

THE ALPHA'S BRIDE

Chapter 820: Ancient relics (3)

Ancient relics (3)

'BOOOOM!'

A thunderous explosion shook the room, and Talia found herself in Damon's embrace. He shielded her with his body from the debris.

The dust settled, and Talia blinked to see on the side Axel holding Yasmin protectively with his back facing the explosion, just as Damon was holding her. Cassandra, Calla, and Remi were hiding behind the stone table.

Talia's eyes widened when she saw the area where the necklace exploded. Everything in that corner was blasted away, including the walls. There was a gap big enough for a person to pass into the adjacent lab. Three panicked heads were peeking through there to see what caused that explosion.

"It's OK!" Cassandra exclaimed while waving at those three healers to leave. "Just an experiment went out of hand!"

Talia silently thanked the Moon Goddess that no one else was in the lab. If this stunt ended up killing someone, she would blame herself forever.

"Is everyone OK?" Talia asked.

"We are fine," Yasmin responded for her and Axel.

"Ugh," Remi groaned, and they all saw a gush of blood on her left thigh. She didn't avoid a beaker that flew her way and ended up with a nasty cut.

Calla was quick to get there and apply pressure on Remi's wound.

"We need healers!" Calla shouted from anxiety, and then she remembered that she was one. She placed her hands above Remi's wound and chanted magical words to promote healing.

Talia wanted to go there, but Damon's hold on her was solid.

'I can heal her,' Talia said through their mind-link.

'It's not life-threatening,' Damon responded stiffly. 'Let the healers handle it.'

A low growl formed in Damon's chest. "Let's NOT do that again." If he didn't react in time... he didn't want to think about it.

Talia wanted to tell him it was fine. She also heard the buzzing sound and was thinking if a shield was needed, but Liseli was calm, so Talia guessed that nothing wrong would happen.

'Didn't you sense the upcoming explosion?' Talia asked Liseli.

'No,' Liseli said bluntly. 'That necklace looked like it was charging.'

'It was. For an explosion.'

'It didn't look like anything explosive to me.'

Talia didn't want to argue. She needed to pacify her Alpha, who was holding onto her like she was his lifeline.

Talia's heart cracked when she sensed Damon's emotions. He was terrified by the possibility of losing her. She tightened her hold on him.

Talia thought of something else, so she mind-linked Axel, 'Didn't you see the upcoming explosion with your ability?'

'My ability is not working here,' Axel responded. 'I believe that one of the relics is blocking it.'

Talia thought how it made sense. She returned her attention to holding Damon.

Talia scrunched her nose, unsure if the scent of Remi's blood mixed with Damon's or if he was bleeding.

"Are you OK?" Talia asked in a whisper.

"No."

Talia quickly ran her hands over his back to sense if there were any tears or stickiness due to blood. "Are you harmed?"

"My heart nearly broke. Why do you make me worry, kitten?" He spoke into her hair. "What will I do if I lose you? Do you want me to go mad and kill everyone?"

His anxiety was spilling on her, and Talia felt dizzy.

"Damon," Talia called. "Damon!"

He moved to look at her, and she teared up when she saw the panic in his eyes. He was pale like a sheet of paper.

Talia put her palms on his cheeks and started chanting, "I am fine. I am right here. You protected me. Everything is fine." She kissed him on the lips. "See? I'm right here." She kissed him again. "How about we go to our room and rest for a bit? Or would you rather go for a run to let out some steam?"

Damon nodded. He didn't care where they went, as long as it was away from this place. Damon paused when he noticed that Talia's attention was behind him.

Damon turned to see Cassandra clearing the rubble with her bare hands.

"Ha!" Cassandra exclaimed victoriously, and then she returned with the necklace in her hand.

"It didn't blow up?" Yasmin asked. Considering the explosion and the damage, it was unbelievable that the necklace was only dusty.

Cassandra bobbed her head. "Relics are resilient. I tried on them spells, abilities, and physically smashing them. I couldn't make a scratch."

Talia thought how that was interesting. "Does this mean we can use this necklace as a bomb?"

"YOU can use it as a bomb," Cassandra responded to Talia. "But I don't think it would blow if you kept holding onto it."

"What do you mean?" Talia asked.

Cassandra gestured toward twelve crystals on the stone table.

"Measurements showed energies converging, but nothing volatile. I believe the explosion happened because it lost contact with you. Of course, that's just a theory. The way to make sure is..."

"NO!" Damon shouted, and everyone (other than Talia) felt his Alpha aura pressing on them.

"Talia is NOT going to do that again!" He kicked the chest with relics to close.

"Take this back from where it came from. Or even better, throw it into the ocean. Bury it somewhere no one will find it!"

Talia hugged Damon, knowing that her proximity could calm him down. There was no point in talking when he was having a panic attack.

'Let's talk about it later,' Talia said to Cassandra through the mind link and turned to Damon. "Are we going?"

Damon nodded stiffly, and they walked out.

Damon didn't say a word until they reached their room.

Talia closed the door behind them and turned to face him.

Damon jabbed his hand into his hair angrily.

"Damn it, Talia! When are you going to..." His words were cut off when Talia jumped on him. "What...?"

Her legs tightened around his waist, and she grabbed fistfuls of his hair.

Before he could figure out what was going on, Talia's lips latched on her mark on his neck.

"Damn it..." He spoke breathily. "Kitten... You... Mmm... Fuck..." He had so many things to say, but she executed a lethal move, and he hated and loved how much she could influence him.

His arms snapped around her, and he fell to his knees. Every move of her tongue over the mark sent electric pulses straight to his groin area and numbed everything else.

Talia continued sucking and licking her mark, and her hands moved to undress Damon.

He was stressed. They both were. Instead of a shouting session to release tension, they might as well indulge in carnal pleasures.

Damon wanted to say they needed to talk, but Talia's emotions told him she needed him, and his resolve dissolved faster than cotton candy that fell into the water.

His head dipped to find his mark on her neck, and he kissed her there, her every moan soothed his anxiety, and by the time they were naked, he forgot why his mood was off when they entered their room.

There were no words spoken, nor foreplay, as Damon invaded her insides with urgency, and she welcomed him eagerly, right there on the floor of their bedroom in the Midnight Guardians pack.

[The Alpha's Bride](#)

[#Chapter 821: Ancient relics \(4\)](#)

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Chapter 821: Ancient relics (4)

Damon and Talia were in bed, with him hugging her from behind.

Talia felt his breath fanning her hair, and his arms were around her while her back pressed to his chest. After a round of carnal pleasures on the floor, they moved to the bed, and now they were both sated and naked, breathing as one. Normally, she would sleep after all that, but this time, Talia had too many things on her mind.

"Damon?" Talia called.

"Yes, kitten?"

"The thing that happened with the necklace... I will do it again."

"I know."

Talia turned to face him. "You do?"

Damon smiled a little. "I know that you are curious about those things for more than just because they could resist the powers of the Guardians."

Talia was glad they didn't need to argue about this. And he was right. Her curiosity went beyond Keith's necklace with the ability to resist Gregory's restrictions.

"My necklace," Talia said. "Don't you think it looks like something that could come out of that chest?"

Damon's eyes fell on the necklace Talia was wearing. "You think your mother had something to do with the Guardians?"

Talia was not sure, but... "I need to find out the truth about this necklace and about me. I am tired of secrets and ambushes." And she didn't want anyone else to die in front of her, because of her. "I need to know who is after us and what I can do. I don't want to hide, Damon. They have already come after me more than once, and I'm confident they are planning their next attack. By staying in the packhouse, they will know where I am, and they will hurt my friends in order to get to me. I... what happened to Lulu..." Talia choked on her words.

"Shh... it's OK." Damon said.

Talia shook her head. "It's not OK. What happened to Lulu, I can't go through it again. I hate this feeling of waiting to see from where the next enemy will come. I want to fight. I want to be ready when they come next time, or even better, I want to attack them before they can. I want us to fight together. Will you support me?"

"Always."

"We can do this, Damon. I know we can. With my power and yours, and with the help from our friends, we can do this."

Damon puffed his cheeks, and Talia felt that his mood had dropped.

"What?" She asked.

"Don't you think I should have an ability also?"

Talia blinked. "What?"

"You marked me. Don't people get an ability when someone from the Midnight Guardians pack marks them? Meg can blow up stuff, Sandy can see the spirits, and what about me?"

Talia realized what he meant. Damon was powerful already, and he was not a greedy man, but considering their situation, he needed more. If their roles were reversed, she would be impatient to get a power boost also. Unfortunately, those things couldn't be rushed. She remembered Axel telling her that some people spent decades without discovering their ability.

"Have faith in the Moon Goddess, Damon. She gives us what we need, when we need it the most. I am confident you have an ability, and it's fantastic. She gave you Sapa when you needed guidance."

Damon smiled a little. "She gave me you when I was on the verge of giving up."

Talia nodded in agreement. "And she gave me you, when I hit an all-time low, and I thought all hope was lost. As for my powers... I didn't know I could heal until you were hurt. I didn't know I could put up a shield until I needed one. I guess what I'm trying to say is, when your power is needed, it will manifest itself."

Damon smiled dreamily. Her words made sense, and her confidence told him that his kitten had grown again. How much more magnificent can she get? "What would I do without you?"

Talia pressed her lips into a line. What would he do without her? "You would have fewer problems."

"Don't say that, kitten. Nothing related to you is a problem. You are the best thing that ever happened to me."

Talia could feel he meant it, and it was all it mattered at that moment.

...

Talia and Damon were back in a lab with Cassandra and a chest of ancient relics.

Seeing that Cassandra was arranging her colorful crystals on the stone table, Talia asked Cassandra to leave in case something else blew up.

Cassandra refused. "I spent a lot of time on these relics without results. Your ability to affect them is a breakthrough I was waiting for. Please, let me stay and observe. If anything happens to me, I won't blame you."

"I am only concerned about your safety," Talia said.

Cassandra smiled. "Your concern is noted and appreciated, Alpha. But I choose to stay."

"Suit yourself," Talia said, and she turned to Damon.

"I'm not going anywhere," Damon said stiffly.

"I know," Talia responded. "But please don't throw stuff away unless Cassandra gives you a sign that something explosive is about to happen."

Damon threw a side-glance at Cassandra, and then he looked at Talia.

"I don't trust her." Damon didn't bother using the mind-link.

Talia didn't trust Cassandra either, but... "You should trust in her self-preserving skills. If things are taking a wrong turn, she won't sit still and wait for death."

With that, Talia squatted to pick a relic from the chest. None of them stood out.

"Cassandra? Do you have a suggestion with which one to start?"

"What are you trying to accomplish?" Cassandra asked.

"I was thinking about this. It doesn't make sense that only people with powers like mine could use these items. There are too many of them, and if there were many people with powers like mine, we would hear about them."

Cassandra nodded at Talia's words. "The necklace your guard used worked on its own."

Chapter 822: Ancient relics (5) [Bonus chapter]

'Calm down, boy,' Sapa spoke to Damon, who was on the verge of losing his mind. 'Mate is not far.'

Damon turned around frantically, searching for Talia, but the only one in sight was Cassandra who was bent at an awkward angle under the pressure of Damon's aura.

'Talia!' Damon called through their private mind-link.

'Woah!' Talia's voice sounded in Damon's head.

'Where are you!?''

'I think I'm in one of the adjacent labs,' Talia responded. 'Let me get into the hallway and see...'

Damon rushed to the door to open it, and he nearly bumped into Talia.

A flood of curses was at the tip of his tongue, but first, he pulled Talia into his embrace. His heart was beating so strongly that he was confident Talia could feel it smacking into her cheek.

"Damn it, kitten," Damon spoke under his breath while pressing her into him.

Damon never cared for anyone so deeply, and since he met Talia, it was just one thing after another. Even before he knew her name, Talia demonstrated her ability to give him the slip, and the more time they spent together, the more dangers around them grew. There were conceited she-wolves, power-hungry Alphas, rogues, Guardians, and now there were exploding necklaces and random teleportation. At this rate, he will die from stress.

Talia looked up at Damon. "I am OK. I think this necklace has teleporting abilities."

"You think?" Damon asked sarcastically. "What if it teleported you into the ground? Into the wall? Inside a volcano? On another planet? So many things could go wrong."

"But it didn't."

"Do you think you can control the distance and destination?" It was Cassandra asking.

Damon stiffened as another wave of rage swelled inside him. How dares that woman interrupt his time with Talia?

Talia and Damon looked that way to see Cassandra wiping the sweat from her forehead. Her body was recovering from the attack of Damon's aura, but her spirit was not shaken. Cassandra was too excited by recent developments to care about matters of the flesh.

Talia could feel Damon's hostility rising, and she guessed that Cassandra's sorry state was because of Damon.

Talia quickly put her hands on his cheeks to make him focus on her.

"I'm not going to stop at this one, Damon. If you react like this every time, maybe you should sit this one out."

Damon scowled. "And leave you alone with the treacherous Oracle and that chest of trinkets from Hell?"

Talia bit her lower lip. She would laugh if she couldn't sense Damon's distress. He was worried about her, and she didn't want to be the cause of his worries, but this was something she needed to do. She was the only one who could do it, and Damon knew it.

"We could find something useful, Damon. We could find things that will protect us from rogues and Guardians. Maybe one of these can allow us to open and close portals with ease."

"And maybe we could get ourselves killed. You could..." He was unable to finish this, but Talia knew. There was no point in talking about it.

"You put your life on the line many times, Damon."

Damon couldn't deny that, but... "I can't bear the thought of you getting harmed. The tiniest scratch on your body feels like someone stabbed me a hundred times over."

Talia smiled. "I feel the same about you, Damon. You are the source of my happiness. But the fact is that others are set on getting between us, and unless we get a bit braver, I fear they will succeed. So... how about we protect each other?"

Damon pulled her into his chest and breathed into her hair. "That's why I'm here, kitten."

Damon spoke bravely, but the truth was that he felt useless. Talia was doing everything and putting herself in danger, yet he was stuck watching and worrying. How was he an Alpha if he was left on the sidelines?

Talia took Damon calming down as a sign that it was OK to proceed. She waited for his heartbeats to stabilize before pulling away.

Cassandra was writing things into her notepad.

"You can mark this necklace as a teleporting aid," Talia said. "I don't want to spend more time on this as our goal today is to identify what they do. Let's try another one."

Talia's real goal was to figure out how to activate these relics. Once she gained confidence, she would try to activate the necklace her parents left behind, but she didn't want to do that in front of Cassandra.

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Damon and Talia had dinner in the main house. Also present were Axel, Yasmin, Meg, Kai, Tyler, Sandy, Amelia, Liam, Pierce, Daria, Cornelia, Keith, and Caleb.

Varya and Grady didn't leave their room yet, and no one wanted to disturb them, so Yasmin arranged for their meal to be left in front of their door. Talia suspected the newly mated couple will stay in their room for a few more days, and since Talia and Damon couldn't wait so long for them to come out, she left instructions to Axel, Yasmin, Betas, and Gammas to take care of newcomers, show them around, and include them in daily activities. It was important for Varya and Grady to feel welcome and accepted; otherwise, they will be looking for a way out of there.

While Damon and Talia were busy with relics in the lab, Pierce, Daria, Keith, and Caleb were training with the warriors of the Midnight Guardians pack. Keith was impressed with their improvement when comparing performance from the last time they visited, and Kai, Tyler, and Sandy were happy to hear Keith praising the results of their work in front of Alpha Talia and Alpha Damon.

Tyler was never into training; he was more into electronics and modern science. However, that changed when Sandy became his mate. She was Alpha Talia's personal guard, one of the top warriors in the Dark Howlers pack, and Tyler didn't want to lag behind his mate, so he attended morning drills regularly.

Talia listened to them talking about training and updated patrol schedules, and she happily accepted all food that Damon offered. She was hungry. Those few hours of charging ancient relics with energies contributed to working out a good appetite.

Other than the necklace that can teleport people, she also identified items that can create a force field, turn into a magnet, and heat up to the point of cutting through stone like it was butter while Talia thought of them as warm to touch. Most of the things barely affected Talia, so they concluded that the one who activated the relic was immune to its effects.

There was also a bunch of items that Talia charged, and nothing happened. Or maybe it did, but Talia, Damon, and Cassandra didn't notice.

Damon was pleased that nothing exploded, and Talia didn't disappear again. But the whole session was super-stressful, and he was sure his lifespan was shortened by a decade with every next relic Talia charged.

There were more items that needed testing and also to see if the ones that were tested could be controlled with precision. It all required time Talia didn't have. Damon and Talia had many things to do, and she wanted to return to the Dark Howlers pack and deal with matters she left behind, like meeting Lulu's father.

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Chapter 823: Help guiding energies

Talia's biggest disappointment was that no one else could activate ancient relics and use those special abilities. It would be awesome if they could distribute them to their warriors or at least to the high-ranking members.

Talia was hoping that Cornelia and Amelia could provide some assistance. They were both witches, sensitive to energies, and they also got a boost in their abilities after being marked. Considering that Cornelia and Amelia were making progress in their research on activating dormant portals, Talia thought that maybe two witches could figure out how a normal person can use those relics.

"Cornelia, Amelia," Talia called. "I was wondering if you will be interested in checking out some items that respond to energies," Talia said to what two witches nodded. They had nothing else to do.

Talia thought that Yasmin would be the best person to help with this. Yasmin was a witch marked by an Alpha from the Midnight Guardians pack, and there was that strange resonance that happened between Talia and Yasmin. However, Talia didn't want to expose Yasmin to something that might harm her babies.

Talia asked Axel about progress with people who will follow them to the Dark Howlers pack.

"People are notified and ready to go at any time," Axel said and glanced at Yasmin. "Yasmin and I will take another group to the realm of witches."

Talia was happy that things were progressing well. "Let's not keep them waiting for too long. We will return to the Dark Howlers pack tomorrow. Tell them to be ready by lunchtime."

"I have good news to share," Yasmin said excitedly. "Healers confirmed that my pregnancy is advancing." She stood up and stretched her blouse to fit snugly over her belly. "See?"

They all cheered and congratulated Yasmin on the now visible baby bump.

"Thank you, Lia," Yasmin said, her voice full of emotions.

"Do you think we will need to perform another ritual?" Talia asked. If Yasmin wanted more, they needed to do it as soon as possible.

"Let's talk after this meal," Yasmin responded mysteriously.

Talia understood that Yasmin wanted to talk in private.

...

After dinner, Yasmin and Talia went to the balcony.

"I would like to join you in investigating relics," Yasmin said. Talia was not specific during dinner when she spoke to Cornelia and Amelia, but Yasmin knew what Talia was talking about.

Talia didn't think it was a good idea. What if Yasmin manages to activate them and ends up harmed? "If anything happens to your babies..."

Yasmin raised her hand, interrupting whatever Talia was about to say next.

"I believe that working with energies is crucial for the development of my babies. Investigating relics is just something that will give me purpose, and maybe I find out something useful."

"Are you sure about it?" Talia asked suspiciously. "Healers advise to not use abilities because no one knows how they impact babies that are not born."

"That might be true for werewolves, but I am not one. After our ritual, I feel like I can connect with nature on a deeper level. A small voice is correcting how I'm harvesting the power of energies. It's similar to what I did previously but different. Like I did it wrongly my whole life. Does this make sense?"

Talia remembered that she heard voices during the ritual. She couldn't make out the words, but those were definitely voices.

"Is that what you wanted to talk to me in private?" Talia asked.

"Yes. What you did for me during the ritual, I feel I should be able to do on my own. I am so close, yet not there. I would appreciate it if you help me guide the energies again. Maybe we start slowly, and when you see that it's happening, then you slowly reduce your input and let me pick it up from there."

"Sure," Talia was quick to agree. "Do you want us to do it now?"

Yasmin's eyes lit up. "Let's go to my room. No one will disturb us there."

While Talia was chatting with Yasmin, Damon used Axel's phone to call Caden and inform him they will return with the company tomorrow (which is just a few hours for the Dark Howlers pack).

After the call, Damon joined Axel and others in the lounge.

"Talia and Yasmin are still talking?" Damon asked.

Axel nodded in confirmation. "They are getting along well."

Axel poured a drink for Damon, and they clinked glasses.

Damon was about to take a sip of amber liquid from his glass when he heard Talia's voice in his head, 'I am going with Yasmin to her room for a bit. It won't take long. Don't worry about me.'

Damon's insides tightened. If there was nothing to worry about, why did she add that last bit?

"Is something wrong with your drink?" Axel asked Damon.

Damon realized that he had made a face. He didn't have anything against Talia socializing with Yasmin, but he had a feeling those two would do something reckless. Again.

Damon wanted to tell Axel that those two were up to something, but he didn't want to reveal his private mind-link with Talia. Could he get his phone and pretend he got a text? No, that won't be useful as they didn't have cell phone reception. Only a few devices worked, and those were specially modified by Tyler.

"I am just worried because Talia and Yasmin are taking so long," Damon said, hoping Axel would get the hint. "Do you mind if we go and check on them?"

Axel smiled. "You are worrying too much about Talia. Nothing can happen here."

"How much I remember, the last time I was here, you had a Guardian moving around like he owned the place."

Axel's expression fell. No one liked being reminded of their mishaps.

"You are forgetting that Alpha Natalia is the strongest Alpha. No matter what comes, she can deal with it."

Damon scowled. "Can you just check if they are where they were supposed to be?"

Axel's eyes lost focus for a moment as he reached out to Omegas who worked in the main house. A second later, Axel said, "They went to Yasmin's and my suite. See? They are fine. Still talking. Nothing happened."

"If they are just talking, why are they going to your suite?"

Axel realized that Damon was right. Talia and Yasmin had privacy on the balcony, so there was no reason to go to any room unless they wanted to ensure no one would overhear them... or see what they were doing.

An image of Talia and Yasmin enveloped in a glowing tornado flashed in Axel's mind, and his anxiety swelled.

Axel downed his drink. "Excuse me. I need to check something."

Axel was so worried that he didn't notice Damon following right after him.

Instead of barging into the suite, Axel pressed his ear to the door to hear some ambiguous words...

"Do you feel this?" Talia asked excitedly.

"Oh, yeah..." Yasmin responded breathily.

"Now, keep pushing. You are almost there," Talia said. "If it gets stuck, pull it out and then push back again."

"Help me push."

"No, no. You can do it. Follow the same thing I'm doing..."

A low growl startled Axel, and he turned around to see that Damon was right behind him with his ear sticking to the door.

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Chapter 824: Releasing tension

Damon's accusing eyes were on Axel, and Axel was unsure if he wanted to open the door.

Those ambiguous words came from Talia and Yasmin, who were in the suite alone, and nothing good would come from opening the door.

If there were no witnesses, Axel would return to the lounge and pretend he didn't hear anything, but how can he do that when Damon was right there?

Axel knew that Yasmin and Talia were getting along well, but were they getting THAT well?

Damon's blood was boiling. What was Talia doing? Did that wretched witch cast a spell on Talia to seduce her? Damon feared that Keith or some other bastard would get his hands on Talia, but did he lose Talia to a scrawny girl like Yasmin? No, no... he didn't lose Talia. The mate bond was stronger than ever. Everything was fine unless... was he supposed to share Talia with Yasmin?

No one, NO ONE, gets to touch Talia other than Damon!

Damon saw red.

Seeing that Axel was frozen on the spot, Damon's temper exploded.

"Move!" Damon growled at Axel.

"Wait! Let's think about this. What if..."

Axel didn't get a chance to finish that as Damon shoved him to the side.

Damon exhaled sharply and gripped the doorknob before opening the door in one swift move.

Talia's head whipped toward the door to see Damon standing there with his face red from anger and Axel peering inside from Damon's right.

'I told you I would be back in a bit. We are almost done here,' Talia spoke to Damon through their mind-link because she didn't want to disturb Yasmin, who was concentrating on channeling energies.

Damon was not sure how to respond to this. Should he admit that he imagined Talia and Yasmin on the bed, naked with their limbs entangled? Now that he saw them sitting on the floor, facing each other and glowing, he felt silly.

'I was missing you,' Damon said. It was the truth. He missed seeing her every second because he feared that she might disappear without any warning.

Talia could feel his sorrow and insecurities, and she realized that she had neglected her mate.

They had a stressful day that started with an explosion, and then Talia teleported unexpectedly, and so many other mentally straining things happened. Damon was tense, on the verge of snapping, and she left him to deal with it on his own.

Talia knew that Damon was not weak. He was the strongest person she ever knew, and he loved her immensely. But that love made him vulnerable, and she promised silently to protect him with all she had and not make him suffer.

No matter how powerful Talia was, Damon was worried about her, and that made her his weakness.

"Continue like that, Yasmin. You are doing great," Talia gave final encouragement before getting up and walking to Damon.

She hugged him and pushed him from the doorframe into the hallway.

"I am sorry, Damon. I won't leave you like this again," Talia spoke into his chest.

She glanced at Axel. "Go in and give her company. Try not to disturb her as she is concentrating on channeling energies."

Axel nodded in understanding and scooted sideways to get into the room.

Now that Talia had left Yasmin's side, Yasmin was not glowing anymore, but the energy pulsating around her was causing refraction, like an invisible layer that distorted vision.

Axel turned toward the door to see that Talia and Damon were not there anymore. He closed the door carefully, and then he sat on the ground opposite Yasmin, and he stared at his mate. Her eyes were closed, and she was smiling. He could feel that she was happy. She was beautiful.

Talia wanted to give her full attention to Damon, but she needed to deal with one matter first.

Talia went with Amelia and Cornelia to the lab where the ancient relics were without releasing Damon's hand.

They found that Cassandra was still there. She was arranging items Talia tested previously in various containers and labeling them.

"Oh, I thought we were done for today," Cassandra said when she saw Talia at the door.

"You should take a break for dinner," Talia said.

"I will, once I finish these."

Talia shook her head at Cassandra. It was obvious that the Oracle was obsessed with her research.

"These are relics," Talia said to Cornelia and Amelia. "You saw magical items in your Coven, right?"

Cornelia and Amelia confirmed.

"The thing with these is that we are not sure how to use them. They respond to my energy." Talia took one relic. It was a brooch she tested earlier.

She put the brooch next to the metallic spoon to demonstrate that nothing had happened.

"Once I charge it, it turns into a magnet."

Talia's palm glowed in silvery light that the brooch absorbed. A second later, Talia put the brooch on the stone table, and the metallic spoon flew toward the brooch until it was stuck to it.

"The effect lasts about ten seconds after I stop charging it," Talia explained.

"What do you expect us to do?" Cornelia asked.

Talia gestured toward the chest that still had numerous shiny things inside. "I don't think these are made for me to use, but Cassandra and her team could not activate them. Cassandra believes that they require some conditions to work. Can the two of you investigate what type of energy will activate them?"

Amelia's eyes lit up, but Cornelia was not enthusiastic.

"This might take a long time," Cornelia grumbled.

Talia understood Cornelia's concern. The witch was eager to return to the human realm and reunite with James. Doing research like this might take months, or longer.

"At this time, I am hoping you will check them out briefly and see if you can feel anything," Talia explained. "If you are interested in taking on this project, we can bring a

number of these items with us. You can test them in the Dark Howlers pack when you take a break from your current research."

Cornelia relaxed at this, joining Amelia in digging through the chest with items.

Feeling that Damon's tension was increasing again, Talia turned to Cassandra. "Do you mind telling Amelia and Cornelia what we did today? It might give them some ideas on how to approach this."

Cassandra had no objections. Witches were known to operate magical objects, and Cassandra hoped she could learn something useful.

Talia gave Damon's hand a squeeze. 'How about a run to release tension?'

Damon's eyes flashed in approval. He was delighted that Talia didn't want to meddle with those damned relics again.

...

Two wolves ran through the forest, one black and the other light gray, nearly white.

Talia jumped on a tall rock and stood on it victoriously.

Damon's steps halted at the base of the rock, and he stared at her. The breeze ruffled her fur to ripple under the moonlight in silvery light.

Talia turned to look at him.

'Why are you standing there? Join me,' she spoke to Damon through their mind-link.

'You are beautiful,' he said breathily.

Talia giggled, but the sound that came from her wolf form was more like a whine. 'If I had non-hairy cheeks, you would see me blushing.'

'I am serious.' He tilted his head. 'Why do I have a feeling that your fur is whiter?'

Talia turned to look at herself. 'Whiter?'

'I could swear it was darker when we had our first pack run.'

Talia didn't see the difference. 'Does it matter?'

'No. Regardless of what color your fur is, I adore you because I fell in love with your soul.'

Talia leaped off the rock, and she rubbed her head on his neck. 'You are a sweet talker, Damon Blake.'

'I am only speaking my mind.'

Talia touched his nose with hers, and then she gave him a lick, knowing that always flusters him.

Before Damon could react, she was running away from him with, 'Catch me if you can!'

Damon was up for the challenge.

Damon was right behind Talia, nipping at her tail whenever it got in his range, and she would squeal and giggle while changing her direction and spurring him to run faster.

It seemed they were running randomly, and Damon paused when he saw the familiar entrance of a cave where Talia had disappeared.

Damon walked slowly inside after Talia, and he shifted into his human form when he saw her sitting on the cot, stark naked... just how he liked her.

"Did you lure me here to seduce me, Mrs. Blake?" Damon asked while stalking toward her.

Talia bit her lower lip while her eyes roamed his naked form hungrily. "I thought we might create some happy memories while we are here, Mr. Blake."

Damon released a deep growl while lowering himself on the cot above Talia. Happy memories it is!

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Chapter 825: Guests from the Midnight Guardians pack

~ the Dark Howlers pack ~

Caden and Maya were ready to welcome the newcomers from the Midnight Guardians pack.

Thanks to Amelia and Cornelia, twenty people were teleported near the packhouse, and they were all excited to take their first steps outside of the territory of the Midnight Guardians pack.

"You got rooms for everyone? That's fantastic!" Talia praised Betas when they had a list of one-bedroom apartments ready.

"As a good Beta, I need to anticipate your moves and set the stage to make it happen," Maya said smugly.

It was no secret that Talia wanted to bring people from the Midnight Guardians pack. It was only a matter of when it will happen. Actually, Maya thought that more people would come, so they had thirty apartments waiting in one of the buildings where Omegas stayed.

They took everyone to the largest conference room, where they showed a map of Darkbourne and several points of interest. Caden explained security procedures in case rogues attacked so that everyone knew how to find a shelter. With technicalities done, Talia reminded them not to mention they were from the Midnight Guardians pack unless they find their mates, in which case, only their mate should know.

Zina prepared a meal for everyone, knowing that people from the Midnight Guardians pack would rather check out the area than spend their time cooking.

Sandy and Tyler tagged along for this trip. Sandy wanted to introduce Tyler to her family, and the Gamma couple doubled as a team who would help in the case of any issues. Daria and Pierce also volunteered to keep an eye on people from the Midnight Guardians pack and to ensure no one bullies them. Without their abilities, they were just werewolves, but one can never be too cautious.

Amelia and Liam were ready to teleport mated people to the Midnight Guardians pack.

After filling their bellies, Sandy, Tyler, Daria, Pierce, Amelia, and Liam led everyone into Darkbourne to see the town center, and after that, they would show the apartments newcomers will get to use while they stay in the Dark Howlers pack.

Maya couldn't prepare a big mixer with other packs in such a short time, so for the evening, she planned to take newcomers to the Shifters nightclub. It will maximize their chances of finding mates. Keith and Caleb said that they will be in the club to ensure no one bullies people from the Midnight Guardians pack.

Talia was pleased to see that everyone was contributing. It turned out better than she expected.

Caden noticed that Talia's guards were taking initiative to help and he thought of something. He waited for everyone to disperse to talk to Talia and Damon in private.

"What do you think about introducing more people to the management of the pack?" Caden asked.

"More people?" Damon cocked his eyebrow suspiciously. "Are you saying that we should have more high-ranking members?"

"Not necessarily high-ranking. More like assistants," Maya clarified.

This reminded Talia of Mindy, who said she would work with Talia. Mindy would be perfect for organizing a cross-pack mixer, but Mindy was currently busy staving off the heat with her Shaman mate. Talia estimated that Mindy and Gideon will come out of their solitude in the next few days.

"I assume you have someone on your mind," Damon said to Caden and Maya after a long pause.

Caden confirmed. "Liam and Pierce are reliable, and their mates also seem capable. If we can introduce them to some aspects of what Maya and I are doing, they can share the workload, and it won't be a big burden when Maya and I take a vacation."

Damon didn't like Caden's picks. "Liam and Pierce are Talia's guards."

"I don't need guards all the time," Talia said, obviously liking Caden's suggestion. "Besides, with Amelia not being a she-wolf, when Liam comes with me outside the pack, she will be left behind."

Damon's frown deepened. "Are you saying Liam should be dismissed as your guard and assist Betas?" Liam was a warrior, not a guy who would do office work.

Talia raised her hand, indicating to Damon to be patient. "That's not what I'm saying. Liam is a competent guard, and I would hate to lose him, but he won't be able to focus on protecting me during long outings if he is missing his mate. Instead of making this all or nothing, how about we expand who can be my guard and add a few people to work with Caden and Maya? They can work as trainees and start with tasks that are not crucial. In time, their responsibilities can expand as they prove themselves capable. Maya and Caden are already delegating some of their tasks to whoever is available, and this will only dedicate a few people to specific tasks."

Maya nodded at these words. "I could come up with a few good candidates right now. Other than Liam and Pierce, there are those three teens who were accompanying James. We can start with them."

Talia's eyes lit up when she remembered Petra, Zack, and Erik. "Yes, they seemed motivated and energetic."

Damon thought for a moment before responding. "Don't promise them ranking positions. As long as they agree to work as your assistants, and you ensure nothing secretive ends up in their hands before they prove themselves and I authorize it, I'm fine with it."

Caden and Maya were happy about this. They liked the concept where it was just the two of them next to their Alpha and Luna, but now that Maya's heat was approaching (in

just over two weeks!), Maya and Caden found it troubling that so much work would be paused until they returned. With a few extra hands, many things can happen without Maya and Caden being there.

With the business part over, Maya asked, "So, are you joining us in the Shifters tonight?"

Damon looked at Talia. That action told her it was up to her.

"If we are not necessary, I would rather we skip this. There is something I would like to do." Talia said. With Sandy and Tyler being here, the members of the Midnight Guardians pack had their Gammas, and they were all grownups. She didn't need to follow them everywhere.

Maya didn't insist. They already had a number of people to keep an eye on their guests and help if needed, so Talia and Damon didn't need to participate.

They ended the talk with Maya asking about Yasmin and Meg, who were pregnant. Maya was happy to hear they would soon have babies in their circle. A new generation was coming, and she hoped that this upcoming heat would bless them with a pup of their own. She knew that Caden was looking forward to it.

...

With everyone heading to the Shifters nightclub, it was just Talia and Damon in the packhouse.

"Do you have something to do? Or do you want us to relax and take it easy? I am fine with either option." Damon said. "Do you want to watch a movie?"

"Maybe you can start that movie, and I will join you later," Talia said while raising her hand to the necklace around her neck. "I want to try activating it." After charging so many ancient relics in the Midnight Guardians pack, Talia was confident she could do it.

Damon had mixed feelings about it. The last time that necklace got triggered, Talia was in a coma-like state for more than an hour. He was minutes away from permanently crippling Sophia and Isaac, and he wouldn't stop at those two if Talia didn't wake up.

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Chapter 826: A message from Astraea

"I know what you are worried about," Talia said to Damon. "But I need to see if there is a message from me in this necklace. I might be out of it for hours. Will you watch over me?"

Damon pressed his lips into a line and responded with a stiff nod.

Talia knew this was hard on him, and it was hard on her as well.

She was driven by her curiosity and need to find out the truth, and it was not that Damon didn't want to know the truth, but he was reluctant to do anything that might harm Talia.

Talia cupped his cheeks and gave him a long, slow kiss. She didn't have words to express her gratitude because she knew that even with all his anxiety and insecurities, he was supportive.

"You are the best mate one could have," Talia said.

"And so are you, kitten." She was determined and cute, and he was unable to deny her anything. "Just promise you will come back to me."

"There is no place I would rather be than right here..." She gave him a firm hug. "You are my home, Damon. I will always come back to you."

After a long kissing session, Talia laid on the bed and held onto her necklace that rested on her chest. Last time Talia fell limply, and like this, she had nowhere to fall.

Talia apprehensively looked at Damon who was sitting on the edge of the bed next to her.

"I won't leave your side until you wake up. I promise." Damon said.

"Thank you, Damon." For everything.

Talia took a few deep breaths to calm her anxiety, and she focused on channeling her energies. There was no point in overthinking this. Either nothing will happen, or she might hear a message her mother recorded. There was no third outcome.

Talia spent many nights thinking about what the message could be.

Assuming that what she saw the last time was the truth, it hinted that her parents were in danger and that her mother knew it will be a while until they reunited... and maybe her mother knew they will never see each other again. What would be the last message a mother would leave to her baby? Would it be full of regrets or wishes for a happy future?

A knot formed in Talia's chest.

'Are you with me, Lis?'

Liseli snorted. 'Why are you asking like I have a choice?'

'A little support would be nice.'

'You don't need my support, girl. You've got this.'

It's not that Liseli didn't want to help, but she couldn't. The last time Talia received the message, Liseli was not part of it. The only thing Liseli could do was to wait for Talia to return.

Damon held his breath when Talia's eyes changed into silver. Her hand holding the necklace was wrapped in pulses of light, Talia's hair turned silvery, and her whole body was glowing.

During experiments with the ancient relics at the Midnight Guardians pack, Damon noticed that Talia was getting more proficient with her energies. What needed a warmup before now all happened in a second. She was impressive.

Talia's hand relaxed on her chest, and the silvery glow subsided, but Talia's hair didn't change back to coppery. She looked like an enchanted princess, trapped in her sleep.

Damon's brows came together, knowing that Talia successfully activated the necklace, and he hoped that no harm would come to her.

He hated that the only thing he could do was sit and wait and hope for the best.

Damon reached to the side and got his laptop. Who said that he couldn't do anything? He will take this time to go through reports related to the recent attack on the Blue River pack, movements of rogues, and everything they knew about the Guardians, and he will find something useful.

He sat on the bed next to Talia and pressed his lips against her forehead.

"Come back to me quickly, kitten..."

And then he turned his attention to the laptop.

...

Talia found herself surrounded by whiteness.

'Liseli?' Talia called. There was no response.

"Uhm..."

A female voice was heard, and Talia couldn't determine from which direction it came.

"My dear child, if you are listening to this, it means that my worst fear came true... you grew up without me."

Talia's heart jumped in joy. Those words confirmed that her mother loved her.

Talia was happy, but she was also sad that she missed a childhood where her mother would hold her, comfort her when she was scared, scold her for mischief, teach her things, lull her to sleep... and do all the things that mothers do.

"There is not much time, so..." The female released a long exhale. "I hope that this decision to separate granted you a safe childhood. Considering who your father is, I am confident you are a remarkable young woman, capable of standing up for yourself and everyone you love. I just wish I was there to see it happening."

A long pause ensued, and Talia was not sure if the message was over, but then the female spoke again.

"I have a request, Natalia. Don't look into who we are. By now, you realized you are a special child for more than just having an Alpha for a father. Whatever powers you discovered, keep them hidden. If people find out... it will only bring you trouble. Don't trust anyone. I am sorry for deciding this for you. My only intention is to protect you from all this mess with the hope you will lead a happy life. I want you to know that I love you very much, and so does your father. I hope you will find your soulmate who will cherish you just how your father cherishes me. And... I hope you will forgive me."

Talia held her breath, wishing to hear more or to replay the message so she could hear it again.

Talia focused mightily on her consciousness to gather energies, and then she heard a small laugh.

"You are my daughter, alright. If you didn't emit another burst of power, you wouldn't unlock the second part."

Talia couldn't believe this. Did she accidentally unlock more? It took her forever to unlock the first part! What was her mother thinking!?

"You are Natalia, daughter of Valerian and Astraea, and we keep our heads high as we follow our own justice. No matter what happens, don't let them control you. You are in charge of your life and what you will do with it, even when you will die. Death is not the end, my child. The end is when you give up hope."

The white light intensified to the point of causing Talia's eyes to ache, and she closed them tightly while a flood of information assaulted her mind.

Talia was choking on emotions, and she didn't realize at what point she came back, that it was dawn outside, or when she managed to soak Damon's t-shirt with her tears. She was glad that Damon was holding her and running his hand through her hair. Those small tugs on her scalp provided the comfort she desperately needed.

Damon knew that Talia was back, and it was over. Her hair regained its original color, and he waited patiently for her to cry it out.

After an unknown measure of time, Talia looked up at Damon, and she gave him an ugly smile.

"My mother loved me," she said in a shaky voice.

"Of course, she did. You were her blessing, and now you are mine."

Damon didn't ask what was message Talia's mother left behind because the only thing that mattered was that his kitten was back. And he loved that she was comfortable with him to cry and vent her grievances.

Talia cried for a long time, and she fell asleep in Damon's arms. It was the most comfortable place in the world.

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Chapter 827: A message from Astraea (cont.)

Talia's thoughts and emotions were a mess, and Damon was unsure how to help her.

Talia told him that she heard her mother and that her parents loved her, but that shouldn't cause this confusion and negativity.

"How about you tell me what the message was about?" Damon asked.

"There were two parts. The first one was about me staying safe and concealing my true nature. The message stopped, and I called for the energies in the hope of replaying the message, but I accidentally triggered the second part. My mother set it up in such a way that if I struggled with accepting to hide, she would tell me more."

"What is that more?" Damon asked impatiently.

"My mother's name is Astraea, and she was what we call a Guardian." Talia noticed a lack of reaction from Damon. "You are not surprised?"

Damon shrugged. "It's obvious you are not a regular she-wolf, kitten. I suspected your mother was a witch, but even witches need to chant spells and draw diagrams while you

don't. That's why I narrowed it down that your mother was either a Guardian or a dragon."

"A dragon?"

Damon chuckled. "Based on the books, they are magical creatures."

Talia suspected that Damon was joking to loosen up the atmosphere. "Do you want to listen or joke?"

"Listen, listen," Damon said earnestly. "What else did you find out?"

"There was a lot of information. I will need time to sort it out, but the main point is that the Guardians are dying. There was a time when Guardians were formidable creatures and many thought of them as Gods. In time, their numbers and their powers diminished. Guardian females stopped bearing children, so males started looking for exceptional females among other creatures. The pairings between Guardians were taking priority because any other would dilute their bloodline and diminish their powers. My mother refused a Guardian that was assigned to her."

Damon was alerted. "Assigned to her?"

"Uhm... Think of it like an arranged marriage. She left to live in another town with humans."

"And the other Guardians let her?"

Talia confirmed. "Yes. You see, they are immortals. There was no point in forcing her to come back. They assumed she would get bored after a few centuries and return on her own. When Guardians discovered that my mother fell for an Alpha and they were soulmates, they intervened. They asked her to return and gave her an ultimatum, and when she refused, they razed the town and killed everyone in it. My mother and father fled. The Guardians didn't know my mother was pregnant and that she gave birth to me. That was why she decided to hide me."

Talia was happy that she got to hear her mother's voice and to confirm that her parents loved her. But she also found out that the dangers lurking all around them were much bigger than she could ever imagine. But it was not all bad.

"There was an information dump, like when we exchange mental images. It was about the powers Guardians have and how they use the energies of nature. There were rituals and ceremonies, and... now I am confident that what Gregory did to me in the Blue River pack triggered my heat."

"Bastard," Damon squeezed through his teeth.

Damon was happy that Talia went into heat, and they spent a week in Maddox's cottage indulging in carnal pleasures, but he didn't like the idea of a Guardian manipulating Talia. So many things could have gone wrong.

"I don't think he was sure it would work," Talia said. "I remember him asking about your mark on my neck and if I went into heat and..." Talia exhaled helplessly. "Now he knows you are my mate, and if he had any suspicions about my bloodline, it's gone. He knows I am one of them." Talia's anxiety was rising. "What if they come here for me, Damon? What if they attack the pack to get to me? I can't sacrifice others for my safety..."

"Shh..." Damon shushed her while pulling her into a tight embrace. "I won't let them put a finger on you, kitten."

Talia's eyes were filled with tears. "What if they harm you, Damon?"

Damon's expression was stern, but his gaze was gentle. "Your parents had a tough time, but we are not them. Our packs will stand united against the Guardians."

"I don't want to put our friends in danger, Damon. It's not fair to ask them to risk their lives for me."

"This is not about helping you. It's about them helping every female that Guardians are coveting. The two of us are the best chance they have to fight against Guardians. Today is you. Tomorrow, it might be Tanya, Kalina, or Yasmin. Imagine what Guardians will do if they get into the Silver Flame Coven. All of them will help us because by helping us, they are helping themselves."

Damon's words made her see a different perspective. He was right. "Together, we can fight. With the information I got from my mother, we can devise plans on how to defend."

Damon hummed in approval. "And it's not just about defending. We will attack because that's the only way to live in peace. We will figure out those ancient relics and portals, and we have Sapa and Liseli, and... there is a reason why the Moon Goddess made us mates. Trust in her. Trust in me."

Talia nodded into his chest. Somehow, his words managed to soothe her anxiety. For now.

...

Damon and Talia went downstairs, and they heard voices from the garden.

Maya, Caden, Pierce, and Daria were there with members of the Midnight Guardians pack.

"Good morning," Talia wished them when they stepped on the terrace that connected with the garden.

Maya grinned. "It's almost lunchtime, but fine... let's go with the morning."

Talia glanced over their guests to notice, "I see some people are missing."

Maya lifted her chin proudly. "Out of twenty people, seven found their mates last night. Sandy, Tyler, Amelia, and Liam sent them to the Midnight Guardians pack last night. Sandy took Tyler to spend some time with her family. As for the thirteen remaining singles..." Maya gestured at people in the garden. "We are taking them to Darkbourne for lunch and some swimsuit shopping, and then for an outing by the lake. I expect to thin this number further."

"And we are happy to report that we had no incidents last night," Pierce added.

Talia put her hand over her chest. "Seven mated couples in one evening? That's fantastic!" She turned to Damon. "How about we join them by the lake in the afternoon?"

Damon agreed. Other than relaxing, the morale of pack members will improve when they see that their Alpha and Luna are getting along well.

"Great!" Maya exclaimed. "With the boost from Malia services, the rest of them will find their mates in no time!" She continued to Talia in a lower voice, "You should ask Axel to send us more people. I'm coordinating with Tanya, Kalina, and Michelle a mixer for singles in four days, and at this rate, we won't have any singles left."

Talia shook her head helplessly. Why did Maya lower her voice when every werewolf could hear her clearly? But she didn't refute Maya's words because thirteen pairs of eyes were looking at her expectantly. It was obvious that Maya told them about Talia's mate-matching abilities.

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Chapter 828: Story of empty promises

Damon and Talia stood in front of the modest home on the outskirts of Darkbourne.

Talia was nervous. What if the people inside start cursing her and tell her to leave?

The door opened, and a middle-aged man bowed with, "Alpha, Luna."

Talia's heart tightened at the sight of a man she saw at the Summer Solstice festival. That was Lulu's father, and they called him chef Page. Talia saw him only a few months ago, yet he looked like he aged a decade.

"No need for formalities, Page. We came here to see how you are doing," Damon said.

"I am honored. Please, come in."

Talia and Damon stepped into the house that immediately opened into a living room. There was one sofa, two sofa chairs, and a coffee table. Straight ahead was a kitchen with a dining area, and there was a small hallway on the right.

Talia swallowed a pinch in her throat at the sight of a fireplace that had Lulu's large photo with a black ribbon at the edge. There were many smaller photos of Lulu around it, from her early childhood and teen years, and then there were few with Lulu as an adult. At the bottom of the fireplace were one teddy bear, a worn-out doll, and several vases with fresh flowers.

"Can I see the photos?" Talia asked, unsure if she was worthy of going there.

"No need to ask, Luna," Page responded respectfully and gestured toward the fireplace.

Talia walked closer to observe photos, and she heard Damon asking, "How are things, Page? Do you need any help?..." Two men talked, but Talia's ears were buzzing, and she didn't hear them.

More than those photos, Talia saw Lulu in her mind, smiling, arguing, and then that prideful expression that made everyone wonder if they should challenge her.

Talia remembered the moment when Damon said they could be her guards. Keith stepped forward first, accepting his role, and Lulu was second. After that, Lulu didn't voice her loyalty, but her actions were not lacking. Why did Talia doubt her?

"Are you OK?" Damon's voice sounded close to Talia's ear, startling her.

She didn't notice when he came behind her.

Talia wanted to say she was fine, but she knew that Damon could sense her emotions, and he would see through her.

Instead of answering his question, Talia pointed at one photo. It was young Lulu, maybe around ten years old, with a woman by her side.

"Is this Lulu's mother?" Talia guessed. There was some resemblance between the two.

"Yes. That's Dove." Page responded.

Damon thought how that was odd. He didn't remember Dove as a pack member, but maybe she joined while his father was the Alpha. He was embarrassed to admit that he didn't know much about Lulu's personal life, but he still asked, "Does she live here?"

"No. She left us a long time ago. It was just Lulu and me."

Talia's heart cracked.

"Page, I..." Talia exhaled a shaky breath. "I am so sorry for your loss. Lulu was an amazing she-wolf. She died while saving my life, and I will always be grateful for her sacrifice. I know that there is nothing I can do to make it up to you, but if I can help you in any way, just let me know."

Page smiled sadly. "Lulu would be happy to hear those words, Luna. There is one thing you could do."

Talia blinked while wondering what he would ask for.

"Can you tell everyone that Lulu was a good person?"

Talia didn't have any problem with that, but... "Why would anyone think bad of Lulu?"

Page released a slow breath. "Lately, Lulu was troubled. She told me that everyone took a blood oath, and she didn't. Rumors spread quickly, and some people asked her if she was planning to betray you. Lulu endured, too prideful to admit why she didn't do it, but I knew she was troubled by it." He turned to look at the photo with Lulu and her mother. "Dove was the reason why Lulu..." He paused. "Do you want to hear Lulu's story?"

"Yes, please," Talia responded right away.

Page gestured toward the sitting area and offered them drinks. Damon and Talia settled on the sofa, and Page brought them water before sitting on the sofa chair.

"I met Dove more than two decades ago," Page started his story. "I was on a mission to check for rogue activity in the area, and I stopped by the human town where I met her. Dove was the most beautiful she-wolf I had ever seen." He smiled bitterly. "That's how the mate bond works. I remember fearing she was a rogue and if we were doomed for failure, but she didn't smell like one."

He released a long breath before continuing, "Dove was carried away by the mate bond, just how I was, and everything was great, except that she refused to come with me. Dove said she had a life in human town, and she couldn't just disappear. I would visit her whenever I could. She had a single-bedroom apartment and..." He shook his head. "That's not important. I was delighted when we confirmed she was pregnant with a pup."

At that time, she agreed to come with me. I thought it would be forever, and I had no idea that Dove had different plans."

Page stopped talking. Damon and Talia stayed silent, waiting for Page to gather his thoughts. It was obvious this was emotional for him.

"It lasted for about half a year. I was blindsided when Dove said she needed to return to human town. Lulu was just a few weeks old then. When I realized she was not talking about just shopping, Dove explained that her vacation time was over, and she didn't want to lose her job. She said this house was small and shabby, and we needed more money and... Anyway, she left."

"Days became weeks, and I was angry that Dove was not coming back. Lulu needed her mother. I went to look for her and... I found out she had a man there. He was human. Dove panicked, thinking I would kill him, and I almost did."

Page's expression darkened.

"Dove said she was with him from before we met, and he was taking care of her, and I realized that my aches when we were apart were because my mate was unfaithful. In a fit of anger, I rejected the bond, and I forced her to accept it. I thought I will die, but Lulu's existence kept me afloat. My wolf weakened, ending my career as a warrior."

He rubbed his face with force and then continued, "I thought I will never see Dove again, but she came to visit for Lulu's first birthday. I didn't have the heart to chase her away when I saw Lulu smiling at her. I didn't know if it was Dove's guilt, mother's instinct, or maybe she just wanted to torture me, but Dove would visit occasionally, always bringing presents. As time passed and Lulu became aware of her surroundings, Lulu noticed that other kids had both parents, yet her mother was not around. Lulu started asking Dove why she didn't live with us, like other mothers, and Dove would always say it will happen next time."

Page looked at Talia and Damon seriously. "Lulu grew up listening to empty promises. Her mother would show up for birthdays and holidays, coming with a smile and expensive toys and clothes, and leaving Lulu with a broken heart. Lulu was a teenager when she confronted her mother. Lulu said that she was tired of lies and that if Dove had no intention to be a mother, she was not welcome."

He smiled sadly. "Lulu burned all the gifts Dove ever gave her. Lulu said she didn't need trinkets and promises. She wanted her mother."

Talia was glad that Damon's hand held firmly on her shoulder like he was preventing her from falling apart. Talia knew very well what it meant to grow up without a family. The comforting thought was that Lulu had a loving father. Unfortunately, that same father was now grieving Lulu's death. How could Talia not feel responsible?

"Lulu was a good child," Page said. "She channeled her frustration into training and studying. Lulu loved this pack, and she was honored to be your guard, Luna. To her, it was recognition of her efforts. Lulu hated empty promises, and she was determined to prove her loyalty with actions."

Talia felt a lump in her throat. "Lulu was an amazing warrior and a great friend. She was loyal to the pack, and she died an honorable death. I will make sure everyone knows that. "

Page bowed his head. "Thank you, Luna."

His shoulders shook, and Talia's vision blurred from tears that streamed down her cheeks as they cried silently.

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Chapter 829: An emotional Luna

After visiting Lulu's father, Talia's mood was low. She was emotional and on the verge of crying, and Damon insisted they go to the lake.

If they were alone, she would dissolve into crying again. Talia started the day with crying after listening to her mother's message, and then the waterworks continued when they visited Page.

That much crying can't be good for anyone, and Damon was desperate to distract Talia.

It was a warm, sunny afternoon, and the beach was packed. People played volleyball and badminton, relaxed in the sun, and many heads bobbed in the water. Laughter and cheers were heard from every direction, and the mood was uplifting.

Maya and Caden coordinated to free up a section for the newcomers that included towels, a shade below the canopy, and fruits and drinks as refreshments.

Damon was pleased to see a smile on Talia's face.

Talia was amused while listening to Maya's narration of how she needed to explain swimsuits to newcomers. In the Midnight Guardians pack, everyone is a werewolf, and they have no problem with nudity. Newcomers didn't understand why they needed to cover up certain parts of their bodies and how that was related to humans.

Talia's mood improved when three more members of the Midnight Guardians pack found their mates on the beach.

Amelia and Liam were right there to take three couples to the packhouse where Amelia set up a teleporting diagram. Amelia, Liam, Keith, and Caleb escorted newly mated couples to the Midnight Guardians pack and then returned to the Dark Howlers pack to see if more mated couples needed moving.

One male from the Midnight Guardians pack found his mate earlier that day in Darkbourne. With these three latest couples, eleven out of twenty people who came from the Midnight Guardians pack found their mates.

"Maybe I should listen to Maya's advice and ask Axel to send us more people," Talia mused. "I was hoping they will find their mates soon, but this is super-fast."

Damon was happy to see that she was thinking about something other than Lulu.

"Maybe we should bring some witches here as well," Damon suggested.

Talia didn't think it was a good idea. "Evanora didn't seem happy when Amelia left with Liam. I don't want her to hate us. We can bring some people with us when we go to visit next time."

Damon liked that idea, but... "The more people we take there, the more will know where the portal is." They can't go knocking out and blindfolding everyone. It was not practical. "We need to make people in this realm aware of witches and abilities and get them to accept it as normal. That won't happen if we only have people going there."

Talia and Damon talked about this before. It was a long-term plan of assimilating witches into society, and it would take years, decades maybe. However, now that the danger of Guardians was looming above them, they needed to speed up the process.

Talia wanted to say something else, but she didn't want to risk others overhearing them, so she continued talking to Damon through their mind-link, 'We should also discuss with Max, Tony, and Cristian how to alert our people about Guardians. If our people are unaware of dangers, they will walk right into them.'

Damon agreed on how that must be done. 'I will contact them to schedule a meeting. We should also find a way to invite George and James.'

Talia agreed. George was an Alpha, and James was the smartest guy around. 'Cornelia comes here every day. We can use that to send information on Guardians to James. That will give him time to brainstorm ideas before we meet. Or if he cannot attend the meeting, he can give his inputs beforehand.'

'I love how your mind works, kitten.'

Damon leaned to kiss her cheek, and then he started feeding her strawberries that Maya had placed nearby.

Talia looked at Damon helplessly. He looked at her with sparkles in his eyes like no worries in the world. She wished that she could disconnect like that.

Talia moved closer to Damon and leaned on him. Sparks of their bond prickled her skin wherever they touched, calming her anxiety; the sweet strawberries and Damon's undivided attention helped.

Talia looked around to see the crowd relaxing on the beach. She felt a sense of pride at the sight of many smiles. Those people were enjoying their carefree time because their leaders ensured their safety.

Talia hoped they will be able to repel the dangers and allow their people to keep smiling.

...

It was late afternoon when Damon and Talia returned to their room.

Talia paused when she saw a deep blue dress on the mannequin in the middle of the bedroom. It was a skater dress with a plunging V-neck neckline. The skirt ended at the knee level and it would be sport-ish if not for the silky material that made it elegant.

Talia looked below the dress to see matching shoes.

"Are we going somewhere?" Talia asked Damon.

Damon smiled mysteriously. "We have a reservation for dinner for two at the Medallion." He winked. "Get ready, or we might be late."

Talia's eyes widened. She heard that the Medallion was the fanciest restaurant in the human town. Maya was complaining about how Caden needed to book their anniversary dinner months in advance.

"What are we celebrating?" Talia asked.

"Do I need a reason to treat my mate well?" Damon moved toward Talia in slow, steady steps, and he stopped when their bodies nearly touched. "You are the most precious person in my life, Talia Blake. I don't need a special occasion to celebrate because every day with you is my best day ever."

Since finding out about her identity as Alpha Natalia Moonrider, Talia loved it when Damon called her Talia Blake. It told her that he didn't care about her status or background.

Talia's chin shivered. There were days when she wondered if she would ever find her mate, and she hoped that he would be proud to have her in his life, and here was Damon, the most exquisite male specimen, saying that every day with her was his best ever. Can he be any sweeter?

"Hey, hey..." Damon said while cupping her cheeks. His expression showed panic. "I wanted to put a smile on your face and not make you cry." The day started with crying, and it seemed that Talia didn't completely bounce back. Talia was emotional, and if she was not crying, tears were waiting to spill again.

Talia sniffled and gave him an ugly smile. "I am happy, Damon. I really am. Can we go for dinner with all the things going on?"

He gave her a smacking kiss on the lips. "If you are happy, show me you are happy. Guests from the Midnight Guardians pack have company, the world won't collapse tonight, and I need you to shower and get ready." Normally, Damon would join her in the shower, but then the shower would take a while, and they would be late. "Zina will be here in fifteen minutes to fix your hair."

Talia blinked. "Zina will do my hair? It sounds fancy."

"Mhm," Damon confirmed with a hum. "She will do your hair while I shower." He held onto her shoulders and turned her to face the bathroom door. "Go, go, go!"

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Chapter 830: A romantic dinner

Talia enjoyed their ride to the human town.

For her, Damon's black armored Lexus SUV was filled with many happy memories, like a lovey-dovey capsule.

Talia enjoyed the way Damon held her hand while driving. His hold was firm yet gentle, and he caressed the back of her palm with his thumb. And then he would pull her hand higher to kiss her knuckles, and his breath fanning her fingers made her all tingly.

Talia couldn't stop staring at Damon. He was dressed up as well.

Damon was extra handsome in a dark blue suit that fit him perfectly. His hair was sleeked back, and his spellbinding visual was enhanced by the shadows that formed under the streetlights flashing as the car moved. The scent of his aftershave mixed with the scent of the forest and the dark chocolate, and Talia sighed dreamily. Was that really her mate? It was surreal.

Damon's lips lifted into a smile. He knew she was watching him, and he loved it.

Damon gave the car keys to the valet, and he made his way to the other side of the car to open the door for Talia.

"You look beautiful tonight," Damon murmured as she stepped out of the car.

His eyes were drawn to his mark on her neck. That right there was proof she was his.

The blue skater dress fit her perfectly, and her high-heeled shoes made her legs look longer. Talia had light makeup on, and Damon loved that her hair was lifted up to reveal her neck. Zina braided Talia's hair with thin silver ribbons to make it resemble a crown.

Damon loved Talia's outfit, but if it were up to him, he would take her to a nearby hotel and rip that dress into shreds because no dress could match the perfection of her naked body. And she was his.

Damon couldn't wait to return home and spoon her naked. He would lift her leg up and slide inside her wet heat from behind... Damon cleared his throat and wiggled his hips to adjust his hard-on.

Talia shot him a side-glance and giggled. She could feel his lust level rising, and she was happy to know that she had that effect on him.

Neither of them enjoyed these formal events in public because they couldn't be naked, and they had to behave, but the thrill of waiting to return to privacy was what made their intimacy more intense.

Talia and Damon were escorted into a private room with dark wooden walls and red accents.

Only one table was in the room; it could seat ten people, but it was set up for two. Flowers, candles, and soft music from the speakers in the ceiling made it romantic.

The server was a female wearing a white shirt and a black pencil skirt. She had a nametag that said "Camila".

Camila's hair was lifted into the neatest high bun Talia had ever seen. Not a single hair was out of place.

Camila showed them to their seats, and then she gestured at the door to the right. "That's your private bathroom. Only people in this room can use it." She gestured toward the digital display on the table. "You can place your order here or call staff..."

Talia frowned at the server, who was ogling at Damon. Well, if Camila were a she-wolf, she would feel Talia's hostility and recognize that mark on Damon's neck, which was a

sign he was taken. Unfortunately, that female was human, and she probably thought that Damon had a cool tattoo.

Talia gritted her teeth when she realized that Camila was talking only to Damon like Talia was not there.

Camila ended her talk about the drink menu with, "Let me know if you need something, Mr. Blake."

"A male server," Talia said.

Camila didn't expect this. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me."

The female glanced at Damon nervously. To her horror, Damon didn't spare her a glance.

"You heard my wife. A male server." Seeing that she didn't move, Damon added, "Or you can call your manager. Your choice."

Camila took two steps back, and then she scurried out of the private room.

Damon took Talia's hand into his and kissed her knuckles. "Don't allow random nobodies to spoil the mood, kitten. Whatever you want, let me know. I will take care of it."

He wanted to go after that female and slap some sense into her. Damon brought Talia here to fix her mood, not to make it worse!

Damon was relieved to see that their drinks were brought in by a tall slim server with a nametag that said "Adam".

Adam asked if they had questions about the menu, and Damon looked at Talia.

"Everything looks great," Talia said.

Talia was in the mood to try something new, so she asked, "What do you recommend?"

Adam bobbed his head. Patrons of the Medallion were all with deep pockets. Since he started working, Adam learned that when patrons ask for recommendations, that was his chance to earn extra tips.

He started talking about steaks and some exotic meals Talia had never heard of, but she picked up his excitement when he spoke about the house special that came with a chef cooking in front of customers. Talia thought how that was novel.

"Can we get that?"

Damon smiled dotingly. "We can get whatever you want." If she wanted, he would buy her the whole restaurant.

Two servers came in next, pulling with them carts with ingredients, utensils, and various containers, and then an older man entered their room while pushing in front of him a portable stove with a grill.

He didn't have a nametag, but it said, "Main Chef", and Talia understood that was his position in the Medallion. The way servers treated him with respect told her that he was someone important.

He fired up the stove, and Talia watched with amusement as he chopped, tossed, and mixed ingredients. It reminded her of cooking shows on TV.

Their meal started with salmon rolls that were creamy and lemony, perfect for stirring the appetite.

As usually, Damon was feeding Talia, not allowing her to touch the food with her hands.

Next was the spinach soup that was filled with herbs, and it smelled delicious. Talia smacked her lips at the rich flavors that danced on her tongue, and Damon inched closer to lick a drop that hung at the corner of her lips.

If the cook and his two assistants were surprised to see how Damon treated Talia, they concealed it well.

Talia allowed Damon to spoil her completely. She looked at him with sparkles in her eyes and opened her mouth obediently for the soup, salad, shrimp balls, wild rice with vegetables, grilled steak with mango sauce, and whatever else he put in front of her mouth. It was all delicious.

"Which one is your favorite?" Damon asked when they finished the last meal. Only dessert was left.

"Everything was delicious," Talia said honestly.

They were sipping sparkling water with lemon to clean their taste buds while preparing for dessert. The cook was flambeeing tropical fruits before putting them on top of vanilla ice cream, and then he drizzled it all with melted chocolate.

Talia felt saliva pooling in her mouth. She hoped that the dessert tasted as good as it looked.

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