sighed heavily, letting my words slip away. “Sunny is in danger. She won’t be safe until she’s mated. And she’s a much better candidate for luna than I am. I can’t...”

He moved forward, closing the distance between us. “You can’t tell me that you don’t sense it, Shade,” he whispered. “I understand you don’t know a lot about mates, but please tell me that you feel this too.”

His fingers gently brushed against mine, sending little pulses of energy zipping through my veins. I shivered but didn’t back away.

“Please tell me that I’m not the only one, Shade. That every time we touch, it affects you as much as it does me,” he begged, his voice filled with desperation. “Because honestly, I’m going crazy here.”

My body buzzed with need, my heart racing in my chest like it was about to take off. I looked up at his chin, ready to tell him that I felt it too, but I hesitated.

“Shade,” he started, bringing his hand up toward my cheek. “There’s something you should know—”

“Caelan!” Gamma Oliver interrupted, rushing through the entrance to the cave. “Sorry, but you’re needed immediately.”

I stepped away quickly, my face burning. *What am I thinking?! Sunny is supposed to be his mate.*

“What’s wrong?” he asked, letting me go reluctantly.

“Dark Moon scouts were spotted near the southern border,” Oliver said.

My head whipped up at his words, my fists clenching. *Dark Moon?! Here?!*

“Tell Dillon and Taffy to escort everyone back to the pack house immediately,” he instructed. “You and I will head over to the southern border to check it out.”

Alpha Caelan turned back toward me, a disappointed look on his face. “I’m sorry, Shade. We’re going to have to cut this short. Go with the others. You’ll be safe with them.”

I nodded, barely registering the concern in his voice as we raced out of the cave. I had bigger things to worry about.

There could only be one reason Dark Moon was suddenly sniffing around Harvest Moon’s territory.

Sunny.