

## Death for the Cause

The wolves of Harvest Moon had been quick to mobilize when they heard their future luna had been taken captive. They joined us on the edge of our territory, every one of them grim-faced and ready for battle.

Oliver and I led a company of one hundred warriors into Dark Moon's territory, while Dillon and Ta y led a platoon of fifty toward Thunder Moon's.

We couldn't be certain where Alpha Huxley would be hiding Shade, but if I had to bet, I figured he'd taken his prize home. Which was why I was leading the charge straight into the heart of Dark Moon.

Howls cut through the still night air as they warned of our arrival. It didn't matter. All the warning in the world wasn't going to save them from what was coming. They had taken my mate, and nothing could undo what they'd done.

My warriors met the Dark Moon wolves head-on, clashing with them in a flurry of fang and fury. The sounds of battle erupted around me as I raced toward their pack house.

I had to get to Shade. I only hoped that I could get there before Huxley placed his lithy mark on her.

But even if I was too late, it wouldn't change anything. Once Huxley was dead, his mark would fade, and then I could claim what was rightfully mine.

I ran headlong through the chaos, mowing down anyone who dared to get in my way. Wolves fell before me, torn and bloodied as I barreled through. I could just barely make out the scent of cherry pie over all the carnage. She was close.

The pack house came into sight, and Huxley stood atop the wide, uneven steps. He held Shade tightly in his arms, a sick smirk on his lips as he watched me approach. She glanced at me, her pale eyes wide as she tried to free herself.

"Caelan!" she called, her voice a balm to my soul.

I slowed, snarling viciously before taking a deep breath as I tried to calm myself. I knew this was what he wanted. The reason he would risk bringing her to the battle eld in the first place.

He hoped that if I saw her with him, it would throw me off my game. He knew he was no match for my strength. He needed me unfocused and sloppy. He thought it would lead me to make a mistake, but he was wrong.

Seeing him there with my mate did fuel my rage, but it also reminded me of what was at stake. I had to be careful. I had to be smart. I had to get Shade out of this no matter what it cost me.

I growled, looking over her as she struggled against his grip. She seemed weak, like she could barely stand on her own two feet.

I tried to reach her through the mind-link, and while I could feel her presence, something was blocking me from contacting her.

*Wolfsbane. They drugged her so she couldn't shift.*

"Is this what you're looking for, Alpha Caelan," Huxley taunted, twirling a thick strand of her hair around his finger and bringing it to his nose.

I snarled as he inhaled her scent, taking another step toward them. He grabbed her by the throat and squeezed, making me stop in my tracks. I knew he wouldn't kill her. She was far too valuable to him. But I didn't want him to hurt her either.

"Uh-uh," he warned. "I'm afraid it's not going to be *that* easy."

I watched as he licked her neck, my hackles rising as I saw red. *I'm going to tear him limb from limb.*

He tossed her into the arms of two waiting guards who dragged her back inside.

"No! Caelan!" she screamed, and it took everything I had not to run to her side.

His wolves weren't the threat. Huxley was. I had to get rid of him first, and then Shade would be safe. I snapped my jaws, but he shook his head as a dark chuckle rumbled from his chest.

"Shade won't be able to save you this time," he spat. "It's alpha versus alpha now. May the better wolf win."

He smirked as he dove into the air, shifting before his paws hit the ground.

*"Keep everyone back," I instructed my soldiers through the mind-link. "This is between Huxley and me."*

He lunged, and I tried to twist out of the way, but I wasn't fast enough. His claws dug into my back leg, slicing open my flesh.

I grunted as I hopped away but refused to show any sign of distress. I wouldn't give him or any of his wolves the satisfaction of knowing they'd caused me pain. I could heal a scratch, but I couldn't afford for my focus to waver.

We circled each other, our soldiers forming a rough ring around us as they barked and yipped their encouragement. He growled, and I bared my teeth.

Then he leapt at me a second time, but this time, I met him head-on, ramming my skull into his muzzle. He yelped, taking a step back to recover, but I dove on top of him, raking my claws down his back. They left bloody tracks down his spine as he skittered away from me.

He went for my tail, but I tucked it in, remembering what occurred at the challenge. I nipped at his ankles as he ran by, clipping one of them and snapping the tendon. He limped past, dragging the leg behind him.

I attacked again, taking advantage of his injury. I leapt on top of him, wrapping my jaws around his head. My teeth punctured the sides of his skull as I bit down. I heard the crack of bone breaking and tasted blood, but even that did nothing to slow him down.

He sailed beneath me, bucking me off. As soon as I landed, he turned and kicked sand into my face, temporarily blinding me. He jumped on me, his jaws closing around my throat as his teeth began to sink into the thick fur around my neck.

He shook his head like a rabid dog, and I could feel my flesh tearing open. I knew this would be the end if I couldn't get out of this hold quickly. I couldn't let that happen. I couldn't fail my mate.

I sank my claws into the space where his shoulder met his torso, yanking them away with so much force, I nearly ripped his arm clean off. He released me, and I tackled him, taking us both down to the ground.

We rolled over the blood-soaked grass, both of us gravely injured but neither willing to give in.

I closed my eyes as I felt my strength waver, picturing my Shade. *This is all for her. Even if I don't survive this fight, I'm going to take Huxley down with me. Then she'll be safe. That's all that matters.*

Huxley clawed at my chest as I bit into the flesh around his neck, blood gushing into my mouth. I clamped down, shaking my head and hoping I tore his throat out before he managed to rip my heart out.

Suddenly, the door to the pack house burst open. A shaggy gray wolf leapt off the porch, her white eyes blazing as she sprinted toward us. I kicked Huxley away, calling out to all my wolves through the mind-link.

*"Get clear! Run! Now!"*

Shade threw back her head and howled, the woeful, earth-shattering sound rippling through the atmosphere with a force unlike anything I'd ever experienced before. It tore through my body, pain radiating through my chest as the strength of it threatened to crush the life from me.

I scrambled away to put some distance between us, shifting and covering my ears as if it would somehow help.

Shade stalked toward Huxley, her otherworldly gaze pinned on him as she stood directly over him and howled in his face. He convulsed beneath her, his body twisting unnaturally until it suddenly lay still.

Alpha Huxley was dead.

Shade's jaws snapped shut as soon as he stopped moving, a shocked silence taking place of her cry.

I swayed, my vision wavering as I watched my mate stumble toward me. I ached all over, the last of my strength gone as I collapsed.

Shade shifted, crawling on her hands and knees until she fell next to me. She reached out, her hand shaking as it brushed against mine.

I could see tears streaming down her cheeks like twin rivers of endless sorrow. I wanted to wipe them away, to tell her it was all going to be okay, but all I could manage was to thread my fingers through hers.

*No. I need to hold her.*

Darkness danced along the edges of my vision as I pulled myself toward her with agonizing slowness.

*If this is it, then I'll die holding my mate. I'll go happily if I can have her in my arms one last time.*

It took everything I had to drag my body to hers, but I wrapped my arms around her just as I started to lose consciousness. The scent of cherry pie filled my senses as my eyes closed.

*She's safe. It's finally over.*