

The Veil

My eyes opened. I was awake, but something felt off. I could feel something solid beneath my feet, but my body felt light and airy, like I was floating.

I glanced around. I was in a forest, but it wasn't any forest I knew.

Unfamiliar trees with low, heavy branches surrounded me, their leaves cascading toward the ground like a waterfall. Thick, stringy moss wove its way along their roots like spider webs, and bushes with huge, palm-frond leaves and colorful flowers as large as my head lined the clearing I stood in.

Where am I? How did I get here? I can't seem to remember anything. Maybe this is a dream.

I turned toward the small pond in the middle of the space, its crystal-clear surface as smooth as glass. The very air around it glowed with an eerie haze as I took several steps forward. I blinked against the light, trying to adjust, but it only grew brighter, making it more difficult to see.

It seemed to pulse, becoming even more luminous as I watched in awe. Then suddenly, there was a so radiant and intense that I shielded my face with my hands. Heat scorched along my skin, so hot it felt as though I had embraced the sun.

It was over as quickly as it began, leaving me surprised but no worse for wear.

As I peeked through my fingers, I saw twinkling lights dancing around me like snow. I stared, mesmerized, slowly reaching out to touch one to see if it would burn. But the light simply faded away, seemingly more affected by my energy than I was by its.

"I'm afraid you don't possess enough magic to contain an ember of time within your grasp, my little one," said a familiar female voice.

My breath caught, my heart hammering in my ears as I turned to face the speaker. Tears spilled down my cheeks as I caught sight of her.

"Mom?"

The angelic woman floated just above the small pond in the center of the clearing, the hem of her flowing white gown dusting along the water and creating tiny golden ripples on its surface. Her long, wavy blonde hair floated around her like a halo, gently swaying in some magical breeze.

I fought hard to remain standing as my knees began to wobble. *It's her. It's really my mom. But if she's here, does that mean... No, I can't be. Not yet.*

"Hello, Shade," she said, a warm smile on her face as she gazed fondly at me. "It's good to see you again, honey. Now, I know there's a lot going on in that overactive mind of yours, but I promise I'll explain as much as I can."

"Am I...dead?" I stammered with a gulp.

"No, sweetheart. You aren't dead," she assured me with a chuckle. "We're currently sitting within the veil between your world and the next. Everything you see is a physical projection of the eternal forest of the Moon Goddess, where all souls reside until their reincarnation."

"Reincarnation?" I questioned, wiping my eyes. "Does that mean you can come back?"

"Eventually, I will be born again," she explained. "I've been waiting for your father's soul to join me as we are two halves of the same spirit, but now we must also receive the Goddess's forgiveness. She is most displeased with the way your father handled the gift she left in our care."

"Gift?"

"You, sweetheart. She gave us you," she said with a smile. "Your ability to amplify emotions is meant as a way to weed out the bad and reward the good. Caelan was designed specifically for you. A wolf pure of heart who would have the strength to love and support you through it all."

"Is that the strange vision I had? The one with all the colors?" I asked hesitantly.

"Yes. Your unique abilities allow for you to identify those with ill intents and stop them before they do unspeakable harm," she confirmed. "The Goddess foresaw great things for you and your mate. Together you will protect and unify packs the world over."

"I don't understand."

"Your gifts and Caelan's wisdom will bless the wolves for many generations to come. Your influence will help to shape the future. Each of your descendants and their mates will leave a lasting mark."

"If that's true, then why did I have to suffer so much? Why would she take my mother and abandon me to such a cruel father?" I demanded, my voice breaking. "Why would she curse me if this is meant to be a gift?"

"There is no curse, sweetheart," my mother insisted. "Those ignorant sages mistranslated the text. The Wolf Born of Sorrow is a *protection* that the Goddess puts in place within the DNA of her most important wolves. It's a fail-safe to guard against any threat to the pup. It protected you then just as it did tonight."

"Tonight?" I asked, images from the battle against Dark Moon rushing back to me.

Sunny's betrayal. Huxley holding me against him as his teeth neared my neck. Caelan as he crawled across the ground toward me, blood dripping from his wounds.

I gasped, my hands covering my mouth as fresh tears streamed down my cheeks. He'd been there when I howled. He'd been close enough to feel the effects. I could vaguely remember the warmth of his body against mine just before I lost consciousness.

Oh Goddess. Caelan. Did I kill him? Please tell me I didn't murder my mate?!

My heart clenched painfully at the thought.

"Caelan," I sobbed as I stared into my mother's comforting gaze. "Is Caelan all right?"

"He's still alive, but he suffered a severe injury," she replied gently. "We need to return you to his side as soon as possible so you can help him."

"How can I help?" I begged. "I don't have any healing abilities."

"His spirit is currently wandering the edge of the veil, teetering on the line between life and death. You can amplify his desire to return to you. That should call him back," she explained.

"Are you sure? I can't lose him," I murmured, the urgency in my voice causing my mother to smile. "I can't lose any of them."

"You've come a long way, Shade," she continued. "You've been learning to love yourself while also discovering how to accept the love of others. You're special. Thunder Moon couldn't see it, but Harvest Moon will embrace it. They will appreciate the light that shines within you."

"Is that like the colors I saw?" I inquired, the new mutation suddenly popping back in my mind now that my memory of that night had returned. "After Huxley took me, my vision changed. Everything around me looked dull except for the people."

"You were reading their energies," she clarified. "You were seeing their emotions projected as colors. Some people call it an aura. The more dominant the color, the more powerful the emotion associated with it. It will help you understand the true intentions of any wolf."

"So, I'll be able to control it eventually?"

She nodded, her smile faltering slightly as she gazed at me. "I'm afraid our time is up, sweetheart," she explained, sadly. "I must leave you, and you must rejoin your mate. He is waiting for you to descend. His soul is seeking yours instead of returning to where it belongs."

"What does that mean?" I pressed, worried for Caelan.

"It means that wolf will follow you, very literally, anywhere," she chuckled lightly, her eyes sparkling with delight. "You have yourself a very good mate, Shade. He loves you fiercely. I couldn't have hoped for anyone better for my little girl."

Then her eyes grew sad, a look of sorrow overtaking her delicate features. She sighed solemnly and took a moment to compose herself.

"I'm sorry that I couldn't be there for you, Shade. I know that my death made everything more difficult, and I wish beyond anything that I could've been there for you. Unfortunately, this is my path, and there was nothing that anyone could have done to change that."

I sniffed, wishing I could feel her warm embrace one last time.

"I have watched you grow into a beautiful, capable young woman," she continued. "And I have listened every night as you pour your greatest treasure out to me. I have always been there for you, and I will always be. You are my greatest treasure. I love you from the very bottom of my heart, Shade."

"I love you too, Mom," I cried.

"You are a special soul, sweetheart. You deserve everything good that is offered to you now. Please embrace it and accept that you have more than earned this happiness."

"I'll do my best," I offered with a misty smile.

"Goodbye, my sweet Shade," she called before fading back into the shimmering light that emitted from everywhere and nowhere at the same time.

Without warning, the ground was ripped out from underneath me, the forest disappearing in a blink as my spirit plummeted through the veil and back toward my body.