

Learning to Love... Book 1: Shade |

Unexpected Discoveries

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CAELAN

I left the party as soon as was socially acceptable, rage burning in my veins as I stormed into my office. I paced anxiously while I waited for my betas to arrive.

How did we miss this? Why wasn't she presented with the others during my last visit to Thunder Moon?

Dillon entered quietly, going straight for my filing cabinets and flipping through without me having to ask.

"Do we have anything on her?" I asked as Taffy entered and plopped down into one of the armchairs in front of my desk.

Her eyes danced with mischief as she watched her mate. She held out her hand, wiggling her fingers and smiling at him as he pulled out one of the folders.

"Pay up," she said triumphantly. "I told you it was her."

"Yeah. Yeah," he said as he shook his head.

"Guys, focus," I growled, struggling to keep my wolf in check. "What do we know about her?"

My mate has been right next door this entire time. How did I not know?

Dillon checked the name on the file before opening it and taking a seat next to his mate.

His eyes scanned the contents of the very thin folder, a frown forming on his face. "Not much, I'm afraid."

I stalked behind my desk, resting my hands on the slick wood as I let out a frustrated sigh.

I was furious. Thunder Moon knew I needed access to every eligible, unmated she-wolf when I visited their pack months ago. And yet here she was, not even attending as a candidate.

“How in the hell did we miss my mate during our visit to the Thunder Moon Pack?” I demanded.

“There’s no information about it in her file, almost like she wasn’t even there, which makes no sense. Why wouldn’t they include that?” Dillon asked, flipping through the few documents in Shade’s profile. “There’s barely anything about her at all in this.”

“You could ask Sunny,” Taffy interjected. “Shade’s her personal guard. Or you could call Alpha Butch, but I doubt either of them will be very forthcoming.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Call it a hunch, but there’s something off about this whole situation. First, they didn’t present her during your visit, which is just odd. We’re their ally. There should be no reason for them to keep her hidden. Then there was the whole mess when they arrived,” she added.

“What happened when they arrived?” I questioned.

“Shade wasn’t on the candidate list, but they penciled her in at the gate and gave her one of the spare rooms,” Dillon clarified. “According to Niral, Sunny had a fit about it, saying something about how including Shade would be an insult to you and the pack because of her rank.”

My wolf threatened to break free as anger coursed through my veins, flaring white-hot as I struggled to hold him back.

“An insult?!” I snarled.

Both Dillon and Taffy flinched beneath my livid glare. They knew it wasn’t directed at them and waited patiently while I regained control.

“She didn’t join you on the tour either,” Taffy prompted. “I saw Sunny talking to her just before it started. I bet she forbade her from going. Shade’s really conscious about pack hierarchy. She nearly panicked when she found out we were your betas. If Sunny ordered her not to go, she wouldn’t.”

“Let me see that file,” I bid Dillon, who closed it and tossed it across my desk.

I dropped into my chair and flipped it open. Every file was supposed to have a photo of the pack member and their wolf along with any relevant information. But Shade’s was suspiciously empty.

A polaroid of her had been stapled to the inside cover. Her hair was pulled back into a tight braid, and her expression was carefully neutral.

I stared at it for a long moment, wondering what my mate had gone through to be so guarded and rigid.

There wasn’t a photo of her wolf, and the only relevant information was a rank demotion when she was seven and a diploma from a private institute. There was nothing about her family or accomplishments or anything.

“Where’s the rest? What about her family? Her parents? Is she an orphan?” I questioned.

“That’s all they gave us,” Dillon said.

“This doesn’t make any sense. As far as we know, she’s spent her entire life in that pack. There should be more than this.” I tossed the useless document on top of my desk. “Get me Sunny’s file.”

Dillon rose and quickly pulled it out, dropping the thick folder into my hands. The photo of Sunny was professional, more like a magazine cover than a simple pack profile picture.

I flipped through, scanning the extensive list of accomplishments, community efforts, health records, and school transcripts. Nothing had been left out, showing that the pack did keep detailed records on at least some of their members.

But then why is Shade’s file almost completely empty? There has to be something I’m missing.

I laid Sunny’s folder down and leaned back in my chair, rubbing my eyes with a groan.

“Okay. How do I get out of the choosing ritual?” I asked. “Now that I’ve found my fated mate, none of this is necessary.”

Not to mention cruel. Seeing me court other females will only cause her pain, even if I have no intentions toward any of them.

"You can't," Dillon sighed.

"Why not?" I pressed. "I've found my mate. Shouldn't that override all this nonsense?"

"Once a choosing ritual has been invoked, it's expected that we honor the traditions, even if there are extenuating circumstances," Taffy said gently. "You just have to go through a couple of motions, like the dinner and the group outing. After that, you can start getting rid of the other as you see fit."

"All right," I huffed, knowing there was no way to argue my way out of tradition. "I kind of had a feeling you were going to say something like that, but it doesn't mean I like it."

"This may actually work out in your favor," Taffy remarked.

"How could it possibly work in my favor to court other females in front of my mate?" I scoffed. "You would have thrown a fit if Dillon even considered seeing anyone else."

"True," she admitted, reaching out to take her mate's hand. "But Shade hasn't anticipated any of this. If you rush into it, she'll probably run. Especially with something big like this."

"Not to mention, Sunny is going to do everything she can to keep Shade out of the picture," Dillon added. "Anyone can see that she wants to be Harvest Moon's new luna more than anything."

"Exactly," Taffy agreed. "The choosing ritual will give you the perfect cover to get to know Shade and get her comfortable with the idea that she's your fated mate before you announce it to the world."

"Okay," I sighed in resignation. "That's not the worst idea I've ever heard, but shouldn't she already know we're mates? I mean, we've scented each other, and I held her hand. Surely, she realizes it."

Taffy shook her head. "I don't think she's been told a lot about mates. She certainly wasn't acting like she knew what was happening. She thought you were bothered by her presence, probably because of her rank as omega."

"That's ridiculous," I said.

"I'm just telling you what I observed," Taffy replied with a shrug. "I don't think anyone taught her how to recognize her other half. If you ask me, I don't think her pack ever expected her to find a mate."

Those words struck me like a kick to the gut. How could my mate be this close and not recognize our connection?

I'll just have to make her understand. Be clear about my intentions and make myself known. I won't let her slip through my fingers.

"I hate everything about this," I grumbled. "But it's the only plan I can think of that lets me court my mate without screwing over tradition. Dillon, see what, if anything, you can find out from Sunny. I have a feeling she might talk to you more than she would to Taffy or myself."

Dillon nodded.

"Taffy," I continued. "You've already started getting close to Shade, but the more we know about her the better. I want her to trust us, to know that we're her friends. Keep an eye on her and make sure she's comfortable."

"Of course," Taffy agreed. "What are you going to do?"

I reached forward, picking up my phone and flipping through the contacts. "I'm going to call Alpha Butch and ask why Shade wasn't included in our visit. See if I can pry any information from him without letting him know she's my mate. If he finds out, he might order her to return home."

"You think he'd risk our alliance over something like this?" Dillon asked. "I mean, his own daughter is a candidate in the choosing. Surely, he wouldn't be that foolish over a bodyguard."

"No, I think he's smarter than that. Goddess knows they need our protection from the Dark Moon Pack, but I can't figure out why he's singled out this one she-wolf. There has to be a reason," I replied, pulling up Alpha Butch's contact information.

"All right," Dillon said as he and Taffy stood. "We'll report back if we find anything."

“Thanks, guys,” I responded, pushing the call button and bringing the phone to my ear.

They left, closing the door behind them as I listened to the line ring, my thoughts swirling with the mysteriously beautiful Shade from Thunder Moon.

My mate.