

Learning to Love... Book 1: Shade |

Tension is On the Menu

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SHADE

Getting ready with Taffy had been unlike anything I'd ever done before. I found myself actually having fun for once.

I caught sight of my reflection in the mirror as we started to leave and was rendered utterly speechless. I didn't even recognize myself as I gave a little spin.

Maybe this is what the Shade Mallory that could have been would have looked like, but certainly not me now. Not just Shade.

By the time we arrived in the dining room, I was feeling completely out of my element.

Sunny was already there, shuffling around the table and changing the position of some of the place cards. She quickly dropped into her seat when she noticed us, smiling innocently. If Taffy had seen her, she didn't say anything.

"Let's find our names," Taffy encouraged. "Ah! Here we are!"

Taffy and I were seated in the center of the table. I glanced at the card on my left and noticed that it sat crooked, as though someone had hastily thrown it down.

I looked toward Sunny. I was willing to bet this was where she had originally been assigned, but she'd swapped it with someone else. Now it appeared I would be sitting next to Briggita.

I didn't really mind. Briggita was nice enough. It made more sense for me to be close to Sunny as her guard, but I figured her switching the cards was part of her plan to gain Caelan's attention.

The rest of the guests began to file in, and Sunny perked up immediately, a polite smile on her face as she batted her eyelashes.

“Wow, Deianira. I really love what you’ve done with your hair,” Sunny cooed as Deianira sat down on the other side of the single empty chair between them.

The alarm bells started going off in my mind.

“Really?” Deianira smiled, soaking up the compliment as she patted her extravagant updo.

I braced for what was coming next.

“Yeah,” Sunny continued with an innocent shrug of her shoulders. “It really makes your face look so much slimmer.”

Deianira’s mouth dropped open in shock. Sunny had already moved on to her next victim before she could reply.

“That’s a really pretty dress, Briggita,” my sister began. “Bold of you to wear that color with your skin tone.”

Briggita gasped, her eyes dropping to her gown. I felt a twinge of guilt that Sunny had targeted her. She didn’t deserve it. She really was a sweet girl.

Sunny set her sights on Talulla next, but the she-wolf quickly put up her hand to stop her.

“Don’t start with me, hon,” she warned, giving Sunny an icy glare.

I instantly liked her. There weren’t many who were willing to stand up to my sister.

Sunny’s face twisted for a moment, and I knew that she was irritated at the slight. However, she quickly schooled her features into a politely puzzled expression.

Suddenly, the strong scent of fresh-brewed coffee with a hint of vanilla and that tantalizing musk filled the air. I found myself taking deep, eager breaths, desperate to fill my lungs with the intoxicating aroma as it soothed my nerves.

I glanced around the room, trying to determine the source of the delightful smell, but I couldn’t pinpoint it. Then I felt someone’s fingers trailing across my back, leaving little sparks of sensation in their wake.

I jumped in surprise, glancing over my shoulder to see Alpha Caelan passing behind me on his way to his seat.

Why does he keep touching me?

I tried to shake off the feeling as he settled into the chair across from mine, a satisfied smile on his ridiculously handsome face.

Now I understood why Sunny had shuffled the place cards. Her new seat put her on the left of Alpha Caelan, a prime position if she wanted to catch his eye.

Everyone stood as Alpha Leal and Luna Maty entered the room, waiting respectfully as they made their way toward the head of the table.

As soon as the alpha and luna took their place, everyone began to reseat by order of rank, but I stayed standing. They were all higher ranked than I was and deserved the respect of being seated first.

Alpha Caelan growled, obviously upset by something I couldn't see, and I risked glancing up. I immediately checked for any threat to Sunny as Taffy grabbed my arm and yanked me unceremoniously into my chair.

I started, realizing the problem had been me, though I couldn't imagine what I'd done wrong. I had followed protocol.

Servants stepped forward and placed large servings of food onto our plates before setting the dishes in the center of the table for anyone who wanted seconds.

It was customary for the higher-ranked members to eat before those below them, so again, I waited. I wouldn't even pick up my utensils until everyone else had begun.

I finally heard the scraping of a fork and glanced over to see the luna taking a bite of her food. Immediately afterward, Alpha Leal took a bite of his. I was certain this would trigger everyone else to start eating, but it didn't happen.

Instead, their attention turned toward Alpha Caelan. He was technically the alpha in this pack, so by the rules of decorum, he still needed to take his first bite before anyone else could.

Everyone stared at him expectantly, but the alpha made no effort to reach for his fork.

I finally looked up, curious as to why he was taking so long. *Perhaps he's making bedroom eyes at one of the she-wolves and hasn't realized that everyone is waiting on him.*

However, I was shocked to find him watching me. I stared hard at his chin, trying not to squirm in my chair.

That can't be right. Why would he be looking at me? He has to be looking at Briggita. Or perhaps he's having a conversation with Taffy through the pack's mind-link.

He turned his head slightly, his gaze falling on Beta Dillon briefly before returning to me.

I stared purposely at his plate as he finally relented and scooped up a bit of mashed potatoes. He lifted his fork slowly to his mouth, his plump lips closing around the tines before he withdrew it.

My eyes narrowed as the others began to dig into their own meals. *He didn't swallow. Why?*

I continued watching Alpha Caelan as he discreetly spat the bite into his napkin.

"Shade, why aren't you eating?" Taffy questioned, nudging me. "I'm sure you're hungry."

"Oh, Shade is very well-trained, Beta Taffy," Sunny interjected, gesturing to her own plate to emphasize that she hadn't taken a bite yet. "As an omega, she can't eat until her superiors have eaten. Respect for pack hierarchy is very important at Thunder Moon, as I'm sure you can appreciate."

She paused, flashing her pearly whites toward the alpha and luna at the head of the table. "My father and I took Shade in. She was a pack orphan, you see," she continued as if anyone had asked. "He had her trained by the best so that she could fulfill her duty of protecting me."

"An orphan?" Luna Maty asked, her voice soft yet commanding. "Pardon me, but you two look remarkably alike. I would've thought you were related."

“Definitely not,” Sunny spat a little too quickly. “I mean...that was one of the reasons she was chosen for this position. She acts as a body double for me when necessary, like during the most recent attack from Dark Moon,” she pouted.

My suspicions kicked into overdrive at the mention of Dark Moon. I looked at Alpha Caelan’s plate, confirming that he still hadn’t touched his food.

Perhaps he hasn’t eaten because someone tampered with his meal. But why wouldn’t he warn the others? What if he’s waiting for one wolf in particular to eat before he saves his own?

“Sunny, don’t eat anything,” I warned using our mind-link. “I think something may be wrong with it.”

“What do you mean?” she demanded.

“Alpha Caelan spit out the bite he took. He must sense something off with it.”

“Then get over here and try my food!” she snapped.

“Okay,” I replied, racking my brain for any excuse to get to Sunny without seeming disrespectful to our hosts.

“Shade,” Sunny called. “Could you get me more wine?”

She tapped her near-empty glass, raising her eyebrows suggestively.

“Yes, miss,” I replied as I rose from my chair.

I was rather impressed with her quick thinking. I could bring her drink and discreetly check her food.

“She doesn’t have to do that,” Taffy protested. “I could just pass you the bottle.”

“It’s all right, Beta Taffy,” I assured as I grabbed it and made my way toward Sunny. “I don’t mind.”

“You see, Alpha Caelan,” Sunny said sweetly. “If you choose me as your mate, you won’t have to worry about my safety. I already have my own personal bodyguard. Shade does whatever it takes to ensure my well-being.”

Alpha Caelan hummed in response, completely uninterested in Sunny’s words as he watched me come closer.

I leaned over Sunny's shoulder, and he put his hand out, his fingertips brushing against my arm. Sparks danced across my skin as an unexpected desire flared to life, the rush of heat making me jump.

The bottle of wine tumbled from my hands, landing with a clunk on the table in front of Sunny as the dark-red liquid spilled down the front of her dress.

I cringed as she jumped from her chair with a shriek. Before I could apologize, she slapped me sharply across the cheek. The room fell silent.

I didn't react, my fingers digging into my palms at the sting. *I deserve that. This is punishment for my carelessness. Mistakes should always be met with swift and severe correction, just like my father says.*

Sunny reared back to strike again, but as her hand swung forward, Alpha Caelan stepped in, catching it and stopping her in her tracks.

"This is how you treat your servants?!" he snarled.

"Did you see what she did, Alpha?!" Sunny scoffed. "My dress is ruined. The only thing she's good for is taking care of me, and she can't even get that right."

Taffy growled as Briggita gasped. I hung my head, noticing Luna Maty was watching the exchange closely.

"Your lack of respect for your fellow pack member disturbs me greatly," Alpha Caelan grumbled, his jaw clenched tightly as if he were fighting to control his anger. "All of this disturbs me greatly."

Then he stomped out of the dining room without another word, a scowl plastered on his face.

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