

## The Marking Ceremony

Ta y walked me through the order of events as the four of us headed downstairs.

By tradition, I was supposed to be one of the last to arrive. Caelan would greet guests as they headed into the ballroom where Luna Maty would entertain them until Caelan and I were ready to make our big entrance. Then his father would announce us just before the ceremony.

"After that, you guys will be free to slip away whenever you want to complete the marking," Ta y added as we reached the ground floor. "Then when you return, Alpha Leal will introduce you guys a second time. Okay?"

I nodded, even though the thought filled me with anxious, giddy feelings. I was utterly mortified that everyone would know exactly what we were going to be up to when we left the party, but I was also so ready to be Caelan's mate.

"I promise you, Shade. Everything is going to be great," Ta y assured, squeezing my hand gently.

"I know," I replied. "I don't know why I'm so nervous. This just isn't what I pictured."

"Don't let Luna Maty's preparations get in your head. She's always wanted a big event for Caelan. Some mates do it more casually. Either way, it's just a party to celebrate your love. That's all," she chuckled. "And that man adores you. He'd be perfectly happy if you were the only one here."

"He would, wouldn't he?" I giggled.

"Absolutely," she agreed. "He's wrapped around your little finger. I swear he's even worse than Dillon was, and let me tell you, that man was stuck to me like glue when we first mated."

"That's right," Briggita laughed. "He wouldn't leave you alone for more than five minutes."

"Caelan...uh, he did sleep in my room last night," I admitted shyly.

"That doesn't surprise me at all," she replied. "I honestly don't know why Luna Maty bothered with that silly tradition. She knew he wouldn't be able to resist."

"He, uh, he slept on the couch," I countered feebly. "We did try to respect it."

"Well, at least you tried," she joked with a roll of her eyes as the girls snickered. "Okay. We'll be waiting for you inside. Caelan is in the parlor. See you in there."

Then I watched as the four girls walked away, each offering an encouraging smile and a wave before they disappeared into one of the side doors of the ballroom.

I took a few moments to gather my nerves, shaking out my limbs and taking several deep breaths.

*She's right. All that matters is that Caelan and I are together. That's all I want from tonight. To be marked by him and to see him wear mine in return.*

I took a step toward the parlor when suddenly a hand wrapped around my arm. I spun around, crouching slightly into a defensive position before a familiar scent hit me.

"Sunny?" I gasped, staring at her with wide eyes.

My sister was barely recognizable. She was covered in filth, her blonde hair dulled by grime and her clothes torn and muddled. There were bloody scratches all over her skin, and twin tracks running down her cheeks where the tears had washed away the dirt.

"Shadel!" she cried, a wild and desperate look in her eyes as she fell into my arms. "Father's dead! The Dark Moon Pack destroyed everything! Alpha Huxley took me captive, but I managed to escape. He's going to force me to mate with him. You have to help me, Shade!"

My face fell. *It's true. My father's really dead. Thunder Moon has fallen.*

I struggled to get control of my guilt as Sunny started dragging me toward the back doors. My entire life had been dedicated to protecting that pack, but when they'd needed my protection the most, I had failed them.

"A few other pack members managed to escape, but Alpha Huxley has scouts out searching for us. We have to get them to safety," she urged. "I told them to hide in the cavern near the waterfall. I thought they might be safe there until I could find you."

That snapped me out of it. *Thunder Moon may have fallen, but I can still help those caught in the cross re.*

"Lead the way," I declared, following her. "We can bring them here to the pack house and offer them sanctuary."

We rushed out onto the back porch, and I skidded to a stop when I realized I'd walked right into a trap. Alpha Huxley stood in front of me, wearing a satisfied smirk as his wolves surrounded me, the heavy wooden doors slamming shut with ominous finality.

"Sunny!" I hissed, glaring at my sister as she stepped away from me. "How could you?!"

She shrugged as Huxley stepped forward with that same air of confidence he'd had the night he challenged Caelan.

*He thinks he's already won.* I clenched my fists tightly. *I'll prove him wrong.*

"What a good little soldier you are, running to your former pack's aid even on such a special night as this," he mocked. "Don't worry. I promise your evening won't be a total loss."

He nodded, two of his warriors seizing me from behind.

"Get her out of here before anyone realizes she's gone," he instructed.

"No!" I screamed as they attempted to drag me away. "Sunny!" I tried again, looking over my shoulder at her. "Don't let them do this!"

I struggled against them as she turned away, ignoring my plea. Huxley sauntered forward, tilting my chin up so I had to stare into his evil eyes.

"Time to make you mine, *mate*," he sneered, the word sickeningly sweet.

Being someone's mate was an honor. A wonderful gift given to you by the Goddess herself. But the way he said it made it sound like something vile. Like a death sentence.

*I won't be his mate. I refuse to be made someone else's weapon. I am Shade Mallory, gifted by the Goddess herself. I'm the fated mate of the alpha of the Harvest Moon Pack and a future luna. I will not go without a fight.*

I jerked, straining against my captors as my body shook. The energy built up inside of me, the walls around my power falling away I forced my ability out to the wolves around me.

"She's about to lose control!" Sunny screamed.

"Wolfsbane now!" Alpha Huxley demanded.

Someone jabbed a needle into my neck, and I laughed bitterly as I felt the serum rush through my veins.

"That won't help you," I spat, glaring at them. "Nothing will."

My gift wasn't connected to my wolf's abilities, so while the wolfsbane would keep me from shifting and using my curse, it wouldn't stop me from using my amplification.

I cried out as I channeled everything I'd been suppressing for most of my life into my power, thrusting it into the air and bodies around me. It was so strong that darkness consumed my vision, and for a horrifying second, I feared I'd gone blind.

I blinked several times as my sight returned, but as I looked around, things were far from normal. The outside world was muted, painted in shades of gray, while the people swirled with vibrant color. My panicked gaze jumped from one person to the next.

*This can't be happening. I don't have time to deal with new abilities right now. I need to get out of here and warn Caelan.*

The hands holding me tightened painfully, their frustrated snarling a sharp note as they struggled against my amplification. The two men snapped at one another, growling as if they were ready to tear the other's throat out.

"Control yourselves!" Huxley ordered. "She's influencing you! Keep your heads straight! Bring her now! We need to move her before she alerts her alpha. Get her to the camp. The sooner I claim her, the sooner no one can stand in my way."

I glanced at him. Alpha Huxley was painted in inky blacks, murky browns, and a deep, bloody red. I shook my head, blinking my eyes and trying in vain to make my vision go back to normal. I needed to focus if I was going to make it out of this.

*What did he say again? That's right. They want to move me. They want me out of range so I can't reach Caelan.*

"*Caelan*," I whimpered through the mind-link as they dragged me toward the tree line.

*"I'm coming, Shade,"* he assured me.

But as we slipped through the trees, I feared that he might be too late to keep Huxley from forcing his mark on me.