

Learning to Love... Book 1: Shade |

The Right Decision

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I was hooked. Absolutely head over heels. One day with Shade in my arms and it was over for me. There would never be another.

To be honest, I'd thought that I'd been in love before. I had my fair share of girlfriends in the past, and I'd even given my virginity to one of them, believing that I loved her enough to reject my fated mate for her.

Oh, how naive I was back then.

Those were nothing compared to what I felt for Shade. She was everything. If the Goddess had asked me what I wanted for a perfect mate, I couldn't have designed a better woman for me than Shade.

The moment she let me kiss her, my heart nearly leapt out of my chest. I couldn't blame it. It didn't belong to me anymore. Shade was its owner now.

That first kiss had blown my mind, and every kiss that we'd shared after had only gotten better. She tasted sweeter than I had ever imagined, like fresh-baked cherry pie. I knew it would be good, but the reality had surpassed my wildest fantasies.

My coronation as alpha seemed less exciting compared to earning permission from my beautiful mate to hold her and taste her intoxicating lips.

Which was why when I awoke the following morning, I had one thing on my mind. To get through this damn dinner so I could finally claim her as mine.

I had dismissed Deianira, Talulla, and Briggita. Now it was time to get rid of Sunny.

I sat in my office with my betas and my gamma, going over the logistics of traveling to Thunder Moon's territory.

I was less than eager to be taking Shade back to them, even if it was only temporarily. They didn't deserve to be in her presence for a second, but I knew we had to do this one last thing to be done with the ritual.

"We need a solid plan for getting us to and from Thunder Moon without giving Dark Moon an opportunity to get at Shade," I said, glancing at the three of them. "What's our best plan of action?"

Dark Moon still posed a threat. They were after Shade, and I didn't plan on giving them a chance to get their paws on my mate. Shade was under my protection now. She may not have *officially* been a member of the Harvest Moon Pack yet, but that was just a technicality.

"I suggest a convoy," Dillon recommended. "Four SUVs should do it. The two in the front and rear will carry the warriors, while the two in the middle will be for your parents, you, Shade, and Sunny with a couple of guards riding along just in case."

"Can't we put Sunny in her own SUV?" I scoffed, knowing full well that would be a ridiculous waste of resources.

"Shade is Sunny's bodyguard," Taffy reminded me. "Until this is all over, you have to keep up appearances. If Sunny's traveling, then Shade would be by her side."

I knew she was right. I didn't like it, but it didn't change the facts.

"We should also consider having a squad in wolf form running alongside the convoy," Oliver added. "They'll know in advance if any wolves from Dark Moon are even close. They'll be able to intercept them and warn the convoy of a possible attack."

"Good point," I admitted. "I think that's a great idea."

"I'll volunteer to lead that group," he added. "Having someone with authority on the outside in case things go south can't hurt."

"Are you sure, Oliver?" I reasoned. "It could get dangerous."

"Absolutely," he confirmed. "You're my alpha, and Shade is my future luna. I would never forgive myself if something happened to either of you, and I wasn't there to try and stop it."

"All right then. It's settled. You'll lead the patrol on the ground," I agreed.

"Dillon and Taffy, I'm afraid I need the two of you to stay here and lead Harvest Moon in my absence. I'm counting on you to hold the pack together if anything should happen."

"Of course," Dillon replied without hesitation.

Taffy huffed but nodded. I knew she was disappointed to not be coming along. She cared for Shade and wanted to be involved in her protection.

"I'm sorry, Taffy," I said. "It has to be this way. I can't leave Harvest Moon without leadership. You and Dillon are the most senior wolves. I need you guys here."

"I know," she sighed dejectedly.

"Once we get to Thunder Moon, I want the warriors in the SUVs to flank the pack house, while those on foot spread out in a one-mile radius," I instructed. "That should give us the most coverage if Dark Moon decides to try anything."

"Alpha Butch isn't going to like that," Dillon warned. "He's going to feel threatened that we've brought so many warriors. With everything going on with Dark Moon, he may think we're planning a takeover of our own."

He's right. Most alphas would see that many warriors and assume it's a threat. I know I would be hesitant if an alpha showed up on my territory with a platoon of fighters, even if they were my ally.

"We'll frame it as a precautionary measure to ensure Sunny's protection," I reasoned. "He should be thrilled with that. That's what he's been after with this whole thing anyway. Protection for her and his pack."

"It will make it seem that you're taking your courtship with Sunny seriously if you're going to all these lengths to protect her. Which will make it all the more surprising when you leave her ass there," Taffy snorted.

I couldn't help but laugh at that.

Both of them are definitely in for a rude awakening tomorrow, but I don't even feel sorry for them. They made their choices. It's not right that Shade has had to shoulder the consequences on her own all this time.

"I'll give him a call when we're done here and tell him about the extra security measures," I replied. "I'm sure he'll agree."

We spent another hour handpicking the eleven wolves who would be on convoy duty and the thirty-nine that would be on foot patrol with Oliver. I hoped it was enough.

After we convened, I called Alpha Butch and explained the reason behind our extra precautions. At first, he was reluctant, but he eventually agreed like I'd expected, gushing about how important it was to protect his precious Sunny.

I was glad that we weren't speaking in person because I'd lost count of how many times I'd rolled my eyes during our conversation. I would need to be extra careful about schooling my expression at dinner tomorrow night.

We loaded up the SUVs after briefing the warriors about their roles the following morning. I wouldn't put it past Dark Moon to play dirty, so we'd done our best to prepare for every possibility, including bringing actual weapons.

The eleven in the cars would be carrying guns loaded with silver bullets and darts laced with wolfsbane. And every warrior under my command was a finely honed weapon, all personally trained in hand-to-hand combat.

Shade was by my side the whole time, assessing our operation as we prepared to leave. Her sister hadn't even come out of her room yet, claiming she had to look "perfect" for our big date.

She's not even going to see this coming. I can't imagine her taking it well once I reveal that Shade is my fated mate.

Shade's hands shook slightly as she rested them on the tailgate. I could tell that she was tense, and I wasn't sure if it had more to do with the threat from Dark Moon or the dinner with her father.

"You don't have to worry," I assured her as we closed the trunk of our SUV. "Everything is going to be fine. We've covered as much as we can think of. Dark Moon won't get close to us."

"I know," she replied. "I trust that you and your warriors will be able to handle Dark Moon."

“And everything with your father will be all right too,” I promised, running a hand along her arm. “Trust me.”

“Now *that* I’m not so sure about,” she admitted, wrapping her arms around herself in a tight hug.

How many times has she had to do that over the years? How many lonely nights has she spent giving herself comfort because there was no one else around to offer it? Never again. She’ll always know she’s safe and loved in my arms.

“It will. I promise,” I insisted. “You deserve this, Shade. You are justified in wanting to be acknowledged, in not having to hide who you are any longer. What your father has done isn’t right. And quite frankly, it’s disrespectful to your mother’s memory. She wouldn’t have wanted this for you.”

“I suppose you’re right,” she sighed. “It doesn’t make me any less nervous, but I know she dreamed of a better life for me. I can do this.”

“Good,” I said, smiling as I held out my hand to her. “Come on. Your sister should be out any second. Let’s go meet your father.”

Next Chapter

Continue to the next chapter of Learning to Love... Book 1: Shade