

### Preparing to be Marked

By the time we were finally done with everything, I was more than happy to retire to my room. I hesitated for a moment as I glanced at Caelan's door.

*I know I teased him about not being able to sleep without me, but I'm not sure I'm going to be able to rest either without him next to me.*

I pushed open the door, leaning heavily against it as I closed behind me. *Don't think about it. Try to get a good night's rest. Tomorrow is going to be a big day for us, and I don't want to be too exhausted to enjoy every minute of it.*

I tried to relax as I climbed in bed, but my body refused to find a comfortable position. I tossed and turned, gripping the pillow that smelled like Caelan tightly and burying my face in it, but nothing worked.

I gave a frustrated groan, settling on my back with a *hu*. *This is going to be a long night.*

I froze as I heard the creak of my bedroom door opening before the scent of coffee and vanilla flooded my senses. The bed dipped as he climbed in beside me.

"Caelan! What are you doing here?" I whispered.

"I can't sleep without you," he admitted with a pout.

"I can't either, but we have to respect tradition," I insisted. "We can't sleep in the same bed tonight."

"Fine," he grumbled, grabbing a pillow and shoving it over for the couch. "But I'm not going back to my room. I need to be near you, or I'll never get any rest. I'll take the couch, and I promise to keep my hands to myself. I'll even set an alarm so I can sneak back to my room before anyone else wakes up. Will that do?"

I giggled at the frustration in his tone. "These are your pack's traditions."

"I know. I know," he mumbled as he flopped down on the cushions. "Go to sleep, baby."

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When I woke the next morning, Caelan was gone. He'd placed his pillow back on the bed beside me with a single throw laying on top of it. I smiled as I picked it up.

*Today's the day.*

There was a gentle knock on the door before Zelda entered.

"I thought I heard you moving around in here," she remarked as she carried the tray over to the coffee table. "I brought you a hearty breakfast since you ladies won't be having a large lunch."

"Thank you, Zelda. I appreciate it," I replied as I got up.

"Of course, Luna," she offered with a smile, stepping around me to make the bed.

"I'm not the luna yet," I corrected her.

"But you will be. You're mated to the alpha, and after tonight you'll carry his mark." She tucked the covers. "I've known from the moment I laid eyes on you that you were something special."

"I remember. You said I didn't smell like an omega," I said as I took a bite of bacon. "I'm curious. What do I smell like then? Do I smell like a zeta?"

"No," she replied, shaking her head.

"Then what do I smell like?"

"It's difficult to explain," she sighed, tugging the sheets up. "It's not so much a rank thing. There's this sense of power to your scent. It overrides the rank markers. Honestly, I think you're the most powerful wolf here."

I snorted. "That's impossible."

She shrugged. "Is it? That's why Dark Moon wants you and why Thunder Moon feared you, right? They sensed your power, and it worried them. Once you become Alpha Caelan's luna, they won't have any control over you anymore. That scares them."

I stared at her, feeling the conviction in her words.

She smoothed a hand over the duvet. "If you ask me, they should be afraid. You're better than them, and after everything they put you through, they deserve whatever the Goddess has in store."

She turned, giving a slight curtsey as she faced me.

"You have my unwavering loyalty, Luna Shade. You and Alpha Caelan will make a powerful couple, and I know you'll be great leaders," she offered before righting her posture. "Enjoy your breakfast!"

I let her words settle as I ate. *A wolf more powerful than them all? That seems a bit far-fetched.*

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Ta y came bounding into the room a short time later.

"All right! I'm here to make you look fabulous! I have something really elegant in mind. You're going to look like a goddess," she said with a mischievous grin. "Well, at least until Caelan ravishes you, then all my hard work will be undone, but until then you'll be the most stunning wolf at the party."

I shook my head, rolling my eyes playfully at her.

"Now, seriously, get your cute butt in the shower. We have so much to do," she said as she started setting out all her supplies. "It took a lot to convince Luna Maty that I could handle your hair and makeup. I can't mess up now."

She was ready by the time I was done, hurrying me into the chair and drying my hair. After that, she began curling it into large, loose curls before pulling it back and arranging it in a romantic updo.

"Voilà!" she shouted as she finished. "How's that look?"

I turned in the mirror, admiring her handiwork. "Amazing, Ta y."

"We want to make sure to show off your neck," she said with a wink. "Get your mate all riled up to place his mark there. All right, stretch your legs while I try to tame my mane. Lunch will be here soon, and we have a couple of guests joining us."

"Guests? What guests?" I asked as I stepped to the side.

She dropped into the seat and began plucking a comb through her natural curls.

"A couple of girls from the pack asked if they could join us today. I didn't think you'd mind, so I agreed."

"Who is it?" I pressed, hoping it wasn't any of Caelan's disgruntled ex-girlfriends.

"Don't worry," Ta y said, waving a dismissive hand. "It's just Briggita, Zia, and Alma."

"Oh," I sighed in relief.

I considered Briggita a friend. She had been kind to me since I arrived at Harvest Moon, and Zia and Alma had been supportive as well, even during the choosing.

There was a knock on the door, and I went to open it. The girls were on the other side holding platters of food.

"Hey! We know there's going to be a feast tonight, so we just brought finger sandwiches," Briggita explained with a smile.

"And blueberry pie," Zia added, lifting the tray in her hands for emphasis.

"Yummy. I love blueberry pie," I remarked as they came in.

"You should tell Caelan then because they made blueberry pie for tonight, but he's making them remake it," Alma said, setting down several glasses and a bottle of lemonade. "He insists the only pie that can be served tonight is cherry."

I ducked my head, my cheeks burning. *That wolf.*

"Caelan's always liked cherry pie, but he's been obsessed with it since the choosing," Ta y added, only furthering my embarrassment. "I've seen him have it for dessert like every day. It's like he can't get enough."

I was certain my face was the reddest it had ever been in my life.

"Shade?" Briggita asked, giving me a concerned look. "Is everything okay? You're really flushed right now."

"Questions," I squeaked, grabbing a sandwich and stuffing it into my mouth so I couldn't answer any more questions.

Ta y raised a skeptical eyebrow as she gave me a knowing grin.

*Crap.*

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The girls stayed behind to help us get ready after we finished lunch. Briggita and Zia helped me with my makeup while Alma helped Ta y with her hair.

I smiled as they shared stories and jokes, feeling more at ease than I had anywhere outside of Caelan's arms.

"Okay, what do you think?" Briggita asked as she spun me around to face the mirror.

I gasped when I saw my reflection. They'd kept my makeup light, adding a delicate shimmer to my eyes and a soft pink color to my lips. It was elegant and bright, a perfect complement to my dress.

"It's incredible! I can't believe that's me!" I murmured.

"Our alpha is in for a real treat," Zia added with a sassy snap of her fingers. "He'll forget all about that cherry pie when he catches sight of you."

Ta y came over with my dress.

"Oh, I doubt that," she said with a coy smile. "Come on. We've got to get you downstairs. It's time."

I stood, letting them help me into my gown and heels. *There's no turning back now. By the end of the night, I'll be officially marked and mated.*