

## Learning to Love... Book 1: Shade |

### What to Know About Mates

### What to Know About Mates

#### SHADE

It was late by the time I finally shuffled back to my own room.

Sunny had spent the last couple of hours detailing how I was going to help her win Alpha Caelan's affections, including how to get me dismissed as soon as possible.

I don't know why she bothered. The thought of the alpha picking an omega like me was completely ridiculous.

But I stood at attention while she paced back and forth, telling me exactly how I was to behave around the alpha so she looked better by comparison. She wanted it clear that I was her servant, there to ensure her well-being.

"If Alpha Caelan thinks I'm in danger, he'll want to go out of his way to keep me and our alliance safe," she reasoned.

I had to admit it wasn't the worst idea she could have come up with. Harvest Moon would consider it their duty to safeguard an ally like Thunder Moon, and the wolves of Dark Moon were a constant menace to both our packs. Solidifying our allegiance through marriage was a smart move.

She also outlined what she expected of me during any interactions I had with Alpha Caelan.

"You will not look him in the eyes. You will not be witty or charming. You will not touch him. You will be subservient, making it clear that you don't have what it takes to be a luna," she ordered. "You will go out of your way to show him that you would be a terrible choice."

This all seemed so pointless. I had no plans to look Alpha Caelan in the eyes, nor would I even consider letting myself be so familiar as to touch him, despite how pleasant it had been at the welcome party.

"Most importantly," Sunny added as she finally pushed me out into the hall. "You will talk me up every chance you get. The conversation should always come back around to me, and why I would make the best luna Harvest Moon has ever seen. Am I clear?"

She slammed the door shut before I could respond, not that I minded. I was exhausted and listening to Sunny rant for hours had given me a headache.

*Like she has anything to worry about. The alpha will never be interested in me. He wouldn't have even touched me if tradition didn't require it.*

I rubbed my palm against my dress as I entered my room, remembering the tingles that had caressed my skin and the electric hum that had danced through my veins from the alpha's touch. It had been like nothing I'd ever experienced before.

*I wonder if that's an ability of his.*

"Geez, took you long enough," a voice chided.

I jumped, bracing for an attack as I spun toward the two chairs facing the fire. Beta Taffy was seated in one of them, her leg thrown over the arm and a book in her hands as she smiled at me.

"Where have you been?" she asked as she snapped it shut.

"I was...ensuring Sunny's room was secure," I replied. "W-what are you doing here?"

*Alpha Caelan must have come to his senses and decided to eliminate me. It's the only reason he'd send one of his betas for a late-night visit.*

I tried to ignore the sudden ache in my chest at the thought.

*Good. It's for the best. If he cuts me, then things can go back to normal. An omega can never be the luna of a pack.*

"I figured we could have a cup of tea and chat," she said cheerfully, nodding toward the tray on the coffee table. "We didn't get to talk much at the party. Sunny practically dragged you out of there as soon as Caelan finished making the announcement."

"Uh, yes," I murmured, unsure of what to do. "She was excited."

I fidgeted beneath the beta's gaze. No one had ever wanted to just hang out with me before.

My father had kept me isolated from the other children in the pack so I wouldn't have any distracting relationships. He'd also discouraged Sunny from considering me anything but a servant, making it understood that we would never be friends or equals.

"Do you want to change first?" she asked. "PJs are way more comfy than evening gowns."

"Yes, Beta Taffy," I replied automatically.

"No," she scolded, setting her book to the side. "None of that. We're friends. Call me Taffy."

"We are?" I queried, the words tumbling out before I could stop them.

I slapped my hands over my mouth, eyes wide. I had never directly questioned a beta in my life. Quickly, I dropped my head, baring my neck and waiting for whatever punishment she deemed necessary.

Much to my surprise, Taffy laughed.

"Of course, we're friends," she giggled. "As a matter of fact, I think we're going to be best friends."

"O-okay," I replied hesitantly.

"Go on. I'll pour the tea while you change," she said, waving her hand at me as she reached for the teapot.

I turned, snagging a pair of pajamas and heading to the bathroom without another word. I changed quickly and tried to figure out what to say when I returned.

I couldn't tell a beta that I wasn't allowed to be her friend. Taffy outranked me, and I had no right to oppose her will. If she wanted me to be her friend, then I had to be.

But what kind of beta would befriend an omega? It wouldn't help her standing in the pack, and I doubted I was great company. It didn't make any sense to me.

*What am I even supposed to do with a friend? I've never had one before.*

I came back to the bedroom, hanging up my dress before taking a seat in the chair opposite Taffy. I clasped my hands tightly in my lap, a storm of anxiety brewing within me as I waited for whatever came next.

"Tell me what you know about mates," Taffy asked as she handed me a warm mug.

My brows shot up in surprise.

*What do I know about mates?* I panicked, trying to recall one of the fairytales my mother had told me as a child.

"Oh...um...they're the..." I paused, clearing my throat as it suddenly felt like I had swallowed sand. "The...o-other half of your soul?"

"Yes," Taffy said, blowing on her cup. "But I meant more like do you know how fated mates recognize each other?"

I shifted uncomfortably in my seat. No one had ever bothered to talk to me about mates. The sage had assured my father that because of my curse, the Goddess would never grant me a mate, ensuring that my affliction wasn't passed down to any pups.

But I'd overheard my sister and her friends discussing their dream mate and what would come after they found them many times.

"Oh...uh..." I blushed, hiding my face behind my teacup. "By their scent?"

"Yes," Taffy answered, her smile growing wider. "The scent is almost always the first sign. It will be the most delicious thing you've ever smelled in your whole life. Your favorite scent in the entire world," she continued, a dreamy, far-off look in her eyes.

My mind flashed back to the party and the aroma of freshly brewed coffee with just a hint of vanilla and masculine musk.

*Is that what she means? That's impossible though. I can't have a mate, right?*

I almost dared to ask but thought better of it. Not only would it show how naive I was, but it would also raise some curious questions about why I couldn't possibly have scented my mate. I couldn't allow that.

“What else?” Taffy pressed.

“Um, something about the eyes?” I shrugged.

Taffy nodded. “The mate bond cements into place the first time you look directly into the eyes of your mate. It’s like this invisible string stretching between your heart and your mate’s, tying you together for the rest of your lives.”

Her fingers brushed the crescent-shaped mark at her neck.

“Of course, the bond isn’t actually permanent until you’ve marked one another, but we don’t have to get into that tonight,” she said softly. “Did no one ever talk to you about mates?”

I shook my head.

“What about your mom?” she asked.

I stared down at the mug in my hands, that familiar pain rushing back as I thought about my mother. “Uh, no. My mom died when I was very young, and it never came up in my training.”

I glanced up, catching the flash of sorrow that flickered across her face.

“I’m sorry about your mom,” she said softly. “That must have been very difficult.”

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak.

“Um, well, there isn’t much more to it than that. You might get a feeling when you touch,” Taffy added. “Sort of like an electric buzzing, but not everyone experiences that.”

I couldn’t help but wonder if that was similar to the feeling I’d had when Alpha Caelan touched me. I rubbed a hand across my face.

*That’s ridiculous. Alpha Caelan is not my mate. I can’t have a mate, remember?*

“Don’t worry. We have plenty of time to get you up to speed,” she said with a wink.

“Why bother?” I scoffed, snapping my mouth shut before I could say more.

*What is wrong with me? I’ve never had this much trouble minding my words before. I can’t let my guard down just because she says she wants to be friends. She’s still a beta. It would be disrespectful.*

“Why not?” she retorted. “Like it or not, you’re a final candidate in the choosing. You’ll have to go on dates and such. It’s expected.”

I allowed my gaze to drift back toward her.

“The alpha won’t pick me,” I admitted, unsure of why I felt the need to convince her that I would never be Alpha Caelan’s mate. “I...uh...I can’t have...a mate.”

“What? Who told you that?” she inquired with an incredulous look.

“My father and the pack sage,” I explained quietly. “I, uh...I have a condition, and the Goddess would never risk it being passed down to any future pups.” I brought my mug to my lips. “At least, that’s what the sage said.”

“That’s ridiculous. What condition could you possibly have that would make the Goddess punish you like that?” she demanded, her playful personality gone in an instant.

I wasn’t sure how to answer that. As a guest in their pack, they had a right to know that I wasn’t dangerous, but if I shared it, my own pack’s shame would be brought to the surface. Sunny’s chances would be destroyed, and I would be severely punished.

*They’re going to find out soon enough. I can’t hide my wolf forever. The longer we’re here, the more likely it will be that I have to shift. Then what? Will they be impressed that Sunny has a monster like me under her control? Surely, that would help her standing, right?*

“Shade, what is it?” Taffy asked, her voice soft and low. “Why do you believe you can’t have a mate?”

I realized I wanted to tell her. Even if she recoiled in disgust, even if she called me a monster and had me thrown out of Harvest Moon, I wanted her to know about the real me.

*That's crazy. I don't even know this wolf. Who's to say I can trust her? And what about Father and Sunny? They'll be furious if they find out.*

Part of me didn't care though. I'd never had anyone ask what I thought or how I felt. No one had ever shown any interest in me or asked to be my friend. Was I being selfish for wanting such a thing?

I focused back on my hands, taking a deep breath and wondering if I had lost my mind completely as I glanced back at Taffy.

Next Chapter

Continue to the next chapter of Learning to Love... Book 1: Shade