

Learning to Love... Book 1: Shade |

Alpha's Orders

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SHADE

“So, what do we need to get?” I asked as Taffy pulled up in front of a strip mall.

She parked and jumped out, waiting for me as I did the same. She took my arm, ignoring the way I tensed at the casual touch, and led me toward a clothing boutique.

“Don’t take this as a criticism,” she said as we entered. “But your clothes are kind of boring. Seriously, you’re practically invisible. You need to stand out more, and you know, be more confident. So, we’re going to pick you out a few new outfits!”

I stopped as she started thumbing through the racks. *Should I tell her that my wardrobe is by design? I’m supposed to be forgettable and unnoticed. I’m a servant, a guard. Drawing attention to myself would be counterproductive.*

“I’m not supposed to stand out, Taffy,” I remarked. “And why should it matter? The alpha is never going to want me. I’m not even sure what he was thinking when he picked me. I’m probably just a seat filler because he had to choose at least five.”

Taffy gave me a bored look. “That’s ridiculous. Now, come on, what size are you?”

“Seriously, I don’t need anything. My wardrobe is fine.”

She sighed, pulling out a lilac sundress and holding it up to me. “Either tell me or I’m just going to start guessing.”

“I don’t have the money for this kind of thing anyway,” I argued.

“Which is why it’s my treat,” she said, hanging the dress over her arm and reaching for another. “I get the feeling that you don’t spend much of anything

on yourself, and as your friend, I want you to know you deserve to feel special. So, get anything you like. No limit.”

I stared at her, the weight of what she'd just said hitting me abruptly. When was the last time I had done something because I wanted to? Something that was just for me? Had I ever?

My entire existence was my duty to my pack and Sunny. I owed them. My happiness was unimportant. Wasn't it?

“And I took a look through your closet last night while I was waiting and noticed you don't have a swimsuit,” Taffy continued. “You will *definitely* need one of those. Oh! This is cute!”

I followed her wordlessly through the store, watching her pick out things I would never have even considered for myself. A warm feeling started to bloom in my chest as she held them up and complimented how they brought out my eyes or hair.

Is this what having a friend is like?

“I can't let you do this, Taffy,” I begged. “It's too much. Let's put it back.”

“Shade, why is this such a big deal?” she asked, handing over a stack of clothes once we reached the register.

“I'm an omega. I don't deserve—”

“Stop,” Taffy interrupted. “Regardless of rank, you deserve to be happy and enjoy yourself. Whatever your alpha ordered you to do back home doesn't count here. Caelan is in charge, and you are his guest. Do you really want to reject the hospitality of an alpha?”

She had me there and she knew it. I respected pack hierarchy too much to ever go against a high-ranking wolf like Caelan.

My status as an omega had been beaten into me since I was young, and I'd been trained to treat every wolf with the respect that their station required. I had never questioned that until Taffy came along and started suggesting that things didn't always have to be that strict.

“I would never.” The words tumbled out of my mouth as my fear of disrespecting an alpha rose to the surface.

“Then it’s settled,” she said with a triumphant grin. “We’re going to buy everything you need and some things you don’t just because we can. No more arguments. Alpha’s orders.”

I sighed as I relented.

After an exhausting day of shopping, we finally returned to the pack house.

We unloaded all of my bags, and then Taffy hung around to help me unpack and put my new clothes away. It was nice having her there. Her endless chatter kept my mind busy.

She was good at that. She rambled on about whatever while I simply nodded along. It seemed she could keep talking even if her partner was bringing nothing to the conversation, which was kind of perfect. She was the ideal friend for someone like me.

“I don’t know if anyone’s told you yet,” she said hesitantly. “But dinner is going to be a little bit smaller tonight. We won’t be eating with the entire pack. It’ll just be us with some of the higher-ranking wolves and the other candidates.”

“What? Why?” I questioned, spinning to face her.

My mind had panicked when she mentioned higher-ranking wolves. I mean, I was happy to hear that I wasn’t expected to eat with the pack. The crowd at breakfast had been overwhelming.

But I wasn’t comfortable eating with higher-ranked wolves either. I didn’t belong in the same room as them unless I was acting as Sunny’s guard.

“It’s customary during the choosing,” she assured. “It allows higher-ranked members to get to know the candidates. And it lets Caelan observe how each of the she-wolves interacts with his most trusted pack members.”

I gulped. I really wasn’t prepared for this. *Well, thank the Goddess she told me now. This way I have a few hours to process and get myself ready.*

“W-who is going to...to be th-there?” I stuttered, cursing myself for my nerves.

“Well, the other females in the choosing,” she said, listing them off on her fingers. “Sunny. Caelan, obviously. Me and Dillon. The gamma, Oliver. Our former gamma, Verrill and his mate, Phoebe. The former beta, Truman and his mate, Alicia. And of course, Caelan’s parents, Alpha Leal and Luna Maty.”

As she finished, I felt like I was going to be sick. It may not have been a lot of people, but they were very important ones.

How am I going to navigate a room with that many high-ranking wolves in it?

Unfortunately, there was nothing I could do to get out of it either. This was tradition, and if we didn’t follow it, others would start asking questions.

“Don’t worry, Shade,” Taffy said. “I’ll be there with you the whole time. I’ll even sit right next to you, so you don’t have to feel alone,” she promised.

I can do this. Just take all those nerves and fears and shove them down deep. Emotion is a luxury I can’t afford. I feel nothing because I don’t need to feel anything.

“I can’t sit,” I stated flatly, easily slipping back into my training.

“Why can’t you sit?” she questioned.

“Because I’m an omega,” I argued, my toneless voice steady. “I can’t sit among such high-ranking wolves. It wouldn’t be appropriate.”

Taffy looked at me with wide, uncertain eyes. I think my sudden emotionless response was beginning to freak her out a little, but I didn’t know how else to cope.

“Well, that’s not a law in this pack,” she retorted, pulling a dress onto a hanger and thrusting it into the closet. “Plus, you’re part of the choosing ritual, so your omega status doesn’t count.”

“I have to serve Sunny,” I countered.

“Like you did at breakfast?” she snapped.

I almost accidentally looked into her eyes, but I quickly diverted my gaze.

“I know I wasn’t there, but I heard about what happened,” she scoffed, unable to keep her distaste for my sister’s actions out of her voice. “You can’t keep allowing her to treat you like that.”

I merely shrugged and turned to continue putting away clothes. I hoped she would drop the topic if I didn’t respond. Things were already getting twisted around as it was. If I started to question my duties to Sunny, what might happen next?

“I think this dress would be perfect for tonight,” she declared, holding up a lilac gown. “It’s super cute and respectful but with just a hint of sexy for Caelan.”

I agreed, having to take her word on it. I knew nothing about fashion. The only skills I could rely on came from my training, and I doubted combat experience would help me tonight.

Taffy went on, picking out shoes and makeup as I continued to internally panic.

This dinner was going to be attended by one luna, two alphas, three gammas, four betas, and whatever ranks the other candidates held, which were all still most likely higher than mine.

What am I supposed to do when surrounded by that kind of power? Who’s even in charge? As Sunny’s guard, it’s expected that she’s my direct superior, but does being in Harvest Moon territory mean that their leaders outrank her?

I groaned, my training saying yes on both counts.

So then, what do I do? Sunny’s going to expect me to obey her, but hierarchy dictates I obey the most senior wolf in the room. Whose rules do I follow if they contradict each other? Worst still, what do I do when I sit down, and they all realize I don’t belong?

I put a hand to my head, already feeling a headache coming on. *This is going to be a complete disaster.*

Next Chapter

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