

Learning to Love... Book 1: Shade |

The Choosing Ritual

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SHADE

FOURTEEN YEARS LATER

“Sunshine,” our father began, smiling at my sister. “I’m sure you’re wondering why I called you here.”

I stood at attention behind my sister’s chair, my back straight and my hands clasped behind me as she sat before him. My father barely acknowledged my presence as he beamed at Sunny, but it no longer bothered me as it had when I was young. Nothing did.

This was the way it was. The way it was supposed to be. I was forever indebted to them for the pain I had caused, and my penance was undying loyalty and service for the rest of my life.

“I am, Father,” Sunny responded. “It isn’t often that I’m summoned to your office. Has there been another threat from the Dark Moon Pack?”

The Dark Moon Pack bordered our territory to the north. Their leader, Alpha Huxley, was a brutal wolf, power hungry and determined to take over our lands by any means necessary.

He and his warriors had already made several attempts on my father’s life, but now that Sunny was of age, he had shifted his approach. His requests for Sunny to be his chosen mate had gone from thinly veiled threats to outright kidnapping.

I allowed myself a small smile. His last attempt had been an absolute failure, his warriors returning beaten and empty-handed. Unfortunately for them, they’d tried to take the wrong twin.

It was only a matter of time before he tried again, though I suspected he’d send more wolves next time, which suited me fine. I had yet to be beaten, and

though I didn't relish causing them pain, protecting Sunny was my job. I couldn't fail her or my father.

"No. Nothing like that," our father chuckled with a wave of his hand. "It seems that Alpha Caelan of the Harvest Moon Pack is ready to take over for his father, but he needs a mate. His efforts to find his fated mate have been unsuccessful so far, so he's decided to undergo a choosing ritual."

A choosing ritual had not occurred in a long time, most wolves preferring to wait for their fated mate.

However, high-ranking wolves would occasionally be forced by the Elders to choose a mate from the unmated females from his own or any of the surrounding packs. Particularly if the mating was essential to the pack's survival like with the role of an alpha.

Most she-wolves were ecstatic about this prospect. For many, it was the opportunity to mate with a male that was likely higher ranked than their destined mate would have been.

Some saw it differently though. The thought of losing their fated soulmate made them reluctant to get involved.

"As I'm certain you're aware," our father continued, "an alliance with Harvest Moon would be a huge benefit to our pack, giving us a stronger ally that Dark Moon would hesitate to anger. And I think we have a good chance for you to become his chosen mate. Your mother was always very close to the luna of Harvest Moon."

He paused at the mention of our mother, his eyes flicking to me.

I straightened, baring my neck in submission as a low growl issued from between his clenched teeth. My father would never forgive me for ripping away his fated mate. Though he had chosen another, the loss of my mother still pained him whenever he was in my presence.

"Harvest Moon has requested that every *eligible* female be sent for the choosing," he began again, returning his attention to Sunny. "You will be the only candidate from our pack, Sunshine. No one else would be worthy of such an honor."

His eyes flicked to me as I stared blankly ahead. Even though I was of age, I would never be considered an appropriate mate for a high-ranking wolf like Alpha Caelan. My father would sooner see me die alone than suffer the shame of such a humiliation.

Honestly, I felt relieved. I knew nothing about mates other than the bits of gossip I'd picked up from my sister and her friends. Including me in the ritual would be an embarrassment for both packs.

Who would even want a mate like me? I was an omega. My rank had been stripped from me after the death of my mother along with my last name. Not to mention, I was cursed.

No, it was better that my father didn't claim me. I would accompany my sister as her guard like I always did, doing whatever it took to keep her safe. She was what was important. Honoring my duty to her and my father was a way to atone for my past sins.

"Sunshine, I can't stress how vital it is that you're made the luna of the Harvest Moon Pack," our father continued. "Not only would you make a fine mate for Alpha Caelan, but our pack's survival may depend on securing that alliance."

His eyes narrowed as he turned his attention to me again. "Shade, your assignment is the same as always. Keep your sister safe at all costs and do everything in your power to help her win Alpha Caelan's favor. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir," I replied.

"Do not fail me," he growled, the threat of what would happen if I did clear in his tone. "Now, go help your sister prepare. You are dismissed."

That night, as I lay on my pallet outside Sunny's bedroom door, I pulled a faded, crumpled photo of my mother from where I kept it hidden in my pillowcase.

I stared at it, softly whispering to it as I told my mother all about how we would be traveling to Harvest Moon for the choosing ritual and how Sunny could be

named luna. I hoped she was excited for her daughter as I promised to do everything I could to help my sister succeed.

“Good night, Mom,” I said, tucking the photo beneath my head before I lay back and stared at the ceiling.

My mind whirled as I waited for sleep.

Could this be some elaborate hoax to lure Sunny away from the pack’s protection? Harvest Moon is our ally, but it’s been years since we’ve been there.

We had gone to Harvest Moon often when we were pups, but that all stopped after my mother’s death. My father had pulled away from our extended friends and family, wrapping himself in his grief and focusing on raising Sunny while ruthlessly overseeing my training in secret.

My stomach had been in knots since we left our father’s office. I couldn’t help feeling like something big was coming. Something that I wouldn’t be prepared for, despite all my training, and that worried me.

Truth be told, I wasn’t even sure Sunny had what it took to be a luna. Could she be a benevolent and gracious figure to a whole pack? And if she did become luna, would I be expected to follow her to Harvest Moon or stay behind to be my father’s guard?

I rolled onto my side, closing my eyes as I offered up a prayer to the Goddess. I rarely spoke to her these days, convinced she had forsaken me long ago, but I hoped she might hear me tonight. Maybe she would help everything work out as it was meant to be.

“Shade,” my father called from the doorway as I loaded the last of our bags into the car.

“Yes, sir,” I replied, snapping to attention.

“Remember your responsibilities. Keep your sister safe at all costs. The future of our pack rests on her. Nothing else matters, understood? Not even your life.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Whatever you do, keep your damn wolf under wraps. I don’t need word of your affliction getting out. It would be an embarrassment to our pack and could hurt your sister’s chances,” my father warned. “Don’t let anyone know that you and Sunny are related.”

“Yes, sir,” I said, pulling my silver hair back as my sister emerged from the house.

I waited as she bade our father goodbye, holding the door open for her as she climbed into the car before coming around to get behind the wheel. I glanced at her in the rearview mirror as I turned the key.

Technically, Sunny and I were twins, but her hair was a rich, golden blonde like our mother’s had been, while mine was a silvery gray like the moon. The few occasions where I had to act as her double always required a temporary wash-in dye that turned my locks a similar yellow shade.

I hate that stuff. It reeks.

Even our eyes were different now. Before that fateful day, they had been a similar shade of blue, but after my curse, mine had changed to a blue so pale it almost disappeared into the whites of my eyes.

When we did appear together, I was always dressed in a simple uniform as Sunny’s servant, usually hiding my face with a mask, a scarf, or a pair of chunky sunglasses. No one ever suspected we were sisters.

“Don’t ruin this for me, Shade,” Sunny said harshly, glancing at me with disdain. “I deserve to be luna of the Harvest Moon Pack, and nothing will stop me from taking what is rightfully mine. You’ll do whatever I ask, whenever I ask without question. Understood? You still owe me, remember?”

“I remember,” I replied as I pulled out of the driveway and headed toward the highway.

I was surprised by how modern the pack house at Harvest Moon was as we pulled into the parking lot. Large white buildings with clean lines and massive glass windows gave the place a subtle elegance.

Wow, this is beautiful. Thunder Moon looks nothing like this.

I turned off the engine and came around the car to open the door for Sunny as a rather frazzled woman with a clipboard approached us.

“Names?” she questioned.

“Sunshine Mallory,” Sunny chirped with a confident smile. “Thunder Moon Pack.”

The woman swiftly checked her list and made a quick note before turning her attention toward me.

“Name?” she prompted, looking a little aggravated that she had to ask a second time.

“I’m Miss Mallory’s personal security,” I offered.

“All eligible females are considered candidates, regardless of their station,” she sighed. “Alpha’s orders. So, name?”

I hesitated, my eyes flicking to Sunny. Her smile faltered for a second before she composed herself.

“I’m afraid you don’t understand. Shade isn’t a candidate. She’s nothing more than a servant, an omega,” Sunny said brightly. “We would never wish to offend the alpha by offering someone of her rank as a candidate.”

“Shade what?” the lady pushed.

“Uh, just Shade,” I said softly. “No last name.”

She made a note, writing in my name and pack beneath Sunny’s.

“Each of you will be assigned a room for the duration of your stay. Niral, our head of house, will show you to your accommodations once you’re inside,” she said in a bored tone. “There will be a group tour of the pack lands in an hour. Guests are encouraged to dress accordingly as you will be expected to shift for the second part of the outing.”

She said goodbye and hurried off to the next car that pulled up.

“I can’t believe this,” Sunny snapped. “Get my bags. You can come back for the rest later. I need to speak to whoever’s in charge immediately before this turns into a complete disaster. What are they even thinking? An omega could never be an alpha’s mate.”

I nodded, my stomach doing a somersault as I turned to open the trunk.

Does this mean I’m a candidate in the choosing now? Please, Goddess. Let this be a mistake.

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