

The Effects of the Change

"Oliver, spar with Dillon," my father instructed as we all stepped out onto the training grounds a short time later. "Shade, try to enhance Oliver like you did for Caelan last night."

Shade nodded, but I sensed her apprehension. I ran my thumb across her knuckles, making her look at me.

"It's going to be all right," I assured her. "No one will get hurt, and no one will blame you if this doesn't work."

Oliver and Dillon faced off against each other as Shade took a deep breath and let it out slowly. I could feel the push of her gift threatening to tangle with my emotions, but it shifted as she refocused on Oliver.

For several minutes, there was no change in Oliver, and Shade finally hummed in frustration.

"It's not working," she mumbled.

"Ta y, help Dillon," my father ordered. "Perhaps the threat needs to be greater for it to react."

Ta y ran onto the field to join her mate while Shade shook out her limbs and tried again. But the effect was the same. She couldn't seem to focus her gift as she had with me.

"Caelan, join Ta y and Dillon against Oliver," my father grunted.

I gave Shade's hand one final squeeze before joining the three of them. We surrounded Oliver, attacking him from all sides, but Shade couldn't seem to transform him as she had with me.

We repeated the experiment, trying different combinations where Shade tried to focus her ability on anyone but me, but nothing happened. No matter how hard she tried, the result was still the same.

"Maybe we should call it," I panted, glancing around.

Ta y and Oliver were hunched over, both struggling to catch their breath as Dillon and I stood with our hands braced on our hips, our chests heaving. Everyone had taken a decent beating, and Shade looked exhausted.

"I'd like to try one more time," my mother interjected. "But this time, I would like for Caelan to spar against Dillon, and for Shade to focus on Caelan. I have a theory."

"Care to share it, my love?" my father asked.

"Let's see if I'm right first," she replied, motioning for us to proceed.

Dillon and I dropped into our fighting stances. He swung, the sickening smack of his fist connecting with my side ringing out as I tried to block. We were always a little rougher when we fought each other because we knew the other could take it.

I felt it the moment Shade's gift was unleashed, but it wasn't the same as it had been in the arena. It felt weaker, like it wasn't just focused on me. My concerns were confirmed when Dillon's attacks grew more frenzied.

"Stop," my father called.

We sprang apart, pacing as we both struggled to calm down. I glanced at Shade, who swayed slightly on her feet.

"I'm sorry," she murmured feverishly, putting a hand to her head. "It's harder to focus it than I thought."

"I think that's enough for today," I announced as I walked toward her, snaking my arm around her waist and taking her weight. "She's pushing herself too hard."

"Just once more," my mother countered. "I think I've worked it out. Dillon, Ta y, and Oliver, if you would all attack Caelan together. This will be the last attempt, Shade my dear. I promise."

Shade nodded, sweat glistening on her brow as she leaned into me.

"Are you sure you are all right?" I asked through our mind-link. "We don't have to do this anymore if you don't want to. I'll tell them to stop. Just say the word."

"No. Your mother is a very wise woman. If she has a theory about all of this, then we need to see if she's right. I'm fine. I can try one more time."

I nodded, still uncertain this was the right decision, but I respected Shade's choice.

"We'll do this once more," I said sternly. "After that, I want Shade to rest. If we can't figure this out today, then we'll try again another day. Okay?"

"Agreed," my mother replied. "I want the three of you to keep Caelan away from Shade. Whatever it takes. And don't hold back. If we want to trigger the same response, the threat has to seem real."

I kissed Shade on the forehead before hurrying back to the training ground. I crouched as my two betas and gamma squared off against me, ready for anything.

Dillon rushed forward as I felt Shade's power start to curl around me. I parried his strike as Ta y darted in, dodging her kick and ducking as Oliver leapt for me. I could feel Shade's ability surging through me like an electric hum in my veins.

Suddenly, my vision sharpened, my speed increased, my strength tripled, and my determined gaze locked on my mate. I blocked their strikes without a thought, every fiber of my being focused on one thing and one thing alone.

Shade. I had to get to her, and they were standing in my way.

I snarled as the three of them tried to drive me back, the hair on my arms standing on end as I felt the same energy from last night course through me.

My body shifted, my claws elongating as my limbs lengthened. Fur spread out across my skin as my form stretched, my halves merging into the ferocious creature from the night before.

I towered above the three of them, standing on my hind legs with ease. I could feel the energy dancing around me, radiating from this brilliant white light. It called to me, swirling and pulsing as it fed into me like a power source.

Shade.

She looked like an angel as she stood there emitting that heavenly glow. Her gift traveled across our bond, her worry and love only fueling me further.

This was for her. It was all for her. Everything I had been before and everything I would be from this point forward belonged to her.

Getting to her became my greatest desire. I surged forward, tossing Dillon, Ta y, and Oliver away like they were nothing.

Some part of me knew they were not my enemy, but they were preventing me from reaching my mate which couldn't be allowed. I pushed through them, knocking them back on their asses as I stomped toward Shade.

The fight doesn't matter. Nothing matters. Only her.

Shade stopped emitting her gift, allowing me to transform back to my normal self, but it was too late to stop the tidal wave of emotion surging within me.

Get to Shade. Get to Shade. Get to Shade.

The thought thumped in my ears, echoing the frantic beating of my heart. When I reached her, I scooped her into my arms and wrapped her legs around my waist, nuzzling my face into her neck and inhaling as much of her scent as I could.

Goddess. Oxygen seems unnecessary compared to this.

I ran my tongue over the spot where she would bear my mark, causing her to squeal.

"Caelan!"

I gave a pleased growl, brushing my lips against her skin.

What I wouldn't give to have her alone right now, naked beneath me as I kissed my way along every inch of this delicious body.

"Interesting," my father mumbled, his voice suddenly bringing me back to myself.

I turned, sheepishly letting her down as I glanced at my parents.

"I was right," my mother replied, smiling victoriously. "She can't eat Caelan this way because of their bond. She doesn't have that with anyone else, because they aren't her mate."

"So, I can only do this with Caelan?" Shade asked.

"It appears so," my mother answered. "We're often given what we need to complete our mates. It seems your gift, used in this way, was destined for him alone."

"Unfortunately, that won't stop Huxley from trying to figure out a way to steal it. We should consider planning a ceremony as soon as possible," my father added. "The only way to ensure that he can't have Shade is for her to wear Caelan's mark."

I glanced at her. My father had an excellent point, but I was nervous about making Shade feel pressured. I didn't want her to feel like her choices were being taken away from her. That was what her father had done, and I didn't want her to think I was anything like him.

She smiled, intertwining her fingers with mine. "Let's do it."