

Dirty Tricks

Before us stood the delegation from Dark Moon, but my father and Thunder Moon were nowhere in sight.

*Something is wrong. Very wrong.*

If my father wasn't coming, then Caelan was going to have to fight Huxley sooner than expected.

Huxley was formidable not just because he was an alpha, but because he was evil. Unlike my father, he didn't mind getting a little blood on his hands. In fact, he seemed to relish in it.

I'd heard my father liken him to a rabid dog on more than one occasion. Once he got going, he couldn't be stopped.

"Where is Alpha Butch and the delegation from Thunder Moon?" Caelan demanded, stepping in front of me.

"Something came up," Alpha Huxley mused, picking something out of his teeth. "Alpha Butch sends his regrets, but he won't be able to attend tonight's festivities. I volunteered to come in his stead. It was the least I could do for a friend."

I knew this wasn't true. My father and Alpha Huxley had never been on friendly terms.

"What have you done, Huxley?" Caelan snarled.

"Me?" he exclaimed in a mocking tone. "I'm merely being good to my neighbor, but you? Stealing someone else's chosen mate? Now, *that's* despicable. That she-wolf was mine before you swooped in and claimed her."

"That isn't true," Caelan spat. "You had a claim on Sunny, not Shade. Even so, she is my fated mate, granted to me by the Goddess herself."

"Funny how that didn't come out until after the choosing. Doesn't matter really. Her father gave me his blessing," Huxley replied, eyes snapping to me. "He's really looking forward to our union, darling."

"He would never," I hissed.

*I don't like where this is going. What has he done to Harvest Moon? Are my father and sister in danger?*

"Alpha Butch wouldn't ally himself with you," Caelan growled, his body tensing as he faced off against the vicious alpha. "That would be suicide. I'll ask you again, Huxley. What have you done with Alpha Butch?"

"Perhaps he realized how much more beneficial it would be to be in my good graces. A lesson you will soon learn, pup," Huxley scooped. "That she-wolf is mine by right, and I'll be taking her with me."

"You'll do no such thing!" Caelan snarled.

"Then you'll have to stop me, pup," Huxley declared with a sinister glint in his eyes.

"Please take my mate to the observation platform," Caelan ordered, waving for Ta'y and Oliver to step forward.

"Caelan," I started, but he brought his hand to my cheek, running his thumb over my lips.

"Please go sit with my mother and father, Shade," he whispered. "I need to know you're safe. I promise, I'll come for you as soon as this is over."

"If he's still alive," Huxley chuckled darkly.

I glared at him, resisting the urge to lash out. *This is Caelan's fight, not mine.*

I gave Caelan's arm one final squeeze before the warriors escorted me over to join Alpha Leal and Luna Maty. I took the chair beside the luna, and she reached over, taking my hand in hers.

"He will be okay, dear," she murmured.

I nodded as Ta'y and Oliver stationed themselves on either side of the platform, their backs straight as they stood at attention. Dillon took position closer to the perimeter, almost as though he were anticipating something.

Alpha Leal rose from his seat as the crowd fell silent.

"Who issues the challenge?" he asked, his deep voice echoing across the space.

"I, Alpha Huxley Balcom of the Dark Moon Pack, issue the challenge," Huxley roared.

"And do you accept, Alpha Caelan of the Harvest Moon Pack?" Alpha Leal questioned.

"I do," Caelan confirmed.

My heart dropped into my stomach. There was no going back now.

"It is decided," Alpha Leal confirmed. "This trial by combat will continue until one of you surrenders or is unable to proceed. At that point, the challenger still standing will be declared the victor and win the right to mate with the she-wolf in question. Let the challenge begin!"

Caelan moved to the center of the arena as Huxley strode forward, peeling off his clothes and tossing them to the side. They both shifted and the fight began.

Huxley rushed at Caelan head-on. They collided in a flurry of fur and gnashing teeth.

He swiped at Caelan, who managed to dodge his claws just in time. Caelan retaliated, snapping his jaws at Huxley's throat, barely missing his target as Huxley threw his body backward.

He reared, striking a blow across Caelan's chest as Caelan grabbed a chunk of Huxley's fur between his teeth. The sight of blood dripping from Caelan's wolf was jarring, and I had to remind myself these were just scratches. They would heal.

Suddenly, Caelan twisted, the motion a blur as he swung his legs hard into Huxley and sent him flying back into the sand.

Beside me, Luna Maty whooped, her fingers clenched tightly around mine. "Get him, Caelan!"

But Huxley recovered quickly and managed to catch Caelan by his tail, yanking it so hard that I heard a snap. It drooped awkwardly behind him, and I knew it was dislocated. But it wouldn't be enough to slow him down.

He spun and rushed toward Huxley, his powerful jaws catching the alpha's leg. His sharp canines shredded into the flesh as Huxley yelped, blood pouring from the wound and matting his mud-colored fur as he limped away.

Caelan stalked toward him, snarling as he knocked the alpha on his back.

I allowed myself a grim smile. *Caelan has him. Huxley will have to forfeit or die.*

The ten other wolves from Dark Moon suddenly rushed into the arena, shifting as they sprinted across the sand.

"Caelan!" I screamed as Luna Maty and I jumped from our seats, both staring anxiously at the scene unfolding before us.

Shouts of protest rose from the crowd as the wolves surrounded Caelan, their jaws snapping as they lunged forward.

"We have to help him," I hissed, stepping away from Luna Maty.

I hurried down the steps, brushing past Ta'y and Oliver. The only thing on my mind was getting to Caelan.

Strong hands wrapped around my arms, keeping me from crossing into the battle arena.

"No, you don't," Dillon grunted as he held me. "You can't interfere, Shade. It isn't allowed."

"They interfered! We have to stop this, Dillon!" I cried as I struggled against him. "Eleven wolves versus one?! Caelan will be killed! This isn't what he agreed to!"

"Doesn't matter, Shade. Caelan accepted the challenge. I can't let you go out there no matter what. I promised him I'd keep you safe," he argued, refusing to let me go.

"Then you go help him!" I demanded as I turned to face him. "He's your friend and alpha. Stop this, Dillon!"

The snarling on the sand reached a fever pitch as the wolves darted forward, trying to take chunks out of Caelan's fur. He did his best to fend off the multiple attacks, but he was outnumbered.

"I can't," Dillon sighed, his shoulders slumping. "If any wolf sets foot on the arena, they'd be undermining Caelan's status as alpha. We can't intervene physically. This is up to him. The only way for him to end this is either to win or concede."

"Don't you see what's happening here?" I yelled. "Huxley is trying to kill him so he can get control of me and the pack. He's not playing by the rules, Dillon. I won't lose Caelan because of some stupid tradition! He won't tap out and you know it. He'd rather die than give me up."

"You don't think we want to save him, Shade?!" Dillon growled. "That's my best friend, and there's nothing I can do to help him. Do you understand me? There's nothing *I* can do."

Dillon's eyes widened, trying desperately to tell me something as we both turned back toward the arena.

I stared in horror at the gruesome scene before me. They were pouncing on Caelan, ripping into him as he did his best to defend himself, but it was hopeless. I didn't know how much longer he could hold out.

Alpha Huxley shuffled forward as his warriors pinned Caelan to the ground, a wolfish smile on his face as he leaned down to wrap his fangs around Caelan's neck.

"Shade," Ta'y begged as she appeared beside me. "Do something. Please."

It suddenly clicked. What Dillon had been trying to tell me. We couldn't set foot in the arena, but I didn't need to. I could help Caelan in another way.

"Caelan," I breathed, my voice like a whisper on the wind.

His ears tilted in my direction as the energy began to pulse through me. I thrust the power out, sending it rushing toward him. I felt it embrace Caelan, wrapping him in my ability and feeding his fury.

I gave him all he could take, fueling his rage like some supercharged battery.

A roar broke out from the center of the arena, the raw, primal sound sending fearful shudders through the crowd. Bodies flew back as Caelan rose, his wolf form morphing into something new.

He wasn't on all fours like a normal wolf anymore. He stood tall, rising above the wolves of Dark Moon on two paws, his mighty limbs longer than they'd been before. He seemed larger somehow, more menacing as his taunt muscles tensed and bulged beneath his skin.

I stared in disbelief. I had never amplified anyone as much as I was doing to Caelan right now, and I wasn't sure what was happening. No one had ever changed their form before, but I couldn't risk stopping.

Caelan's wolf turned, his eyes locking with mine. The burning hunger in them made my breath catch. I knew without a doubt he was coming for me.

He threw his head back and howled, tossing three wolves off him with one powerful swing of his arm. Caelan struck out at another pair that rushed forward, knocking them back with ease as he stalked toward me.

He snarled and snapped, ripping through their flesh like paper as they tried in vain to stop him. Blood coated the sand, the wolves of Dark Moon dropping like flies in Caelan's wake.

Huxley leapt on his back, but Caelan peeled him off, throwing that full-grown wolf aside like a toy. All the while, his gaze remained fixed on mine.

Before long, there was no one else standing.

Caelan slowly shifted from wolf to man as he neared the arena's edge. The change was so effortless that I almost missed it. He stopped as he reached me, standing there in all his naked glory.

I stared up at him as Dillon finally released me, and Caelan reached out, wrapping his strong arms around me. He pulled me tightly against him, his desire radiating along my skin and searing a path straight to my core.

"Mine," he snarled, the gruntness in his tone making me shiver.

"Yours," I confirmed.