

Knowing You Better

"I'm so happy to see you, baby," Caelan said, waving to Ta y and Dillon as they left to give us a little privacy. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"I know you're busy, but...uh, I thought you might be hungry," I explained as I held up the picnic basket Ta y had helped me prepare. "It's nearly lunchtime."

"You brought me food?" he asked quietly as he glanced down at the basket in my hands.

My shoulders slumped, my confidence instantly deflating.

"It's stupid. You've probably got too much going on to take a break. I'll just get out of your hair and let you get back to training," I babbled as I turned to walk away.

"Shade, wait!" Caelan said, catching my arm and pulling me back. "Baby, I'm never too busy for you." He lifted my chin, capturing my gaze with his own. "And I'm starving. I would love to have a picnic with you."

He maneuvered the basket into one hand while taking hold of mine with the other. I followed him to a grassy hill overlooking the training grounds, smiling as he unrolled the blanket I'd brought along.

We sat, and I began pulling out what I'd packed for our lunch.

"So, what are we having?" Caelan asked, rubbing his hands together in excitement.

"Well, Ta y said you stick to a pretty strict diet when you're training, so I made us a lemon chicken salad."

"You made this?" he asked with wide eyes as I presented him with one of the containers.

"Yes," I replied hesitantly. "Why? What's wrong with it? Does it smell funny? Look gross? You don't have to eat it if you don't want to."

"Baby, I promise it looks and smells great," he explained with an easy smile. "I guess I just didn't expect you to cook for me. That's all."

"I wanted to do something special for you," I replied with a shy shrug. "We haven't gotten to spend much time together lately. We've been so worried about the challenges."

"You wanted to spend more time with me, huh?" he teased with a grin.

"Of course," I replied, my cheeks heating as I glanced down at his lips. "But today I figured we could maybe talk a little more. I feel there's still so much I don't know about you, and I want to know everything."

"We have had other things on our mind when we're able to catch a moment together, haven't we?" he offered with a cheeky smile. "We have our whole lives to learn everything we want to know about each other, Shade, but I'm more than happy to answer any questions you have right now."

"Thank you. Um, what's your favorite color?" I asked before taking a bite of my salad.

"Blue. *Light* blue," he replied, wiggling his eyebrows suggestively and causing me to giggle.

"For real?" I pressed, feeling like he was only saying what he thought I wanted to hear.

"For real. Even before I met you, I always really liked that color. But after I saw these eyes"—he ran his thumb delicately across my cheek—"the color was locked in at the number one spot permanently."

I stared at him lovingly as my heart fluttered.

How does he always manage to make me feel like this? One touch, one look, one kind word, and I'm rendered completely helpless. It's intoxicating. I don't even care if it's just some lame pick up line. It's working.

"I thought you said you had more questions for me," he teased.

The blush on my cheeks spread quickly, turning my face bright red.

"And that is my second favorite color," he remarked, pointing to my face.

"You're only making it worse," I groaned as I tried to hide behind my hands.

He laughed, a lyrical and alluring sound that I wanted to hear all the time.

"What's your favorite food?" I said when I finally managed to get myself under control.

"I'm a simple guy." He shrugged. "Nothing beats a good hamburger. I've had fantastic meals from all over during my travels, but there's just something about the wholesomeness of a simple burger that can't be beat."

"Wow. That was more profound than I expected," I admitted.

"What can I say? More than just a pretty face," he joked with a wink.

"What's your favorite dessert?" I asked.

"Cherry pie," he answered without hesitation. "And it's also my favorite scent, if you were wondering," he offered with a mischievous grin as he leaned over and took a long sniff of my hair.

"Are you saying I smell like cherry pie?" I asked with a giggle as he sighed happily.

"Like fresh from the oven. Sweet and tart with just a hint of spice," he whispered, his voice growing husky as he took another whiff. "Good enough to eat."

Oh my Goddess. I'm not going to survive this lunch if he keeps saying things like that.

"Uh...Ta y and Dillon mentioned that you've traveled a lot," I said quickly, tripping over the words as I tried to refocus on my main goal. "I didn't realize it was so extensive. How many other countries have you visited?"

He smiled as he took another bite of his salad, like he knew the exact effect he was having on me.

"Including this one? Twenty-seven," he replied after a moment. "Dillon and I started traveling for training and other pack business when we were teenagers. It wasn't until my father handed down the alpha title that I started sticking closer to home."

My mouth dropped open in surprise. "Twenty-seven?!"

"Yeah, that sounds about right," he confirmed with a nod. "Some places we stayed in for several months while we trained with their warriors. Other times it was only for a week or two as we settled some pack business."

He leaned back on his elbows as he looked over his territory.

"Not every pack appreciates venturing beyond their own borders, but we've seen the value in it. When you have allies across the world, you have access to a bounty of friends and resources. You also open yourself up to a wealth of knowledge that you might not have otherwise had access to."

"So, which one was your favorite?" I asked, smiling at the wisdom in his words.

"Now? I would have to say this one because it's the one you're in," he replied with a cheesy grin, causing me to giggle once again.

"Be serious," I chuckled.

"Seriously? That's a tough question. There's really something to love about each country and its people," he replied with a sigh. "But if I had to pick...I'd probably choose Norway."

"Why?"

"Something about standing on the edge of a cliff and looking out over a fjord as the sun rises in the distance," he said wistfully. "It's a hard view to beat. I've been there a couple of times. There's a pack there that specializes in extreme cold weather training. Another still lives like the packs did during the Viking Age."

"Wow, really? I bet that was incredible," I said, unable to keep the envy out of my voice.

I'd never gotten to travel much of anywhere because Sunny was never allowed to go anywhere. Our father was always too worried about Dark Moon coming after her to let her venture far beyond our territory.

"It was. I've even traveled across northern Scandinavia with a pack of nomads that herd reindeer for a living. It was an amazing experience," he replied, still apparently awestruck by the memory. "I never spent time with a pack that wasn't bound by borders before."

"I wish I could see it," I replied, marveling at the way his eyes lit up when he spoke.

"I'll take you there sometime," he said softly, reaching over to brush my hair behind my ear.

We talked for another hour, our lunch finished long before Caelan ran out of stories. I ate every one of them up, mesmerized by his every word.

"Thank you for indulging me," I said as I cleaned up. "I think I've kept you from your training long enough."

"Nonsense. I'm always happy to get to spend some time with you," he replied sincerely. "What do you have planned for the rest of the afternoon?"

"Nothing, really." I shrugged. "I'm sure I'll find something."

"Why don't you stay and train with me?"

"You want me to stay?" I asked, a little surprised.

"Yeah. I think it could be fun," he said, looking me up and down. "I've never got to see you in action. How about a little light sparring session?"

"I'm not really dressed for it," I remarked, gesturing toward the little pink sundress I had worn for tea with his mother.

"You won't always be dressed appropriately when an attack happens. But if you're worried about it, we usually keep extra workout clothes in the gym," he suggested, taking the basket from me and setting it aside.

He's not wrong, and it could be fun. Maybe I could get him back a little for all the teasing he did during lunch. Give him a taste of his own medicine.

"Are you sure that you're up for this?" I pressed, kicking off my shoes and dropping into a defensive stance. "Don't want you to get distracted."

"Baby, I promise I'm prepared for whatever your father and Huxley can throw at me." He winked, flexing his bicep and shooting me a cocky grin.

Goddess, he is a real wolf.

He mirrored my stance, his hands held loosely at his sides as he crouched. "Show me what you got, baby."

I swung low, his knee effortlessly blocking my strike. I darted back as he parried my attack, dodging him just barely. He was fast, and after a few moves, I knew I was hopelessly outmatched. But I wasn't going to give up so easily.

I went to strike again, but he was ready for me. He grabbed my wrist, spinning me around and trapping me against his body. His hard chest pressed against my back, his arms pinning me in place.

"You're good, baby. I'll give you that," he whispered softly in my ear, his breath hot against my neck. "You're fast, and you've got power. But you need to leverage your strengths more. Use all the advantages at your disposal. Get creative."

"You mean like this?" I asked, my voice breathy as I pushed my ass back against his crotch.

He groaned, his arms tightening around me as I rubbed against him. I waited until his hands started to drift toward my hips before pivoting and throwing him over my shoulder. He landed on his feet, jumping back as I reassumed a defensive stance.

His brow arched in surprise, a playful smile crossing his lips. "Oh, so you want to play like that, huh? All right, baby. Let's do it your way."