

A Different Shade

"Come on, guys!" Ta y called from the hall as she knocked incessantly. "It's after seven, and Luna Maty told all the guests to be here at seven. You need to get ready!"

I rose from the bed, yawning as I shuffled toward the door.

"Tell her to go away and get your cute butt back over here," Caelan groaned.

"I wish I could. Believe me," I sighed. "But she isn't wrong. I need time to get ready, and so do you."

I stopped, smiling at him over my shoulder.

"Fine," he grunted as he rolled onto his side of the bed, sitting up and rubbing his hands over his face.

"I'll see you in a couple of hours," I promised, walking over and placing a gentle kiss on his cheek.

"You'd better," he teased. "Nothing is going to stop me from marking you tonight. Not a damn thing."

His declaration caused a sensual shiver to run through me, carving a path straight to my core. He pulled me into him, planting a passionate kiss on my lips and leaving me breathless as he pulled away.

"Guys! Today!" Ta y shouted.

"Go on, mate," Caelan muttered with a cocky grin. "Before your beta breaks down the damn door."

I loated across the room, still buzzing from the kiss as I opened it. Ta y grabbed my hand and yanked me into the hall, dragging me toward the luna's quarters.

"Finally! Go take a shower!" she said as she shut the door behind us and hurried to plug in the curling iron. "We won't be able to do the same look as last time, but I think we can still pull off something really cute."

"I don't even have anything to wear, Ta y," I remarked as I veered toward the closet.

"Uh-uh! Shower!" she instructed, grabbing my shoulders and directing me back toward the bathroom. "I already took care of it and picked up something for you in town. Now hurry up. We've a lot to do in a short amount of time."

I did as I was told, stepping into the steaming shower and sighing as the warm water cascaded over my shoulders. I had felt nervous the night before, but now I was just excited. I wanted this. I wanted Caelan to be mine. And for once in my life, I was going to take what I wanted for myself.

And if last night was any indication, there was no shortage of forces waiting to try and tear us apart. The sooner we were marked, the better.

No one is going to try and steal my mate again. Not Sunny or any other she-wolf. He's mine, and I want it to be official. Once I mark him, there will be no question as to who he belongs to.

I marched out of the bathroom, determination written on my face.

"Whoa, something about you looks different," Ta y remarked as she took me in.

"Different how?" I asked.

"I'm not sure," she hummed. "I can't quite put my finger on it. But you look...confident. Comfortable in your own skin. Come on. Let's get you ready for the night of your life."

Ta y worked her magic, curling my hair into a simpler version of the masterpiece she had spent hours creating the day before. Then she mimicked the same elegant look with my makeup before taking a step back.

"Perfect," she said, turning and picking up a garment bag from the bed. "Now for the dress. I know you planned on light blue, but I couldn't find anything in the right color, so I picked something else out. I hope you like it. It screamed 'Shade' the moment I saw it."

She unzipped it to reveal a magnificent dress. The top was a strapless corset in pure-white satin, the bodice intricately decorated with pearls and crystals. The bottom was a soft black, the sheer tulle fabric layered in several large strips, creating two long slits that ran up either leg.

"It's beautiful, Ta y," I gasped, reaching a hand out to touch it.

"I figure we pair it with some simple pearl earrings, and you'll be the talk of the town," Ta y added as she took it off the hanger.

She helped me into it, lacing up the back as I stood in front of the mirror.

I look sophisticated and elegant. Like myself and not myself at the same time. A new and improved Shade.

"You look so regal, Shade. Like a true queen," Ta y exclaimed. "All right. Grab those earrings on the coffee table, but no necklaces. We don't want anything to cover Caelan's mark. I'm going to quickly throw myself together and then walk you all the way to him personally."

"You don't need to do that," I teased. "I'm not going anywhere."

"I know that, but I don't trust anyone," she declared, no humor in her tone despite my efforts to lighten the mood. "After what happened yesterday, I'm not leaving your side until you're safely in Caelan's arms."

"Where are we meeting him anyway?" I questioned as I put in the earrings.

"The gazebo."

A short time later, Ta y led me out toward the gardens, her arm linked with mine as we walked.

I smiled as we approached the gazebo, thinking back to the romantic dinner Caelan and I had shared beneath it. It hadn't been that long ago, but it felt like an eternity had passed since that day.

I could see Caelan waiting inside, standing beneath the soft glow of the twinkling lights that had been strung all around. He turned to face us as he caught our scent, and I gasped as I took him in.

The black button-up he wore clung to his muscular form, his bright white tie stark against the dark fabric. His shirt was tucked neatly into a pair of crisp black slacks and paired with a shiny pair of dress shoes.

It seriously should be a crime for one man to look this good.

I could feel his gaze dancing over my body in return, goosebumps rising in their wake. His throat bobbed as he gulped, a barely discernible *whoa* slipping past his lips.

We stood there quietly, staring at each other for several minutes.

"Well, I'll leave you two to it then," Ta y said with a wink as she released my arm. "Don't take too long. Remember, everyone is waiting for you."

"Thanks, Ta y," Caelan muttered as she walked away. "Shade...you look...wow," he breathed, closing the distance between us.

"You don't look so bad yourself," I managed with a soft smile.

"We better get this ceremonial crap over with quickly," he groaned, pulling my body against his. "I don't know how long I can resist the urge to tear this dress off you. I can feel my wolf stirring, and both of us want you all for ourselves."

He growled, his face dipping toward my shoulder as he inhaled deeply.

The wolf inside me went wild at his words. I felt the same way. But the pack had come together to put on this party for us at the last minute. As much as we wanted to disappear, it wouldn't be fair to them.

"We should probably get going then," I said, stepping away and threading my fingers through his. "The sooner we get through this, the sooner we can slip away."

"That's not what I hoped you'd say," he whined, following petulantly behind me. "That dress is going to kill me," he grumbled, his gaze burning a trail along my backside.

I couldn't help the smile on my face at the effect I had on him. I had seen his desire for me before, but this was another level altogether. He seemed desperate, practically panting with need.

But then again, so was I. I bit my lip as we made our way along the lit path toward the music and the chatter of gathered wolves.

Tonight is the real deal. The night I've secretly worried about and longed for ever since he told me we were mates. Tonight, I'll mark Caelan, and we'll finally be joined as one.