

Marking Ceremony...Again

As we rounded the corner to one of the large covered pavilions in the pack gardens, I stopped in my tracks. My eyes widened as I tried to take it all in.

The entire pavilion was covered in twinkling lights. Every inch of the ceiling glittered with them, their strands tightly wrapped around every column, illuminating a large dance floor.

Picnic tables lined the perimeter, each one decorated with vases of fresh flowers, probably gathered from the garden that afternoon. All of them were different shapes and sizes, yet they somehow managed to go together.

A buffet along one side was lined with various dishes brought by the pack members. Adjacent to that was a makeshift bar where a couple of wolves had volunteered to play bartender for the night.

This felt more relaxed, more rustic, and more like Caelan and me. My eyes began to water as I looked over every detail.

"Do you like it?" Caelan whispered in my ear as he came up behind me, wrapping his arms around my waist.

"I love it," I admitted. "This feels...right."

"I agree," he stated. "Much more our kind of night. Still, I'd be much happier if we were alone and naked in our bed though."

He buried his face in my neck, his grip on me tightening as his lips brushed my skin.

"Caelan," I chastised half-heartedly. "You're supposed to let your father know we're here so he can introduce us. You're just causing more delay until we can actually...you know."

I started to pull away, but he dragged me back.

"I will. Just hold on a second... Don't move, okay?" he asked, his voice strained as he held me in place.

"What? Why?"

"I-I just, uh," he stammered. "I need a second to...adjust. I told you this dress would kill me. Can you please just stand there and give me a second to get myself under control?"

"Oh!" I exclaimed a little louder than I had intended. "Uh, sure. Is there anything...I can, uh... You know what? Never mind. Forget I said that."

I instantly flushed as a million dirty images flooded my mind. The desire to press my hips into him and feel his hardness pressed against my skin was overwhelming.

He gave a throaty chuckle. "Shade...baby...that is *not* helping." He let out a pained groan. "This would probably be a lot easier if I stopped touching you," he grumbled, pressing his forehead between my shoulder blades as he tried to take deep, calming breaths.

"Maybe we should...uh...step away from each other for a moment to...um...collect ourselves," I suggested, fanning my face like that would help me cool down.

"Uh-uh, no way," Caelan countered, dragging me back.

I stifled a moan as I felt his erection dig into my backside.

"You're not leaving my side until I've properly marked you. And then probably not for a few days after that," he said in a low husky voice. "I have plans for you."

My cheeks were probably beet red as a bolt of desire rushed through me. "Well...um...adjust yourself the best you can, so we can get a move on then. Neither of us is going to be able to make it for long before we explode."

"Yes, ma'am," he growled in my ear, kissing my neck and making my knees weak.

Goddess. We'd better hurry.

The music suddenly quieted, and Alpha Leal's voice boomed over the crowd.

"Ladies and gentlemen, Alpha Caelan Kendrick and Shade Mallory!"

Caelan and I entered the pavilion, our hands raised as the crowd erupted into cheers and applause. I laughed, a bright smile on my face as we were greeted by our guests. I didn't feel anxious at how many wolves were present. I was simply happy.

We walked straight to the center of the dance floor where Luna Maty and Alpha Leal waited for us. The crowd circled around as we stood in front of Caelan's parents, both of them smiling warmly at us.

"Alpha Caelan Kendrick of the Harvest Moon Pack, do you commit yourself to your mate, Shade Mallory, on this night under the light of the full moon within the gaze of the Goddess and these witnesses?" Alpha Leal asked proudly.

"Absolutely," Caelan replied without hesitation, a goofy grin on his lips as he squeezed my hand.

Alpha Leal turned toward me. "Shade Mallory of the Harvest Moon Pack, do you commit yourself to your mate, Caelan Kendrick, on this night under the full moon within the gaze of the Goddess and these witnesses?"

"I do," I replied softly.

"Harvest Moon and honored guests, under tonight's full moon, these fated mates will commit to each other, marking their skin and combining their souls for eternity," Luna Maty announced to the crowd.

The room erupted in more cheers and applause before Alpha Leal silenced the crowd once more.

"Let us eat, drink, and celebrate in their honor!" he roared, leading the room in a celebratory howl.

With that, the music blared back to life, playing an upbeat song about finding your missing piece. The lyrics reminded me of how I felt about my relationship with Caelan.

He swung me in for a quick kiss before we were quickly swarmed by our friends and packmates, all of them offering us their congratulations, even though we hadn't actually done anything yet.

Caelan grinned at me from over Dillon's shoulder, a heavy, heated look in his eyes that promised we'd be fixing that very soon.

For the next hour, we spoke with various guests as Caelan introduced me to the members of allied packs who'd come specifically for our marking. They all expressed relief that both Caelan and I were all right. It was a bit overwhelming, but no one brought up what had happened the night before.

Eventually, we made our way over to the buffet where Caelan filled up a plate for both of us. He led me to one of the tables, passing me a fork as we sat.

"I got a little bit of everything. We can just share," he remarked, grinning at the look on my face.

"I was going to say there's no way I can eat this much food without needing a nap later," I laughed, shaking my head.

"I promise you won't be sleeping when I carry you to bed," he replied with a lopsided grin.

Ta y, Dillon, Oliver, Briggita, Alma, and Zia joined us. Caelan straddled the bench and pulled me against him so that Ta y could take the spot next to me.

"I'm going to grab a drink from the bar. Do you guys want something?" Ta y asked as she set down her heavily laden plate.

"I'll have a beer," Caelan said.

"Anything for you, Shade? A glass of wine to celebrate?" Ta y suggested.

"Um...no thank you. I think I'll stick with water."

"Are you sure?" she pressed.

"I'm sure," I replied, my cheeks warming as I glanced at Caelan. "I think I'd rather have a clear head for...you know...later."

I felt Caelan's chest rumbled in delight.

"On second thought, cancel my beer," he called. "I'm going to stick to water as well."

"I don't mind if you have a drink," I whispered as Ta y walked away.

"Alcohol will dull my senses, even if it's only a little bit, and I don't want that. I want to be entirely present for every single moment," he explained as his hand slipped under the slit in my skirt and ran up my thigh.

"Eat your food then," I commanded with a coy smile. "You're going to need your strength."

"Let's dance!" Ta y suggested a little while later when we had finished our meal.

She jumped up, dragging me away from Caelan's hold and out onto the dance floor. He grumbled unappreciatively before he and Dillon rose to follow us.

We danced to several songs as a group, bouncing around to the high energy beat and laughing before the music shifted to a slow song.

Ta y drifted over to Dillon, and I found myself wrapped in Caelan's arms, gazing deeply into his eyes. We swayed along to a song about finding true love, our bodies pressing tightly together.

The rest of the room faded away until it was only him and I. He lifted his hand, gently raising my chin up as his lips met mine in a delicate kiss.

His tongue brushed across my lower lip, requesting access I was more than willing to grant as he deepened the kiss, his fingers moving to rest gently at my throat.

I moaned softly, clutching him tighter and not caring for a second that we were standing in the middle of a crowded dance floor. My fingers gripped his shirt so firmly I could hear the buttons straining to pop free. I needed Caelan like I needed air in that moment.

We were both panting heavily as he pulled away.

"Now?" he whispered.

"Now," I breathed.

He growled victoriously, lifting me up and wrapping my legs around his waist as the crowd around us whooped in encouragement. I squealed in surprised delight as he spun and ran out of the pavilion as fast as his legs could carry us.