

Teatime

A FEW DAYS LATER

"Oh, Shade! I'm so happy you were able to join me for tea!" Luna Maty said as she rose from the little round table in the drawing room. "I've been looking forward to this for a while now. I can't tell you how thrilled I am that Caelan has found his mate."

I smiled as she took my arm, leading me over to the tastefully decorated tabletop. White linen and china cups had been set out for our teatime, along with a three-tiered platter of decadent little sandwiches and treats.

I had a moment of panic as I stared at the elegant setting.

How formal is this supposed to be? Am I even dressed appropriately? I don't know the proper etiquette for this kind of thing. Goddess, please don't let me embarrass myself.

"Thank you, Luna Maty," I replied as I perched on one of the chairs.

She took a seat next to me, smiling brightly. "Please, we're family! Call me Maty, or, if you're ever comfortable enough with it, you could call me Mom."

I nodded, though I didn't know if I'd ever be comfortable enough to do something like that. It felt as though I'd be betraying my own mother if I called another by her title.

"My goodness, you look so much like your mother," she said in a hushed tone.

"I do?" I questioned.

I honestly never thought that I had much resemblance to my mom. Sunny looked more like her than I did.

"Oh yes! You're the spitting image of her." She sighed sadly. "I miss her dearly. She was one of my very best friends. Her visits were one of the things that I looked forward to the most."

"Did she visit often?"

"Oh yes. She came all the time, and sometimes she would bring you girls with her," she replied. "She loved you both ~~ercely~~ You were her pride and joy. Even when things were bad with your father, she said she never regretted becoming his mate because it brought her the two of you."

I gave her a sad smile. "I don't remember as much of her as I would like," I admitted. "But I do remember always feeling loved. It was just warmer in her presence, like being wrapped in a soft blanket just because she was near."

"She would be so proud of you, Shade," Maty said. "She always wanted her girls to grow up to be kind and caring. But most of all, she wanted you both to be strong, to be the sort of wolves that would stand up for others. The kind of women that others could look up to and emulate."

"I don't really think that I turned out how she would've wanted," I replied as I stared down at my clasped hands resting in my lap.

How could my mother be proud of what I've become? I've killed. I've been powerless where it probably counts the most. I couldn't even stand up for myself. I let my father dictate everything I thought or did and use me like a weapon for years. I'm not what anyone should aspire to be.

"You are ~~exactly~~ what she would've wanted," she countered passionately. "You've been through a lot. Things no one should have to experience, but you came out the other side, still a strong, vibrant, beautiful young woman who would give her life to save another."

She took my hand, patting it gently.

"You are exactly the kind of role model young she-wolves need. Brave. Resilient. Kind. Mark my words, you're going to be an inspiration to little girls in this pack for years to come. Your mother would be so proud, and I couldn't be happier to have you as a mate for my son or as the one to inherit my title."

Tears welled in my eyes at her words. I wanted to make my mother proud. I wanted to make Luna Maty proud. She had so much faith in me, and I wouldn't let her down.

I will do everything in my power to be the absolute best luna that I can possibly be.

I stood on the edge of the training field after finishing my tea with Luna Maty, watching Caelan train for the upcoming challenges. I tilted my head, setting the basket I brought with me at my feet as my eyes eagerly followed his every move.

He was so focused on striking the practice dummy that he hadn't even noticed my presence yet, not that I minded. Seeing him in action was a treat. His movements were ~~uid~~ and precise, each blow sharp and powerful as it made contact.

Desire pooled in my belly as I admired his shirtless, sweaty body. Moisture glistened across his chiseled back and sculpted chest, droplets running along the hard contours of his form.

I shifted on my feet, wanting those strong arms wrapped around me like they had been on the night of my initiation. I had never felt the urge to be with anyone so strongly, and that need only seemed to be growing the longer we waited.

I'm not sure how much longer I can hold out. It gets more and more difficult not to throw myself at him when we're alone.

"Shade! Yoo-hoo, Shade! Are you in there?" Ta y chuckled as she waved a hand in front of my face, trying to get my attention.

"Huh?" I mumbled, blinking in surprise as I ~~nally~~ noticed she and Dillon were standing beside me. "Oh! Uh, hey. Did you ask me something?"

They ~~ashed~~ each other an amused glance before turning back toward me.

"Hmm, whatever could you have been thinking so hard about?" Ta y teased, her eyes darting toward Caelan as a knowing smile crossed her lips. "I wonder."

"Fine. You caught me," I muttered. "I was thinking about them for a second though, I promise. Then I got...distracted."

I honestly hadn't been able to stop thinking about them since I learned about Dark Moon's challenge.

I already didn't like the idea of Caelan having to ~~ght~~ my father, but I didn't consider him much of a threat. My father wasn't weak, but it'd been a long time since he'd gone into battle personally. He was happier to command his troops from a distance than to get directly involved.

And Caelan was a young alpha in his prime. I had no doubt that he'd put my father in his place quickly and without much difficulty.

Alpha Huxley was a different matter entirely. I'd seen that wolf ~~ght~~ on more than one occasion. He was vicious, brutal, and not above playing dirty. He was the real threat.

"I'm worried about Alpha Huxley," I admitted. "He'll do whatever it takes to win a ~~ght~~, and he wouldn't hesitate to kill Caelan if he got the chance."

"I wouldn't worry too much," Ta y assured me with a confident grin. "Caelan knows what he's doing. He's trained with multiple packs and knows a variety of techniques. He's well-versed in more fighting styles than I can name. He and Dillon are probably two of the best-trained warriors in the country."

"You guys trained with other packs?" I asked Dillon.

"Yeah. Caelan and I have trained in packs all over the world," Dillon said with a shrug. "It was something Luna Maty and Alpha Leal arranged. Kind of like an exchange program. We would go somewhere for a few weeks while two of that pack's warriors came here."

"And when they returned to Harvest Moon, they taught all of us what they had learned," Ta y added, smiling at her mate proudly.

"Wow," I remarked in surprise. "I didn't realize that Harvest Moon's training program was so extensive."

I probably should spend a little more time getting to know my mate and new pack. We've been so worried about the challenges that we haven't talked about anything else when we're together, if we talk at all.

My cheeks warmed at the thought as I watched Caelan dance around the practice dummy. His movements were beautifully fluid but ultimately deadly.

Suddenly, he stopped, raising his nose to the air and breathing in deeply. He turned, his eyes landing on me as a wide smile appeared on his face. He hurried over, scooping me up and kissing me like his life depended on it.

I leaned into him, not caring for a second that his sweat-soaked skin was pressed against my eyes or that his bates were standing right there. As long as he kept his lips on mine, the rest of the world didn't exist. It was just me and him.

I grinned, draping my arms around his neck. I could definitely get used to this.