

Learning to Love... Book 1: Shade | The Scent Question

The Scent Question

SHADE

Try as Sunny might, she was unable to convince the stern housekeeper that a mistake had been made. I stood quietly to the side as they argued, admiring the pack house and cataloging every possible exit just in case.

Natural light poured in from the numerous floor-to-ceiling windows. The views beyond the glass were breathtaking, the pack village stretching out in one direction and a dense forest in the other.

Though the decor was minimal, it was tastefully done, no expense having been spared in its design. The walls were a crisp white, the occasional painting gracing their bare surfaces. Most of them depicted images of wolves running through the wild.

The floor was a rich, dark hardwood. A large staircase rose up to the second floor, a lush red carpet flowing down its steps.

We were handed off to a maid who led us up the stairs. She showed Sunny to her suite first, and I set her bags just inside the doorway. My sister rushed in, her lip curling at her small room before she slammed the door shut.

The maid snorted, shaking her head as she started down the hallway. I followed, worrying that Sunny may have not made the best first impression as the young she-wolf opened the next door and ushered me inside.

I froze as I stepped into the room.

An enormous bed sat to my right, a delicate sheer canopy draped over its four posts. Two open doors rested on either side of it, one leading to a luxurious en suite bathroom and the other a large walk-in closet.

To my left was a white-bricked fireplace framed by a pair of white built-in bookshelves. Each held several books, their spines the only pops of color in the room. Two plush chairs sat in front of the fireplace, and a large white vanity framed by enormous bay windows was placed on the adjoining wall.

"There must be some mistake," I remarked to the maid. "I'm Miss Mallory's servant. Shouldn't I be in something a little less...opulent?"

"There's no mistake, miss," the maid assured. "Alpha Caelan assigned each of the rooms personally."

"But I'm an omega," I replied. "I wasn't even supposed to be part of the choosing ritual."

The maid frowned and leaned in, taking a big sniff of my arm.

I stiffened. It was rare that anyone willingly came so close to me, especially not in a friendly manner. I didn't know how to interpret her sudden proximity, and my body braced for an attack.

"You don't smell like an omega," she said with a shrug.

I stared at her in confusion. *What does she mean by that? If I don't scent as an omega, then what do I smell like?*

"Anyway, omega or whatever you are," the maid continued. "This is the room the alpha assigned you. Now if you want, I could tell him that it's unsuitable—"

"No!" I said quickly, fearing my actions might reflect poorly on Sunny. "It's fine. More than I deserve. The alpha is very gracious."

"You'll want to change," she said, nudging me farther into the room. "I don't know if the alpha will be attending the tour, but if he is, you'll want to make sure you catch his eye right away."

She winked as she shut the door.

I sighed. *As if someone like me could ever catch his eye.*

But she was right about one thing. I needed to change if I didn't want to offend the Harvest Moon Pack with my appearance, so I rushed back down to the car for my bag.

I don't belong in this choosing ritual. I know it, and tonight, everyone else will too. The sooner I'm dismissed, the sooner I can get back to my responsibilities.

A she-wolf with bright honey-colored eyes and long, curly black hair watched me with amused interest as I came back up the stairs.

“So...you here for the choosing ritual?” she asked as I passed.

“Yes,” I replied, knowing it would be rude to ignore a high-ranking wolf like her.

By her scent, I figured she was a gamma or maybe even a beta. *Definitely not someone who should be talking to me.*

“You don’t sound excited about it,” she said as she followed me down the hall. “Don’t think you have a shot with Alpha Caelan?”

“Of course not,” I scoffed.

“Why not?” she asked. “I think you have as good of a chance as any of these other she-wolves. Maybe even better.”

“I highly doubt that,” I said, turning to face her as we neared my suite. “I’m an omega.”

“You don’t smell like an omega,” she chirped.

Again with this? Is it because I was in the car with Sunny for so long? That has to be it. Her scent is masking my own.

“Well, I am,” I said, looking anxiously down the hall. “Besides, my mistress would be a much more suitable mate. I’m really just here to ensure her safety. I wasn’t even supposed to be considered a candidate.”

“But you are,” she said with a smile. “And what does your alpha think is going to happen? Our pack is more than capable of protecting our guests.”

I bared my neck, hoping she wouldn’t take my words as an offense. “Yes. Of course. I didn’t mean to imply... It’s my responsibility, that’s all.”

“No worries,” she replied. “The name is Taffy, by the way.”

“Shade.”

“Shade... That’s cute,” she chirped. “See you on the tour, Shade!”

I stared after her as she bounded down the hall, unsure of what had just happened. I shook my head and hurried to change, knowing that Sunny would want to make sure I understood my orders before I escorted her downstairs.

“Remember, stand a few steps behind me. Keep your head down and hands clasped in front of you,” Sunny hissed as we approached the group gathered in front of the pack house. “Don’t speak unless I speak to you directly, and for Goddess’s sake, don’t shift. I don’t need anyone seeing that hideous wolf of yours.”

I nodded, stepping away from Sunny as she joined the crowd. I assessed the situation clinically, determining that as long as she didn’t mouth off to the wrong she-wolf, my sister was probably safe.

My hand twitched, and I covered it with my other one, taking a deep breath and blowing it out slowly. I wasn’t a fan of crowds, and while this gathering was relatively small, I couldn’t help but feel a little out of my element.

“So,” a male voice said to my left. “Are you excited about the choosing?”

I glanced over my shoulder, barely taking my eyes off Sunny as I spotted the strikingly handsome wolf with a slightly crooked smile and dirty-blond hair beside me.

“No. Not really,” I admitted as I shifted my attention back.

“Why’s that?” he pressed.

I shrugged. “I don’t expect to make it very far.”

“Why not?” he asked. “You seem like a perfectly stunning wolf to me.”

I gave him a surprised look, fighting the blush that threatened to spread across my cheeks. No one had ever complimented me on my appearance before.

A heartwarming smile graced his lips. “I’m Dillon.”

“Shade,” I replied.

“It’s nice to meet you, Shade,” he said as he held out his hand.

I fought the urge to flinch, my mind automatically dropping into defense mode as I braced myself for a slap or a reprimand. But neither came.

I hesitated, finally reaching out and shaking it.

“Oh...uh...nice to meet you too,” I replied with a touch of uncertainty.

“I think you’ve got better chances than you think,” he offered, leaning in as he spoke. “I happen to know Alpha Caelan quite well, and you’re exactly his type.”

“I doubt that,” I said softly as the male wolf winked at me and headed toward the front of the group.

My sister and father made sure I understood my place a long time ago. I was an omega and an embarrassment, not worthy of an alpha or any other wolf.

“All right, everyone!” Dillon shouted. “I’m sure you’re all eager to see the pack lands. If everyone could shift, we’ll get started.”

Sunny shot me a pointed look as they started for the tree line, mind-linking me and telling me to get lost as she peeled off her clothes and shifted into her golden-blond wolf.

I glanced around, noting the dozen pack warriors that would be accompanying the tour.

The Harvest Moon Pack was well known for its fighters, so Sunny would be perfectly safe as long as she stayed with the group, and since Alpha Caelan would be joining, I doubted she’d stray far from his side.

I slipped into the gardens while the group shifted, backtracking toward the pack house as they took off through the trees.

“Shade, there you are!” Taffy shouted as she cut her way through the welcome party crowd.

I turned, ducking my head as she approached so I wouldn’t look her directly in the eyes. Doing so would be a sign of disrespect, and while I wasn’t sure of her rank, I knew she was much higher in the pack than I was.

"Taffy. Are you participating in the choosing ritual too?" I asked as I admired her purple sundress.

"Definitely not," Taffy laughed. "Being with Caelan would be like dating my brother. Plus, I'm already spoken for." She moved her hair, pointing at the crescent-shaped bite mark where her collarbone met her neck.

"Oh, I see."

"Come on! I want you to meet him," she said, glancing down at my simple steel-colored gown. "You look fantastic, by the way. That color is incredible on you."

She pulled me toward a sharply dressed male with dirty-blond hair. I recognized him immediately.

"Dillon! This is her! The girl I was telling you about," she said as we neared. "Shade, I want you to meet my mate, Beta Dillon. Dillon, this is my new friend, Shade."

BETA Dillon?! That makes Taffy the beta female. Oh Goddess.

I quickly unhooked my arm from Beta Taffy's and dropped my gaze to the floor, baring my neck in submission.

"It's nice to see you again, Shade," Dillon offered, trying to ease the tension. "I was disappointed you didn't join us for the tour."

"My apologies, Beta Dillon. I wasn't feeling up to it."

"There's no need for any of that," Taffy tsked as she encouraged me to raise my head. "We're not that formal here."

I kept my line of sight carefully trained on the floor. It would be disrespectful for me to look directly into the eyes of such high-ranking wolves.

"All participating she-wolves please assemble for the scenting," a loud voice called out.

"Dang it," Taffy huffed. "I thought we had time to introduce her to Caelan."

Dillon put an arm around her. "It's all right. She'll just have to meet him this way." He turned his attention to me. "Shade, you should join the others. You're an eligible female after all."

I nodded, hurrying off toward the end of the line as ordered. I passed Sunny, who shot me a warning glare before turning her attention back toward the drop-dead gorgeous man at the front.

What on Earth am I doing? Considering me a candidate is an insult to the alpha. I need to get out of here.

I started to turn when Taffy and Dillon came up behind me, both smiling encouragingly as the line moved a step forward. My pulse quickened, dread settling in my chest as I neared the handsome male wolf.

Oh Goddess. This is going to be awful.

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