

Learning to Love... Book 1: Shade |

The Cursed Wolf

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SHADE

"My mother..." I paused, gripping my mug tightly. "My mother died because of me."

My eyes closed, tears threatening to spill over my cheeks at the admission. I let out a trembling sigh as I turned toward Taffy.

"I don't think I've ever said that out loud before."

"What do you mean, Shade?" Taffy's voice was almost a whisper.

"It was my fault," I replied, my tone much firmer than I intended as I set down my cup and stood, slowly beginning to pace back and forth. "I'm responsible for her death, and for that...I was cursed."

"Cursed?" she asked. "What do you mean cursed?"

"Lupus ad laborem natus ex," I replied. "It means the wolf born from sorrow. It's the curse the Goddess bestowed on me the day that I watched my mother die."

"Oh, Shade," Taffy soothed. "And what does it do? This curse?"

"Nothing anymore," I said dismissively. "Alpha Butch made it so I would never hurt anyone again, but a cursed wolf can never have a mate. The Goddess would never allow it."

"Do you want to tell me what happened?" Taffy queried, giving me a comforting smile.

Goddess help me, but I did.

I told her everything that happened that fateful day, leaving out the details about how Sunny and I were related and how the alpha was actually my father. Taffy didn't say a word, listening intently as she sat in her chair.

When I finished, she leaned back, her expression carefully guarded. "So, you can't howl? Like ever?"

I nodded.

She shivered. "That's messed up."

"It was the only way," I assured, dropping into the opposite chair. "People could have gotten hurt. My...alpha did what was best for the pack. I owe him everything."

Taffy frowned. "Maybe you should talk to our sages? They might know more than the old sage at Thunder Moon. To be denied the right to howl and a mate is just...cruel. The Goddess would never condemn a wolf like that for something that was out of their control. Why don't—"

"No," I said quickly, my voice shrill with panic. "You can't tell anyone. If they knew...it could be bad."

She pursed her lips, glancing away. I reached out, putting a hand on the arm of her chair.

"You're my friend, right?" I asked.

"Of course," she assured.

"Then please, don't say anything about this to anyone. For me," I begged.

She hesitated a moment before finally nodding, but the look in her eyes told me this wouldn't be the last time we discussed this.

"You'll stand just to the side of my chair until I'm ready to be seated," Sunny instructed as we made our way down to breakfast the next morning. "You'll be at my service, bringing me whatever I need, and only once I've taken the first bite, may you sit and eat. Am I clear?"

"Yes, Sunny," I answered, stifling a yawn.

Taffy and I had stayed up much later than anticipated, discussing everything and nothing as she assured me friends did. She had done most of the talking

while I listened to her stories about growing up next to Caelan and meeting Dillon.

I smiled as Sunny continued. I had a friend. Someone who didn't seem to want to use me or shun me, but who actually seemed interested in just spending time with me. It was a strange and comforting feeling.

Sunny kept talking the whole way to the dining hall, and I obediently nodded along. I had my doubts that any of this would help her gain the alpha's attention based on what Taffy had told me about him, but who was I to tell her otherwise? I had never dated anyone, and it wasn't like it was entirely unusual.

Caelan was an alpha. Being in service to a higher-ranking wolf was a long-standing tradition for omegas, particularly if that wolf was the alpha.

Who knows? He might appreciate how Sunny has this down to a science.

We arrived in the crowded dining hall, and I instantly tensed, doing my best to fade into the background as heads turned our way. Wolves watched us curiously as they continued to chat and eat, and I shifted uncomfortably as I followed Sunny, careful to keep my eyes low as we crossed the room.

I wasn't comfortable with all the attention. The spotlight was Sunny's. I was supposed to be invisible.

Seen but not heard. Noticed but not acknowledged. A shadow to my sister's light as my name suggests.

She led us to a round table near the front of the room. A couple of she-wolves our age were huddled together, chatting about the choosing ritual over their plates.

"Fetch my breakfast," Sunny commanded, snapping her fingers as I pulled out her chair.

She sat, and I turned, making my way toward the buffet table. I could feel the weight of everyone's gaze as I gathered a plate of bacon, eggs, sausage, and a chocolate chip muffin, fighting the urge to squirm as I added a bowl of fruit to the tray.

Ignore them. Breathe and just focus on the task at hand.

I returned, setting the plate in front of Sunny and placing her napkin in her lap. I laid out her silverware and poured her a glass of water before finally stepping back and clasping my hands in front of me as I waited for her next command.

“Shade,” she bid, her voice sickeningly sweet. “My juice?”

“Of course, right away,” I offered, hurrying back to the buffet.

The she-wolves on the other side of the table shot Sunny a disdainful look, but I doubted my sister noticed. She was too busy acting like she was already the pack’s new luna.

I was on my way back when the scent of coffee, vanilla, and musk wafted through the room. I inhaled it greedily, delighting in how it helped calm my nerves.

It was gone by the time I reached our table, fading from the air almost as quickly as it had arrived. I felt a sudden emptiness at its loss.

Where was it coming from, and how could I get it to stay forever?

“Shade, clean this up when you’ve finished,” Sunny commanded as she set down her fork and jumped up from her chair. “I believe I saw Alpha Caelan pass by on his way toward the garden a couple of minutes ago. Join us when you’re done.”

I nodded, waiting for her to leave before taking a seat. I ate, keeping my gaze focused on my plate.

“You’re Shade, right?” a bright voice asked.

I glanced toward the other side of the table to find the she-wolves that had been studiously ignoring Sunny suddenly watching me as I enjoyed my breakfast. I nodded, careful to keep my eyes down as I bit into another piece of fruit.

“Nice to meet you,” the one that had spoken up continued. “I’m Briggita. These are my friends, Zia and Alma.”

I recognized the name.

Isn't that one of the other finalists? Why would she want to talk to me? Perhaps she also wants to figure out a way to use me for her own advantage? I can't think of why else she'd socialize with me.

"Nice to meet you," I replied.

She slid around the table, taking a seat closer to me.

"So, are you excited about the choosing?" she asked. "Being a finalist is a big deal."

I stared at her chin.

What am I supposed to say? Not really, I'm not sure what your alpha is thinking, and I'm probably just a seat filler.

I swallowed my bite and shrugged nonchalantly.

"Alpha Caelan seemed quite interested in you," she teased. "We were just talking about that, weren't we girls? How he couldn't seem to get enough of your scent at the party last night."

I shook my head, feeling my cheeks warm at her insinuation. "No, he was just bothered by it. I'm an omega. He probably was shocked they bothered presenting me at all."

"Hush, now!" Briggita exclaimed. "I didn't see him kiss anyone else's hand."

"That's true," one of her friends interjected. "Only you."

I took a drink of water, trying to figure out what their reason for talking to me could possibly be. Briggita was a finalist. Surely, she wanted to become the luna. Was this some strangely kind way of telling me that I didn't belong?

"Just so you know," she remarked casually. "I'm rooting for you."

I forgot myself, my eyes flicking to hers briefly before I quickly corrected my gaze. But what I saw in them only confused me further. She was either really good at masking her emotions or being truthful. I wasn't sure which worried me more.

"W-why?" I finally managed.

"Well," she giggled. "I know I'm not going to win. Alpha Caelan and I already tried dating a long time ago. It didn't work out, and we both agreed that we were better off as friends."

Why would the alpha waste a spot on someone he didn't actually want as a mate? I scoffed. *Then again, he also picked me, so what do I know?*

"I only participated in the choosing because my mother insisted on it. 'It's tradition.'" She rolled her eyes. "And I would never want Deianira or Talulla to become our next luna. They're both power-hungry snobs."

"Yeah. No thank you," one of her friends added, causing the three of them to break out into a fit of laughter.

"And the other girl from your pack...Sunny... Well, from what I've seen, I doubt she's in the running," Briggita explained once they calmed down. "Caelan doesn't really go for that type. Plus, after seeing how he reacted to you, I think you have the best chance."

"Definitely," both of the other girls agreed.

"Uh, thanks," I mumbled awkwardly. "But I doubt he's interested in me. I could never be luna."

The fact that these girls thought that I had a chance as the alpha's mate seemed perfectly laughable. I couldn't lead a pack. I was an omega. That was my place in the pack. I'd never let myself even consider anything else.

"Hello, ladies," Taffy's familiar voice called.

I bowed my head on instinct as she approached. She had said to treat her less formally since we were friends now, but that had been a private conversation. Publicly, I needed to be respectful of her position.

"Hi, Taffy," the others responded.

"Shade, are you finished?" she asked. "I want to take you somewhere."

"Oh...uh...yes," I replied, quickly gathering the dishes as I stood.

"Briggita will take care of this. Won't you, Briggita?" Taffy asked.

"Absolutely," Briggita chirped with a smile. "You two go on."

“B-but...,” I stammered.

“Thanks, Briggita!” Taffy shouted as she pulled me along.

She led me out of the pack house and toward a large, deep-purple pickup truck.

“Uh...where are we g-going?” I asked. “I can’t leave. I have to protect Sunny.”

“Sunny will be fine,” Taffy sighed. “I promise. I have a couple of our best warriors watching her so you can have a well-deserved break. Besides, we have to run into town for a few things.”

“We do?” I asked as she opened the passenger-side door.

“Yep,” Taffy said. “Sooner you get in the car, the sooner we’ll be back, and you can get back to guarding Sunny.”

I glanced back at the pack house, anxiety rising in my chest.

What if something happens to Sunny while we’re gone? Taffy said she has warriors watching her, but that’s my responsibility. I could never expect anyone to put themselves at risk for her, and my father would never forgive me if anything went wrong.

“I’m waiting,” Taffy sang.

I let out a defeated sigh, climbing in as she gave an excited squeal and slammed the door shut behind me.

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