

Learning to Love... Book 1: Shade |

A New Kind of Family

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SHADE

“Who would bother challenging you for me?” I asked in disbelief.

“Someone who doesn’t believe you deserve to be happy,” he growled.

I stared. *My father is the one who issued the challenge? He’s really going to fight Caelan’s right to mate with me and my right to become luna?*

I couldn’t believe he’d go this far to stop me from finding happiness. Challenging the alpha of the pack that was the only thing standing between him and Dark Moon seemed pointlessly reckless.

This has Sunny written all over it. Is she really so desperate to be with Caelan that she’d put all of Thunder Moon at risk to get what she wants?

My guess was yes, but why my father would agree to it, I couldn’t understand.

“We need to initiate you into Harvest Moon right away,” he growled, fury making his voice harsher than he probably intended. “As long as you’re a member of Thunder Moon, your father has a say in where you end up. If you’re a part of this pack, then he can’t force you back into servitude.”

I nodded. As a member of Thunder Moon, my father could take me without argument, but if I were initiated into Harvest Moon, then even if for some reason Caelan were to lose the challenge, it would be harder for my father to demand my return to Thunder Moon.

Not impossible, but certainly more difficult.

“Don’t worry, Shade,” he promised. “I won’t let anything happen to you. You’re my mate, and I’ll be damned if I’m going to let anyone take you from me.”

“I know, Caelan,” I replied, gripping his hand between both of mine. “I just can’t believe my father is doing this. I knew he didn’t like me, but to risk the alliance like this just to stop us from mating? It doesn’t make sense.”

“He’s grown desperate, and desperate wolves make desperate decisions,” Caelan sighed. “He’s convinced himself that the only way for this to work is for me to be with Sunny, and neither of them are willing to let that go.”

“I thought they’d be happy to be rid of me,” I murmured. “I never expected them to try something like this.”

“Which is why we’ll take precautions to ensure we can make it more difficult for them to ever drag you back to that hellhole,” he assured me. “This is a good first step. We’ll initiate you this evening as soon as the moon rises. I’ve already alerted the pack.”

“Today?” I replied. “Do you think that we can get everything together that quickly? I’m not even sure what to wear to something like this.”

“Taffy’s taking care of that,” he said. “She’s on her way to the village shops right now to pick out a dress. You’ll need to wear something dark red because that’s the official color of Harvest Moon. She’ll meet you in your room to help you get ready as soon as she gets back.”

“All right. Is there anything that I need to do or that I can help with?” I inquired.

“Not really. All you need to do is show up and look beautiful,” he offered with a wink and a goofy grin. “Which you’re already doing.”

I giggled. I was glad to see this more playful side of him considering everything that was going on.

He was right. We could figure this out together.

I stood in my room staring at my extensive wardrobe. What had once been a tiny capsule of about fourteen outfits had grown into a massive collection of clothes.

It seemed silly to me that I needed something new to wear tonight, but as I looked over everything, I realized that Taffy and Caelan were right. Even with all of my additional garments, nothing seemed quite right for such a momentous event.

Being initiated into a new pack was no small thing. It would change a big part of who I was and how I identified myself.

A wolf's pack meant everything to them. They were your family. And even though Thunder Moon had never treated me particularly well, there was still a small part of me that felt sad about losing that. They were the only pack that I'd ever known.

There was a knock on the door, and Taffy bounded in, full of her infectious energy.

"Today is the day!" she cheered, dress in hand as she danced back and forth. "Are you excited?!"

I couldn't help but giggle. "I don't think I could ever be as excited as you are about anything," I teased, taking the dress from her hands and hanging it on the closet door.

"I'm going to take that as a compliment," she declared. "So, are you ready? This is the first step toward being part of Caelan's pack!"

"I guess there's a part of me that's excited. I mean, Caelan's going to declare me as his mate after I'm made an official member of Harvest Moon. But I don't know." I sighed. "I guess I'm just nervous about how the pack is going to take the news. What if they don't like me?"

"Don't be silly," Taffy chided, dismissing my words with a wave of her hand. "I already told you that the pack is going to love you. All that matters is that you make Caelan happy. They trust him, and if he trusts you, then they'll accept it without question."

She came over, putting a hand on my shoulder as she turned me to face her. "Plus, you're Caelan's *fated* mate. That means something. The Goddess chose you for one another, and there's a reason she did what she did. We just don't know what it is yet. We have no right to question her wisdom."

I sniffled, fighting back tears as the weight of her words hit me. I wanted to believe she was right. Not just about the pack accepting me, but also that the Goddess had a reason for why I'd been afflicted as I had.

Maybe she does have a purpose in mind for me.

"On a lighter note," Taffy sang. "You're going to love what I picked out for you. You will look absolutely gorgeous tonight! I can't wait for Caelan to see! He's going to want to mark you right then and there!" she squealed, letting go of my hands and clapping excitedly. "Open it!"

I unzipped the garment bag with a smile. Inside was a long, dark-red dress with spaghetti straps and sheer panels running down the sides of the skirt. It was stunning.

Taffy's right. Caelan is going to lose his mind when he sees me in this.

I slipped it on, the silky fabric soft against my skin as Taffy zipped up the back. I stood in front of the dressing mirror and looked at myself.

I was surprised by how pretty I felt as I swished the skirt around. Then a thought struck me that made me frown.

I look like Sunny.

Thinking about my sister made me a little sad. She and my father were the only family I'd known for so long, but despite everything that had happened, I couldn't help but feel upset that I might never see them again.

Would they even want to be around me now? They clearly felt like I betrayed them by taking Sunny's place at Caelan's side. After everything they've done, do I really want to see them ever again?

To be honest, I wasn't sure, but I still couldn't help but feel a pang of loneliness at the realization that I might not have a family anymore.

"There! Absolutely perfect!" Taffy announced after I slipped on the heels she'd bought to go with the gown.

She looked up, her smile suddenly dropping as she noticed my expression.
"Shade, what's wrong?"

I shrugged, trying to dismiss the silly notions running through my head. My family had never been kind to me. Why should I care that they weren't here? It felt ridiculous.

"No, don't shrug it off. What's the matter? Maybe I can help," Taffy pressed.

“It’s stupid, really,” I admitted with a sigh. “It just hit me that I probably don’t have a family anymore.”

My gaze dropped to the floor as I fought back tears.

“That’s not true,” Taffy asserted, putting a comforting hand on my arm. “Your family didn’t deserve you, Shade. They treated you like you were disposable. What you have here with Caelan and the rest of us? That’s a real family. One that loves you for who you are.”

I covered her hand with my own, my throat tight with emotion.

“We may not be blood,” she continued. “But we’re going to be there for you like they should’ve been in the first place. And not because we need you to protect us with your superpowers, but because we care for you and want you to be happy. Because that’s what you deserve. What everyone deserves.”

A lone tear slid over my cheek, and she reached up to wipe it away.

“Don’t cry for them, Shade. They aren’t worthy of it,” she said with a misty smile before clearing her throat. “Also, like I need you to stop so I can do your makeup. I can’t have you going out there looking all puffy-eyed and sad for your initiation. Not the look we’re going for here.”

I laughed as she gave a dramatic eye roll, grateful she’d managed to ease the tension.

She’s right. My past is behind me for a reason. Chin up. Eyes forward.

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