

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

### Doubts and Confusion

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#### SHADE

“Oh my Goddess, Shade!” Sunny squealed as she barged into my room first thing the following morning.

I shot up in bed, immediately on high alert as I looked around. Realizing there was no danger, I flopped back against the pillows.

“What is it, Sunny?” I grumbled, rubbing my eyes.

“Did you hear?! Deianira has been dismissed!” she announced, her voice filled with joy.

“That’s great, Sunny,” I yawned as I stretched.

“It’s more than great,” she scoffed. “That means there’s one less person in my way.”

“That’s true,” I agreed sleepily. “Gives you better odds.”

*Why did she have to run in here to tell me this? I was having the best dream.*

“To be honest,” she continued, dropping onto the edge of my bed. “I’m surprised Caelan didn’t get rid of you. Everyone knows you don’t belong here. You’d think he would’ve cut the least likely candidate first.”

I gave a halfhearted nod. *She’s not wrong. If Alpha Caelan was going to cut anyone, it would’ve made the most sense for him to cut me. Especially now that he knows about my curse. It’s obvious that I can’t be his luna.*

“Anyway,” she said, jumping up and fluffing her hair. “Today is my private date with Caelan, and it has to be perfect. I plan on getting a lot more than a little comforting from him, if you know what I mean.”

She winked, flipping her blonde locks over her shoulder as she rushed out of my room.

I groaned, climbing out of bed to get ready for my day.

*Five more minutes. That's all I wanted. And why does it bother me so much that Sunny has a date with the alpha. I knew she did, but still, knowing that she's going to be throwing herself at him makes me sick.*

I showered, contemplating Sunny's news.

*Why would Alpha Caelan have dismissed Deianira instead of me? Deianira is beautiful, and she's a higher-ranked wolf and part of his pack. Why would he want to keep a cursed omega like me?*

I dressed and was just about to leave my room when another familiar face barged through my door.

"Breakfast!" Taffy chimed with a bright smile.

I couldn't help but laugh at her enthusiasm as we sat down to eat.

"Can I ask you a question?" I asked.

"Of course," she assured me with a shrug.

"What happens if a wolf doesn't accept their mate?"

Taffy grew quiet, her eyes darting to me as she considered my question.

"Well, rejection is always an option, but it's frowned upon. Most wolves wouldn't even consider it unless they had a really good reason."

*Like a curse?*

"You can reject your mate?" I asked, snagging a piece of bacon.

"Yes. One of them would just have to proclaim it out loud for the Goddess to hear, and the rejected mate has to accept it. It's simple enough, but I've heard it can be quite painful. Honestly, I've never heard of anyone rejecting their fated mate."

"What about a chosen mate?" I asked. "Like in a choosing ritual. Would there still have to be a rejection?"

"Only if they'd already marked each other," she explained. "Chosen mates aren't handpicked by the Goddess, so it's a little different. Probably not as painful, but again, I've never heard of anyone doing it."

"Well, what if that wolf might be making a mistake? Like if they wanted to be with someone they shouldn't. What if it was better for their pack if they picked someone else?"

"The only mate pairings that affect the pack are the alpha, beta, and gamma," she clarified.

"Okay, say Alpha Caelan was considering a mate that wouldn't be good for the pack," I pressed. "Or say the choosing is a bust and the only one left standing isn't right for the role of luna."

"What are you trying to get at, Shade?" she questioned, eyeing me skeptically as she took a sip of coffee.

"If Alpha Caelan dismisses everyone from the choosing for one reason or another, and the only one left standing isn't right for the role, would he be forced to make her his mate or would he be allowed to find another?"

"He could declare the ritual a failure, and the Elders would allow him a chance to start over and try again. But I doubt it will come to that, Shade," she replied with a shake of her head. "I already know he's going to pick you."

"Why?" I scoffed. "I would make a terrible luna, and we both know it. I'm cursed. I can't have pups. I'm awful in social situations. I hate crowds," I argued, listing off each point with my fingers. "Face it. I would be the worst choice."

"First of all," Taffy said, setting aside her cup. "I don't believe that you'd make a 'terrible luna.' You're a warrior who has always put your pack first. That's what a good luna does. You can learn to handle the social stuff over time."

I frowned at her, not believing that I could ever get used to any of that.

"As for the issue with pups," she continued. "You don't know for sure that your curse keeps you from having them or that they'd inherit it from you. Honestly, I can't see any reason why they would, so I don't think you can assume that. But you can always adopt if you're worried about it."

“But he’s the pack’s alpha,” I countered. “Continuing his lineage is part of the job description.”

“So? He wouldn’t be the first alpha to adopt. It happens all the time. And knowing Caelan, he wouldn’t mind. He knows his pack well enough to know what’s best for them. An unhappy alpha is a less productive alpha. If he believes you’re what’s right for him and the pack, then that’s what he’s going to choose.”

“But, what if—”

“Shade, stop,” she said, rolling her eyes. “You’re worrying about things that haven’t happened yet. If Caelan picks you, then he’s made up his mind that you’re the best she-wolf for him. And I won’t question his decision for a second. I know you’d make a great luna. Now, finish your breakfast.”

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I was looking over an aerial photo of Harvest Moon’s territory when Sunny skipped into my room for a second time that day.

“Shade, you’ll never believe the day I had,” she said with a spin. “I had the most wonderful time with Caelan. He’s so perfect for me.” She flopped down on my bed, a dreamy look in her eyes. “We went for a long walk in the gardens and then had lunch together in the village before...”

She continued talking, but I tuned her out, rubbing a spot on my chest as that same pain returned.

Honestly, I hadn’t thought about their date all day. I’d been so focused on coming up with a plan if Dark Moon decided to try to sneak past the borders again.

Admittedly, I was less worried for Sunny now that I knew she wasn’t the target. No, the next time Alpha Huxley came back, he’d be coming for me, and I needed to be ready.

Still, it bothered me that they’d had a nice time together, even though I should have been thrilled. This was the whole reason we were in Harvest Moon, to ensure Sunny became the new luna.

I forced a smile as she talked about trying to get him to kiss her good night when they parted ways.

"I think he's playing hard to get," she reasoned. "Make me want him more, you know?"

I nodded, jealousy warming my blood. *What is wrong with me?*

There was a sudden knock on the door, and I was grateful for the interruption. I couldn't listen to Sunny gushing about how she had thrown herself at the alpha any longer.

"Come in," I called, ignoring the glare that Sunny shot my way.

The door opened, and the maid Zelda poked her head in.

"I was coming to turn down the sheets, if that's all right," she explained, and I nodded for her to go about her work.

"Of course. How has your day been, Zelda?" I asked as Sunny reluctantly jumped off the bed at Zelda's pointed look.

I smiled. I liked the sharp-tongued maid. We'd had a few conversations, and I liked how open she was about sharing her opinions.

"A bit easier now with one less guest to worry about," she admitted as she fluffed the pillows.

"Yeah, we heard about Deianira," Sunny chuckled as though she were single-handedly responsible for her dismissal. "So sorry to see her go."

"Not just Deianira, but Talulla as well," Zelda informed us.

"Really? When was she dismissed?" I pressed, my brow shooting up in surprise.

"Just a little while ago," the maid admitted, smoothing out the comforter.

"See!" Sunny jumped, giggling excitedly. "I told you our date went well! He probably dismissed her as soon as we got back!" she sighed happily. "Caelan is totally falling for me! He'll ask me to be his mate any day now, I bet! No one can resist my charms. I'm going to make the best luna this pack's ever seen."

"Yeah, that must be the reason," Zelda agreed sarcastically. "Couldn't at all be related to the fact that they were both ex-girlfriends of his whose relationships ended badly. It had to be because you're *so perfect* for each other," she concluded with a roll of her eyes.

I hid a smile as Sunny huffed indignantly. Zelda finished her work, humming contentedly to herself as she bid me a polite good night, pointedly neglecting my sister.

"I don't like her," Sunny scoffed. "She's rude and extremely disrespectful to those who are better than her. The first thing I'm going to do when I'm in charge is fire her and that head of house, Niral. Both of them need to be reminded of their place in the pack."

"I don't know," I shrugged. "She's a hard worker, and Niral was just following orders. You can't fire them for doing as they were told."

She looked at me, raising a skeptical eyebrow. "You're disagreeing with me? Seems even you've forgotten where you belong since we've been here."

I ducked my head, baring my neck to her. "I'm sorry, Sunny. I meant no offense."

She tossed her head, turning her nose up at me. "I have half a mind to tell Father, but with Dark Moon sniffing around, I can't afford to lose you. But *don't* let it happen again, Shade."

I nodded, listening to Sunny babble about all the changes she was going to make once Alpha Caelan made her luna. It made me cringe.

I knew that we needed this mating for Thunder Moon's sake, but I was starting to wonder what kind of damage we'd be doing to Harvest Moon if we succeeded. Sunny was self-centered and dazzled by her own sense of importance. More and more I was convinced she'd be a horrible luna.

When she finally returned to her room, I slumped into a chair, grateful at last for the peace and quiet. I stared at the books on the bookshelf, my mind spinning as I reflected on the day's events.

*Both Deianira and Talulla are out of the running. That leaves only Briggita, Sunny, and me. Could Alpha Caelan be waiting to dismiss me in person during our date tomorrow?*

I sighed, not sure if I should be happy or sad about that as I prepared for bed.

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