

Howling

"Where are we going," I giggled as he led me down the stairs and out the front door.

"For a run," he replied with a playful wink.

I grinned as we made our way toward the tree line and shifted into our wolves. A run sounded perfect.

Once we were ready, I followed Caelan as he took off into the trees. We ran for nearly an hour, deep into the heart of the forest.

I suspect we aren't far from the tower he took me to on our first date, if I have my bearings right.

Eventually, we came to a large clearing filled with wild flowers. I stopped and stared. It was beautiful, the entire field speckled with blues, purples, yellows, oranges, reds, and whites.

Caelan bounced happily, tossing back his head and releasing a long, cheerful howl. He looked at me as though he expected me to reciprocate.

"I can't howl," I reminded him through our mind-link.

"I know," he replied. "That's actually why I brought you out here. I want to unlock your howl. We're as far away from anyone else as possible. There's not even any patrol in the area, so we should be safe."

"What?! Are you insane?" I exclaimed. "You're still here Caelan. What if I hurt you? I can't risk it."

My curse was not to be tried with. It was deadly.

"Just hear me out, please," he begged. "Your father overreacted that day, but I've been doing some more digging and consulted with our own pack sages about your curse. Yes, your howl could be harmful, but it doesn't mean that it will happen every time. We actually believe it's related to your emotional state."

"Really?" I questioned, still skeptical.

"Yes, and unlike your father, I consulted more than one sage. They all agree that your howl shouldn't be dangerous under normal circumstances," he explained. "I think you're strong enough and aware enough to know when it's different. I want to give you a chance to howl like a normal wolf."

"But what if something goes wrong?" I countered. "You could get hurt or worse."

"You said that your father was able to withstand it better than most. That's why I'm the only one out here. If he could survive it, then I should be able to as well. If you can't control it, then I promise to put the alpha order back in place immediately."

I shifted on my paws, weighing my options.

"I'm still not entirely convinced this is a wise idea, but I've always wanted to howl along with the pack. It's a basic right. It shouldn't be important, but it is."

"You'll stop me immediately if something happens?" I pressed hesitantly. "Don't drag it out if I can't control it. As soon as the wrong howl starts, you stop it."

"Yes, Shade. I promise," he replied with a nod of his shaggy head.

"Okay," I relented, taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly. "Do it."

"SHADE, AS YOUR ALPHA, I GIVE YOU PERMISSION TO HOWL," he bellowed through our link.

I waited for a moment. Should I feel something? Like the opening of a door? I don't feel any different.

"Did it work?" he asked hopefully.

"I don't know," I replied, shrugging my shoulders.

"Well, give it a try," he suggested.

I nodded, trying to psych myself up for this. I can howl without hurting anyone. Caelan has the power to stop me if anything goes wrong. I can trust him. I can control my amplification. Who says I can't control my curse as well?

With renewed determination, I took a deep breath and tossed back my head, opening my mouth and releasing a forceful howl. The sound rang out crisp and clear, seeming to hang in the air a moment.

I snapped my jaws shut in surprise, cutting it off almost as quickly as it began. I looked at Caelan with wide eyes and saw the wolfish grin spreading across his face.

"I just howled!" I chirped in astonishment.

"Yes, you did!" he cheered. "Try it again, but maybe hold it for a little bit longer this time."

"Okay. Okay," I replied excitedly.

Feeling more confident, I threw my head back and let out a long, loud howl full of joy. It echoed through the clearing as I stopped, and I looked at Caelan.

He wasn't clutching at his chest or twitching. He seemed entirely unaffected.

I yipped in excitement. I can howl! I can howl without hurting Caelan!

I stopped suddenly as a thought occurred to me.

"Wait. What if this only works because I'm your mate?" I asked, some of my enthusiasm dwindling. "What if you're somehow immune because of our bond?"

"I took that into consideration, which is why I asked Dillon and Oliver to join us. As high-ranking wolves, they should be able to withstand it for a minute or two if something happens. But I really don't think there's any reason to worry. As long as you avoid howling when you're upset, then everything should be fine."

Oliver and Dillon came trotting up a short while later, both panting from their run out to the clearing.

"Thanks for joining us," Caelan said. "Are you both ready to give this a go?"

They nodded, and I hesitated a moment, trying to clear my mind and think of only good things as I tossed back my head and howled.

I stared at them as I finished, searching their faces for any sign of distress, but there was nothing. Not a twinge of desperation or despair. They were fine.

I leapt around the clearing, howling in short, joyous bursts. "I can howl!"

Luckily, the boys were equally enthusiastic and joined in, allowing me the opportunity to lead my very first group howl.

This means the curse doesn't have the hold on my life that I thought it did. It's just another part of me. I'm not some uncontrollable killing machine. I'm simply Shade. A wolf who can howl.

Caelan froze suddenly, raising his muzzle to the air. I stopped, my fur standing on end as I caught a whiff of the same unknown scent.

"What the hell is that?" Oliver asked, his hackles rising as we dove into the trees to track it.

"I'm not sure, but I don't like it. Everyone on high alert, just in case," Caelan replied.

We stumbled through the brush to find three Dark Moon scouts sauntering through the woods, not even trying to hide that they were on our territory. Dillon snarled as we circled them while Caelan shifted so that he could speak with them.

"You're trespassing on Harvest Moon Pack lands," he barked. "State your business."

The one in the center shifted, a cocky grin on his face as he squared off against the alpha. "We're here to deliver a message."

"From who?" Caelan demanded.

"Alpha Huxley. The Thunder Moon Pack has fallen," he scoffed. "Alpha Butch Mallory is dead."

"What?!" I cried, something breaking within me at the news.

My father may not have been loving, but he was still my father.

Caelan's eyes darted toward me. He could feel my anger radiating through our bond, and his face pinched with worry.

I glared at the three wolves from Dark Moon. *They should all be worried.*

"Run," I growled to Caelan, Dillon, and Oliver.

"Shade, I'm not leaving you," Caelan argued.

"I'll be fine. Now get out of here," I spat. "You'll want to make sure you're far enough away for what happens next."

Caelan hesitated but shifted and nodded for the others to follow him.

"We'll be back in five minutes," he assured me as they darted into the trees. "Be careful."

"You should have run with your friends, little freak," the scout taunted. "Pity the alpha wants you brought back alive."

He laughed like he'd won, but I knew better. All he'd done was sign his death warrant. I let my rage, sorrow, and desperation fill me, bracing myself as I threw back my head and howled.

The sound was low and bitter, nothing like the ones I'd emitted in the clearing earlier.

The three of them began to paw at their heads, dropping to the ground as though they could escape its somber tone. They twitched and screamed, scratching at their chests as their eyes rolled back and blood pooled from their mouths.

I stopped as they dropped, their voices forever silenced, and stared at them without an ounce of remorse. They had deserved their fate, and if I ever got close to Huxley, he would suffer the same if not worse.

Caelan, Dillon, and Oliver returned to find me lying on the ground in my human form, too exhausted to maintain my wolf any longer. Caelan shifted and scooped me up, holding me close as he carried me back toward my pack house.

"Do you think it's true?" I managed, my throat dry and scratchy from the force of my howl. "Do you think my father's dead? What about Sunny? Would he kill her too?"

"I don't know," Caelan admitted with a heavy sigh. "But I intend to find out."