

Challenge Pending

The day of the challenge with Thunder Moon had arrived, and I couldn't untangle the knot of anxiety that had settled in my stomach.

I felt apprehensive, doing my best to hide it as Caelan and I shared breakfast together in my rooms before he left to prepare. I wouldn't be able to see him again until just before the challenge tonight.

Honestly, I didn't want him to fight at all. I was angry at my father for putting us in this position and just had a feeling that something was going to happen. There was this ominous charge in the air that made me nervous, but I wasn't sure why. This wasn't the fight I was truly worried about.

I paced in my room, certain that my father was up to something. I had to figure out how to protect Caelan from whatever he had in store.

Why couldn't he just leave well enough alone? Is he that determined to keep me in my so-called place? I don't even understand it. My father's wanted me out of his life for so long that he told others I was dead. You'd think he'd be happy that I'm no longer his burden.

"Is there any way that we can stop this?" I asked Ta y, a frustrated sigh slipping past my lips. "I'd rather have to fight my father myself than risk Caelan getting hurt."

"No, Shade," she replied, rolling her eyes. "For the hundredth time, there's no way to stop the challenge. Your father issued it, and Caelan accepted. He has to see it through. If we back out, then it will be seen as a forfeit, and your father can demand your return. Caelan knows what he's doing."

I knew she was right. If I tried to intervene, then it might come off as a sign of weakness for Caelan, and a weak alpha was a liability to his pack.

I'd realized after watching the wolves at Harvest Moon that my father's grasp over his pack was tenuous at best. To be honest, I wasn't sure why no one had challenged him yet. There were other more capable wolves at Thunder Moon, but my father somehow managed to stay in power.

The only real weapon he'd ever had at his disposal besides his alpha command had been me. I couldn't help but wonder if he'd used the threat of my abilities or my curse to force everyone into submission.

"The best thing you can do right now for Caelan is be there to support him," Ta y continued. "When you see him before the fight, let him feel how much you believe in him. As your mate, if he knows you're with him, he'll fight harder because he knows what he stands to lose if he doesn't win."

I nodded, determined to make sure Caelan knew I had the utmost faith in him.

Tonight, I won't let him see my fears. I'll walk in there with my head held high so he knows how much I believe in him.

By the time the sun had set, we still had not heard from my father or his delegation. My anxiety doubled as Ta y and Oliver escorted me to the arena with a full procession of pack warriors following behind us.

What could he be planning?

It was traditionally accepted that those in attendance would wear dark colors. Their alpha was being challenged, and it was considered a somber occasion.

I was already filled with enough trepidation about tonight's event to come dressed as if I were going to a funeral, and I wanted Caelan to be able to easily find me in the crowd. I wanted him to know I was there.

Heads turned as we walked up the pathway to the arena, eyes on me as I entered. I had double-checked with Ta y, ensuring that the dress code was not actually a set rule before I donned a long white dress that swept down to my ankles.

The airy fabric cinched at my waist before fanning out into a flowy skirt. I looked like a princess from some ancient land. Like I'd stepped right out of an old Grecian artwork. It felt appropriate as my eyes fell on the arena for the first time.

I had seen it from a distance, but since it was only used in exhibition-style events like this, I had no reason to visit it before today. The large, dirt-covered stadium looked like something out of a history book, a place where brave gladiators battled for freedom and glory.

There were no walls or fences, the rough circle in its center ringed by a series of torches. Their flickering flames cast an eerie glow over the space.

Several benches and a couple of old bleachers sat around the perimeter for spectators, and a small stage with several chairs rested at one end. That is where I would watch alongside Alpha Leal and Luna Maty.

I spotted Caelan at the far end of the arena, and I could hardly contain myself, ready to rush into his arms.

"Whoa there," Ta y said, stopping me. "You can't just step out there. That's the battle arena."

"Why not?" I whined, looking longingly toward Caelan. "The fight hasn't started yet. My father hasn't even bothered to show up."

"It's part of the rules," Ta y hissed. "We have to escort you to him since you're 'the mate in question.' Caelan is trying to prove he's worthy of you. You can't be alone with him until after the challenge."

"That's a stupid rule," I huffed.

"You're a lot feistier nowadays," Ta y chuckled. "I like it, but you still have to obey tradition."

Oh. She's right. I didn't back down like I normally would have, and I'm not bothered by it. It didn't feel like I did anything wrong, like I could express myself without fear of repercussions. I like that. It makes me feel like I'm slowly becoming the Shade I was always meant to be.

"Can you take me to him?" I begged, not ashamed to show my neediness for my mate around Ta y.

"Just a second," she chided. "Oliver has to get the warriors in place."

"Warriors?" I asked, noticing the four wolves lining up behind me.

"Yes. You have to be surrounded while in the arena," Ta y explained. "Two will walk behind you, one on either side, and Oliver and I will take the front."

"Will I be able to touch him?" I asked, hoping I would at least be able to hug my mate.

Ta y didn't answer, moving the warriors into place as we proceeded to step onto the arena.

I frowned as they led me toward Caelan. I desperately needed the calm his touch brought, but if they had to surround me at all times, would that even be possible?

At least I'll get to speak with him.

"Alpha Caelan," Ta y said, her voice uncharacteristically stern. "We present your mate."

Oliver and Ta y stepped aside, and there he was. My heart felt like it would fly out of my chest as I gazed at him.

He wore only a pair of loose-fitting sweatpants slung low across his hips, his muscles deliciously on display. Desire spiked within me as he looked up, his hazel eyes going wide as he caught sight of me.

"Goddess," he breathed, awestruck by my appearance.

I could feel the blush burning its way across my cheeks as his gaze traveled along my body. His arms were wrapped around me in an instant, and I sighed contentedly.

"You're breathtaking, Shade," he whispered in my ear.

I sank against him, hugging him tightly. "I missed you."

"I missed you too."

"I wanted to wish you good luck tonight," I said as I leaned back, staring into his eyes. "I know you can win this, and when you do, I'll be waiting for you."

"That's all the motivation I need," he assured me with a wink before moving to kiss me on the cheek.

I turned at the last second, cupping his face as my lips met his in a passionate embrace. I put everything I had behind it. I wanted him to know how much I believed in him and how strongly I felt for him.

His hand threaded through my hair, deepening our kiss as he gripped me tighter. I didn't care that everyone was watching, and neither did he, it seemed.

We were gasping when we separated, both our chests heaving as we struggled to catch our breath.

"Finish this," I whispered, pressing my forehead to his.

"For you...anything," he murmured, placing his lips against mine once more.

"Well, isn't this nice," someone snarled from behind us.

Caelan and I turned to see who would be so bold as to interrupt an alpha and his mate, though I was certain I recognized that sinister voice.

"Alpha Huxley?" Caelan asked, his brow furrowing in confusion. "What are you doing here?"

A dark sneer wormed its way across the alpha's face. "The challenge, of course."

Unease rippled through me. I didn't like where this was going.

"A date for your challenge hasn't been set yet. I'm meant to fight Alpha Butch tonight," Caelan countered, his tone harsh as he glared at the intruding alpha and his warriors.

"Plans change," Alpha Huxley said menacingly, holding his arms out as his wolves stormed into the arena.

I gripped Caelan tighter, glancing around anxiously. *Where's my father?*